



**Vignettes of Naga Culture: A Reading of Easterine Kire's *Sky is My Father***

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**Abstract**

Long-standing taboos and conventions are a feature of Indian civilization, and they are closely related to education. Their relationship is quite complicated and has a "chicken or the egg" nature. These two allow people to express themselves. The taboos and rituals expose the people's indigenous religious faith and vast unheard cultural heritage. The practice of these in the society plays a kind of educative purpose to nurture the newly sprung young minds and thus these taboos and conventions reshape as well as remold the society. These are prevalent in India's Northeastern tribal society. This tribal populated land is most diverse, the cultural cauldron of India. Within Northeast India, Naga life is fully submerged in the sea of taboos that includes taboo relating to birth, death, agriculture, marriage, war etc. Each and every activity of them is bound by taboo. In a nutshell, taboo acts as an authority to determine a person's course in life. It even defines their social and cultural life. The understanding of the taboos of the Naga world is the key to unlock the treasure of the Nagas' knowledge reservoir. The researcher through the present article will try to highlight the everyday life of the Naga tribe and in addition will focus on the educative purpose of these in the society. The present paper is solely based on the Naga novel, *The Sky is My Father*.

**Keywords:** Taboos, Rituals, Tradition, Naga, North-East India

Around the world, writers from underprivileged groups in society use their writings to reflect their culture. They incorporate local expertise and distinctive cultural customs to "affirm that academic products are not solely for the benefit of universities...but are important means of promoting self-determination and control over Indigenous territories and resources" (Samson & Gigoux, x). Northeast Indian creative authors like Temsula Ao, Mamang Dai, Aruni Kashyap, Easterine Kire, and others use their works to paint a picture of the area on the literary canvases. Northeast India is the anthropologists' paradise and administrators' nightmare. The cultural situation, the British invasion, and the relationships between the tribes of Northeast India and the centre are all issues that the writers from this area instil in their work. Easterine Kire, a Nagaland

native, expresses the rich culture of the land through her works. Apart from an academician, Kire is a poet, novelist and social activist. Her literary work is acknowledged as one of the greatest regional literary voices. Her motto behind the depiction of Naga world is to preserve the culture of her mother land. She has translated more than 200 poems from her mother tongue *Tenyidie* into English to open up the Naga reservoir of culture to the world. She is also known as Easterine Iralu, the writer of the first Naga novel originally written in English. She depicts colonial history, Naga struggle, societal structure and culture of Nagaland in her first novel *The Sky is My Father: A Naga Village Remembered*. The other books namely *A Terrible Matriarchy* (2007), *Mari* (2010), *Life on Hold* (2011), *When the River Sleeps* (2014), *Son of the Thundercloud* (2016), *Don't Ruin, My Love* (2017), and *The Rain Maiden and the Bear Man* (2021) add glory to her crown. Her *Son of the Thundercloud* is honoured with Sahitya Akademi's children specific award, Sahitya Bal Puraskar in 2018.

Kire explores her environment and experiences through creative writing. Readers are sensually satisfied by her genuine representation. The moving story of a little girl growing up in Naga civilization is found in *Terrible Matriarchy*. The Naga culture holds that girls don't require education, family love and support, or even a decent piece of meat with grease. The *Bitter Wormwood* chronicles the deadly political battle that devastates the lives of the common people and introduces the scent of gunpowder to their mountainous region's pure air. Readers are transported to the isolated Nagaland mountains by the book *When the River Sleeps*, a setting rich in natural beauty and paranormal intrigue. The protagonist Ville travels through the forest in the book to actualize his goal. The readers are taken along by the compelling story in a world where spirits are just as real as men and women. In a nutshell, Kire's work takes one deep into the lives and hearts of the Naga people, including their rituals and beliefs, respect for the land, close-knit communities, and the melodies of a life lived in tune with the natural world. The present paper examines Easterine Kire's novel, *Sky is My Father*.

