



Easterine Kire's Saga of the Indigenous Naga Worldview and the Politics of Resistance in *Sky is My Father: A Naga Village Remembered*

Deepanjali Baruah, PhD
Assistant Professor in English
Jagannath Barooah University
Jorhat, Assam, India.
Email: deepanjalibaruah73@gmail.com

Abstract

Easterine Kire is an Indian English writer from Kohima, Nagaland, currently living in Norway. Nagaland, a state in northeast India, is a treasure trove of rich traditions, narratives, and oral histories. Home to seventeen major tribes and numerous sub-tribes, the state boasts a diverse cultural heritage. Their cultural heritage and storytelling form the foundation for much of Nagaland's literary creativity, offering writers both inspiration and responsibility. By reimagining oral narratives, these writers strive to make the traditional Naga worldview and historical memory relevant to the present generation. Easterine Kire's *Sky is My Father* is one such historical novel, portraying the courage of a proud Naga village that repeatedly defied British advances and withstood their sieges, thereby preserving its identity and resilience against colonial domination. Their defiance was more than a military resistance—it embodied a moral force that bound the community together, shaping its collective identity and reinforcing the values of unity and resilience. Building on this, the present paper seeks to analyze the continuing relevance of the Naga traditional worldview and its significance in shaping identity, literature, and history, comprising the myths and symbols that form the Naga social and cultural life.



Received: 04.09.2025

Accepted: 29.11.2025

Published: 31.12.2025

CJHSSC, Volume: 1

Issue: 2, December 2025.

Page: 50 - 56

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18252953>

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Published by: Seth Soorajmull Jalan Girls' College,
Kolkata, West Bengal, India

Available at: www.ssjalangirlscollege.org.in/journal.php
Email: confluence.sjgc@gmail.com

Keywords: Naga, resistance, subaltern, colonialism, indigenous.

Introduction

Easterine Kire is an Indian English writer from Kohima, Nagaland, currently living in Norway. She is a novelist, children's book writer, poet, short story writer, and translator. Some of her notable books are *Sky is My Father: A Naga Village Remembered* (2003), *Mari* (2010), *Bitter Wormhood* (2011), *When the River Sleeps* (2014), *Son of the Thundercloud* (2016), *Don't Run My Love* (2017), *Spirit Nights* (2022), etc. She has been awarded various literary prizes for her creations, including the Governor's medal for her contribution to Naga Literature in 2011, the Hindu Lit for Life prize for her novel *When the River Sleeps* in 2016, and the Sahitya Akademi Award for her novel *Spirit Nights* in 2024. She is a member of Jazz poesy, a band based in Norway. Kire has pioneered modern-day literary culture in Nagaland and established herself as one of the most important contributors to contemporary tribal/indigenous literature.

Nagaland, a state in the northeast of India, is a treasure trove of rich traditions, narratives, and oral histories. Home to seventeen major tribes and numerous sub-tribes, the state boasts a diverse cultural heritage. According to historical accounts, these tribes are believed to have migrated from present-day China and Tibet, with some estimates tracing their migration back to the 13th Century. The Naga tribes possess a wealth of indigenous knowledge and history, sustained through lived experiences, communal practices, and oral traditions transmitted across generations. Their cultural heritage and storytelling form the foundation for much of Nagaland's literary creativity, offering writers both inspiration and responsibility. By reimagining oral narratives, these writers strive to make the traditional Naga worldview and historical memory relevant to the present generation. *Sky is My Father* is one such historical novel, portraying the courage of a proud Naga village that repeatedly defied British advances and withstood their sieges, thereby preserving its identity and resilience against colonial domination. High in the mountains lay a small village whose warriors, though outnumbered and ill-equipped, stood with unmatched courage against the British. Their defiance was more than a military resistance—it embodied a moral force that bound the community together, shaping its collective identity and reinforcing the values of unity and resilience. Kire has brought the vibrant Naga culture and its oral narratives into focus. Kire spoke in an interview, "I usually explain that we, writing from the hills, have the backdrop of the hills of history, culture, religion, and politics behind us" (In Conversation With: Easterine Kire). The author illustrates how this spirit of resistance becomes deeply integrated into Naga traditional and social life, forming an inherent aspect of their cultural normality. Building on this, the present paper seeks to analyze the continuing relevance of the Naga traditional worldview and its significance in shaping identity, literature, and history, comprising the myths and symbols that form the Naga social and cultural life. The paper will also shed light on the resistance of a small Naga community against the British—an unrelenting form of guerrilla warfare that, though absent from contemporary headlines, sent ripples of anxiety through the colonial regime. It will further examine how these acts of defiance, carried out by a subaltern and politically marginalized community, challenged and unsettled the hegemonic order of colonial power.

