

An Ecological Discourse on Naga Spiritual Cosmology: Defining through Oral Narratives and Easterine Kire's Select Novels

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Abstract

The Nagas are synonymously called the Hill people. Nagas have always been deeply seated in rituals, beliefs and practices, and the fear of unknown deities and spirits has constantly controlled their activities. In the Naga spiritual cosmology, Nature in itself was a strong spiritual entity. Forests, trees, water, even birds and animals and all elements of nature as such, had spiritual significance in the Naga society. Another aspect of the Naga spirituality was the belief in the plurality of souls and their varied forms. The Oral tradition also speaks of how men, spirits and animals coexisted as brothers at the earliest of times. Different elements of Nature were also considered as a medium of communion with the spiritual. Therefore, Nature was not just a means of sustenance for the Nagas, but the very culture which defines their identity was a synthesis of their relationship with nature and belief in the divine in Nature.

Nagas' affinity with Nature is found strongly embedded in the oral tradition so also in the post colonial Naga writings such as the novels of Easterine Kire. In view of this, Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps* and *A Naga Village Remembered* along with Naga oral narratives will be taken into account to define the spiritual cosmology of the Nagas from an ecological perspective. This entire paper, as the title suggests, is a discourse on the inter-connectedness of Naga spiritual belief and Nature.

Keywords: Naga, Spiritual Cosmology, Oral Narratives, Nature, Taboos/gennas

Introduction

Nagaland has often been characterized as a repository of culture. One unique feature of this culture is its association with Nature. Nature, with all its entities, has always played a pivotal role in shaping the culture of the people, their beliefs and customs, thoughts and practices, common behavioral pattern and traits, even fears and affinities and its destruction has also been associated with the degradation of man and this stands truest in the context of Naga cultural milieu. The Nagas

are synonymously called the hill people, and the mountain is their habitat. According to V. Nienu, in his book *Naga Cultural Milieu: An Adaptation to Mountain Ecosystem*, "the mountains and rivers of their land, combined with the indigenous flora and fauna, shaped the Naga life, and culture to a great extent. Consequently, for the Naga people, the mountains are more than just a habitat; rather, the mountains are a sacred vicinage- a sacred landscape and heritage that helped forge Naga

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society, beliefs and identity” (Nienu 34). As such, much of the Naga cultural practices and beliefs have been directly influenced and shaped by their reverence and understanding of Nature.

Naga Spiritual Cosmology: Spirits, Deities and Supreme Being

Nagas have always been deeply seated in rituals, beliefs and practices, and the fear of unknown deities and spirits has constantly controlled their activities. Even so, the idea of the deities and spiritual beings is still considered vague. One of the underlying reasons according to J.H. Hutton is because there has been no attempt to reproduce the mental images of spirits and deities in carvings or pictures. “There is no written dogma about the idea of God and faith... places like thick forest, rocks, mountains, springs, lakes, big rivers and other natural objects are believed to be the abodes of these spirits” (Lohe 76).

The Nagas believed in two types of spirits: the Benevolent and the Malevolent. In order to appease both types of spirits, sacrificial rituals were performed. They believed that the spirits were “not malevolent to one who has performed the rituals” (Iralu 35). These spirits “communicate with individuals in dreams, but their will is also discerned through omens” (Hibo 51). In Kire’s *A Naga Village Remembered*, when Keviselie had a dream “of the short-tailed *gwi*... he felt ready to take a title very soon” because it was a “good dream” (Iralu 16). Keviselie through the symbol of the ‘short tailed *gwi*’ (mithuns) in his dream, could discern the will of the higher forces and decided to prepare for the feast-of-merit.

Most Naga tribes also believe in the existence of a Supreme Being. The Ao- Naga oral narratives for example, speak of *Lijaba*, “the Creator of the earth and all living things and vegetation upon it. He is all powerful and he causes natural calamities too when

he is displeased with men” (Ao 52). The Angami Nagas “recognize a high God or creator, *Kepenopfu*... (While)the Konyak place a great deal of power in the hands of their high God *Gawang*, who exerts a direct influence on earthly matters” (Jacobs 83- 84). This Supreme Being or the Creator was believed to be omnipresent and omnipotent and “had to be appeased and propitiated. Taboos had to be observed so that the Creator was feared, revered and not angered for fear of harmful calamities, crop failure, massive injuries, unnatural death or restlessness in the after-life” (Hibo 1).

