

The Unreliable Witness: Narrative Authority, Competing Explanations, and the Credibility of Knowledge in Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam*

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ABSTRACT

Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam* (2006) tells the lives of the Adi people of Arunachal Pradesh through a series of interrelated stories in which memory, traditional beliefs passed down, and individual interpretation all shape how experiences are understood. This article examines how narrative credibility is achieved when an account of an event explains why it happened. It examines three episodes—the remarkable arrival of Hoxo, Kalen's death while on a hunting trip, and Kepi's illness—as presented in a study unit from the Indira Gandhi National Open University on Dai's novel. Using narratology and epistemic criticism, the article separates reported events from their interpretations. It examines how the narrator's authority is shaped by recollection, shared communal beliefs, and the ways stories are passed on. It maintains that credibility in the novel should not be seen as a simple choice between truth and falsehood or between reason and indigenous belief. Instead, testimony functions through several overlapping aspects: access to the event, the basis for causal interpretation, and the cultural importance of the account. The article's main contribution is a thorough study of explanatory uncertainty within current scholarship on folklore, memory and indigenous identity. Because this draft has not been independently verified against the full version of the novel, check any details about the episodes and any detailed textual claims on particular pages against the edition used before submitting the article to the journal.

Keywords: Mamang Dai; *The Legends of Pensam*; narrative authority; testimony; epistemic criticism; narrative credibility; indigenous literature; oral storytelling.

INTRODUCTION

Literary narratives do more than represent events; they set the conditions for understanding them. When readers encounter an event, they do so through the narrator's presentation, a character's memory, or others' reports. Thus, the question of what actually happened is often accompanied by another: how can anyone know what happened, and why should we accept this particular explanation?

These questions are useful when reading Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam* (2006). The book shows the lives and traditions of the Adi community of Arunachal Pradesh through a series of interconnected stories. Unlike conventional fiction, which focuses on a single protagonist and a continuous main plot, the IGNOU study unit argues that the community and its evolving way of life take centre stage in a narrative made up of separate but related episodes (Indira Gandhi National Open University 71–72). The unit also situates the work in relation to oral traditions and the changes that resulted from colonial contact.

This narrative organisation raises doubts about testimony and authority. If a character describes an event, the account will often contain both a statement of what took place and an explanation of why it occurred. Such descriptions and explanations are not the same kind of knowledge. A witness might remember the circumstances surrounding a death or illness but still be unable to determine the reason. An explanation can be genuine and significant within a cultural context without being verifiable on its own.

This article examines the distinction through three episodes mentioned in the IGNOU unit—Hoxo's remarkable origin, Kalen's death while on a hunting trip, and Kepi's illness. These episodes link unusual, unsettling experiences to explanations that don't match the circumstances. The article then considers how moving from an event to an interpretation produces narrative meaning, and how circumstances and storytelling shape an account's authority.

The main point is that narrative credibility must be seen as a process rather than as a fixed attribute of the speaker. It emerges from the interaction between narration, memory, common beliefs, and interpretation. This view avoids two oversimplified options: treating all culture-rooted explanations as empirically proven, or rejecting indigenous interpretative systems as irrational because they do not fit a single evidentiary framework.

Previous scholarship has examined folk belief, cultural memory, indigenous identity, and narrative structure in Dai's novel. This article does not claim these topics have not already been studied; rather, it asks a more specific question: how does an account move from narrating an event to explaining its cause, and what makes that explanation credible in the story? This proposed contribution needs to be continually compared with existing criticism and carefully checked against the original novel.

LITERATURE REVIEW.

Folklore and literary narrative

Scholarship on *The Legends of Pensam* identifies folklore as central to its plot world. In her article "Echoes of Tradition: Folklore in Mamang Dai's '*The Legends of Pensam*'", Dhruti Raval examines how folkloric elements guide the novel's structure, themes, and cultural effect (Raval). The article proves that the connection between folklore and literary storytelling is already a major area of critical discussion. It follows that another study should not only examine how the novel presents folklore but also what storytelling achieves in specific narrative situations.