The word 'Naga' is an exonym and there exist several theories and opinions regarding the origin of the Nagas. J.H Hutton believed that "the word "Naga" is merely a European lengthening of the Assamese "Naga" or Hindustani "aga" meaning "naked" (5). General Mowu Gwizan opines that the Chinese called the Naga people *Natcharme* (run away people), the people who ran away during the construction of the great wall of China (Noordermeer). Another theory proclaimed that the word "Naga comes from the Sanskrit nag for snake-worshipper is viewed by most as an

implausible source” (Kire, Walking., 6). Dr. V.K Nuh in his book *Origin of the Naga* traces the root of the Nagas. He is of the view that the Nagas are Mongoloid by race and are found as tribe and sub-tribe with various customs and traditions broadly scattered between the Brahmaputra River in India and Salween River in Myanmar (1). Abraham Lotha, another prominent Naga scholar notes “according to oral traditions, Nagas migrated from Mongolia and then through South Western China and Myanmar into their present territory of habitation” (5). Today, there are Nagas living both in India and Myanmar. In India, the Nagas occupy the state of Nagaland and the boundary lines are the Manipur Valley in the south, the Brahmaputra Valley in the west and Tirap and Changlan in Arunachal Pradesh in the north (District Census Handbook).

The Naga society is democratic, and historically, they used to live in small communities. Many different clans made up the settlements. The village's founder took on the role of leader. Social, economic, political, and religious links bring the populace closer. The British alluded to the Nagas as naked, primitive, uncivilized, and savage headhunters because they engaged in indigenous rituals worshipping their own religion. According to the 2011 census, the major fourteen tribes coexist in the Nagaland region. They are Angami, Ao, Chang, Chakhesang, Khiamniungan, Konyak, Lotha, Phom, Pochury, Rengma, Santgam, Sema, Yimchungra, and Zeliang. Though each tribe has its own language for daily communication but “their common religiosity and spirituality, their common reverence for the land as sacred and as a place of their origin bolster the Nagas common foundation as an ethnic group” (Imsong 31). In a word, the traditional religion of the Angami might be described as a religion of taboo. The taboos are fascinating because some of them have grave repercussions and others serve as societal norms that must be taught. Every community has a priest who serves as the moral and spiritual guide. There are no priestly clans in the Ao tribe. The owner of the house personally performs the simple domestic ceremonies. The clan priest oversees significant rites (the old and knowledgeable man). In their tradition, all guests and visitors are asked to depart the village before the start of communal prayer, and new guests are not permitted to arrive on that day. The locals are forbidden from travelling so that their God might bless them. Both women and men both wear ornaments. The Chakhesang have a rich heritage that includes songs, dances, tales, and rituals. They strictly follow their Medanyi religion and worship Nunupi, a higher spirit who is neither male or female. They have an after-life belief in a place named Kusamira, which is physically located beyond Mount Tiyi. They don't believe in heaven or hell. To placate the

spirits, they sacrifice animals during thanksgiving rites. Their celebrations centre on agriculture, when rituals are held for bumper harvests and a bountiful harvest.

From the very beginning the Indian society has been a pluralistic one. Despite the fact that society and societal structure change through time, heterogeneity and fellow feeling persist. Clans and sub-clans are used to identify and represent the community, particularly the tribal populated community. They have a strong sense of loyalty to their motherland and like the freedom's crisp air. The hill tribes of northeast India may personally attest to this depiction of tribal society. They live in 'dawn lit mountain' and enjoy community pleasure. They are ignorant and believe in the words of their ancestors. They are pleased to see that individuals of their community are still adhering to their long-standing customs, taboos, and rituals. The taboos and rituals are inseparable part of their life and these two teach them "acceptable social conduct" (Kire 63). The Cambridge English Dictionary defines taboo as "a subject, a word, or action that is avoided for religious or social reasons" and ritual as "a way of doing something in which the same actions are done in the same way every time." For the Nagas ritual does not merely identify that which is sacred, it also creates the sacred. When the dreams and superstitions of those individuals are available, it is simpler to comprehend the local culture of primitive people. The practice of taboos provides this access. For Henry Presler, taboo or taboos are those "caution established to guard against supernaturally dangerous things like plants, person especially those possess mana" (Longchar and Imchasenla 47). About taboo and its association with Northeast India, Raghuvir Singha writes:

Taboo complex in the north-eastern region is so effective that it does not only control social behavior but also surrounds most of ritualistic performances. It is the taboo complex which links the social to the religious and prompts an individual to remain in a regulated behavior, thus occasionally reminding him of the supernatural force controlling the phenomena. It makes him revere this supernatural being in awe and afraid of his fury. (Kamei)

In the novel *Sky is My Father*, Kire very skillfully paints a picture with words to convey a sense of Naga life. She tells the tale of the inhabitants of the Khonoma village. She describes the 20 years' happenings of the village, more particularly the Levi's family (his brother Lato, his mother Piano, his wife Peno and their kids, Sato and Roko). As it is a historical novel, it shows the changes of the environment of the village due to the invasion of the Whites. It ends with the return of village people from imprisonment. Apart from the changes in Naga society, particularly

in the Levi household of Khonoma the novel is rich in description of Naga culture. The novel gradually unfolds the layers of Naga custom. It introduces us with the meetings at the *theou* (village community hall, translation mine), Feasts of Merit hosted for good harvest, the observance of genna days. The novel moves from feast and festival to battle and war not just between the Naga villages and British but also between old religion and new, old ways of life and new, and more.

