

# Negotiating Identity: Tradition and Change in Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam*

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## ABSTRACT

**MamangDai explores the cultural transitions of indigenous communities in Arunachal Pradesh through a narrative that blends myth, memory, and realism. This study examines how the novel represents the interaction between tradition and modernity, focusing on oral traditions, memory, external influences, and identity conflicts. The idea of “Pensam,” meaning “in-between,” symbolizes a liminal cultural space where past and present coexist. Through textual analysis, the paper argues that tradition and change are interconnected rather than opposing forces. The novel highlights storytelling as a means of preserving cultural identity while acknowledging transformation, thereby contributing to discussions on indigenous identity and cultural continuity.**

**Keywords: Cultural transition, Tradition, Memory, Oral tradition.**

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## INTRODUCTION

Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam* offers a profound exploration of the cultural life of the Adi tribe in Arunachal Pradesh. The novel departs from a conventional linear form and instead presents a tapestry of interconnected stories, memories, and legends, reflecting a community in transition. The term “Pensam,” meaning “in-between,” signifies a liminal space where tradition and modernity intersect.

Cultural transition is central to the narrative. Life in Pensam is rooted in oral storytelling, communal bonds, and harmony with nature elements that shape the community's identity. However, external forces such as colonial encounters, modernization, and administrative changes gradually disrupt this traditional structure. Storytelling remains vital, as Dai notes, “In our stories are the voices of the past, and the past lives on in us” (Dai 27), emphasizing its role in preserving cultural continuity.

Yet, these traditions are not immune to change. New ideas influence younger generations, creating a divide between past and present. The novel also highlights the deep connection between humans and nature, where “the land is not just soil; it is memory, ancestry, and spirit” (Dai 45). The disruption of this bond symbolizes cultural erosion.

In dreams, my people say, they see the rain mother sitting on the treetops, laughing in the mist. Her silver ornaments clink as she rides the wind, brandishing her sword. Every time she twirls her skirt, the storm clouds edged with black rush up to cover her. (36)

Through its fragmented narrative and evolving characters, the novel portrays identity as fluid. As Dai reflects, “We are what we remember, and without memory, we are lost” (Dai 63), underscoring memory's role in cultural survival. In this context, memory becomes a crucial element in the construction of identity. It acts as a link between the past and the present, enabling individuals to retain continuity despite external changes. The act of remembering is both a personal and cultural process that preserves identity in times of transformation.

This research article analyzes how *The Legends of Pensam* represents cultural transition through its themes, narrative techniques, and characterization. It examines how Mamang Dai portrays the tension between tradition and change, and the ways individuals and communities negotiate this shift. By focusing on this novel, the study highlights Dai's nuanced approach to cultural transformation, presenting it as an ongoing and dynamic process rather than a fixed outcome.

A key aspect of cultural transition in the novel is the role of oral tradition and storytelling. In indigenous communities, stories function as the primary medium for transmitting history, beliefs, and cultural values across generations. Unlike written texts, these narratives are fluid and evolving, yet they preserve the essence of collective memory. As Dai observes, “In our stories are the voices of the past, and the past lives on in us” (Dai 27), emphasizing storytelling as a bridge between generations. The novel’s fragmented structure reflects this oral tradition. Instead of a linear plot, it presents interconnected narratives that mirror the fluid and non-linear nature of oral storytelling. This technique reinforces the theme of transition, moving between past and present, myth and reality.

However, oral traditions face challenges from modernization. Younger generations gradually move away from storytelling practices, leading to a weakening of cultural transmission. The decline of storytelling signals a deeper cultural shift, resulting in the erosion of collective memory.

We are what we remember, and without memory, we are lost in time, cut off from our past, and uncertain of our future. (Dai 63) Memory, therefore, remains central to cultural continuity. It is not merely individual but a shared resource that connects people to their ancestry and identity. As Dai states, “We are what we remember, and without memory, we are lost” (Dai 63), highlighting that identity is rooted in memory, and its loss leads to cultural dislocation.