This article views storytelling as a process by which events gain interpretative structures. A story can record an occurrence and connect it to a community's understanding of causation, responsibility, danger, or belonging. It is important to keep these functions separate: storytelling can still pass on cultural meaning even if the explanation for the event is uncertain.

Memory, identity, and communal knowledge

Ujjwal Jana and Tanushree Dutta interpret the novel through memory, culture, and identity, arguing that literature can preserve and pass on a minority community's traditions and social beliefs (Jana and Dutta). Similarly, Anju Bala and Shafayat Hussain Bhat foreground subaltern voices and cultural memory, while Dara Vanaja examines identity, tradition, and the difficulties indigenous communities face (Bala and Bhat; Vanaja). These studies show the importance of situating stories within wider cultural and social contexts.

This study considers this context by investigating how remembering and retelling affect the credibility of explanations. Collective memory does not just store information; it also organises and interprets experience. It cannot be assumed that a remembered narrative is either completely accurate or entirely false. Moreover, communal authority is not the same as universal agreement or factual verification; an account can be culturally authoritative even if it does not answer all the questions regarding the earliest event.

Narrative authority and epistemic criticism

The book *The Rhetoric of Fiction* by Wayne C. Booth enables us to consider the way in which the presentation of a narrative influences readers' judgments, while Gérard Genette's *Narrative Discourse* provides concepts for examining mediation, order, and perspective; these approaches allow us to tell the difference between an event and the form in which it becomes available to the reader (Booth; Genette).

Miranda Fricker's framework in *Epistemic Injustice* helps analyse credibility and the social conditions under which people accept or reject knowledge claims. Her work is pertinent to questions about who is granted authority when giving testimony. Yet epistemic injustice should not be used as a general term for every disagreement between medical, spiritual, and communal explanations; we must consider the circumstances in which a speaker's credibility is evaluated and the power relations that shape that evaluation (Fricker).

The article brings together narratology and epistemic criticism to examine how uncertainty is represented. It does not assume the narrator is deceptive, that all witnesses are unreliable, or that indigenous belief is naturally at odds with reason; rather, it investigates how narrative mediation and interpretation, situated within a particular culture, shape what a reader can know.

Research Gap

Critics have already noted that folklore, memory, identity, and indigenous knowledge matter in *The Legends of Pensam*. The suggested research gap is more specific: it asks how the narrative differentiates between an event's occurrence and the explanation given afterwards, and what gives that explanation credibility. This is a research gap that is currently being explored, not a definite assertion of originality. The gap's validity must be checked through a systematic comparison of the full texts of relevant studies, including those that address narrative technique and the relationship among myth and truth.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Event and interpretation

This article distinguishes between an event and an explanation of the event. This is an analytical distinction, not an absolute one, since we always encounter events as recalled and represented. Yet separating reported occurrences from causal statements clarifies what a witness knows and what the witness infers.

Someone might see a death and describe the circumstances at the time, later explaining it as caused by a curse, some form of spiritual interference, or a series of bad omens. The various claims have different levels of evidential weight. The part relating to what was seen or reported concerns the observation or account given; the explanation offers a cause or interpretation. A witness can be credible about certain parts of an event while still being uncertain about others.

Narrative mediation

The way a narrative is mediated refers to the processes by which events reach the reader. An event can be presented directly, recalled after a period of time, or passed on through multiple tellers—the different methods of presentation result in different conditions of access. In a connected narrative such as *The Legends of Pensam*, the stories spread around through recurring characters and recollections rather than being brought together in a single authoritative version that settles all the uncertainties.

One should not automatically regard fragmentation as unreliable, since it can let various experiences exist without forcing them into a single explanatory framework. The reader has to consider who is speaking, what the speaker might know, and the way in which the account is presented.

