



Divulgence Of Naga Culture Through The Concoction Of Supernatural And Universal Wisdom In Easterine Kire's *When The River Sleeps And Son Of The Thundercloud*

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ABSTRACT: Easterine Kire Iralu is a renowned novelist and poet from Nagaland, a state in Northeast India. The Northeast, though they feel isolated from the mainland India because of the polarity in their language, culture, history and even physical appearances; writers like Kire attempts to celebrate their unique identity in their works and also strive to bring in homogeneity among the different tribes of this region. This paper attempts to examine how her novels, *When the River Sleeps and Son of the Thundercloud* unveil the Naga culture and traditions, through the amalgamation of the spiritual world and universal wisdom. The paper depicts Kire as a preserver of her own culture and also the righteousness of the human world. Modernization and globalization have led to the deterioration of the true essence of various cultures and this paper also discusses how Kire, through her novels, safeguards the Naga culture by unveiling it to the ignorant-younger generation Nagas as well as world-wide.

KEYWORDS - Folklores, Myths, Naga culture, Supernatural, Universal wisdom.

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The seven sister states – Tripura, Nagaland, Mizoram, Meghalaya, Manipur, Assam and Arunachal Pradesh, together known as the 'paradise unexplored' and the Himalayan state- Sikkim, constitute the northeastern region of India. Literature of this region is imbued with a spirit of their culture and customs. Nagaland, formed on 1st Dec. 1963, shares its border with Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh, Assam and Myanmar. Nagas lack a written history that explains their origin so they rely on folklores and myths to establish their identity. Various origin myths are believed by different Naga tribes: the origin of tiger, spirit and man from the first woman named dziillimosiuro; origin of Angami, Lotha, Sema and Chakhesang tribes are linked with the myth of stone slab or the origin stone, that served the ancestors of these tribes by providing them with enough food; creation of landscapes for Ao tribe by the creator named Lijaba; origin of the main clan and sub clans of Ao is related to the myth of Longterok or the six stones, from which their ancestors originated. Thus myths and folklores play a pivotal role in Naga culture.

Animism was the religion practiced by Nagas before the British colonization. It's a belief that attributes spiritual essence to every element of nature. Thus Nagas acknowledge their natural world as divine and the abode of supernatural powers. They worship Kepenuopfu, the birth spirit and consider Terhuomia, Rutzeh, Telepfu, Maweno, Ayepi and Tsukho as sub-deities that originated from the birth spirit. Each of these deities is believed to be assigned with a special ability, as Maweno for bringing in fertility, Ayepi for prosperity and Tsukho for guarding the wild animals. Rutzeh and Telepfu are blamed for evil happenings and several rituals are performed by the Nagas to please those deities.

Easterine Kire Iralu is a poet and a novelist, who is currently settled in northern Norway. She was born on 29 March 1959 to the Angami tribe in Nagaland. The first English novel published by a Nagaland author, *A Naga Village Remembered*, was written by Easterine Kire, and was published in 2003. *A Terrible Matriarchy*,

published in 2007 is Kire's second novel, which unfolds Naga culture through the life of the female protagonist, Lieno. Her novel, *Mari* (2010) can be categorized as a feminist novel that narrates the hardships endured by a young mother, on the backdrop of Japanese invasion in Nagaland. Her fourth novel, *Bitter Wormwood* was shortlisted for The Hindu Literary Prize, 2011 and is a novel in which the intense pain endured by Nagas, during their struggle for freedom is exposed to the whole world, through the characters of real life. Three collections of poetry, several children's book and short stories, which delineate Naga culture and traditions, have also been written by Kire. She has also translated several oral poems in her native language into English. Easterine Kire was honored with the Governor's Medal for excellence in Naga literature (2011) and The Catalan PEN International Voice Award, at Spain.

Easterine Kire's novel, *When the River Sleeps* (2014) had won The Hindu Prize 2014 and *Son of the Thundercloud*, published in 2016 was shortlisted for the same. Protagonists of these novels- Vilie and Pele, undertakes a journey to revelation, a journey that unfolds the Naga culture through an encounter with the mystic nature of Nagaland.

