



# Revisiting the Oral Traditions of Angami Nagas of North East India – A Reading of Easterine Kire’s *When the River Sleeps*

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## Abstract

Traditions of a particular community offers us the knowledge of the socio-cultural patterns of behaviour acquired by human beings that are transmitted from one generation to the next. Oral narratives play a crucial role in every indigenous tradition to maintain its customs, rituals, beliefs, traditions, way of living and way of being. They also construct its archetypal hero who bears the value, morality and indigenous knowledge of his culture. North east India is a region of unbelievably exhaustive ethnic, religious, and linguistic diversity. A number of writers from the Northeast writing in English namely Arup Kumar Dutta, Mitra Dhruba Hazarika, Temsula Ao, Mamang Dai, Robin S. Ngangom, Desmond L. Kharmawplang, and Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, Siddhartha Deb and many others have earned fame for depicting the this region to the world community. In this regard, any list of the very best writers in English from India cannot possibly overlook Easterine Kire (b.1959). Kier’s novel “When the River sleeps” explores the various forms of oral traditions of Angami Naga. This paper is an endeavour to show- how Easterine Kire in her fiction “When the River Sleeps” attempts to retrieve the oral traditions and discuss the manner in which oral narratives shape the psyche and life of Naga Community (Tenyimia) by revisiting the oral traditions especially of Angami Nagas.

Key Words: Angami Naga, folklore, North-East India, Nagaland, Traditions

## Introduction:

“Oral traditions” essentially bonds us with the thoughts and inner minds of “the folk”—often ordinary men and women with whom we owe our traditions. To be more accurate, they enable a particular community to recreate their history, and offer them with a sense of belonging to ethnic identities to which they originally belong. Oral traditions encompass folktales and fairy tales, legends, myths, epics, ballads, rituals, fables, ghost stories, superstitions, jokes, chants, proverbs, and mythologies. When we talk about the traditions of a particular community, it refers to human-made socio-cultural explicit and implicit patterns of behaviour acquired by human beings that are transmitted from one generation to the next. Depending on their explicit and implicit cultural and socio-historical location, these oral traditions contribute to the creation of folk as well as modern literature. The basic purpose of these oral traditions was to entertain, to inform, and to disseminate cultural traditions and values. The stories narrated in the various forms of folklore or oral traditions may not be historically accurate or even true. However, they provided the much needed cultural

cohesion amongst the particular tribe or community in which they were in vogue. Indeed, oral narratives play a crucial role in every indigenous tradition to maintain its customs, rituals, beliefs, traditions, way of living and way of being. They also construct its archetypal hero who bears the value, morality and indigenous knowledge of his culture.

### **Understanding the traditions of Northeast**

Northeast India, earlier the seven sisters ( including Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Tripura) and now the Ashta Lakshmi (the eight forms of the goddess of wealth also including Sikkim), is home to various diverse tribal communities such as Adi, Apatani, Angami, Ao, Rengma, Nyishi, Garo, Khasi, Synteng, Mizo, Kuki, Bodo, Missing, Dimasa, Nepalese, Rieng, Trippera and Tripuri. It is a region of unbelievably exhaustive ethnic, religious, and linguistic diversity. The lifestyles of the people living here get reflected in traditional art forms through the representation of indigenous games, hunting agriculture and fishing styles. Similarly, the life of tribal groups in the Northeast India flourishes with many traditions imbued in folklore, myth, superstition and a strong belief in the co-existence with nature. Meeta Deka in her article “ Folklore and northeast Indian History” rightly concluded “The very cultural heritage that gives indigenous peoples their identity, now far more than in the past, is under threat of extinction. This is particularly true of Northeast India, which is inhabited by over 200 of the 635 tribal groups in the country, and what is more striking is the fact that this region, plains and hills people included, geographically secluded as it is from the mainland shares greater affinity, besides the geographical, in terms of race, culture, and tradition to its eastern neighbours, viz. China, Tibet and Myanmar than with the mainland. Identity crises have grown exponentially in the last the six decades and more in post-Independence India , allowing a flourish of cultural diversity in the region as elsewhere, adding vibrancy to national identity on one hand, while the ever-widening contours of the economic world under the process of globalization, taking the shape of the Look-East Policy and other economic developments in Northeast India, have converted this region into one of South Asia’s hottest trouble spots, steeped in insurgency and secessionist movements. Ethnic identity crises have perforce drawn the attention of the various tribes to look for roots and invent a history, wherein folklore plays a remarkable role.” (Deka, 2011, p. 176) It is for this region that the writers from this region who have made attempts to preserve these otherwise perishing traditions. A number of writers from the Northeast writing in English namely Arup Kumar Dutta, Mitra Dhruba Hazarika, Temsula Ao, Mamang Dai, Robin S. Ngangom, Desmond L. Kharmawplang, and Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, Siddhartha Deb and many others have earned fame for depicting the this region to the world community. In this regard, any list of the very best writers in English from India cannot possibly overlook Easterine Kire (b.1959). Kire has acknowledged the importance of a written form of literature: “I felt we needed to create written Naga literature. We have so many oral narratives but with oral dying out, it’s all going to be lost” (Mandal & Singh, 2019, p. 1377). This paper will focus on as to how Easterine Kire in her fiction “When the River Sleeps” attempts to retrieve the oral traditions and discuss the manner in which oral narratives shape the psyche and life of Naga Community (Tenyimia) by revisiting the oral traditions specially of Angami Nagas.

