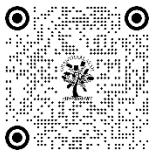


REVERING NAGA TRIBES AS THE PROPAGATORS OF ECOCENTRISM: RETRIEVING THE EVANESCING CULTURAL HERITAGE THROUGH EASTERINE KIRE'S WHEN THE RIVER SLEEPS

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ABSTRACT

Tribes are always considered as unique people because of their phenomenal culture. The reason is that their culture and its practices are encompassed with fructuous values which assist them in living a prolific life, and frame their lifestyle as an unsophisticated one that facilitates them to live one with nature. In addition, as they primarily reside in mountains, forests, and areas around the water bodies, they follow eco-friendly cultural and traditional customs that instigate them to coexist with their natural environment, and foster the mentality of protecting and preserving their surrounding ecosystem by considering it as their predominant life source. So, they do not possess the attitude of harming or violating their ecological unit; instead, they venerate it. Therefore, they are recognised as ecocentric people. One such ecocentric community is Naga tribes who dwell in the North-Eastern states of India. Even though they are illustrious for their ecocentric way of life, this prestigious identity has been vanishing over time. Further, the entire populace is largely portrayed as uncivilised folk, and they are mostly represented by their faults or misdeeds rather than their goodness or merits. Thus, demonstrating the significance and eminence of their ecocentric and animistic lifestyle, the present research article intends to laud their cultural heritage and attempts to reclaim their evanescing cultural identity, with the analysis of Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps*. Consequently, it tracks down why their distinctive identity is languishing, and why their negative stuffs are mainly spotlighted.

Keywords: Animism, Ecocentrism, Naga Cultural Heritage, Naga Tribes and Naga Tribal Identity

1. INTRODUCTION

The label 'Naga tribes' does not denote a single tribal community but a group of seventeen major tribes and a few minor tribes who live in Nagaland, Manipur, Assam, and Arunachal Pradesh of India. Not only India, but Myanmar is also an abode of certain Naga tribes. However, the majority of Naga tribes reside in Nagaland. Though they are diverse, they share a lot of common cultural and traditional heritage.

In the earlier days, Nagas observed customs and rituals that interlinked with their natural environment, as they had agriculture as their primary source of livelihood. Each Naga practiced those customs ardently. Contravening or defying those practices were considered as serious taboos, and they believed that disobliging those practices would catalyse unimaginable hazards for the entire family or clan. Besides that, they had animistic ideologies that inspired them to adore

the natural resources, on which they rely for food, shelter, medicine, and so on. To venerate and cherish their ecological unit, they celebrated a number of festivals; to guard and conserve those life sources, they designated various efficacious directories and constraints. On the whole, they were very attached to their non-human environment, and that association propagated an ecocentric lifestyle. Ecocentrism is a most productive environmental philosophy; it "finds intrinsic value in all of nature – that includes living and non-living part of nature" (Holloway 2). So, this is an admirable identity for these tribes.

Apart from being an ecocentric community, Naga men were dauntless warriors. In their context, battling was a sport in which they would promulgate their valour, and with that, they would devour a lot of privileges in their clan. Their fights were not only with the nearby villages, but they combated hard against British colonisers also, when they encroached on their territory to colonise them. Remarkably, they did a tough battle against the Japanese army along with the British soldiers and desisted the Japanese invasion by defeating them. This bloody war took its toll on the many lives of Nagas. In addition to the battle sport, hunting was also a prestigious sport in their culture, and that Naga men were proficient hunters; it is notable that they were notorious for head-hunting as well. Moreover, Naga women as well as men were good at farming, weaving, singing, dancing, and carving.

Unbelievable transformations were induced in the world of Nagas when colonisation and war hit Nagaland. They effectuated industrialization as well as modernization that rendered the circumstances for contacting the non-Nagas of the outside world, and these new things influenced these tribes immensely. Thereafter, Nagas engendered numerous alterations in their cultural and traditional practices, which impacted their day-to-day lives. One of the key reasons for these transitions is the spread of Christianity, which was also propagated by colonisation. It played a requisite role in terminating the animistic religious conceptions and practices of these indigenous people. For these processes, the colonisers established a range of churches and Christian institutions where Christian missionaries played their roles impeccably. From these momentous moments, their cultural legacy and tribal identity began to deteriorate. After India gained independence, the Naga insurgency also modified their identity and representation. However, the Nagas of certain interior localities have ecocentric lifestyle, animistic conceptions, and the urge to hold on to their cultural heritage till now; these circumstances indicate that there is still a silver lining.