The primitive people of Northeast India represent diversity. The modes of expression, language, race, vernacular, etc. differ from clan to clan. But what unites them is their belief in taboos and culture. Kire writes in her book *Walking the Roadless Road* “The cultures of the different Naga tribes within Nagaland are multifaceted, including their music, their oral and written literature, the culinary habits of the people and Naga art- these various aspects make up the distinct culture of the Nagas” (58). The spiritual realm that permeates the Naga people's way of life and culture makes them extremely sensitive people. The taboo is deep-seated in the Naga psyche as they pronounce “*Tei apfu, kiju apfu, a kepenuopfu peleya*” (Sky is my father, Earth is my mother, I believe in the Creator-Deity) (Kire 64). Taboo and its recurrent application in everyday life become their means of survival. In their Naga world each village has a priest who monitors the family rituals and ceremonies. The taboos and rituals of the Nagas are mainly connected with agriculture and social life. Kire writes in “A Poem is a Song is a Story” “agricultural taboos and social taboos helped maintain conformity in the tribe and they preserved tribal life for many years before colonization introduced western education and culture” (116)

Easterine Kire, a writer from Nagaland, in her novel *Sky is My Father* unfolds the multi-layered unknown world of the Nagas through the brilliant portrayal of Khonoma village. She very skillfully incorporated into her work the folk beliefs in the ominous power of the spirits as well as the division of power relations in the tribal society. The society is male dominated and patriarchy is too much active to confine women to the household affairs. The women of Naga society are denied participation in public affairs. The men even don't share with them their activities regarding war with neighboring villages and the White invaders. The entry of women to the village community hall is restricted. Men feel good to see women working since dawn for their household. At the very beginning of the novel, the writer introduces the taboo regarding *lashu* that refers to the death of mothers during childbirth. Kovi's wife took her last breath during childbirth but as Khonoma peasants in Nagaland strictly forbid performing burial customs for

deceased women. Additionally, Khonoma peasants in Nagaland strictly forbid performing burial customs for deceased women. Deeply saddened by the loss, Kovi and his daughter were unable to publicly show their sorrow because doing so was frowned upon. The tribes believe in the 'midas-touch' of almighty God in procreation who even controls birth and death rates. In the tribal society of Northeast India, death of child and mother immediately after delivery is frequent. The folks believe that if immediately after the birth the father fails to claim the fatherhood, the evil spirits take the baby away. Kire very brilliantly portrays this through the death of Kovi's wife. "No, no mourning for a *lashu* death, it is taboo...The strictest of taboos was upon the *lashu* death. No mourning of the dead" (Kire 6).

When a young man is ready to be married, one of his female relatives preferably his paternal aunt proposes to the young woman of his choosing. When the proposal is approved, the two are given a little window of opportunity to get to know one another and listen to one other's dreams. If one of them has a horrible dream or if a relative from either side passes away during the formalities, the marriage cannot go through. If everything goes according to plan, the marriage is a success. On the second day of marriage, the bride and groom avoid one another so that further rituals can be carried out. The newlyweds venture out into the fields for the first time on the third day. Once more, an elder conducts a ritual for the new married couple in the third or fourth month. A chicken's mouth and legs are washed by the household elder, who then asks the couple to touch the chicken before swinging it back and forth and blessing the home for a long life free from illness. Once more, the individual kills the chicken outside the village gate.