Dimensions of epistemic authority

In this analysis, epistemic authority is examined along three different dimensions: that of experiential credibility, which refers to the speaker's access to the event; interpretative credibility, which relates to the reasons why an explanation is accepted; and communal authority, which concerns the role that a particular account plays in collective memory. Although these dimensions can overlap, they do not need to coincide. A narrator can have direct knowledge of an event yet still provide an uncertain causal explanation; a story can have communal authority even if it does not conclusively prove all of the factual claims.

Fricker's framework calls for a focus on how credibility is distributed socially. Applied to Dai's novel, the analysis must show how credibility functions in each episode rather than assume that any difference in interpretation amounts to injustice. It aims to make clear the conditions upon which accounts are accepted, not to impose a fixed hierarchy on the various forms of knowledge.

METHODOLOGY

The article uses a qualitative, interpretative approach that involves close-reading questions alongside narratological analysis. The main text is Dai's *The Legends of Pensam* (2006). The three episodes examined—Hoxo's arrival, Kalen's death, and Kepi's illness—are the ones discussed in the IGNOU study unit on the novel. That unit includes secondary summaries and contextual background; it does not take the place of the primary text.

The episodes are looked at using four questions: (1) Who is the one who gives an account of the event, and what is the relationship between this person and the event? (2) Which of the details refer to the actual occurrences and which refer to interpretations of the reasons for them? (3) On what basis is the credibility of an explanation established in the narrative? (4) What issues remain unanswered, and in what way does this uncertainty influence the meaning of the story?

The technique does not decide the factual truth of supernatural claims; rather, it analyses how explanations operate in a literary narrative and how the reader is encouraged to evaluate them.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Hoxo: extraordinary origins and communal narration

The Indira Gandhi National Open University lists Hoxo's story as "the boy who fell from the sky"; the summary states that Hoxo was found in the forest and brought up by Lutor and his wife, and his arrival is linked to a remarkable event in the sky (Indira Gandhi National Open University 72). This account shows how an unusual experience connects to the communal narrative through the way it is remembered.

The story matters because a doubtful origin can be made to fit a narrative. It is not simply an enigma awaiting a definitive factual answer; the story also addresses his position within a family and community. His remarkable origin can be reconciled with social belonging since the community includes the event in a story.

This episode raises a question about evidence and the role of narrative. An account can explain why someone belongs to a community without checking every detail of that person's background. The story's social function and its factual status must therefore be looked at separately. This does not mean the story is false, nor does it require the reader to treat each element as literal fact. Instead, it highlights two questions: what the story says took place, and what purpose the telling serves within the narrative world.

The status of the person telling the story also matters. A narrative can gain credibility because it is passed on through collective memory, linked to well-known storytellers, or able to make sense of an experience that, at first sight, cannot be explained intelligibly. Although these sources of authority help show why a story matters to its audience, they do not always guarantee

independent verification of each claim. For this reason, Hoxo's account introduces the article's central distinction between narrative authority and concrete proof.

Kalen's death: the limits of causal explanation

The Indira Gandhi National Open University section describes Kalen, a hunter who joins an expedition after recently having malaria. While hunting, Kalen becomes separated from the group. A change in the weather causes the hunters to lose sight of the monkeys they were tracking, and Loma fires at what he thinks is a monkey but, in fact, kills Kalen. On their way back, the rope bridge collapses. Bodak sees this series of events as a meeting with hostile spiritual forces (Indira Gandhi National Open University 72–73).

The events in the sequence can be stated without reference to the later explanation: the party leaves, Kalen gets separated from them, Loma fires, Kalen dies, and then the bridge collapses. According to Bodak's interpretation, these events should be seen as part of a wider context of supernatural danger. Although the sequence might create a feeling of foreboding, it does not, on its own, prove that a supernatural force caused either Kalen's death or the bridge's failure.

Bodak should not be dismissed as a liar, since his version of events may reflect the fear and confusion of a traumatic experience and draw on a cultural framework that helps explain misfortune. His account must be evaluated on more than one level, as he can reliably report the group's experience even if he cannot identify the cause of what occurred.