Rituals and taboos/ gennas

In the Naga Spiritual Cosmology, ritual practices permeated all aspects of their lives. These rituals were conducted by Village Priests, Shamans (‘witch- doctor’ or ‘medicine-man’), and also by individuals. As described by Julian Jacobs the village priest was responsible for village wide rituals. The Village Priest acted “as a mediator between the Supreme Being and the villagers” (Epaio 70), while the shaman was consulted for specific problems. The shaman was “able to foretell the future, interpret dreams and heal sickness” (Jacobs 93). On the other hand, individuals could conduct rituals in matters affecting their own households. In *A Naga Village Remembered* after the confirmation from the dream, Keviselie now went ahead with the preparation for the feast of merit. He approached the *Thepa* priest (younger priestly clan) and *Thevo* priest (elder priestly clan) to request them to perform the ritual for his family. In another instance, when Vikhwelie went missing for the third day and the villagers could not trace him out, seers were consulted. The seer of the *Thevo* clan prophesied that he was not far away from home

but his 'hands, feet and mouth were bound'. They "always stated facts cryptically necessitating an elder to interpret their words" (Iralu 28). Individuals also could indeed conduct some rituals like the 'birth ritual'. This ritual comprised of the father of the newborn child putting saliva on his finger and smearing it on the child's forehead with the words "I am first" (Iralu 5). This was act of swearing to protect the child from any harmful spirits, as done by Kovi in the novel.

Taboos simultaneously "were essential social functions that exhibited both the latent and manifest functions that benefitted the individual and the society" (Hibo 1). Taboos and observance of *gennas* was:

"to maintain proper order and right relationship with the Supreme being, spirits, Nature and fellow human beings... it brings blessing, success, victory, joyful life, achievement, prosperity and long life to those who hold on to it... curse, failure, sorrowful life, poverty and short life" for those who disobeyed (Marhu 31).

During the consecrated *genna* period, it was a taboo to work for the villagers. If they ignored this aspect, it was believed that their crops would be "damaged by insects, birds and animals" (Iralu 46). The taboos and myths of the past on which the Naga life was concentrated is not lost but has metamorphosed into values and ethics of today. In *A Naga Village Remembered*, many taboos are highlighted like the *lashiisia/lashii death* (women dying at birth unable to deliver). When Kovi's wife dies during child birth, he was forbidden from mourning because in the Naga Spiritual cosmology, "the strictest of taboos was upon the *lashii*

death"... his wife was "wrapped in a mat and taken out of the house through a new opening in the wall, and not the doorway, a *lashii* was the most abominable of apotia deaths" (Iralu 5). As mentioned earlier, Kovi and his family were 'too familiar with the taboos', they feared breaking them. "So the *genna* was death to those who defied it but life to those who abided by it" (Iralu42).

Naga concept of Soul

Another aspect of the Naga spirituality was the belief in the plurality of souls and their varied forms. The Naga oral tradition stands as a strong testament of this belief where Nature is entwined with the soul of man. Temsula Ao accounts of six souls in men and five for women in her book *The Ao- Naga Oral Tradition*. She further writes "the principal soul is the one which sustains the life force in the person. When this soul departs from the body then the person dies. The next important soul turns into a hawk and flies away". She also talks of "the other minor souls, four in men and three in women, remain in the body, sustaining it for some time till they turn into stones, insects and sticks etc., and become part of the universe" (Ao 56). The Naga-Chakhesangs believed in the concept of "seven times reincarnation" of the soul. "The last stage is reincarnation in the form of flies and bees" The Chakhesangs also ascribed to the belief that "the righteous men and women will be transformed into stars after death. If a spider is linking the grave to the sky, then they believe that man has gone to the sky and become a star in heaven" (Lohe 77).

Tigers and Were tigers

The Oral tradition also speaks of how men, spirits and animals coexisted as brothers at the earliest of times. In fact, oral tradition has within its gamut a