The Indigenous Naga Worldview in *Sky is My Father: A Naga Village Remembered*

The term indigenous has gone beyond the discipline of anthropology in contemporary times. "The international agencies are increasingly and extensively making use of this term and concept in their deliberations and discussions" (Xaxa, 2023, p.3590). After this, the term has begun to

occupy several discourses, including those of general discourse and other social sciences. In the northeast, indigenous or tribal people enjoy the right to practice their traditions and rituals, maintain their culture, and retain their specific identities. The Nagas are a prominent tribe of northeast India, comprising 16 to 20 sub-tribes numbering between 2.5 and 3.5 million. The Naga territory is known as Nagaland, and each tribe speaks a different language. The prolific writer Easterine Kire, who hails from Nagaland, belongs to the Angami tribe known for their excellent skills in farming, weaving, art and craft, and warfare. In the novel *Sky is My Father: A Naga Village Remembered*, Easterine Kire has beautifully projected the indigenous worldview of the Angami Nagas, with their unique culture, in which the human world and the world of spirits intersect. Through the examples of spectacular oral narratives and rituals, the writer has portrayed the inextricable link between the human and spirit worlds. The novel revolves around Khonoma, which, according to Kire, “nestles amid mountains that are as high as 7,000 feet; a little village on a small hillock cradled by gaunt mountains that form natural fortress” (Kire, 2018, p.vii). During the colonial period, Khonoma had only 500 houses, but its reputation spread far and wide for its warriors, who were willing to sacrifice their lives in defense of their land and people. “Her warriors of the Semo, Thevo, and Merhu clans hardly numbered over thousand at any given time in her history. However, Khonoma’s protectorate extended in every direction, to the southern, eastern, and western Angami villages and some other Naga villages” (Kire, 2018, p.vii).

The narrative weaves together personal and collective histories, drawing on the author’s deep understanding of Naga culture and history. This is the story of Penno, her husband Levi, and their sons Sato and Roko, who grapple with the challenges of living in a rapidly changing world. The women are shown to engage in ceaseless labour throughout the year to ensure a good harvest. It is imperative for the characters in the novel to bow to the spirits who shower their blessings for a bountiful harvest with reverence. Levi is a good Naga warrior who believes in spirits for peace and prosperity. “If you honour the spirits, they will bless you; if you defy them, you will learn how mortal man is” (Kire, 2018, p.50). Spirit worship holds significant cultural importance among the Nagas and the other indigenous tribes of the northeast. “Nagas attributed spiritual existence to every element of the natural world, including trees, stones, water bodies, animals, and many more, and they are pacified through rituals and sacrifices” (Vinita & Mathews, 2023, p.70). The Naga worldview is expressed through this unique cultural system, in which magic and reality are juxtaposed. They believe in the blessings of the sun, and the rain, and the mother of Levi and Lato teaches her sons to fill up their granaries with the help of the magic of the sun, the rain, and hard work. The spirit *Vo-o* is called by the *Thevo* priest during the *Terbase*, a ritual of making peace with the spirits, which helps to coordinate between the man and the spirit so that there is no destruction, disease, or death in the village.

In the Khonoma village, the Nagas indulge themselves in hunting spree, and the killing of a tiger is considered to be a heroic task. A character in the novel Vilao kills a tiger, which raises interest among the brothers Levi and Lato. After killing the tiger, Vilao has to perform some mandatory rituals, such as spending five days as *genna* days, which means no-work days. Most people would come out of their houses to see the dead tiger and the hero who killed it. There are stories around tigers and tiger hunting. There is a blurred boundary between the spirit and the human world. The Nagas believe that spirits may transform themselves into tigers, snakes, or even into men and women. The tiger is also understood to be the “elder brother” (Kire, 2018, p.

18): “it is because man, tiger, and spirit were once brothers” (Kire, 2018, p. 18). The people of Khonoma also believed in weretigers, just like the people in the West believe in werewolves. “Werewolf, in popular legend, is a human who can shape-shift into a wolf or a hybrid wolf-human form. In many werewolf stories, this transformation occurs at night, often under the influence of a full moon” (Britannica). On the other hand, the weretiger is a part of the Naga mythology. Basically, the Angami tribe of Nagaland believes in the *tekbumiavi*, a human whose soul enters the body of a tiger while the human body normally functions.