This distinction complicates the idea of the unreliable witness. Unreliability does not have to involve deliberate deception; it can result from incomplete information or from how people link events in retrospect. If another disturbing event succeeds an unexpected death, a witness might see a significant pattern. This pattern may be important to the witness even if it does not amount to conclusive evidence of a common cause.

The unit also states that Kalen's widow, Omum, goes on living and that the village keeps going (Indira Gandhi National Open University 73). This point shifts attention from the question of cause to the social effects of loss. The community must go on living even if the reason for the tragedy is unclear. The narrative can therefore meet both the need to make sense of misfortune and the requirement to carry on without possessing all the answers.

Kalen's death shows that credibility can be shared between a description of what happened and an explanation of why it happened; a reader can accept both the witness's sincerity and the cultural importance of the interpretation without requiring the causal claim to be fully proven.

Kepi's illness: competing explanations and the need to understand

According to the IGNOU unit, Kepi, Karyon Togum's son and a young boy, develops a high fever and then becomes unable to move. His parents take him to a hospital and also consult the shamans. Later on, a link is found between the child's illness and the python that his father had shot. Hoxo describes a ritual meant to free the child, but it is too late to intervene (Indira Gandhi National Open University 73).

The episode offers multiple explanations within the same narrative: both medical intervention and shamanic practice respond to the child's illness, and the connection with the python offers a possible spiritual explanation. However, the sequence does not state that shooting the python caused the illness.

To treat this case as merely a conflict between modern medicine and indigenous belief would be too simplistic. The summary does not show that either explanatory system fully explains the child's condition. Furthermore, it does not support treating the two explanations as equally evidential. The analysis is about the way in which the explanations function within the story, not a medical determination of cause.

The episode shows the distinction between needing an explanation and having actual proof. When the family faces a difficult situation, they ask for help. By linking the illness to the python, the family places the situation within a framework involving human actions, animals, and spiritual forces. Although this kind of explanation may have social and emotional importance, its importance does not in itself confirm the claim of causation.

Hoxo's role as narrator adds another layer of mediation. Instead of having direct access to each stage of the event, the reader gets the episode through narration. Experience becomes memory, and that memory, in turn, becomes a story told to others. Because of this transmission process, questions arise about selection, emphasis, and interpretation. What was seen directly? What was deduced later? What is known via the account of another person? And which aspects remain uncertain?

These questions help establish narrative credibility in the episode. A story can offer an explanation that makes sense within a given cultural context, even if it does not resolve its causal status. The reader's role then is to separate the account's social and narrative importance from what can actually be established about the event. Hence, Kepi's illness supports the view that testimony cannot be judged merely by whether the speaker is truthful or deceptive.

Storytelling as a social process of making uncertainty meaningful

The three episodes may be considered as a group since each one links an unusual or disturbing experience with a narrative that makes it understandable. Nevertheless, their differences are significant. Hoxo's remarkable arrival concerns origin and belonging; Kalen's death concerns misfortune and how a disturbing sequence is interpreted; Kepi's illness concerns suffering and the quest for an explanation. It would be too general to say that all three show the importance of folklore. What is more specific in relation to them all is the gap between the event as reported and the explanation by means of which it acquires meaning.

This is not necessarily a flaw in how the story is told. Stories can preserve experiences, convey a group's collective anxieties, and offer ways of interpreting events, all without needing to answer every question about cause and effect. Their importance may come in part from helping keep difficult experiences within collective memory. Because one authoritative voice to resolve every uncertainty builds up over the various episodes without demanding that all the uncertainties be settled by a single authoritative voice (Indira Gandhi National Open University 71–72).

One should not regard communal acceptance as equivalent to universal agreement or as proof of a fact. A story can have cultural authority even if it does not ultimately prove what caused an event. On the other hand, the lack of definite evidence does not mean that the storyteller is dishonest or that the story has no worth. Narrative credibility is relative, arising from the interactions among the speaker, the account, the listener, and the context in which the story is interpreted.