vast store of such beliefs and as unrealistic as they may sound, the truth remains that the Nagas' deep reverence and love for nature had sprung from such interconnections they felt with nature. 'Tiger, Spirit and Man' is a famous Naga folktale that speaks of how the three lived together before their mother separated them. As the story goes, the tiger was the eldest amongst the three brothers and man the youngest. They took turns in tending to their sick mother. However, the tiger and the spirit were devoid of human feelings and as such, while the tiger awaited the mother's death so as to feed on her body, the presence of the spirit made the mother sicker with its negative aura. The mother could find love and care only in her youngest son, that is, man. And therefore, according to the measure of their care for her, the mother cursed the tiger to a life in the jungles, to live in fear of man away from human habitations; the spirit was cursed to live in dirty, dark, secluded places and ordered to keep away from man's sight. As for man, he was blessed with the open space to dwell and to prosper, and was made superior over all creatures on earth. The tiger is still referred to as the "elder brother". This is a clear indication of how myths have got manifested in the lives of the Nagas. The Nagas also believed in weretigers which is "the folk practice of certain men transforming their spirits into tigers"(Kire 25). According to Kire in *When the River Sleeps*, "among the Angamis, the weretiger ritual was a closely guarded one" (Kire 27). In cases where a village dweller killed a tiger, which was an unusual event, a stringent tiger-killing ritual had to be performed by the person to atone for what he had done. For example, when Vilau kills a tiger in Kire's *A Naga Village Remembered*, he had to undergo a very intensive 'tiger killing ritual'. One of

the observances included thrusting open the tiger's mouth with a stick and carrying it to a waterfall where they would let the water fall through its mouth. "This was done so that when other tigers came to avenge him they would hear only the sound of the waterfall which would sound like "thevo, thevo, thevo" and the tigers would angrily go away and kill the pig believing it had killed their brother" (Iralu 13).

Values and ethics

"To the 'primitive' man the so called inanimate objects of Nature are parts of the great pattern of the universe, absolutely throbbing and pulsating with life and power, and potent with medicines. Thus, mountains and rocks, trees and rivers and even small pebbles on the river banks are believed to be 'animate' with such 'power'" (Ao 80). Likewise, stones have always been highly symbolic when we talk of Naga Spiritual Cosmology. In the origin myths of the Angamis, Chakhesang, Lotha, Sema and the Rengma they "have references to their ancestors having emerged from the Spirit Stone locally known as the 'Tsotawo', 'Tso' meaning stone and 'Tawo' the spirit" (Zehol 93). To this day, remnants of the spirit stone are preserved at Khezhakeno village in Phek District as shown in the picture below.



The Nagas, above all anthropocentric inclinations, valued the knowledge of the spiritual as evident in Kire's *When the River Sleeps* where Kani, an inhabitant of the border village tells Vilie:

“if you are grasping at wealth, you are going to lose something that wealth cannot buy for you. You will lose knowledge of the spiritual. And you will lose the power it offers you. That is true power; that is the only power to aspire to because it gives you power over both the world of the senses and the world of the spirit” (Kire 96).

Although the reverence for Nature was largely shaped by the fear of calamities and curses, this knowledge of the spiritual was highly valued and preserved. There was a sense of gratitude and respect for Nature and her forces because they knew what was guarding them as evident in the speech by Kovi in *A Naga Village Remembered*. He tells his mother Vipiano “whatever we have achieved, we owe” it to “the favour of the spirits. We shall endeavour to honour the spirits” (Iralu 52). In the Naga spiritual cosmos, the misuse of this spiritual knowledge invited the wrath of the spirits and the predicament was death. This is typified by the character Zote, the elder sister of Ate in *When the River Sleeps*. She manipulates the ‘Heart Stone’ to bring destruction upon the villagers who had mistreated her in the past. As a result of this, Zote provokes the ancestral spirits who consume her being at the end.

Another aspect of the matrix between man and Nature was that the forest was also the seat of all traditional therapy. Vilie in time became the Guardian of the forest. He “carefully tended to injured forest dwellers when he came across them

on his walks through the forest. He was skilled at using splints to set broken bones. He would make paste of *ciena* for open wounds. That worked for smaller injuries, but for bigger wounds he liked to use the pungent *Japan nha* and rock bee honey” (Kire 41).

Symbiosis between Nagas and Nature

The Nagas' close connection with nature is an outcome of their belief that the land is god given and it is their birthright to nurture and preserve it and “it is upon this indigenous ethic that the Nagas insist upon the moral and ethical rights to own and preserve their god-given land” (Neinu 34). This connection is found in Easterine Kire's historical novel *A Naga Village Remembered*. After six years of imprisonment under the hands of British imperials, when Levi returns home to his ‘Warrior Village’ of Khonoma,

“Impulsively he picked up a bit of soil and smelt its earthiness. He felt bonded to the village, to the land, and feelings surged up in him that he'd never known before. I should feel strongly for a mistress he mused, smiling to himself. That was what the village did to her men, she bonded them to her strongly that they were always striving to prove themselves men enough for her”.

