



ORAL TRADITIONS AND INDIC KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS IN EASTERINE KIRE'S *WHEN THE RIVER SLEEPS*

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Abstract

Easterine Kire's When the River Sleeps presents a rich tapestry of oral traditions, customs, beliefs and indigenous knowledge through the journey of Vilie and his connection to nature and cultural identity. This paper will study how oral traditions play a role in the preservation and transmission of Indic knowledge systems in preserving cultural continuity and sustaining indigenous knowledge, such as medicine, arts and environment. For Naga people oral traditions continued to serve as the primary means of sustaining their rich cultural knowledge within communities, ensuring that wisdom is passed down through generations. This study ultimately aims to highlight the significance of oral traditions to encourage cultural continuity, resilience and innovation within Indic knowledge systems.

Keywords

Preservation, Transmission, Continuity, Indigenous knowledge, Oral traditions, etc.

Full Article

Introduction:

Easterine Kire, born on 29 March 1959 in Kohima, Nagaland, India, is one among the few Naga's writers who work so hard to preserve oral traditions like the folktales, myths and history of Naga through her writing. Kire once says in her interview that she grew up with her grandparents a good part of the year, by choice. Her motivation to write is summed up in this statement by her in an interview, "I felt we needed to create written Naga Literature. We have so much oral narratives but with oral dying out, it's all going to be lost. Every night, one grandparent would take on the delightful duty of telling stories" (an interview with Veio Pou). Everything she listens to from her grandparents sums up to her writings. She also said that she uses oral traditions as a based to create Naga literature in the same way that western literature grew out of Greek classical myths. Naga arts, literature, and music unveiled a tapestry woven with folk tales, dances, and song that resonated across all Naga tribes. Song, in particular, held a revered status among the Nagas, serving as a vessel for communication and storytelling. Naga songs, characterized by their soft and melodious nature, served as channel for narrating historical events, soothing infants, energizing warriors, and expressing deep emotions during times of war and romance.

Naga folktales emerged as not just sources of entertainment but repositories of moral values, cultural insights, and natural world knowledge. These tales, imparted in communal spaces like the *morung*, functioned as educational tools conveying tribal traditions, warrior tactics, artistic



skills, and societal norms. Kire in her book *Walking the Roadless Road* writes, it was the centre for attitude formation of young people where the young men received semi-military training, taught war tactics and various training like the cultural, arts, and craft skills.

Naga oral traditions were kept alive in the *morung* and passed on from one generation to the next in the form of folk songs, dances and folk tales. The education system of the *morung* was highly relevant and utilitarian, serving the practical needs of the people while developing character and sense of civic duties, community ethics, cooperative labour and responsible citizen (Kire 32).

The *morung* is a sacred community hall, fostered a spirit of equality, discipline, and cultural preservation, where elders imparted wisdom, and younger generations imbibed the cultural heritage through stories, songs, and dances. The enduring significance of oral traditions in preserving Naga cultural heritage was underscored by scholars like Jan Vansina, quoted from her book *Oral Tradition as History*, “Ancient things are today” or “History repeats itself”.

Whether memory changes or not, culture is reproduced by remembrance put into words and deeds. The mind through memory carries culture from generation to generation. How it is possible for a mind to remember and out of living, which manifest continuity over time is one of the greatest wonders one can study, comparable only to human intelligence and thought itself. Oral tradition should be central to students of culture, of ideology, of society, of psychology, of art, and finally, of history (Vansina xi).

Oral tradition for Naga people, though it is unwritten, it is entrusted to the memory of the successive generation of people, where they act as a repository of the past and it serve as a knowledge Indic system. Despite challenges posed by colonial influences and cultural shifts, Naga writers like Easterine Kire sought to safeguard and showcase their people's narrative through historical novels based on oral traditions. When she was interviewed by Namrata Kolachalam, why she writes historical novels. She says, we have an ancient oral, unwritten literature and a young written literature dating back to the 1970s when academic works by Nagas appeared in print. Before that, the writings that existed on Nagas were by western anthropologists and British political officers and American missionaries. I started writing historical novels on my people's history because the insider's voice was silent in all the historical narratives on us. Writing historical novels gave me the opportunity to give a socio-cultural presentation of my community. I always include the spiritual element as that is a big part of our reality as a people. I see the role of Naga writers as one of chronicling our history and our socio-cultural reality in the format of written literature (Helter- Skelter Magazine, 11 March 2019).