Levi is known as one of the warriors of Khonoma. The warriors in Khonoma are highly revered. Levi's uncle Kovi is proud of his nephew's courage and strength, but he always gives him advice as an elder. “You are a warrior of Khonoma. People will think twice when they hear your name. So step into your life carefully. Be humble, heed the taboos, and there is no reason why you should not have a full and long life” (Kire, 2018, p.53). The warrior acts as the saviour, protector, and carrier of the values of the Naga tribe. Kire is proud of her tribe, which brings glory to Nagaland through their strong faith in the history, myth, culture, and deeds of valour. In this connection, it may be argued that the indigenous people remained outside the larger socio-political or economic system. They basically wanted to stay away from the people of the plains and wanted to maintain their distinctiveness. This worldview was more prevalent during the colonial period. “They are all tribes because they all stood more or less outside of Hindu civilisation and not because they were all at exactly the same stage of evolution” (Xaxa, 1919, p.3593). The indigenous, rich cultural values of the Khonoma village and the strong sense of independence drove its men to safeguard the village's unity and integrity, even at the cost of their own lives, against aggressive forces such as the British. The people of Khonoma still gather around bonfires to share the stories of an indelible and brave past with young Naga people, so that they may firmly adhere to their roots and the teachings of the Angami culture.

Politics of Resistance

Sky is My Father reveals how the tiny village of Khonoma in Nagaland puts up a strong resistance against the British a number of times, encouraging the other villages to join them as well. Easterine Kire, in the introduction of her novel, has narrated the history of the aggressive encroachment of the outside world upon Khonoma since the 1800s briefly:

The officers of the British Imperial Army recorded that the fiercest resistance to colonial rule was in these hills of the Naga tribes. Khonoma, an Angami village of warriors, fought from the moment of their entry till 1880 when a major offensive was launched against the village, ending in a stalemate. Prior to that, the British launched three attacks on the village of Khonoma, referred to as Khwunoria by its inhabitants, and appearing as Konemah in British records (Kire, 2018, p.vii-ix).

The resistance displayed by the Nagas of Khonoma against the British forms the backdrop of Kire's novel. Foucault stated that there are points of resistance everywhere when there is a power network. There are two types of resistance: cultural and political. Cultural resistance is less demanding than political resistance. Stephen Duncombe has stated,

Cultural resistance can also be thought of as political resistance. Some theorists argue that politics is essentially a cultural discourse, a shared set of symbols and meanings, that we all abide by. If this is true, then the rewriting of that discourse - which is essentially what cultural resistance does - is a political act in itself (2002, p.7).

Therefore, it may be argued that cultural resistance can also be expressed through political activities. The resistance shown in the novel is both political and cultural. The Khonoma warriors fought fiercely against the British several times. There were twenty-two Naga raids into the territory of the British. In one of the attacks, Levi was trapped, and later he found himself in a closed cell of a prison with other men. The male characters in the novel started to gather arms and ammunition to fight against the British, leaving their work in the fields. They fortified themselves very well and sent the women and children to the nearby villages for security. Levi had to live at the Tezpur jail and was released after six years of imprisonment. After he came out of prison, he married a girl named Penu, who became a devoted wife and a loving mother.

In *Sky is My Father*, the politics of resistance is explored through the struggles of the people of Khonoma against the external forces that attempt to undermine their culture, identity, and way of life. The narrative reflects the personal and collective challenges faced by the characters as they resist colonial domination, military occupation, and pressures of modernity. Therefore, cultural resistance is similar to that of political. Resistance in the novel is not just about armed conflict but also takes the form of cultural preservation, defiance in the face of adversity, and individual and community resistance. The characters strive to maintain their traditions, beliefs, and sense of self amid forces that seek to dominate or oppress them. Later on after independence when Nagaland was given the statehood in 1963, December 1, “to satisfy the national aspirations of the Nagas, article 371A was incorporated in the constitution, ensuring that no act of parliament would bring any change in religious or social practices, customary laws, traditional ownership patterns in Naga society without the consent of the Nagaland Legislative Assembly” (Srikanth, 2014, p.42).

In 1979, Mr. Damant, the political agent, marched towards Khonoma with 21 military and 65 police troops. The people of Khonoma did not know Mr. Damant's clear intention. However, the aggressive nature of Mr. Damant and his men led the Khonoma men to prepare for a fierce fight. Suddenly, a shot was fired, and Mr. Damant was dead. “The victory spurred the men of the village. The men in the foreground, shouting terrible war cries, began to give chase to the escort of the political party. Caught in a volley of shots, thirty-eight men were killed and nineteen wounded in this encounter” (Kire, 2018, p.88-89). The people of Khonoma were so excited that they began to shout, “we have ousted the white man's rule” (Kire, 2018, p.89). However, at the next moment, they could realize that there were numerous British enemies, and the hope of killing them all was utter foolishness. But they had a great confidence that they would strike the British and crush them completely. The mountain region, the dark forests, wild animals, and the fearless Angami Naga people posed a great danger for the British. At the same time, they put up a steady resistance against the European officers. “The bungalows of the two European officers were constantly under fire because the Angami strategy was focused on first killing the European officers” (Kire, 2018, p.96). The British were strategically planning to crush Khonoma once and for all after the killing of Mr. Damant. But the Naga warriors were not going to surrender so easily. According to Baudrillard, the strategies of resistance may be transformed into strategies of control. These people are known for their community solidarity, conception of masculinity, and self-respect. They love their people, land, culture, society, and the forests, which served as fortresses for them while they were attacked by the British. So they will resist in continuum to retain their control over their land and people. The internal self-image of the Nagas has been a particularly strong one, which helps them to sustain their warrior status. They held the British for