In the present context, the grievous problem is that the excellences, distinctions, calibers, and good qualities of Nagas and their culture are neither rewarded nor acknowledged by the mainstream people; only their negative stuff are interpreted widely, and these tribes are recognised with that unfavourable identity. Therefore, with the assessment of the enthralling Naga writer Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps*, this research article aims to honour the Nagas by illustrating the prominence of their ecocentric cultural and traditional lifestyle with the intention of reinstating their fading cultural heritage. Furthermore, it procures the answers to the research questions that why their rich cultural identity is evanescing, and why their news is generally overloaded with the affairs that defile their identity.

Easterine Kire is the first English novelist from the Naga community. She is not only well-known for her novels but also for her short stories, poems, and non-fictions. Through her literary works, she articulates her voice to explicate the issues of her people, and to demonstrate the importance of her cultural ethnicity. The chosen source for this study is her award-winning novel *When the River Sleeps* which depicts the story of a Naga tribal man named Vilie, a hunter who lives in the heart of a forest by accepting it as his spouse and home; and it enumerates his venturesome journey that he makes to find a supernatural river from which he desires to acquire a magical stone. Besides the plot, it is acclaimed as an illustrious novel for representing the cultural and traditional practices of Nagas.

Leaving his relatives and ancestral village, Vilie lives alone in a forest and remains unmarried. "The idea of a man living his life out in the forest-away from the communal life of a village-was so alien to them" but he states that "[t]he forest is my wife" and thinks that "leaving the forest would be the same as abandoning his wife" (Kire 7, 9). As he believes that the forest is his home and wife, he is not worried about being unmarried or heirless, whenever his family members nag him to get married and have children to live a communal life in his village. Further, he feels content in this life because "[t]he forest was his wife indeed: providing him with sanctuary when he most needed it; and food when his rations were inadequate. The forest also protected him from the evil in the heart of man. He felt truly wedded to her" (Kire 51). This shows the affection, devotion, and respect, an ecocentric man upholds for the natural world that grants him all the needed things.

Spending "twenty-five of his forty-eight years" in the forest, Vilie has enhanced his knowledge about his environment (Kire 3). For instance, despite having a map of the forest in his hands, he has his own map in his mind. As a tribal man,

he trusts the medicinal values of the plants and herbs that he uses for himself and others whenever there is a need. Subsequently, his experience shapes him as an expert, and thereby he augments his intelligence, with that he utilises the forest produce as food and medicine as well. Further, there is no need for a clock because he calculates the time through natural phenomena. And wherever he travels, he constructs his own shelter with the leaves and branches of trees, without shedding much effort. These circumstances aid him in leading an exemplary life in the simplest way and mould him to live a life without any luxury. This kind of lifestyle is achievable when a person follows ecocentric principles to live a harmonious life with nature. In the case of Vilie, his Naga tribal cultural heritage is already a manifestation of ecocentrism, which naturally attaches him to his ecological unit.

In the forest, Vilie leads his life by hunting animals. Despite being a hunter, he is conscious of preserving his ecosystem, for this demeanour, he is appointed as an official guardian of the endangered species Tragopan and Mithun. Concerning this as his predominant duty, he seeks the help of Krishna, a Nepali woodcutter, to look after these species in his absence when he goes in search of the sleeping river. Krishna lives with his wife and son in the same forest. He plans to teach his trade to his son in the future to lead an honest life like him; moreover, he desires to send his son to Vilie in order that his son can learn the lessons and skills that are mandatory for a person to live a life in the forest. Vilie also acknowledges that as the best schooling because, in their conviction, the rich knowledge is that “the ways of the forest, herbs one could use for food, the animals and birds one could trap and the bitter herbs to counteract the sting of a poisonous snake” (Kire 15); likewise, they admit that “the forest is dangerous to those who don’t know it, but it can be kind to those who befriend it” (Kire 20). Therefore, they believe that knowing about one’s environment and how to lead a life in one’s environment is the best knowledge that one should fundamentally learn because they depend upon their ecological unit for their livelihood.