Oral Tradition as Indic Knowledge Systems:

Oral tradition is generally defined as the practice of passing down of cultural knowledge, beliefs, stories, customs and history from one generation to another. It includes a various form such as proverbs, riddles, tales, nursery rhymes, legends, myths, epic songs and poems, charms, prayers, chants, songs, dramatic performances serving as an important means of preserving and transmitting cultural heritage, in a society where there is no written language.

In *When the River Sleeps* Kire present a narrative that connects the spiritual wisdom, cultural identity and environmental consciousness through oral traditions. Her narratives pull



readers into the perspective of Nagas, focusing on how oral narratives and natives' knowledge help their connection with the natural world and create their cultural and spiritual identities. This study of Nagas' culture as reflected in the novel aligns with Indic knowledge systems, where spiritual belief, environmental ethic and traditional practices are interwoven, creating a holistic approach to existence and sustainability. Kire uses, Vilie's journey to show how oral traditions in indigenous communities' functions as more than just a storytelling but they act as a repository of wisdom, guidance, moral lessons and present the interconnectedness with nature.

Practice of Traditional Medicinal Herbs through Generations:

In when the River Sleeps, an important feature of the storytelling was the use of medicinal herbs and healing practices which is deeply rooted in the oral traditions. The novel depicts how Vilie and the indigenous people in the novel depend on the knowledge of the medicinal herbs, the oral wisdom that passed down from their ancestors. There are certain herbs that are used for healing which are identify through oral transmission from the folktales and myths. When people got injured in the forest, they use *Ciena* (Bitter wormwood) a soft leafed plant with an unpleasant smell, paste for open wounds for smaller injuries and *Tierhutiepfu* (Amaranth) is used as an antiseptic and antifungal properties, also eaten as vegetable. Pungent *Japan Nha* (Crofton weed) and rock bee honey for bigger wounds that gives a quick healing to the wounds. When Vilie was stung by a nettle leaf, the women quickly smeared the rock bee honey over the swelling skin and covered it with medicinal herbs. Other herbs, Vilie use to immediately stopped bleeding was *vilhuunha* (redflowerragleaf or fireweed). He also used ginseng root, soaked in the hot water and drink to restore back his strength. *Tsomhou* (nutgall tree) which gives very sour small seeded fruit is used for food poisoning and allergies. These are medicinal herbs found in the forest for immediate treatment and cure which is a knowledge passed down from their ancestor orally and this was how knowledge is preserved and passed on to generation to generations.

Another traditional practice before the entry of the Christianity in the native, the non-Christian customarily offered chicken sacrifices when someone fell sick. It is because they feared death so much that they would offer a chicken into the woods and proclaim, "Life for Life" and release the chicken so that it cheeped all evening until it died or was eaten by a bigger animal (Kire 54). But now no one followed that since the Christian taught that Jesus had been sacrificed for everyone's sickness. But there are still some Naga tribes, when a person is fallen sick after returning from the forest or field, they break the local egg and applied on the patient's forehead, chest as they believed that the egg has the power to remove the evil spirit that had touched the person, and it does heal the sickness. This cultural legacy underscores the importance of respecting and preserving such traditions, which carry profound symbolic and therapeutic value.

Preservation of Artistic Traditions:

Kire highlights the art of weaving through Zeliang women depicted as a prominent figure in this tapestry emerge as stalwarts of tradition and resilience, embodying values of hard work and cultural heritage preservation. These women strip the fiber from the nettle plant to make into yarn then weave a nettle cloth. This is called bark weaving, which is a dying art. Harvesting nettle is a difficult task as it stings if your hand is not properly covered with a thick cloth. The senior women taught the younger women on the task of harvesting and weaving nettle cloth and that was how Zeliang women kept the art of bark weaving alive and ensuring that cultural practices and values are not lost. Bark weaving is passed down from one generation to another, through the women of the community ensuring that weaving skills and tradition are preserved over time. The art of bark weaving is an integral part of the Naga culture, symbolizing their relationship with nature and traditional craftsmanship.



