

# **Telling Our Own Stories: Oral Tradition, Memory, and Resistance in Easterine Kire's *Sky is My Father: A Naga Village Remembered* and *When the River Sleeps***

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## **Abstract**

Easterine Kire's innovative literary exercise of integrating indigenous Naga oral traditions into modern narrative forms as a deliberate strategy of cultural reclamation and resistance against the historical erasure of Northeast India. The two novels – *Sky is My Father: A Naga Village Remembered* (2003), a historical novel based on the 1879 British invasion of Khonoma, and *When the River Sleeps* (2014), a spiritual quest narrative grounded in the cosmology of the Angami Naga people is taken here for reference to analyse how these texts challenges colonial historiography and Indian nationalist discourse, both of which have rendered Northeast India peripheral in dominant narratives. Postcolonial theory and memory studies support the argument that Kire's literary intervention is not merely about cultural protection but a form of political storytelling. She revives collective memory through localised idioms, orality, and myth, while simultaneously reshaping the novel form to suit indigenous epistemologies. The use of oral histories, ritual, and landscape in her writing situates indigenous subjectivities at the center, asserting the legitimacy of non-Western knowledge systems. By placing Easterine Kire's work within the broader framework of decolonial aesthetics and indigenous resistance, this essay shows how her fiction actively reclaims narrative authority from the colonial archive and the militarised discourses of the modern state.

**Keywords:** Easterine Kire; Oral Tradition; Memory; Resistance; Naga Marginalised Histories

## **Introduction**

Easterine Kire stands as a pioneering voice in Naga literature, and her fiction plays a vital role in preserving and breathing new life into the oral traditions of

her people. She was born on March 29, 1959 into an Angami Naga family in Nagaland, India. She was awarded the Governor's medal for excellence in Naga Literature. Her contribution to Naga literature is very impressive – five poetry collections, nine novels, three short story collections, one essay collection, two novellas, eight children's books, and many translations and anthology books. Her stories emerge from a landscape stained by colonialism, political unrest, and cultural silencing, making her storytelling not just a creative endeavour but also a deeply political one. This article explores how Kire positions storytelling as a means of reclaiming historical memory and asserting indigenous ways of knowing. Her narratives emerge from Angami Naga cosmology, oral practices and collective memory, challenging foremost historiographical and literary frameworks that have reduced Northeast India as peripheral in both colonial and nationalist discourse.

The focus is on two of her most significant works, *Sky is My Father: A Naga Village Remembered* (2003), which recounts the resistance of the village of Khonoma against British colonial forces, and *When the River Sleeps* (2014), a meditative journey of a lone hunter through the mystical Naga Hills, to examine how orality functions as a deliberate narrative strategy rather than a stylistic embellishment. Easterine Kire uses Naga oral traditions, myth, and lived landscapes as a sensible political approach to recover scratched pasts of Northeast India and challenge both colonial records and Indian nationalist narratives. By remodelling the modern novel through orality and indigenous ways of knowing, Kire turns storytelling into an act of resistance that re-establishes collective memory and proclaims the rightfulness of Naga epistemologies.

### **The Naga society**

The Nagas, an indigenous people inhabiting the North-East Frontier of India, belong to the “Indo-Mongoloid group of the Tibeto-Burman branch within the larger Sino-Tibetan language family” (Shimray 2). Nagaland, a region often described as ‘unexplored’ in dominant Indian historiography, is home to sixteen major tribes, each characterised by its own distinct language, social customs, cultural practices, and belief systems. Naga social organisation is deeply rooted in tribal affiliation, village autonomy, kinship structures, and clan identity. Due to the linguistic diversity among these tribes, inter-tribal communication is

commonly facilitated through Nagamese Creole and English, which function as *lingua francas* in both informal and institutional settings.

Before British colonisation, headhunting was a prominent cultural practice, reflecting the warrior ethos and spiritual beliefs of the Nagas. However, with the arrival of Christian missionaries and the subsequent spread of formal education, the practice gradually diminished. “In Naga society the beginning of a new era can be traced back to the year 1872, when the American missionaries landed in the Naga soil” (Benjongkumba 27). Among the Nagas, storytelling continues to serve as a dynamic mode of cultural transmission, shaping the community’s worldview, moral frameworks, and ontological assumptions. These narratives are typically shared in intimate communal spaces such as around the hearth where elders transmit ancestral knowledge and cosmological tales to younger generations, reinforcing both memory and identity.