The lifestyle of Vilie is already a wonder, but he wonders at the lifestyle of a Naga tribal couple Kani and Subale who dwell in their isolated village by following the ecocentric way of life that their ancestors practiced. He is totally amazed when they describe about their exceptional way of life in the modernizing world:

We live as our forefathers did. Fishing and drying the fish and selling it in the market so we can buy the things we can’t make by ourselves. We use the brine pools for the salt and we collect and sell to buy tea and sugar at the market . . . but we can’t grow rice on these rocks where our houses stand. In any case, we have learnt from childhood to manoeuvre these rocks so we don’t mind using the only piece of flat land we have for growing rice. (Kire 90 - 91)

Even though their surrounding world has been transforming due to political and cultural transitions, they still stick to their traditional lifestyle. In addition, unlike other people who moved to towns to improvise their lives, they are not willing to desert their village. Subsequently, they do not mind about their comfort; instead, they try their best to live with what they have in their environment because they are not inclined to muddle their ecological unit, which presents everything to them, and they are gratified with that.

Vilie, Kani, and Subale live in the period when Christianity has erected its firm foundation in the terrain of Naga tribes. Despite the influence of Christianity, these Naga tribal people practice animism:

Animism is a religious . . . perspective common to many indigenous cultures . . . animists believe in the “animism of all nature . . . animists accept that some features of the natural environment such as trees, lakes, mountains, thunderstorms, and animals are non-human persons with whom we may maintain and develop social relationships. . . . The animist is committed to a superstitious belief in anthropomorphic spirits, which reside within non-human animals or altogether inanimate objects. (Smith)

Naga tribal culture is structured on the ecocentric philosophy that stimulates the demeanour of revering their non-human environment, which serves as their life source. Based on these natural resources, they have majorly configured their animistic religious conceptions. Whenever they obtain valuable things from their non-human organisms, accomplish success, or encounter danger, they pronounce the names of their animistic deities. Further, they practice certain customs to venerate and appease them. Vilie, Kani, and Subale also do the same when time demands it.

Animism can be considered as a fructuous ideology as it generates a kind of respect as well as fear towards the non-human organisms, and it establishes the notion that it can function as a threat for a human who harms the natural entities or indulges in any misdeed. This is an unavoidable dogma in the culture of Nagas. Therefore, When Vilie goes to catch the stone from the sleeping river, Kani advises Vilie, “your protection is your own good heart and your clear conscience. Harbour no evil against any man when you are on this trip” (Kire 93). They believe that non-human organisms of their

surrounding would act as powerful spirits to punish them if they commit any crime. So, this kind of animistic ideology employs as a healthy barrier in their culture that helps them to lead a virtuous life.

One thing that is apparent from this study is that Naga tribes have an impeccable cultural heritage that propagates ecocentrism and animism. In ecocentrism, “[m]an is considered as a simple member of the biotic community. Therefore, this position, through its holistic views, gives moral dignity to natural objects and ecosystem as a whole” (Donev 181). It is completely contrasted with Anthropocentrism, which “values non-human life forms through the lens of values for human well-being, interest, and profits” (Holloway 2). The ecocentric principles of Nagas invoke dependency and respect for non-human organisms; this is also a root cause for their animistic conceptions. Henceforth, it is not acceptable to label them or their customs as uncivilized. They ought to be acknowledged and applauded for their lifesaving cultural practices, which would be the best antidote to the contemporary environmental issues of the world. Even though there are superstitious beliefs in their animistic tradition, it teaches that there is life in non-human organisms that should be treated mindfully, and it insists a warning point that it will be a menace if humans disturb the non-human entities with selfish motifs; therefore, animism can be a precious conception as it can have the bridle of unrighteous human life. Hence, it will not be an exaggeration if the Naga cultural heritage is described as an embodiment of ecocentrism and animism.

It is ascertained that the invaluable cultural heritage of Nagas has been evanescing since colonisation, modernization, and industrialization sowed the seeds of transition; this alters their identity, yet the aforesaid factors have uplifted their social life. It is an undeniable truth that change is the only unchangeable thing still it would be chaotic and meaningless if the core of identity was deconstructed due to the changes. So, it would be best if one strives to retain the ethnic identity by following the possible traditional and cultural practices, even in the advanced eras, to formulate a wholesome life. Further, the commons have stereotypical and narrow views on tribes generally, because the tribal representations are mostly made by non-tribal folk whose articulations are not first-hand experiences. Subsequently, negative news is gaining much popularity among people nowadays; thereupon, negative representations are highlighted and publicised more than the positive contents. These are the prominent reasons behind the negative portrayal of Nagas as well, but indigenous voices have begun to expose the authentic circumstances that gradually reform the Naga identity; this is the most promising rectifier to regenerate the representations of Nagas.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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