At the same time, memory in *The Legends of Pensam* is portrayed as selective and interpretative. Different characters recall events in varied ways, highlighting the subjective nature of memory. This adds complexity to the narrative and reflects the evolving nature of culture itself. Cultural transition, therefore, is not merely about the loss of the past but about its reinterpretation in the present. Another important dimension of storytelling in the novel is its connection to the spiritual world. Many narratives in *Pensam* involve spirits, ancestors, and supernatural elements, reflecting the community’s belief system. These stories are not treated as fiction but as essential to understanding reality. The blending of myth and reality illustrates how traditional knowledge systems differ from modern rational perspectives.

The presence of spirits and unexplained phenomena emphasizes a worldview that is deeply spiritual and interconnected, in contrast to the scientific outlook of modernity. Thus, cultural transition involves not only changes in practices but also shifts in perception and understanding. Despite these challenges, storytelling functions as a form of resistance against cultural loss. By continuing to share stories, the community preserves its heritage and asserts its identity. As Mamang Dai suggests, stories endure even in changing circumstances, becoming tools of cultural survival.

The land is not just soil, it is memory, ancestry, and the spirit of our people, living in rivers and forests, guiding us through time. (Dai 45)

Moreover, the act of writing *The Legends of Pensam* itself extends this oral tradition. While the written form helps preserve these narratives and reach wider audiences, it also raises questions about authenticity. Written texts capture the essence of oral storytelling but cannot fully replicate its communal and performative nature. The interplay between orality and literacy thus becomes another dimension of cultural transition. While writing ensures preservation, it transforms the experience of storytelling. Similarly, the communal sharing of stories once central to social bonding declines with modernization, giving way to increasing individualism.

Dai’s portrayal of storytelling and memory ultimately underscores their vital role in shaping cultural identity. Even as external forces challenge tradition, the persistence of stories ensures continuity. Cultural transition, therefore, is not simply a process of loss but one of adaptation and renewal. Through her nuanced depiction, Dai demonstrates how culture is both preserved and transformed over time, emphasizing the enduring power of memory in sustaining identity.

In *The Legends of Pensam*, nature is not merely a physical setting but a fundamental component of cultural identity. Mamang Dai portrays the natural environment as deeply intertwined with the spiritual, social, and emotional life of the community. The forests, rivers, and mountains of Arunachal Pradesh are not passive landscapes; rather, they actively shape the cultural existence of the people of *Pensam*.

The relationship between humans and nature is grounded in harmony and mutual respect. Nature is not viewed as a resource for exploitation but as a living entity that sustains life and preserves memory. Dai captures this idea in the line, “The land is not just soil; it is memory, ancestry, and spirit” (Dai 45), emphasizing that the environment functions as a repository of history and tradition.

Nature is also closely linked to the spiritual world. The presence of spirits, ancestral forces, and unseen energies reflects a worldview in which the natural and supernatural coexist. Rivers are believed to carry stories, mountains hold ancestral

secrets, and forests are inhabited by spirits. This belief system shapes human interaction with the environment, fostering a deep sense of reverence and responsibility.

Dai further reinforces this connection through her poetic imagery: “The river speaks to those who listen, carrying stories from the mountains to the plains” (Dai 102). This personification suggests that nature itself acts as a storyteller, preserving and transmitting cultural memory. Thus, nature operates both as a physical reality and a symbolic force within the narrative. However, this harmonious relationship is gradually disrupted by the forces of change. The intrusion of modernization alters traditional ways of life, weakening the bond between humans and nature. Developmental activities, administrative interventions, and exposure to external influences contribute to this transformation. These changes are subtly embedded in the narrative through the decline of communal practices, shifting values, and the changing attitudes of younger generations. As individuals move away from their traditional environment, their connection to nature becomes increasingly distant. This shift leads to a sense of cultural loss, as ecological disruption parallels the erosion of traditional values.