Vilie, in *When the River Sleeps* pursues his recurring dream of grasping the supernatural heart-stone, which is believed to be a fulfiller of every wish of its owner. Thus he leaves his abode- the wilderness of forest to a journey through Nagaland landscapes, in search of the stone. During his journey, he confronts the spiritual world of weretigers and spirits. Spiritual wisdom that he attains along the journey ushers him to grasp the heart stone, by triumphing over evil spirits with the comprehension of the utmost power of his soul. Vilie finally returns to his village, with Ate, a woman from the village of kirhipfimia, and the heart-stone. Even after several years of Vilie's disappearance, Ate feels his presence and surmises the heart stone to be in the safest hands. The novel concludes with a hope of revelation about the spiritual world and Naga culture that might be attained by the unborn child of Ate and the little boy, Vibou.

Son of the Thundercloud by Easterine Kire depicts the protagonist, Pele's journey through the terrains of Nagaland, resulting in his appreciation of Naga culture, with myths and supernatural elements at its core. Pele, after the death of his dear ones, due to a famine, leaves his village and undertakes a journey to nowhere. His meeting with the two women in the abandoned village, once called the village of Noune, becomes the turning point in his life. He witnesses birth of Rhalie, son of the thundercloud, by Mesanuo, who was impregnated by a single drop of rain. Barren villages regain their fertility with the birth of Rhalie. Pele helps Mesanuo in bringing up Rhalie and ushers him to fulfill his life purpose: to kill the weretiger and liberate humanity from evil. But the dark hearts of the mortal world, ignorant of Rhalie's goodness, murders him and famine returns as its aftermath. The novel ends with Pele, a transformed man with a vivid realization of true Naga culture, starting another journey, a journey to open his heart further to the unknown and unexplored Nagaland.

Easterine Kire's novels *When the River Sleeps* and *Son of the Thundercloud* disclose the esoteric world of Nagas entwined in universal wisdom. Naga culture, with its substratum of oral tradition and folklore is divulged through Kire's novels, which have myths, spirits, folklores and mystic nature as its kernel. Universal wisdom is unveiled through confrontation with an enigmatic world. Wisdom of hope, love, compassion and forgiveness conceives an image of exemplary human world in the readers and facilitates the writers of Northeast in the blooming of an adamant bond among Nagas, to ensure the survival of Naga culture and tradition.

"In general a myth is a story which is not true and which involves (as a rule) supernatural beings – or at any rate supra-human beings. Myth is always concerned with creation. Myth explains how something came to exist. Myth embodies feeling and concept . . ." (Cuddon 526). Myths and folklores are embedded in the oral narratives of Nagas. Origin of every Naga clan is tethered to a myth, which people believe as the fountainhead of their ancestors. Kire's novels are an allusion to such myths that persist among Nagas. Her novel *Son of the Thundercloud* has one of the origin myths of the Nagas as the core of the story. Mesanuo in the novel and dziilimosiuro in the myth, were impregnated by a single drop of rain. The Naga's myth of Longterok professes the Ao-Nagas belief of their ancestral genesis from the six stones and supernaturalness of these stones is analogous to the mystical heart-stone in *When the River Sleeps*.

Supernatural story is a "very comprehensive term which may be applied to any sort of story which in some way makes use of ghosts, ghouls, spectres, apparitions, poltergeists, good and evil spirits . . . the eerie atmosphere and the presence of the uncanny; anything supranormal, and beyond sensory perception; what makes the flesh creep and the hair stand on end" (Cuddon 879-878). Supernatural elements along with the bewildering landscape of Nagaland delineated in Kire's novels culminate in the revelation of isolation-swathed Naga culture and intuitive wisdom in mankind. Nagas surmise their natural world as the dwelling of supernatural beings. They give credence to spirits that resides in rivers, stones, trees, forest and every strand of the eldritch nature. Mechuseno, a tender-faced and gentle-mannered girl, loved by Vilie is accompanied by a spirit from a tree when she returns home after plucking flowers from the forest. She passes away after a few days and is buried outside the village because of the obscurity in her death. The inexplicable and malefic effect of the spirit mirrors the supernatural world of Nagas, which is indecipherable to a skeptic. "*Rarhuria*" or the

“unclean forest” (76) is also appraised by the villagers, as an abode of diverse spirits, which abduct children to play with them and fantasize adults with their melodic songs. In *Son of the Thundercloud*, Siedze and Kethonuo, transform into spirits. Their body gradually begins to disappear. Pele witnesses Kethonuo’s legs being transformed into spirit-form when she bids farewell to them. Thus Kire’s novels, like Naga culture, bridge the disparities among human, natural and spiritual world.