### **Script, Education, Missionary and ‘Cultural Neglect’**

What did colonialism do to Naga knowledge systems? It is a very interesting and important concept related to the main argument of the article. The emergence of writing amid the Naga tribes was not an organic development rooted in indigenous epistemologies, but rather an externally imposed consequence of colonial intervention and missionary education. British colonial rule in the nineteenth century brought with it not only military and political control but a new systematic effort to ‘civilise’ the indigenous communities with the help of formal education. The imposition of Western literacy in colonial and missionary contexts functioned as a deliberate cultural intervention that privileged the written word over indigenous oral traditions, effectively marginalising Naga storytelling practices. This form of literacy was a colonial inheritance, privileging the written word over the oral and thereby contributing to the decline of ancient storytelling traditions (Elizabeth and Tsuren 83). The transition from orality to literacy not only disrupted the age-old ways in which knowledge was shared and preserved among the Nagas, but also silenced their ability to tell their own stories in their own voices—stories rooted in lived experience, memory, and communal wisdom passed down through generations. This disruption is part of what Linda Tuhiwai Smith refers to as the ‘cultural assault’ of colonialism, wherein indigenous ways of knowing were systematically

devalued and overwritten by Western epistemologies (Smith 34). In this context, the elevation of written language became a mechanism for reshaping identity and knowledge, distancing communities from their oral heritage.

The Nagas passed down their history, ethics, cosmology, and communal values through storytelling, songs, proverbs, and ritual performances. When writing displaced these practices, it disrupted the very modes through which the Nagas had preserved and transmitted knowledge for generations. Temsula Ao writes in *The Ao Naga Oral Tradition*, the Naga tribes' oral tradition is "not a mere form of 'storytelling' as opposed to a written recorded version", it is "in many ways the source of the people's literature, social customs, religion and history" (185). It is living repositories of communal wisdom, social norms, cosmologies, and ancestral memory. She describes it as a repository of traditional knowledge systems: "it has evolved into a comprehensive and integrated network of indigenous knowledge-system, incorporating art with reality, history with imagination and the ideal with the practical" (Ao 185). For the Nagas, whose histories, ethics, and cosmologies were transferred primarily through oral tradition, colonialism ruptured the cultural continuity by separating knowledge from community and performance.

### **Orality as Narrative Epistemology**

In oral traditions – stories, myths, songs, rituals, and communal performances are not merely modes of expression but are deeply embedded ways of knowing and accepting the world. Ong explains in *Orality and Literacy* (1982), oral epistemologies are performative and situational truth emerges through storytelling, songs, and speech acts that are repeated, remembered, and recontextualised across generations. "In an oral culture, knowledge is not separated from the knower; it is preserved by being embedded in the human experience, transmitted by memory and expression" (34). In her article "Opening up the Physical and the Spiritual Universe of the Angamis," Easterine Kire explains that her novels strive to "chronologise the socio-cultural and historical life of her community, drawing on information gathered from oral narrators within her society" (54). In "Decolonizing Methodologies," Linda Tuhiwai Smith argues that storytelling is a decolonial act. For colonized peoples, oral traditions are "ways of knowing, ways of remembering, and ways of

resisting” (Smith 145). They are methods by which communities preserve their histories, assert their identities, and resist prevailing colonial accounts that often exclude or distort indigenous experiences. For the Nagas, oral forms such as folktales, clan genealogies, headhunting songs, and seasonal rituals function as what Ruth Finnegan calls ‘performative knowledge genres,’ where meaning is enacted, not inscribed. Finnegan emphasises that such traditions are not inferior to written texts; rather, they demand different modes of engagement and interpretation. “The performance, the interaction, the ritual context—these are part of how oral texts mean what they mean” (bvfrf41).