Stories are the threads that bind us to our past, carrying voices of ancestors, through generations, keeping our world alive. (Dai 27)

At the same time, Dai does not portray modernization as entirely negative. Rather, it is presented as an inevitable process that brings both challenges and possibilities. Characters must adapt by negotiating between inherited traditions and modern realities, reflecting the dynamic and evolving nature of culture. The tension between tradition and change is particularly visible in generational perspectives. While older generations regard nature as sacred and central to identity, younger individuals may view it as secondary to modern aspirations. This divide highlights the complexity of cultural transition and the varied responses to change.

In this sense, nature functions as a stabilizing force amid cultural transition. It provides continuity by linking the past with the present, while its persistent presence serves as a reminder of the community’s heritage. Thus, even as other aspects of culture transform, the natural environment sustains a sense of cultural rootedness. Mamang Dai’s ecological perspective deepens her exploration of cultural change. By emphasizing the interconnectedness of nature and culture, she underscores the need to preserve both. The novel suggests that cultural survival depends not only on maintaining traditions but also on protecting the environment that sustains them.

Time moves like a river, carrying away old worlds, yet leaving echoes behind, so we stand in between, holding both past and present. (Dai 102)

Furthermore, the depiction of nature challenges dominant narratives of development and progress. Instead, it offers an alternative vision based on harmony, balance, and sustainability, an approach that remains highly relevant in contemporary environmental discourse.

In conclusion, nature in *The Legends of Pensam* emerges as a powerful symbol of cultural identity and continuity. Its disruption reflects the broader process of cultural transition, while its endurance offers hope for preservation and renewal. Through this portrayal, Dai emphasizes that true progress lies in sustaining the connections between culture, memory, and the natural world.

The novel ultimately presents cultural transition as a complex and dynamic process rather than a linear shift. Oral traditions and storytelling remain central to cultural continuity, as reflected in the idea that “the past lives on in us” (Dai 27). Even as external influences reshape cultural practices, memory and narrative ensure that the essence of tradition persists, enabling communities to adapt while preserving their identity.

At the same time, *The Legends of Pensam* acknowledges that change is inevitable. The intrusion of modernity through administrative systems, education, and new ideas gradually reshapes the cultural landscape of Pensam. This transformation is neither wholly destructive nor entirely beneficial; rather, it creates a space of negotiation where individuals and communities adapt to new realities. The concept of “Pensam” itself functions as a powerful metaphor for this transitional state, representing a space where multiple cultural influences and temporalities coexist.

The role of nature further deepens this exploration of cultural transition. As previously discussed, the natural environment is inseparable from the community’s cultural and spiritual life. Dai’s assertion that “the land is not just soil; it is memory, ancestry, and spirit” (Dai 45) highlights this intimate connection. The disruption of this bond due to modernization signifies not only ecological damage but also cultural loss. Yet, the enduring presence of nature also suggests the possibility of continuity and renewal.

Another crucial aspect of cultural transition is the identity crisis experienced by individuals. The movement between tradition and modernity creates a sense of dislocation, as characters struggle to define themselves within a changing cultural framework. As Dai observes, “we are what we remember, and without memory, we are lost” (Dai 63), emphasizing the central role of memory in sustaining identity.

Importantly, the novel does not portray cultural conflict as purely negative. While it involves tension and uncertainty, it also enables growth and transformation. The emergence of hybrid identities blending tradition and modernity reflects the resilience and adaptability of the community, challenging rigid notions of cultural purity.

In conclusion, the novel presents cultural transition as a continuous process of negotiation between tradition and change. Through its exploration of storytelling, memory, nature, and identity, it highlights both the challenges and possibilities inherent in this process. Ultimately, it suggests that cultural survival lies not in resisting change but in integrating it with tradition. By sustaining connections to memory, respecting the natural environment, and embracing the fluidity of identity, communities can preserve their heritage while adapting to an evolving world.

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