The protagonists’ exposure to natural and supernatural world discloses their paramount human soul. It is the Naga’s extramundane environment that ushers them in their journey to revelation. This arcane world willingly submits itself to the mankind in possession of a greater spirit. Vilie accomplishes his journey to grasp the mystical heart-stone, with his wisdom of the spiritual sphere. After grasping the heart-stone from the sleeping river, defending the widow spirits, Vilie and Kani returns to the village silently, without exchanging any words, cherishing their experience that strengthened their spirits. Vilie’s “large-hearted and teachable” (108) spirit elevates in the apprehension of the spiritual world. In *Son of the Thundercloud*, Rhalietuo defeats the were-tiger, a spiritual being, with the greatness in his spirit. As Kethonuo says, one who believes in his own spiritual strength, rather than worldly weapons can only subdue the abstruse supernatural world. Rhalietuo eradicates the iniquity of the were-tiger with a resolution to safeguard his fellow beings. This affirms that the abysmal power of supernatural thwarts the temporal aspects in mankind and can be fathomed only with a commensurable power of human soul.

Immense spiritual knowledge implanted in the heart-stone reveals the soul of rectitude in Ate. The heart-stone helps Ate to free her from the shackles of pessimistic outlooks of others and to appreciate her true self. Thus the mysterious charm of the heart-stone reveals the triumph of the virtuous human soul over evil forces. Spiritual knowledge that unfurls from the stone discloses purer and nobler facet of Ate’s soul. As Vilie says, it transmuted her into a new person, who is able to acknowledge her own innate goodness.

The old man, Ate and Kani in *When the River Sleeps* and Mesanuo, Siedze and Kethonuo in *Son of the Thundercloud* unfolds the Naga’s extramundane universe entwined in universal wisdom. In the modern era, where the younger generations of Nagaland forsake their culture and traditions, these characters in Kire’s novels function as a medium to disseminate the supernatural knowledge of the Naga world, along with its ubiquitous sagacity; thus fulfilling the writer’s obligation to persevere Naga culture.

The old man, without any emphatic proof, cognizes the presence of heart-stone with Vilie and enlightens him with the wisdom of supernatural world. He explains to Vilie how the heart stone remains unattractive and as a mere stone for the disbelievers. Thus, through the old man, Kire enlightens Nagas on the relevance of acceptance of their supernatural world to realize the true essence of Naga culture. His words guide Vilie along his journey: the old man tells Vilie to always take the road in the left and he follows the old man’s advice and reaches successfully in Ate’s ancestral village. The old man also helps Vilie to discern the world of spirits- spirits that approach in a deceived form and deludes the human senses, as the beautiful river spirits, who come to the market in search for bridegrooms.

Easterine Kire encapsulates Naga’s faith in supernatural in her works, through the portrayal of “the village of kirhipfimia” (*When the River Sleeps* 124). Ate belongs to the kirhipfimia, which is inhabited by women who are isolated by the other villagers for their possession of evil powers, like Zote, who has murdered a fetus, simply by pointing one of her fingers towards a woman’s womb. Their supernatural power is amalgamated with intense knowledge of Naga landscapes and its assistance to ordinary people. They have a masterly knowledge about the salubrious role of nature and other villagers seek their help to cure diseases. Even though the bigoted and rational villagers disdain the supernatural, they depend on them when the mundane world fails to heal their ordeals; thus affirming the pre-eminence of spiritual world in the survival of Nagas. Character of Ate also renders the readers with an understanding of Naga culture, with supernatural elements and universal wisdom as its substratum. She is encompassed with knowledge unknown to ordinary people. Ate imparts the true purpose of heart-stone to Vilie, that it edifies the owners with spiritual awareness and functions as a “stumbling stone” for the “impure hearts and their corrupted understanding” (142). Thus the Naga’s loss of faith in their mysterious world and their mimicking or imitation of other cultures as that of West, stumble the whole community by the gradual eradication of their culture and traditions and also make their identity anonymous. Through Ate, Kire unveils the amiability of the extramundane and its pre-eminent endowment to sustain Naga culture and traditions.