### **The Role of Memory in Challenging Colonial Discourse**

Kire’s debut novel, *A Naga Village Remembered*, echoes the rhythm and structure of oral storytelling. The novel which was renamed as *Sky is My Father: A Naga Village Remembered*, describes the war fought by the Nagas against British colonial forces. In establishing its colonial empire by force, the British uprooted the Nagas from their ancestral setting. The novel not only recounts a personal and communal narrative but also signals to readers that these stories function as a form of social documentation. Set between 1832 and 1900, the novel centers on the Angami-Naga resistance to British colonisation in Khonoma village. Intertwined with this central narrative are oral histories from three local clans – Mehri, Thevo, and Semo shared through the voices of Sebi Dolie, Niu Francis Whiso, Thezavilie, and Nichüriasco Chücha. As a writer from an oral tradition, Easterine Kire, skillfully incorporates these collective memories into her fiction, transforming her work into both a literary act of resistance and a means of preserving Naga cultural history. Walter J. Ong’s distinction between “primary and secondary orality” provides a foundational lens to examine the structure of Kire’s novels (Vansina et al.). *A Naga Village Remembered* unfolds through episodic narration, with minimal linear development, mirroring the additive, situational style characteristic of oral cultures. The novel opens with community memory with elder voices recounting the past, suggesting that legitimacy derives not from documentation but from communal remembrance. “We will speak of those times. The words are still in our breath. The fire is not cold” (*A Naga Village Remembered*, 1). This invocation resonates with Ong’s claim that oral cultures “store knowledge not in texts but in people” (34). He writes, “Knowledge is stored not in external

memory banks like books or computers, but in people who repeat and adapt it" (*Orality and Literacy* 34–35). Leanne Betasamosake Simpson also asserts, "Story is stored in the bodies of people and places and practices," he highlights that Indigenous knowledge exists within embodied experience, land-based relationships, ceremonies, and communal memories, rather than detached in written archives (152). This contrasts sharply with Western epistemology's emphasis on abstracted, decontextualised data. Oral narratives operate as counter-narratives to dominant historical accounts, preserving perspectives on sovereignty, land, spirituality, and social organisation. Oral literature is a significant part of Kire's narrative blends together oral tradition with fiction, merging the distinct forms of folklore and the novel to create a unique narrative style. Walter J. Ong commenting on the relationship between orality and writing writes:

Oral cultures indeed produce powerful and beautiful verbal performances of high artistic and human worth, which are no longer even possible once writing has taken possession of the psyche. Nevertheless, without writing, human consciousness cannot achieve its fuller potentials, cannot produce other beautiful and powerful creations. In this sense, orality needs to produce and is destined to produce writing. (*Orality and Literacy* 14)

Vansina opines, "Oral tradition when systematically transmitted across generations serves as a valid form of historical knowledge" (*Oral Tradition* 13). Kire builds her narrative from village memory, generational testimony, and local myth which Vansina describes as historical consciousness through oral continuity. Kire's integration of orality is more than a stylistic choice; it's an epistemic intervention. It privileges indigenous knowledge systems and rejects colonial hierarchies that dismiss oral cultures as 'primitive' or 'unscientific.' Here Kire aligns with Ngig wa Thiong'o's idea of 'orature,' which sees oral tradition as a legitimate and powerful alternative to Western literary forms. "Orature carries the heritage, the aesthetics, the philosophy, the ethics, and the communal memory of a people. It is not a precursor to literature—it is literature" (15).

## **Angami Resistance in *A Naga Village Remembered***

Set in nineteenth-century Khonoma, the novel recounts the Angami resistance to British colonisation. Kire like a traditional indigenous storyteller explains the life of the Angami-Naga community through the ordinary, everyday experiences of characters whose lives are deeply embedded in the indigenous spatial and cultural landscape. The novel begins by depicting village life through the eyes of Kovi, a respected elder within the community. It is through his gaze that readers are introduced to the serene atmosphere of Khonoma at dawn, “where smoke gently rises from the clustered houses nestled along the hillside” (*Sky Is My Father* 1). This opening gesture is significant as it situates the narrative within an indigenous spatial framework, where the landscape is not merely a passive setting but an active presence deeply intertwined with cultural life, memory, and identity.

Kire’s portrayal of Khonoma resonates with what Yi-Fu Tuan calls topophilia, the “affective bond between people and place” where space becomes meaningful through lived experience and emotional attachment (Tuan 4). In indigenous contexts, such spatial relationships are even more pronounced, as land is not merely territory but a source of identity, knowledge, and spirituality. The landscape is remembered not just geographically but experientially as a lived and storied space. Through Kovi’s sensory perception of the village at dawn, Kire affirms the Naga relationship to territory as ancestral, sacred, and mnemonic. Through Kovi’s sensory perception and deep connection to the village, Kire reclaims Khonoma as more than just a geographical setting; she renders it a living, breathing entity, it becomes a storied landscape where memory, resistance, and cultural identity converge. In doing so, the novel offers a form of spatial remembrance that counters colonial cartographies and reaffirms indigenous place-making as both an epistemological and narrative act.

