

Voices and Whispers: Towards an Epistemology of Tribal Life in Contemporary Naga Stories

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Abstract- Historically, Naga voices and narratives have suffered during different periods of history. However, much of the new literature coming out of Nagaland today has challenged these views. This paper examines three such narratives: Easterine Kire's *Don't Run, My Love* and *When the River Sleeps*, as well as Avinuo Kire's short story *The Visitors in The Last Light of Glory Days: Stories from Nagaland*. It argues that these contemporary narratives defend long-standing Naga epistemologies by highlighting the rich reservoir of oral traditions, indigenous knowledge, and epistemic systems that have existed among the Naga people. Moreover, the barrier between human and non-human elements is also vividly reimagined through the lens of tribal epistemology. Such reconstructions shape the portrayal of tribal life in the stories of E. Kire and A. Kire. By demonstrating this, the paper reveals how both authors challenge Western rationale, defend indigenous ways of knowing as a legitimate thought and practice, and truthfully depict the worldview that shapes the lives of Naga communities.

Index Terms– Epistemology, Tribal, Culture, Colonial, Tradition

I. INTRODUCTION

Epistemic violence, as theorized by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988), can be witnessed in Nagaland and the historical encounters of the Naga people during colonial and postcolonial periods. With the arrival of outsiders—American missionaries, colonial officials, and Indian administrators—Naga voices suffered a devastating “silencing,” where local knowledge was discarded in favor of a dominant Western epistemology (Elizabeth & Tsuren, 2017). Making matters worse, the measures put in place by the British government during the 19th and 20th centuries were directly intended to marginalize and restrict Naga narratives. Through its educational system, the British colonial administration imposed Western knowledge systems and languages, which eroded the veracity and authenticity of Naga ways of knowing. As a result, their indigenous cultural norms, oral traditions, folklores, folk songs, war dances, traditional ornaments, attire, religious beliefs, and judiciary system were unjustly labeled as “primitive” or “barbaric.”

In addition, the limits and borders set up by the British government split up Naga society. Collective narratives were erased as a result of this divide, and the Nagas lost control over their territory and resources (Chasie, 2005). This limited the Naga people's capacity to create their own narratives, which were already constrained by the imposition of Western systems and modernity. It was only after the attainment of statehood that many Nagas who received higher education started writing articles in local dailies in the 1970s (Chasie, 2015). By the 2000s, more Naga authors emerged on the scene. Some still remained reluctant to explore themes related to the political situation of Nagaland, as it was considered a sensitive topic. However, much of the new literature coming out of Nagaland today strongly opposes the reduction of Naga stories to bloodshed, insurgency, and primitivism (Misra, 2011).

Two well-known Naga authors, Easterine Kire and Avinuo Kire, have been at the forefront of this movement. By highlighting rich tribal traditions, indigenous knowledge, and epistemic systems that are frequently ignored or left out of mainland India's creative imagination, this paper examines how both authors use stories to revive Nagaland's long-standing indigenous epistemology.

II. BACKGROUND

Historically, the tribes of Nagaland were usually portrayed as primitive and unusual in colonial writings (Ziipao, 2015). They perpetuated prejudices that undermined their complex socio-cultural systems by depicting them as “savage,” “uncivilized,” and “backward.” The objective, as Bhabha notes, “is to construe the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 70). Both Ziipao (2015) and Misra (2012) have also highlighted how such skewed epistemic assumptions are rampant in colonial publications about Nagaland.

Literature can play a crucial role in such conditions. Through their stories, Easterine Kire and Avinuo Kire have found ways to question predominant narratives, reclaim indigenous knowledge, and revive Nagaland's long-standing epistemic traditions. In her book, *When the River Sleeps*, E. Kire investigates the spiritual and ecological ties between the Naga people and their natural environs. By exploring supernatural elements, rituals, and indigenous beliefs through her protagonist, she provides crucial insights into Naga epistemic systems and the interaction between people and the natural world.

Similarly, the writings of Avinuo Kire also illuminate Naga customs and knowledge structures. In her short stories, A. Kire delves into issues of identity, memory, and the intricacies of Naga society. She does this by adapting Naga mythology, folktales, and oral traditions into modern contexts. By highlighting the resiliency and wisdom ingrained in Naga culture and customs, A. Kire directly challenges the imaginations of mainstream writers who frequently ignore or misinterpret indigenous knowledge. Both authors underline the value of protecting and honoring indigenous methods of knowing and aggressively oppose the elimination of Naga epistemology.