four months. But the time for negotiation came as the Nagas killed the last British, as they killed some of them by entering into the territory of Assam. The warrior Pelhu did not want to make peace with the British, but he could not defy the advice of the elders and finally approached the British for the restoration of peace and order in the Naga land. Ultimately, a treaty was concluded between Khonoma and the British on 27 March 1880.

The resistance displayed by the Nagas in Khonoma, though indigenous, shook the power and glory of the British Empire in India for a considerable period of time. In the words of Scott, “they are the stubborn bedrock upon which other forms of resistance may grow, and they are like to persist after such other forms have failed or produced, in turn, a new pattern of inequity” (2005, p.404). The collective resistance of the Angami Nagas from Khonoma village reflects the conditions and constraints on the basis of which it is generated. The otherwise peaceful village saw sudden changes with the threatening advancement of the colonial forces. The Nagas, who led a carefree life, had to leave their work in their fields and get involved in warfare against the British.

The political action and cultural forms play a dominant role in the creation of resistance. The politics of tradition and modernity during the British rule had an impact on this small Khonoma village, too. It was during the advent of the missionaries that the conversion of the Naga tribes began. Since the Nagas of Khonoma village were strictly traditional, adhering to their values, morale, and religion, those who converted to Christianity were ostracized by the village. Levi is heartbroken when his son Sato embraces the new religion. Sato is sent by his father to a white man’s school for the purpose of education. He is influenced by the teachings of the Bible and subsequently converts to Christianity. The cultural resistance is portrayed through Levi’s struggle in persuading his son to maintain his indigenous Naga worldview and identity in the face of external pressures. The father is devastated at this, “How is it, my son, that you have turned your back on all that we’ve taught you of what is good of our ways?” (Kire, 2018, p.126-127). The father refuses to accept his son and turns him out of his house. Kire thus portrays the tension between tradition and change and the ways in which the Nagas resist the cultural erasure. Nevertheless, a strong cultural resistance is displayed by the clansmen against the converts, for they are outcasts from the village. A new settlement of the converts begins to grow beside the village “because their excommunication meant they were cut off from all links with their old village” (Kire, 2018, p. 128). The novel portrays the ways in which the resistance is often shown by the Nagas in their emotional and spiritual connections to their land, language, rituals, and familial bonds.

Conclusion

Easterine Kire’s *Sky is My Father* is not only a historical retelling of the Khonoma warriors’ defiance against British imperialism but also an affirmation of the cultural, spiritual, and ecological values that sustain Naga identity. It may be argued that the Nagas were one of the valiant tribes in the whole of northeast India who resisted against the British, “the officers of the Imperial Army recorded that the fiercest resistance to colonial rule was in these hills of Naga tribes” (Kire, 2018, p. vii). By narrating the repeated clashes between the Khonoma villagers and the colonial forces, Kire situates the Nagas within the larger discourse of anti-colonial resistance in northeast India, demonstrating that their struggle, though often overlooked, posed a genuine challenge to the hegemonic ambitions of the British Empire. Yet the novel transcends the

boundaries of political history. It weaves together oral traditions, rituals, and ecological consciousness, thereby highlighting how the Naga worldview is inseparably tied to community, morality, and harmony with the natural world.

The Nagas' belief in the spiritual essence of all living beings reflects an enduring ecological philosophy that continues to resonate in contemporary debates on sustainability. Their reverence for sacred landscapes and commitment to sustainable practices present an indigenous model of environmental ethics that modern societies can learn from. At the same time, Kire's characters embody cultural resilience, confronting pressures of modernization and Christianization without surrendering the essence of their traditions. Their acts of preservation are a form of cultural resistance—an assertion of identity against the homogenizing forces of colonial and global modernity.

In bringing these histories and worldviews into the literary space, Kire performs the vital task of cultural remembrance, ensuring that the struggles and values of the Naga people are not lost to the margins of history. *Sky is My Father* thus becomes more than a novel; it is a testimony of survival, a celebration of indigenous resilience, and a reminder that cultural memory can be as powerful a weapon of resistance as armed defiance. By foregrounding both political and cultural resistance, Kire underscores the relevance of the Naga worldview in contemporary times, where questions of identity, belonging, and ecological responsibility remain as urgent as ever.

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