The ethical limits of the “unreliable witness”

The title's reference to the unreliable witness needs cautious handling. In narrative theory, the unreliable witness generally refers to a narrator whose version of events clashes with other evidence or whose assessments cannot be fully trusted. In this case, however, the term is used tentatively to examine the limits of testimony. A person can describe an experience honestly while still misinterpreting the cause of it; another person might retell a story that they have heard from someone else without having witnessed the first event themselves; and a community might keep a story around because of its cultural importance even if the particular details of how it originally came about are no longer accessible independently.

Such cases call for separate evaluations since deliberate falsehood, partial recall, and culturally significant interpretation are not the same. Fricker's work offers a useful warning, since social assumptions about who is entitled to have their knowledge recognised can shape judgments about testimony. However, to claim that an epistemic injustice has occurred, one needs evidence that a speaker's credibility has been unfairly damaged or that an appropriate interpretative resource is missing. It would be too early to regard every difference between medical, spiritual, and communal explanations as an example of epistemic injustice.

It is possible to make a more reasonable argument that the episodes encourage readers to think about the way they assess claims of knowledge. People who are used to certain standards of evidence will tend to accept some explanations while rejecting others readily. Critical reading involves separating the evidence supporting a claim from the story's human or cultural importance. This method does not suspend judgement or impose a fixed hierarchy; instead, it clarifies the basis for judgement.

FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

The analysis points out four findings. First, it helps distinguish between events and explanations when examining the episodes; Hoxo's arrival, Kalen's death, and Kepi's illness are each linked to the interpretations given of the reported experiences. However, the importance of these interpretations does not mean that all the causal claims they include are established.

Second, credibility is not a single, inseparable attribute; a narrator can describe an event reasonably while still offering an uncertain explanation of its cause. An account can also have communal authority even if it does not answer all the factual questions. It is therefore more useful to adopt a differentiated approach to testimony than to make a simple distinction between reliable and unreliable speakers.

Third, the interrelated nature of the narrative means the spread of stories lies at the heart of how communal life is portrayed. Without a single overarching explanation, various experiences and interpretations can coexist. This structure should be seen as an invitation to examine how knowledge is passed on, rather than as evidence that the narrative is inherently unreliable.

Fourthly, epistemic criticism offers a way to examine storytelling plus knowledge without treating the novel as a simple clash between indigenous beliefs and rational explanation. The appropriate questions concern how claims come to be seen as credible, what evidence underpins them, and what issues remain unresolved. Because this version of the first novel has not yet been independently verified, these conclusions remain provisional and must be tested through a detailed analysis of the original manuscript.

CONCLUSION

The Legends of Pensam provide useful context for examining storytelling, testimony, and the credibility of knowledge. Through a series of interconnected stories about community life, Dai's account combines experiences interpreted through memory, traditional

beliefs, and the individual's own understanding. The episodes concerning Hoxo, Kalen, and Kepi, as presented in the IGNOU study unit, show the gap between what is said to have happened and the explanations offered for those events.

This difference complicates the usual contrast between truth and falsehood. A witness can describe an experience sincerely without having definite knowledge of what caused it. A story can be culturally important even if it does not include independently verifiable evidence for each claim it makes. Similarly, uncertainty does not always mean someone is deceiving themselves, and the lack of conclusive evidence does not remove a narrative's social significance.

The article argues that credibility is relational and context-specific; it depends on the narrator's access to the event, the pathway through which the account is passed on, the interpretation frameworks available to the community, and the assumptions listeners use to assess what they are told. The interconnected narrative structure offers a way to examine these relationships without needing to resolve all uncertainties through one authoritative explanation.

This approach does not assert that all interpretations are equally valid, nor does it assume that indigenous beliefs should be accepted or rejected in their entirety. Instead, it promotes a careful examination of the reasons for making claims and the meanings through which stories are passed on. This viewpoint provides a clear basis for further research into narrative credibility in Dai's fiction, provided the analysis is checked against the entire novel and situated within the current body of scholarship.

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