They accomplish this by drawing on strategies for decolonization, notably the processes of “deconstruction and reconstruction” (Smith, 1999). This means dismantling what is wrongly written about the colonized “Other” by retelling stories of the past. Unlike dominant narratives, Nagaland’s new literature truthfully explores the historical, social, and cultural facets of tribal life. In turn, it reflexively dismantles the colonial and postcolonial narratives that have ignored or distorted the indigenous epistemologies of Naga communities. By examining, praising, and contextualizing indigenous knowledge, practices, and values, E. Kire and A. Kire are able to reconstruct Nagaland’s long-standing epistemology. Additionally, writing and publishing literature itself turns into a kind of decolonization and resistance. As Naga authors help rebuild Nagaland’s epistemology through their works of art, they also provide Naga communities the power to create their own stories and future.

Reviving Nagaland’s epistemology is also intertwined with its oral history (Chatterjee et al., 2022). For generations, oral traditions, or stories passed down orally, have shaped the lives of the Naga people. After suffering epistemic erasure, orality has come to occupy a dual role in Naga literature. Not only does it solidify a sense of identity and pride, but orality also embodies the originality of Naga culture. By emphasizing such traditions as a generations-old carrier of indigenous knowledge, literary creations have been able to fight against the erasure of their epistemological foundations. The strength of orality is poignantly explained by Birendranath Dutta in the forward of Temsula Ao’s *The Ao-Naga Oral Tradition*:

The Ao-Naga oral tradition is not a mere form of ‘story-telling’ as opposed to a written, recorded version. It is indeed in many ways the source of the people’s literature, social customs, religion, and history. It has evolved into a comprehensive and integrated network of indigenous knowledge systems, incorporating art with reality, history with imagination, and the ideal with the practical (Ao, 1999, p. vii).

Literary representations of this reservoir—skills, dialects, sacred locations, myths, and governance systems—allow authors to resist assimilation into dominant narratives and create new stories that reclaim and revitalize Nagaland’s epistemological roots. Women writers have played a crucial role in this space (Ao, 2019). As they fortify these cultural elements in fiction, they also open the door for future generations to discover, express, and draw from Nagaland’s epistemic history. By openly discussing the current state of Naga society, their work marks a significant departure from past writings and a much-needed return to Nagaland’s vibrant history.

III. DISCUSSION

In *When the River Sleeps*, Easterine Kire uses orality to resurrect indigenous knowledge and illuminate Nagaland’s cultural setting. Though written in English, her story is populated with indigenous languages and expressions. For example, when the Tenyimias collect firewood or successfully entrap an animal in the forest, they are required to thank Ukepenuopfü, the creator deity, by saying “Terhuomiapeziemu,” a thanksgiving prayer (Kire, 2014, p. 80). By incorporating their native tongue, E. Kire’s narrative not only reflects Nagaland’s linguistic diversity; it also allows her characters to communicate a system of knowledge and beliefs passed down over centuries. Similarly, cultural ceremonies and practices with a strong foundation in indigenous knowledge are also depicted in *When the River Sleeps*. This includes extensive descriptions of rituals connected to hunting, healing, and nature worship, which reveal the connection between people and the natural world and reaffirm the presence of indigenous wisdom.

Vilie, the main character in *When the River Sleeps*, helps negotiate this knowledge. On Vilie’s quest to find the sleeping river, readers follow his interactions with many spiritual creatures. As Vilie moves through the textual space, his experiences offer a window into the daily lives of the Naga people. Moreover, a deep sense of eco-spirituality binds Vilie with the forest. Having spent 25 years in the jungle, he is a lone hunter who knows how to use *Tierhutiopfu* as herbal medicine, *Japan nha* to treat wounds, rock bees for damaged tissues, and the nutritious values of Ketsaga, or tree fern, which are all derived from the Tenyi people’s survival practices (Kire, 2014, p. 15). This indigenous knowledge is so central to tribal life that Vilie even declares, “leaving the forest would be the same as abandoning his wife” (Kire, 2014, p. 9).

Passing wisdom down through generations is an equally fundamental component of Naga spirituality and oral tradition. This urgency is echoed in E. Kire’s novel when Vilie, who intends to pass on his knowledge to his son Krishna, says, “I am not a rich man I don’t have the means to send him to school. I will teach him my trade and he will grow up and earn an honest living. School is not for the like of us” (Kire, 2014, p. 15). All this deepens the significance of indigenous ways of knowing in the novel, allowing E. Kire to explore the relationship between people and their epistemologies beyond the limits of Western pedagogy.