Piano, mother of Levi conducts the rituals associated with marriage for Levi and his wife. Piano is well aware that if they fail to observe those rituals it will hamper the married life of her son. She knows the taboo and its consequences. Kire through Piano expresses:

If you break the taboos, you break yourself... If you did not heed the taboos, you could live on unharmed for some years, but the day would soon come when the earth would open up to receive you before your time. And then, when that day struck, you went without the compassion of the village. (Kire 14-15)

The tribal life of Northeast India revolves around agriculture as it fulfills their basic need of life. They work hard throughout the day in their land. But throughout the *Khunuo lievi* (genna days means no work days) they remain aloof from their field. "To Nagas, a *genna* is a community worship of God" (Kamei). These days are no working days for the villagers. The *genna* day would curse the crops of those who break it as their crops would be damaged by insects, birds

and animals and it would give life to those who observe it. Apart from genna day that observed to protect crops, the Nagas also observe *genna* to prevent “sterility of the soil as well as the genna to ensure the fertility of the soil” (Kire 57). Thena day is a part of the genna and during this the Naga people do only field work. The Naga people dwell in the deep forest. They are primitive and believe in the presence of spirit in their everyday life. For them spirit controls their life and they are not malevolent to those who perform the rituals. From their indigenous knowledge inherited from the ancestors they learn how to satisfy the spirits. In the Naga village of Khonoma, the tribes on the decline of full moon day observe *Terhase* ritual to make peace with the spirits. Each clan participated in this rite by offering a chicken to the spirits distant from their usual habitation. In the novel *Sky is My Father*, the priests of Thepa clan and Thevo observe the ritual. The Thevo priest loudly speaks:

Spirit Vo-o, we were wondering where you were but here you are. We have come to solicit peace between man and spirit. Let there be no destruction and calamity, no death and disease and plague. Who is honest, you are honest. Who is honest, I am honest. We will compete with each other in honesty. (Kire 14)

The Mishmi mythology claims that tigers as the brother of human from same mother (human being the younger). One day the younger brother hunted a deer and left it under the custody of elder and went to collect some firewood. But the elder ate the raw meat. The younger complains it to the mother, “my younger brother is a tiger. If he can eat raw meat, then one day he will eat me too” (Aiyadurai 308). The mother to resolve the issue makes a plan and as per the plan the one who would cross the river first would kill the other. The tiger decides to swim whereas the human chooses the bridge. It is due to the trick of the mother human wins and shoots the tiger with an arrow. The tiger passes away, and its body is carried off to a far-off location. A bird finds the tiger's bones sometime later, treats them like eggs, and perches there. As a result of it again the tiger comes into existence. The residents of the Northeast view the killing of tigers as taboo and adhere a series of rituals in order to prevent the tigers' spirits from causing any harm to the community.

In the novel *Sky is My Father*, Vilau killed a tiger and for that he has gone through a set of rituals. He makes a new fire place from split bamboo and cooks by himself. As part of the ritual, in addition, he kills a pig and chops off the right leg to give it to the *tekhu-u* (the man who injures the tiger). He has to divide his share of food into thirty-nine portions and has to eat after counting carefully. The next five days are genna (no working days) for him and on the fifth day he has to

“store the remains of his fireplace and put away the cooking stones” and then he is supposed to fetch water to complete the ritual (Kire 17).

Chicken sacrifice to the omnipotent God is a prevalent practice in Indian tribal communities. This practice of offering a chicken as a sacrifice to God is called *geisu ruotho* in the Naga culture. It is a ritual that the Nagas execute for their own protection so that no evil spirits would dare to harm them. The priests play a key role here. In *Sky is My Father*, Piano, the mother of Levi arranges the *geisu ruotho* (post marriage ceremony) for her son and son’s wife. The priest speaks loudly and offers the sacrificial meat to the spirits thus: “We refuse to take disease, death or any ill encounter with spirits from any place and therefore we are substituting your life with this unblemished chicken which is greater you’re your life and we will appease the spirits with it...” (Kire 70). Subsequently, these two men take the initiative to place the chicken of sacrifice at a prefixed place on the road.

It is obvious that tribal society's religion has a direct impact on their way of life. With the exception of the tribal group, the majority of people view religion as only one aspect of their daily lives. Tribal religion and daily functioning are both inextricably connected to their belief that a supernatural force governs the universe. All of their rituals are prescribed by their religious law, but their main objective is self-defense against the perilous supernatural force that could have an impact on their daily course of lives. Ritual is a straightforward method of conveying to the evils that they must confess that they are always available for their assistance. However, it is also a great disappointment because in this modern social system, tribal community also sustain massive gaps between the cultures of the rest of the country's population. Their primitive culture keeps them cohesive and fosters a lovely emotional bond amongst them.

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