### **Easterine Kire and her works:**

Easterine Kire was born to an Angami Naga family in Nagaland, India. As mentioned earlier, She is a major Anglophone poet and novelist from Northeast India and most of her writings are rooted in the lived realities of the ethnic tribal groups of her region. Kire has authored six novels, three collections of poetry, short stories and children’s books. Her works have been translated to Norwegian, German, Uzbek, Croatian and Nepali languages . In 2011 she was honored the Governor’s medal for excellence in Naga literature, Free Voice Award by Catalan PEN Barcelona. "Bitter Wormwood" was shortlisted for The Hindu Prize in 2013, and won the Hindu Literature Prize 2015 for her novel “When the River Sleeps”. Her first book of poetry “Kelhoukevira” was published in 1982. Her novel “Sky is My Father: A Naga Village

Remembered” (2003) is acclaimed as the first novel by a Naga writer in English. It was followed by the novels “A Terrible Matriarchy” (2007), “Mari” (2010), “Bitter Wormwood” (2010) and “Don’t Run, My Love” (2017). Her “Son of the Thundercloud” in 2017 won the Book of the Year at the Tata Literature Live festival. Kire’s writings explore and bring to the fore exciting areas of the collective past and present of the Nagas. As narratives deeply rooted in the Naga ethnic worldview, they celebrate the oral traditions at its best.

### **Analysis of “When the River Sleeps”:**

Kier’s novel “When the River sleeps” explores the various forms of Naga oral traditions. The novel opens with the protagonist Vilie having a strange dream about the sleeping river which he has been continuously dreaming for past two years. Perplexed by his dreams, Vilie sets out on an epic journey in the quest for the stone, encountering men and spirits, in an unforgiving landscape where every day is a survival.

Vilie responded: when the river sleeps, it is completely still. Yet the enchantment of those minutes or hours when it sleeps is so powerful, that it turns the stones in the middle of the river bed into a charm. If you can wrest a stone from the heart of the sleeping river and take it home, it will grant you whatever it is empowered to grant you. It could be cattle, women, prowess in war, or success in the hunt. That is what is meant by catching the river when it is asleep. That way you can make its magic yours. The retrieve stone is a power charm called a heart-stone (p.3)

The story stays resolutely on the adventures of Vilie, a lonely hunter. Vilie works for the Forest Department to ensure safeguard of the Tragopans in the forest and is insistently haunted by dreams of a river from where he has to grab a stone that is said to confer untold power. As Vilie treks through the forest on the trail of his dream we are transported to the far-flung mountains of Nagaland in northeastern India. With him, we roam around the lives and hearts of the people of Nagaland, and become familiar with their rituals and beliefs, their reverence for the land, their close-knit traditions.

