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**ISSN 2278-9529**

**Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal**  
[www.galaxyimrj.com](http://www.galaxyimrj.com)

## **Angami Tribe in Nagaland: Tradition, Continuity, and Change Reflected in Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps***

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<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13683839>

**Article History:** Submitted-03/07/2024, Revised-13/08/2024, Accepted-25/08/2024, Published-31/08/2024.

### **Abstract:**

The Angami are indigenous people who revere and worship Mother Earth. Kire exquisitely captures their strong bond and harmony with Ukepenuopfu, the birth spirit. As he battles not only humanity's evil but also malevolent spirits, the focus remains on Vilie's realisation of his spiritual journey. *When the River Sleeps* is an expanded version of Naga folktales, steeped in powerful supernatural beliefs. Kire's narration emphasises the novel's spooky and gothic themes.

Vilie fears that anyone entering the unclean woodland could become ill after the ghosts' attack. Mesanuo's spiritual insight enables her to comprehend evil and defeat it. Nagaland's stunning and picturesque highlands serve as the setting for the book. In her book *When the River Sleeps*, Easterine Kire describes how a man battles many forces after having a paranormal dream.

**Keywords:** Mother Earth, Ukepenuopfu, spiritual journey, gothic, and paranormal dream.

India's first feminist publishing house, Zubaan, first published Easterine Kire's novel *When the River Sleeps* in 2014. The novel, comprising fifty-one chapters, intricately portrays the rare excellence and beauty of Nagaland's mountainous landscape and its native people. The

narrative is deeply rooted in the rituals and ways of living of the aboriginal people, characterized by ethnic semblance and vibrant colour.

The Angami are one of the indigenous tribes of Nagaland. Like many other tribes in the region, the Angami people hold a deep reverence for Mother Earth and maintain a harmonious bond with Ukepenuopfu, the birth spirit. This connection reflects the ideals passed down by their ancestors, shaping the way of life in Angami territory. Easterine Kire's works are replete with representations of the Naga people, their customs, terrain, and surroundings, offering readers a fascinating glimpse into their culture. Her novels, including *When the River Sleeps*, vividly capture the customs and heritage of the Nagaland tribal community.

*When the River Sleeps* follows the story of Vilie, a middle-aged lone hunter who has made the forest his home. Through Vilie's life, Kire explores the oral narratives that shape the life and psyche of the Angami community. The novel is particularly notable for its depiction of the Angami people, their lives, and their culture, beautifully weaving in the supernatural beliefs and folktales of the Naga people.

Set against the backdrop of Nagaland's stunning and picturesque highlands, the novel's theme and setting evoke a spooky and gothic atmosphere. Throughout the story, the protagonist, Vilie, embarks on a spiritual journey, making *When the River Sleeps* not just a tale of adventure but a deeply spiritual exploration.

Vilie remembers his mother emphasizing the importance of acknowledging the sources of firewood or herbs taken from the forest in order to maintain a man's connection to nature. The magical realist novel is a literary genre that emulates the oral tradition from which it emerged. In the book *When the River Sleeps*, Vilie, a lone hunter, recounts his exploits while looking for a stone that will grant him superhuman abilities. Vilie believes he is "married" to the forest, and this obsession sends him down a path where strange and fantastic events occur frequently. An evil spirit that followed Vilie out of the forest and caused her untimely and eerie death is believed to be responsible for the passing of Mechüseno, whom Vilie wished to marry.

This deeply ingrained Naga folklore belief that men and women can change their spirits into particular animals and birds, like tigers, snakes, and eagles, serves as a link to cultural history. We encounter incidents involving both benevolent and malicious spirits throughout the book. Kire reassembles the link between the spiritual and material worlds, emphasising their

mutual existence and man's inescapable position "in-between." The focus remains on Vilie's realization of his spiritual journey, as he battles not only men's evil but also spirits' evil. Vilie adopts the role of Ate's guardian and accompanies her on his trip back to his village.