Another means through which tribal epistemology “speaks” in Nagaland’s literature is by positioning human and animal kinship as a central constituent of tribal life. One such example is the Naga Tigerman or the *Tekhumiavi* (Heneise, 2016). The Naga Tigerman is a mythical creature with a strong foundation in Naga mythology. The literature of Nagaland frequently explores stories surrounding this creature by drawing on local knowledge and beliefs. The distinction between human and animal worlds is often muddled in the depiction of the Naga Tigerman, revealing how intertwined humans and the natural world are. In Easterine Kire’s *Don’t Run, My Love*, when Visenuo, a young widow, tries to determine if such a creature is a man or a tiger, a wiser Pfenuo replies: They are both ... They have a foot in both worlds. So long as they are alive, they belong to both the world of men and the men that we call their owners grow more powerful and wealthy from this connection. But it is wrong to call them tiger-owners: the tiger and the man, they are one and the same. ... So they are very closely connected; they say the man is the body and the tiger is the soul. Some say they can interchange at will. (Kire, 2017, pp. 92–93)

Tribal epistemology, expressed through such dualism, emphasizes the role that legendary creatures play in the formation of Naga culture and worldview. Readers are prompted to reconsider Western scientific categorizations and binary divisions between real and mythical and real and non-human through literary depictions of the Naga Tigerman. Moreover, these representations also act as a reminder of the value of tribal epistemology as a source of knowledge and cultural identity in a world that is rapidly changing. Similar to *Don’t Run, My Love*, Avinuo Kire’s *The Last Light of Glory Days: Stories from Nagaland* also subverts the human/non-human divide. In this collection of stories, Avinuo Kire explores the theme through a story titled *The Visitors*. Here, an eight-year-old girl named Khriesinuo has a brief brush with Kamvüpfhi or demon warriors. As the story progresses in her Auntie Neibou’s kitchen, Khriesinuo gets to witness a bizarre interaction with the spirit world, full of “dark silhouettes of grotesque human-like faces

and figures” and “long sinewy limbs and majestic shapes of spears and shields,” which move from floor to ceiling (Kire, 2021, p. 109). Naga mythology and folklore frequently include interactions between people and supernatural beings as a part of daily life. When Khriesinuo wakes up, the “visitors” have left with no sign of ever being there. But unlike Western ontology, such inexplicable occurrences find an acceptance in Naga culture, allowing for a much deeper discourse between the physical and the supernatural. Sadly, as Aunt Neibou proclaims the next day, such “visitations” are becoming less frequent due to modernization.

Ultimately, Aunt Neibou’s observation sums up A. Kire’s case for the legitimacy of non-human characters in Nagaland’s epistemology. E. Kire’s fiction echoes this too, where Vilie’s ecological ties to the forest and the Naga Tiger man prompt readers to question the divisions between both worlds, human and non-human. Such tropes, used by both writers, make a compelling argument for the need to rethink animism.

Nagas firmly believed in animism, which is reflected in their way of life, thought processes, and beliefs (Babar, 2019). Till now, this fundamental connectivity and interdependence of all beings, including humans and non-humans, has been seen as a “simple” view of life. However, an “ontological turn” in recent scholarship has recognized that a binary view might not sufficiently represent the realities of the world (Harvey & Astor-Aguilera, 2020; Hornborg, 2019). Instead, to understand the connectivity and interdependence of all beings, including humans and non-humans, animism needs to be seen as a relational epistemology, rather than a primitive reasoning.

Naga literature, arguably, sits at the heart of this discussion. In the fictional worlds of Easterine Kire and Avinuo Kire, characters, setting, plot, and conflict are reimagined in ways that revive and legitimize Nagaland’s indigenous epistemologies. Here, literary representations anchor the idea that animism is connected to a fundamental ecological awareness that goes beyond the typical divide between humans and the environment. More importantly, they voice a much-needed holistic approach to ecological thinking. One that challenges the anthropocentric worldview and highlights the significance of fostering complex connections between people, the natural world, and the spiritual world.

IV. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this paper has explored how literature combats the silencing of Nagas and the epistemic violence they have faced. During different periods of history, the Naga people were subjected to hegemonic knowledge systems that damaged their own narratives, knowledge, and sense of agency. However, through stories that authentically depict the experiences of Naga communities, authors are able to dismantle colonial and postcolonial ideologies that have disregarded or misrepresented indigenous epistemologies.

An examination of contemporary Naga stories, particularly the work of Easterine Kire and Avinuo Kire, has brought attention to Nagaland’s oral tradition as a strategy to defy cultural homogeneity and assimilation into mainstream narratives. Several important conclusions have been drawn after examining and assessing their work. Across their stories, which are part of Nagaland’s new literature, there is an emphasis on the part that non-humans play in shaping Naga culture and worldview. Tribal epistemology is also defended by legitimizing the relationship between humans and non-humans. When seen as a relational epistemology, the fictional worlds of both writers argue for the need to rethink animism, which has long been misrepresented in dominant Western paradigms. Outside of fiction, such perspectives propose a useful framework for dealing with environmental issues, advancing sustainability, and even offering profound insights into the intricate web of life.

Literature, in this context, is remarkably powerful. As authors explore the traditions, mythologies, and histories of Nagaland through their narratives, they provide ways to reclaim, maintain, and revive epistemologies that have been marginalized. They serve as a catalyst for rebirth in the face of cultural loss. By bringing such forgotten stories to life, Naga authors foster a feeling of community and enable Nagaland to choose its own future while preserving its rich and varied past.

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