For Angami Nagas, the world of nature is the world dear to their traditions. Therefore, Ville states “...the forest is dangerous to those who don’t know it, but it can be kind to those who befriend it.” (p. 20) Vilie on his hunt not only encounters mysterious and evil spirits, nasty witches and beasts prowling in the forest. He also encounters more dangers in the form of armed men that chase him. As he keeps roaming on foot from one place to another seeking asylum every now and then, he receives the support of kind and helping villagers. Also, he meets ruthless people who try to accuse him on a murder in which he was an eyewitness. Through his will power and valor Vilie finally gets in possession of the heart stone that he has dreamed about. Interestingly, on his way back home he meets a kind-hearted young lady Ate, who has been thrown out of her village on the accusation of being a witch. The traditional superstition of Nagas on such a witch is discernible here as the villagers believed that Ate possessed ominous power that will bring curse on anyone if finger is pointed. Vilie, on the other hand was convinced that Ate is harmless and decided to take responsibility of Ate and brings her with him. Further, realizing that the forest is unsafe for her, he took her to his familial village with his aunts and offers her the heart-stone. At the end, we find that Vilie is viciously murdered by a man who desires the stone to accomplish his worldly belongings.

In “When the River sleeps”, Kire mixes Naga folklore and fables blending them with lessons on life. The storyline is embroidered with the socio communal life of the Naga people in villages. As Vilie encounters on his journey filled with supernatural elements, Kire unfolds their traditions and belief systems. Usually, in the tradition of Naga belief charmed stone is always a coveted stone. However, Kire calls it as heart stone to symbolize the desire of human mind. Kire in an interview with Dibyajyoti Sarma about her ‘spiritual’ book, and about being a writer from Nagaland herself says, “The heart-stone is actually called a

charmed stone, but I preferred to call it heart-stone because of its closeness to the desires of the human heart. So I was writing out of the communal store of spiritual knowledge and it was very gratifying when readers recognised these elements. It was a very smooth process” (Kire: raiot.in)

Similarly, a minority group of women namely *Kirhupfümia*, thought to have the powers to disfigure, to blind a person or to kill the human species just by pointing their finger at them. In “When the River sleeps”, the kind-hearted young lady Ate is shown as representative of *Kirhupfümia* women. Kire says, “I knew the characteristics of the various characters Vilie would meet, such as the *Kirhupfümia*, because they are a big part of village lore. The widow-spirits are a cross between the new androgynous Naga spirits from the east and the very dangerous market spirits of Manipur. Using what I know of them, it was not difficult to fuse the two kinds of spirits and include them in the story. (Kire: raiot.in)

In fact, Kire delineated her subject matter in the novel mostly to reveal the ethno culture of the Naga people. Though Vilie has spent twenty-five of his years in the forest where he guards the forest and the gwi (mithun) yet he did not feel the urge to return to his village even after the death of his beloved Seno. Remarkable Kire also fuses the story of Seno to give the cultural milieu of the Naga people, their superstition beliefs and their practices. The Naga people have a notion that if any member of the clan died out of the ominous circumstances, it is not good for the villagers to bury such person within the village. “Any clan member dying after encountering a spirit could not be buried within the village” (P. 5) Therefore, as Seno died in ‘ominous circumstances’ she was buried outside the village gate.

It must be noted that in the Angami Naga has deep belief in transmigration of spirits from one body to another. In “When the River sleeps”, tiger spirits are referred to frequently in the novel. “The folk practice of certain men transforming their spirits into tigers was a closely guarded art. Despite the secrecy, most of the villagers knew who were the men who had become weretigers” (P. 25-26). In fact, the weretigers are called as ‘Tekhumiavi’ in the Angami language and they endure long processes before they finally get transformed. It is believed that the Angami men whose spirits start turning would behave bizarrely. They also fool around their tricks on cattle; swooping at them and scuffing their skin and thereby make them growl and mewl. The central character Vilie understands that the folk practice of certain men who transform their spirits into tigers and it is unsafe to kill them. Vilie decided to make peace with them; he quickly called out the names he remembered

Kuovi! Menuolhoulie!Wetsho! Is this the way to treat your clansman? I am Vilie, son of Kedo, your clansman. I am not here to do you harm. Why are you treating me as a stranger? I come in peace. You owe me your hospitality. I am your guest!” He shouted these words out with absolute faith that they being listened to and heeded. Sure enough the animals retreated for the second time, but not before it made a call like a warrior’s ululating cry as it departed (P. 26).