As mentioned above, *morung*, functioned as educational tools conveying tribal traditions, warrior tactics, artistic skills, and societal norms. It is a sacred community hall, fostered a spirit of equality, discipline, and cultural preservation, where elders imparted wisdom, and younger generations imbibed the cultural heritage through stories, songs, and dances. The hall is decorated with different kinds of artifacts, like the log drums, wood carving, animals and birds skulls. The seers and the old men who sit in the hall, wise advice acts as a repository of courage and wisdom for the generations.

When Vilie was attacked by the forest spirit, he draws strength and wisdom from the oral traditions of his community, from the advice given by the seer. He remembered seer's words. "Let your spirit be the bigger one. They are spirits, they will submit to the authority of the spirit that asserts itself" (Kire, 83). Then, Vilie summoned all his strength and pushed the thigh off him "Mine is the greater spirit! I will never submit to you!" This reflects the profound strength of oral tradition in shaping Vilie's understanding of himself and the seer's advice is filling with oral wisdom, focusing on the inherent strength of the human spirit. The seer wise advice helps Vilie during his journey in the deep forest to remain focused and composed in the face of supernatural encounters. The art of oral tradition acts as a repository of courage and wisdom for the generations.

Oral Tradition Imparting Ecological Knowledge:

Oral tradition in *When the River Sleeps* plays very important role in promoting environmental preservation. The novel portrayed how the Naga people oral narratives, myths and wisdom shape their harmonious relationship with nature, emphasizing respect for the environment and sustainable living. This oral tradition act as a repository of ecological knowledge helping the individual in the novel, especially Vilie, the protagonist to coexist with the natural world while protecting its resources.

The forest is depicted as a motherly figure, providing food and shelter for the inhabitants dwelling within her. The people whenever gather herbs and edible food from the forest; they never forget to acknowledge the owner for the provision. Vilie's mother will always say "*Terhuomia Peziemü*" which means thanks be to the spirits. That is the way of thanking the creator deity, *Ukepenuopfu* for the provision. The characters in the novel exhibit a profound respect and values for the nature. The people in the novel follow traditional culture and beliefs that they live in harmony with the natural world. The oral tradition emphasizes using only what is needed and avoiding exploitation. We see this when Vilie gather herb, he does so respectfully, ensuring the forest's ability to regenerate.

Elders in the story act as custodians of the oral traditions, passing on the younger generation about the forest ethic and its resources. When Vilie went out to the sleeping river to catch the heart-stone, he has to go through a lot of testing whether he is fit to possess the heart-stone or not. The Heart-Stone is a mythical and powerful stone which is believed to grant wishes to its possessor, but its acquisition is governed by strict spiritual and ethical principles. The river rewards the heart-stone to only those with courage, integrity, ethically worthy and to use for an unselfish purpose. Greed, fear or bad intentions are seen as barriers that prevent individual from claiming the Heart-Stone. He was told by the seer that Heart-Stone is not for the weak hearted man and selfish man. The purpose of having attained the Heart-Stone holds the potential to protect and benefit the whole community if used responsibly, it is beyond personal gain as reflected in the story. The ceremonial practices orally, such as offering of prayers, when the forest blessed them with something good.



Conclusion:

Easterine Kire is extremely concern about losing the rich Naga oral tradition as indigenous people are already facing a tremendous challenge from globalization and education. Today, she continues to write a novel based on Naga history chronologically as to give the historical background of the people and their lives to do her part as a writer. There are Naga artists and musicians perpetuating it in the art forms of their choice.

Kire's *When the River Sleeps* is great exploration of the symbiotic relationship between oral traditions and Indic knowledge systems, specifically in the context of Naga culture. Through Vilie's journey Kire represented how oral traditions serve as repositories of traditional healing for sickness, ecological wisdom, spiritual beliefs and cultural identity. The novel reminds the readers that the oral tradition and the indigenous knowledge are not just the story of the past but living systems that continue to give wisdom and guidance for the generation to come. This study also shows that *When the River Sleeps* is not just a story but a testament to the enduring power and relevance of oral tradition and Indic knowledge systems.

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