Subale and Kani of the “border village” (86) typify the real Nagas, with traditional veneration of their enigmatic landscapes and supernatural world. The border village, with “a small settlement of determined people who had made their dwellings in an impossible place” (88) symbolizes the Nagas, who are disposed to bide in the spiritual world of Nagaland wreathed in myths and folklores, for abiding their culture and tradition. Kani permeates Vilie with his knowledge of the spiritual world. Indispensability of a protection- protection of a good heart devoid of any unscrupulous deeds, to grasp the heart-stone, is cognized by Vilie through the words of Kani. Wisdom of Kani, on how to triumph over the evil spirits, is augmented by his universal wisdom of life. This is asserted when Kani says to Vilie about the irrelevance of wealth, when one fails to live in peace with the

fellow beings. According to him, worldly pleasures become extraneous and the “true power” adheres to the “knowledge of the spiritual” (96) - the power that makes one capable to acknowledge the world of spirits, as well as the world of senses. Kani says: “I was foolish enough to go out unprotected and paid for it with my arm” (93). Flesh from Kani’s arm was torn away by the widow spirits, when he went unprotected to grab the heart-stone. Thus, the ignorant Kani becomes an epitome of the modern Naga generation, who are ignorant of their rich culture and foolishly tears away their own identity.

In *Son of the Thundercloud*, Mesanuo, Siedze and Kethonuo- the three sisters who endured the famine with hope and faith, reveal the power of Naga culture, conserved by the supernatural world of storytellers and folktales. Siedze and Kethonuo, four hundred and two hundred years old respectively, “haven’t seen rain” since they were born. Like Pele, who felt “that they were telling the truth” (29), the Nagas also surmise their folklores and myths as existent. Siedze and Kethonuo outlive hunger and thirst with faith on the supernatural as their life-sustaining power. Their hope is rewarded with the birth of Rhalie; likewise the Nagas are vouchsafed with a unique identity by their credence to the supernatural world. The word kethonuo means truth and siedze stands for future, but Pele considers these sisters as a symbol of a “future full of hope” (34). This hope in them emanates a transcendent wisdom that satisfies their spirits, which is the ultimate gratification that everyone seeks. Kethonuo says, after Rhalie’s birth that they are willing to go anytime, since their spirits have been contented with the arrival of Rhalie. Thus Naga’s faith on the spiritual world avails them in their journey to revelation – revelation of their true identity.

Virtuousness of human soul bestows an unsurpassed spiritual strength to defend the evil forces, as in Mesanuo, who with an aggregate of hope, faith and wisdom of life has endured the dark side of humanity. She never left the village that isolated her, and deploys their negligence to assimilate a further spiritual strength in her, that later qualifies her to be impregnated by a supernatural process. Thus Naga’s reliance on the spiritual world is recompensed genuinely by the supernatural, as Mesanuo’s faith and wisdom are rewarded with the birth of Rhalie. The spiritual world of Nagaland comprises of both good and evil spirits and only a man of complete integrity can quell the evil. Mesanuo’s journey to the abandoned village, to meet her sisters, is distracted by the evil spirits, in the guise of heavy rain. Her wisdom of the spiritual world empowers her to comprehend the evil and vanquish it.

Universal wisdom of love, hope and forgiveness are amalgamated with the life of Nagas in Kire’s works, thus divulging Naga culture and tradition, with sagacity as a cardinal attribute. Mesanuo forgives the villagers who have abandoned and blamed her for the death of her husband and seven children. She says, “My son [son of the thundercloud- Rhalie] forgives you, headman. Do not condemn yourself any further” (45). Thus, comprehension of the spiritual and natural world of Nagaland transmutes the Nagas into altruistic beings. Mesanuo, before her journey to the abandoned village, leaves a sack of grains outside her house and she says to Pele that it is an act of hospitality by which she can feed her guests even in her absence. Compassion and love for fellow beings embedded in Naga culture is divulged through this action of Measanuo who believes in the virtue of helping the needy. She, like every ancient Nagas, considers adversities in their lives as the result of ebbing away of human values. Thus, through the character of Mesanuo, Kire reveals the Naga culture founded on universal wisdom of compassion.