## **Conscious Resistance to the Colonial Ideology**

The novel integrates communal oral traditions to document pre-colonial Naga existence and the Angami struggle against British forces (1832–1880), positioning orality as both historical record and cultural epistemology. In this way, the novel becomes not only a historical reconstruction but also an act of

spatial remembrance that resists colonial mappings and instead reclaims Khonoma as a site of indigenous presence, resistance, and belonging. The events of the Battle of Khonoma are reconstructed from collective village memory, with an emphasis on how history is lived, felt, and passed down. This aligns with Jan Vansina's claim that oral tradition constitutes a valid and autonomous historical method, especially in societies where literacy was introduced late or through colonial coercion (Vansina *Oral Tradition as History* 27–29). The novel opens not with a colonial officer's logbook, but with a voice of cultural inheritance: "We will speak of those times. The words are still in our breath. The fire is not cold" (*Sky Is My Father* 1).

This metaphor of warm breath and fire recalls Walter Ong's assertion that in primary oral cultures, knowledge is "kept in active circulation" through speech, memory, and performance, rather than textual inscription (Ong, *Orality and Literacy* 34). The preface-like voice here operates as a ritual invocation, echoing oral traditions where the authority to recount the past is sacred and intergenerational. The narrative centers on figures such as Tikhü, the warrior who represents both the physical and symbolic resistance of Khonoma. These characters are not merely fictional but serve as mnemonic anchors, embodying the values and traumas that persist in Naga collective memory. As Vansina notes, oral history often remembers "what is relevant to present cultural and political identity" (96).

The novel is punctuated by ritual moments, funerals, warrior oaths, ancestral invocations that demonstrate how oral tradition is embedded in spiritual and ceremonial life. History is, thus, not linear or secular; it is cyclical, sacred, and place-bound. These features align with Ruth Finnegan's observation that in oral societies, the genres of oral history, myth, and ritual are not strictly separated but interwoven and performative (40–47). Finnegan's foundational work on orality foregrounds the complexity and sophistication of oral literatures. She observes that oral traditions are rich, performative, and deeply embedded in the social and historical fabric of communities. This perspective is crucial when approaching Kire's fiction, which reclaims Naga oral traditions not merely as remnants of the ancient time but as living epistemologies. In the novel, storytelling serves as a powerful medium for passing down cultural knowledge, values, and narratives of resistance across generations. Kire's incorporation

of embedded myths, ritualistic language, and dream sequences reflects Finnegan's view that oral literature is not a "primitive precursor" to written texts, but a vibrant and autonomous form of expression and meaning-making (*Oral Literature in Africa* 40).

### **Erased Stories and Living Memories**

The narrative itself mimics the rhythms and structures of oral storytelling. The novel recounts the 1879 British invasion of the Naga village of Khonoma, but it does so not through an official colonial archive, but through the voices and memories of the villagers especially elders – who transmit history as lived and embodied experience. The communal retelling of the Angami warriors' resistance, where memory and myth blend, and individual heroism becomes part of a collective narrative. The narrator often uses phrases like 'it is said' or 'they remembered,' echoing the cadence of oral speech and signalling that the authority of the story lies in communal remembrance rather than written documentation. The community's rituals are not just cultural texture; they are acts of historical transmission. For instance, during mourning rituals, elders retell heroic tales, passing on historical memory. These performances turn the community into custodians of history, where communal validation replaces documentary proof. Kire's narratives blur the lines between history and memory, portraying rituals as living acts that recall and re-enact the struggles, resilience, and values of the Naga people. Through oral storytelling and ritual performance, the community continually reconstructs its past, making history a collective, participatory process rather than an official chronicle.

### ***When the River Sleeps***

Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps* follows Vilie, a reclusive hunter from the *Angami Naga* tribe, who sets out on a solitary and spiritual quest to find a mythical 'heart-stone' – a river-stone believed to be imbued with magical power when retrieved from a river at the moment it 'sleeps,' or becomes completely still. This novel explores the adventurous quest of a hero as a narrative framework that reflects various dimensions of human experience, distinct cultural landscape of Nagaland, where the realms of magic and reality seamlessly intertwine. Significant to this narrative is the belief in the coexistence