It was not just into tigers only that the men get malformed into. There are cases where they have turn out to be huge snakes and even women perform this practice. But once a person undertakes Lycanthropy it is very difficult for him to turn back and survive a normal life. Therefore, it is more like a living death: “Only with great difficulty and as though you were going through a living death. The spirit is tormented so greatly that the pain itself is a deterrent to those who want to stop being tigers” (P. 28). However, the risks of these bizarre metamorphoses cannot affect Vilie. Like a dignified Angami Naga who knows how to coexists with this supernatural world, he embarks on his bold journey by building a stable relationship with his surroundings.



While speaking on the attitude of the Vilie, the protagonist of the novel as one bellowing to the Angami culture, Kire herself comments:

In Angami culture, the culture to which the protagonist belongs, survival of the tribe depends on conformity of its members. Vilie takes a non-conformist stance when he chooses to live in the forest, and not amongst his clan members, doing what everyone else does, marry, have progeny, male heirs to carry on his name even as he matures into an elder contributing his wisdom to the life of the village. There is nothing wrong with that life, but by choosing the route he has taken, Vilie gives himself much more opportunity to explore the spiritual universe. (Kire: raiot.in)

Angami Nagas had belief in the traditional use of nettle. According to their belief, stinging nettle has been used to treat painful muscles and joints, eczema, arthritis, gout, and anemia. Therefore, Kire draws a picture of harvesting of nettle in the novel. Vilie was very much pleased to see the women harvesting carefully the nettle. He offered his helping hand, to an elderly woman namely Idele. Idele, however, instructs him as to how to harvest the nettle without getting hurt. She instructs him that it is always important to cover steam with the cloth. As she instructs Vilie, she reveals that she learned this art from her grandmother. She says, "I learnt it from my Grandmother and I am trying to pass it on to my niece (33). She also explains to Vilie how important it was to learn the language of one another because trading was based on barter system. She further says, "We are Zeliang and the younger generations do not know how to speak Angami, since there was no need for them to learn it. I speak because it was necessary in my day. Back then we trade with Angamis and took their daos, spears, and spades and keshiini, in exchange for our brine, salt, pigs, dried fish and chilly (p. 35).

The traditions of Angami Nagas in celebrating the genna day also find its due space in "When the River sleeps". The word "genna" has its roots in the Angami Naga word kenna, which means Ñit is forbidden. Shimreichon Luithui writes:

During a genna period much of what is part of every-day life comes to a standstill: It is forbidden to travel, to have sexual intercourse or to eat certain types of food. A genna period can last several days, and, depending on the occasion, has to be observed either by the whole village or only by certain individuals. A collective genna was for example connected to feasts of merit, or, still today, with annual festivals like the spring festival that marks the beginning of a new agricultural cycle. Genna is found among all Naga tribes. The custom is still practiced, though to varying degree, even among Christian villages. (iwgia.org p.7)

Subale in "When the River sleeps" explains this to Vilie: "Every time a person catches the sleeping river, we who live here observe a genna-day, a no-work day. The villagers here will not do any work in their field today. They will not go fishing or go to look at their traps. It a day of thanksgiving for delivered lives (p.109).

Throughout his journey, Vilie uses the traditional knowledge of Angami Nagas that was passed on to him by the elder people- in all domains of life. While having food, Vilie followed the Angami proverb "You can eat yourself dead" (p.56) Kire states that Vilie ate slowly to help his digestive organ, because that was what he had always been taught.

## Conclusions:

The novel *When the River Sleeps* is also a fine example of refashioning English in its use of words and phrases which are deeply embedded in Angami culture, customs and worldview. The protagonist Vilie and the other characters are representatives of a specific geographical and cultural location, and the story is narrated through their experiences. It is important to note that while negotiating the challenges on the way, Vilie keeps a firm faith on traditional wisdom. As writers like Salman Rushdie, Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, etc. use Hindustani, Igbo and Yoruba phrases in their English narratives, Easterine Kire too uses words like *Jotho*, *Gara*, *Gapa*, *Semyiega*, *Ciena*, *Mezasi*, etc, giving a sense of recognizing things in typical Angami way. Besides, Kire's description also brings alive the everyday vignettes of Angami life – be it domestic living, market system, law and justice, rituals and crafts, superstitions, etc. These are the markers that signify the uniqueness of the Angami ethnicity that distinguishes them from the other tribes. To put it in a nutshell, Kire's novel is certainly an attempt to decolonize the narrative as it keeps the said tribe at its centre, and everything about the outside world is dealt with from this centre.

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