Easterine Kire incorporates in her works, the wisdom of life, which reveals the innate goodness of human beings. Commiseration for fellow beings and other creatures emanates from the consciousness of utmost spiritual power. In *When the River Sleeps*, Vilie, after being chased by the hunters who blamed him for a murder that he has not committed, instantly feels an emotional rapport with all helpless creatures in the world. Novel experiences get imprinted in his mind along his journey. Thus Vilie’s journey to comprehend the supernatural has revealed to him the wisdom of compassion entwined in Naga culture. The heart-stone enlightens Vilie with an exquisite spiritual knowledge that belongs to the heart and can never be snatched away. When Zote seizes the heart-stone from Vilie, he “reached for his gun but did not know what to do. Should he shoot at a human being for the sake of a stone? It did not seem right at all” (148). This unfolds the truth that a mere possession of the supernatural heart-stone is of no avail; the profit exudes from one’s immersion in its spiritual wisdom. Easterine Kire thus unfolds Naga culture that gives prominence to the spiritual knowledge and universal wisdom, rather than consumerist attitude of the modern era.

Kire’s *Son of the Thundercloud* also delineates a concoction of the supernatural and universal wisdom of life. Rhalie’s affinity with Siedze illustrates the gaiety of unfeigned love. Rhalie admires Siedze’s hands with the “spidery veins pulsating beneath the blue skin” (99), for its beauty. The beauty that Rhalie sees is not the mere physical appearance, but the warmth of love and care that those hands provide him. Thus Rhalie, a human being with a supernatural provenance, unveils the transcendental power of love and compassion that even triumphs over death. Kethonuo tells Rhalie about the boundless power of love, that persists forever and which even make the physical separation by death irrelevant. Blending of the supernatural and universal wisdom is also evident through words of Mesanuo, after the murder of Rhalie. She says that the villagers’ hatred for Rhalie has culminated in hurting their own self. Though the supernatural world has bestowed prosperity and fertility

on mankind, their adulation to the darker side of humanity concluded with a return of the famine. Thus hatred is always rewarded with hatred. Character of Mesanuo also embodies the wisdom of life: she says to Pele, "Life is hard and unexpected, but we can direct it to go the way we want it to. It is up to us" (92). Liberty of mankind to choose the path of vice or virtue is evident in these lines. It is the perception of spiritual world melded with universal wisdom that empowers Nagas to espouse a life of righteousness.

Amalgamation of the extramundane and universal wisdom is the essence of Naga folklores and other oral narratives, through which Naga culture is promulgated. Mesanuo says to Pele about the relevance of storytellers. Their stories make people free from fear, shame and extreme desires. They also outspread compassion and hope and saves the people from the darker side of humanity. Thus the folklores and stories are a means to propagate the virtuousness and wisdom of human soul entwined in Naga culture and traditions. The "dark ones"- people who "thrive on fear and greed" (64), overlooks the spiritual world of Nagas and propagates hatred, distrust and despair, thus annihilating Naga culture and their traditions. The novels of Easterine Kire indemnify for the endorsement of the "dark ones" in the modern era, who neglects their own culture.

Certain Naga communities assume potsos (spiritual beings) as equivalent to god. Potsos are expected to visit the village of seers and bestow them with presents which help to envisage the future. The novels of Kire also exhibit the supernatural competence of seers, as presumed by Nagas. Vilie, along his whole journey, is aided by the seer's advice that the struggle against the spiritual powers can never be overwhelmed with any worldly weapons, but with the ultimate power of the soul. The spiritual world of Nagas always embodies the unknown and can only be comprehended with the assistance of a supernatural wisdom, alike a seer. After Vilie's and Ate's encounter with the were-tiger, they were confused on how a spirit tiger has caused spilling of real blood and Vilie considers it as a question that can be answered only by a seer. *Son of the Thundercloud* depicts the modern era Naga world with seers of immense spiritual wisdom and ordinary people with waning credence to their spiritual world: The headman of the village of weavers mentions about the prophecy of a seer regarding the birth of a child that saves the whole village and he also admits that only a few of them believe in such divinations.