The land was a symbol of home to them; there was a sense of belonging and natural affection for the bestowed lands. “The Nagas did not come and conquer land and take it away from someone already living there, beyond pushing their own farther by those trailing behind; rather, the Nagas came and occupied a virgin territory that their creator gave them. The creator also gave them

both the rights and obligations to maintain and be sustained by the land” (Nienu 34). Vilie, the protagonist in Kire’s *When the River Sleeps* was a forty eight year old man who had been staying as a forest recluse for the last twenty five years. In the village world it was considered unthinkable to reside in the forest. For the Chakhesang Nagas, “the forests were the abode of *Chiikichi-o* their creator. They dared not disturb their *Chiikichi-o* for fear of disastrous weather. . . the forest remained untouched and undisturbed. . . as a result of such beliefs, the forest was rich in flora and fauna” (Zehol 38). The villagers could not comprehend why Vilie did not want to return to the village. “The village is the abode of humans and is a known area, free from fear and dangers of the unknown world. The fields and forest, in other words, the world beyond the village gates is an unknown area; and therefore, filled with uncertainties and referred to as the abode of the spirits” (Hibo 52). Interestingly enough, this thought had also often assailed Vilie in times of loneliness and he would think back on the village life. But this was not a sense of alienation that he was undergoing. This was rather Vilie trying to formulate why he preferred to stay attached to Nature. Eventually, he realizes, his relationship with the forest was beyond an ephemeral moment of escapism. He says, “The forest is my wife. . . Now he had the sensation that he was being an unfaithful spouse. He began to think that leaving the forest would be the same as abandoning his wife” (Kire 9). Traditionally, the men folk took it as a responsibility to love, respect and protect their womenfolk. Nature as given in the two examples is being likened to women to whom they are bonded and in union. In the case of Levi, the word “mistress” is used which reflects on the magnitude of awe,

admiration and attachment with Nature. This could be also because in the village world, although they were eco- centric, the level of intimacy with nature was relatively lesser as opposed to the forest world; for in Vilie’s case, his relationship with Nature is a sacred union, a moral duty to stand by his other half in oneness as a faithful husband and keep her protected.

The Nagas’ relationship with Nature was practical and organic. They sought to explain the physical world based on how they saw it and religiously built their perception along those lines. Forests, trees, water, even birds and animals and all elements of nature, as such, had spiritual significance in the Naga society. In Kire’s *When the River Sleeps*, the River is projected as a spirit. “The river was almost human as it pushed him down and under, down and under, and the water rushed at him as though it would strangle him” (Kire 103). In the same novel, the plot goes on that, if a person “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. . . that way the magic is yours. The retrieved stone is a powerful charm called a heart stone” (Kire 3). Naga oral narratives also speak of village trees which would shed leaves as a premonition to deaths in the village. Birds and animals played an equally significant role in the Naga spiritual cosmology. Naga folklore tells us of Koza, the ancestral chief who led his men to the land now inhabited by Nagas following the flight of a bird and such other signs and guidance provided by the Supreme Being. Thus, the Nagas were spiritually rooted and since Nature was the means and nexus to the Supreme being, a very cohesive relationship was formed.

Conclusion

Thus, this paper is an attempt to bring out the interconnectedness among Naga people, the Spiritual and the Natural world. The Nagas since time immemorial have had a rich tradition of love and respect for nature and “their love of nature continues to be profusely expressed in the various forms of arts and crafts, in dress and ornaments, in religious ceremonies, and in the stories and songs of rich oral traditions” (Nienu 35). The Nagas seem to have been consistently eco-conscious; they were accepting of the fact that by embracing nature as an entity in itself and through harmonious coexistence, the balance would be sustained. In the Naga spiritual cosmology “Gods, spirits, humans and nature: everything had its part in keeping the

balance intended within all of creation” (Abraham 149). Man, nature and spirit as such, are all inclusive or inductive and no one entity dominates or remains outside the unified and balanced ecosystem. By revisiting the spiritual cosmology of the Nagas, we hope that it will open new vistas and arenas for eco-critical studies in and beyond the Naga society. This study has also been taken with the aim to strengthen and reaffirm the Nagas’ bond with Nature, and to reinforce stability which has been disrupted by the changing tides of modernization and urbanization. In addition, this study stands as an attempt to spread eco-awareness and to usher in a neo-ecoconsciousness that will propel people to take initiatives to restore and to rebuild.

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