Conviction of were-tiger concretizes another supernatural facet of Naga culture. According to Michael Heneise, spirit-tiger or tekhumiaivi has the "concept of theriomorphism" as its core. A weretiger springs from the process of soul-transference between a human and a tiger. Rhalie- son of the thundercloud was born with the purpose to kill the weretiger and save the village from its evil sway. Both Vilie and Rhalie murder the weretigers with their spiritual weapon, since terrestrial powers are of no benefit, to shield against evil spirits. Vilie overpowers the weretiger with an intense spiritual strength and goodness of heart, intensified with his complete reliance on the unrivalled power of the birth spirit. Rhalie conquers evil spirit of weretiger with a dearth of pride and wisdom of compassion for his fellow beings. Thus, agglomeration of universal wisdom and conception of supernatural becomes the hub of Naga culture. Easterine Kire belongs to Angami community in Nagaland and the notion of weretigers or tekhumiaivi is not acclaimed among the Angamis. Her depiction of the concept of weretiger in *When the River Sleeps* and *Son of the Thundercloud*, qualifies the novels as a revelation of Naga culture, unstirred by the heterogeneity in the Naga clans.

Kire, through her novels, *When the River Sleeps* and *Son of the Thundercloud*, divulges the Naga culture, which is vulnerable to globalization and modernization in the modern era. Spread of Christianity and western education have marred the culture and traditions of Nagaland and these novels, unveils the beauty of Naga culture, with their acceptance of supernatural in the natural world. These novels also promulgate the idea that rational doesn't mean the negligence of indigenous culture, but the comprehension of one's own culture as it is.

The protagonists, Vilie and Pele acknowledge the supernatural in Nagaland landscapes, only through their experiences and words of other characters who have comprehended Naga customs and traditions. Alike the folklores of Nagas, spiritual wisdom is also attained through oral tradition. This spiritual wisdom thus becomes analogous to the knowledge of Naga culture, which ushers Nagas to survive in their natural world that abodes both good and evil spirits. The ultimate power of the spirit, realized by the protagonists to triumph over the evil, epitomizes the disclosed Naga culture itself, which can be comprehended through Kire's novels, thus helping the Nagas to survive and defend against their cultural loss.

The evil spirits in *When the River Sleeps* and the "dark ones" (63) in *Son of the Thundercloud*, who destroys the storytellers, are overpowered only through spiritual wisdom and credence to the Naga folklores that pervades hope. This resembles the various factors that lead to cultural loss in Nagaland and how the Nagas, with a firm belief and admiration for their natural as well as supernatural world, strive to preserve Naga culture and traditions.

Easterine Kire says, "Each story of mine is different; so each message is different too. However, I always try to give my readers something positive to hold on to" (qtd. in "Novelist from Nagaland"). Thus, the novels of Kire, besides establishing a world-wide recognition to the Nagas, also portray the innate goodness in

human world through the concoction of supernatural and universal wisdom. In her poem “But Our Dreams Stubbornly Refuse to Die,” she writes:

They have killed our dreams.

But our dreams stubbornly refuse to die.

We dream of the liberation of truth.

This sentence is a dream-breathing.

Every Naga life is a stubborn refuse. (Nirmal 48)

These lines proclaim Kire’s works as a disseminator of hope and optimism to the people of Nagaland, to protect their indigenous culture and to establish their identity. Naga’s cultural loss can only be defended with an intuitive comprehension of Naga culture. The spirit of Nagaland- its natural and supernatural world, amalgamated with wisdom, hope and optimism are portrayed in Kire’s novels- *When the River Sleeps* and *Son of the Thundercloud*, thus divulging Naga culture for a world-wide recognition and understanding. Thus, as Paul Pimomo said, “Easterine Kire is the keeper of her people’s memory, their griot. She is the master of the unadorned language that moves because of the power of its evocative simplicity” (qtd. in “*Bitter Wormwood*”).

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