After a "were-tiger" attacks Vilie, Ate uses the "heart-stone" to revive her, leaving her defenseless. Witchcraft, heart stones, seers, and forest spirits abound in *When the River Sleeps*. Kire's narration emphasises the novel's supernatural and gothic themes. As she accepts the heartstone, Vilie exclaims, "The sky is my father."

The book is an expanded version of Naga folktales, which are rife with superstitious beliefs. Throughout his journey, the main character, Vilie, encounters various Gothic elements. During his stay in the forest, he witnesses an attack by a fox. Vilie believes that anyone entering the unclean forest could become ill after the spirits attack him. would become ill. Ate and Zote serve as a constant reminder of the mutual benefit between a good Ate, who embodied kindness and humility, and Zote, who harboured evil thoughts.

Because she needs the ability to defeat her enemies, Zote threatens Vilie, saying, "I want the power of battle that will avenge me against my enemies." The quest for the heartstone is what gives the book its shape. Various Naga tribes hold dear the origin myths of the first woman from Lotha, the Angami man from Dziililimosiuro, and the spirit. The Chakhesang and Sema tribes are associated with the origin stone slab myth. Naga folklore and tales hold significant importance in Naga culture.

The book ends on a positive note with new information about Naga culture and the spiritual world. According to the old man's instructions, Ville always takes the left-hand road and eventually arrives at Ate's ancestral village. Ate hails from Kirhipfimia, a place where the locals isolates women and believes them to possess evil powers, similar to Zole's imprisonment for killing a foetus by merely pointing her finger at the pregnant woman's womb. The reader can learn more about Naga culture, as well as universal truths and elements, through the perspective of Ate's character. The Nagas' rejection of superstition and imitation of Western and other cultures are slowly wiping out their traditions and culture.

Vilie learns from Ate what the stone's true purpose is. She claims that it is a "stumbling stone" for those with "impure hearts" and instructs the owner in spiritual awareness. Kire exquisitely captures the close bond and harmony with Ukepenuopfu, the universal birth spirit.

Mesanuo's spiritual wisdom empowers her to comprehend evil and overcome it. When Vilie encounters the forest's magic and the supernatural realm, which are an integral part of Angami's life, he feels at ease.

*When the River Sleeps* (2014) is a story about its famous protagonist. Vilie, a 48-year-old Anagari hunter, lives alone in the jungle. Nagaland's stunning hills provide the setting. Kire tells Vilie about her background. At 18, he and Mechusen fell in love. His tribe believed they'd marry. A strange sickness killed her. She had a fever when she and two buddies went herb-picking. After picking an orchid, she noticed a tall, dark person following her, but her friends couldn't see him. She died of a fever that night. After she died, Vilie stopped caring about his life and left the village for the wilderness.

The title of the book is ironic, since the river never sleeps. When Vilie enters, he appears to be asleep, but he immediately wakes up and grabs him with his water. The word "river" symbolically refers to the human mind. Vilie is always ruminating. He is a hunter by nature, so he never sleeps. He does, however, uncharacteristically nod off at the end of the book. The reason for his sleep, which is death, remains a mystery to the readers. As a result, the title *When the River Sleeps* is more topical and fitting. It suggests movement rather than stillness.

The Angami's belief in the spirit realm also revolves around several other mythologies. Furthermore, the natural world serves as the foundation for these perspectives. During a journey to the river's slumbering location, both local inhabitants and hunters shun the Rarhuria jungle, also known as the filthy forest, which Vilie must traverse. People avoid the woodland for specific reasons: "Those who unintentionally walked into Rarhuria later complained of fever and headaches. There were enough incidences of fever to justify designating the jungle an unclean place in community terms." (51)

The Angamis tribe member Vilie was astounded to learn that a man may decide to change his spirit into that of a tiger. He had heard tales of individuals whose spirits had transformed into weretigers. Men whose spirits became tigers exhibited odd behaviour, attacked cattle, and made grunting and meowing noises. Vilie, the Nettle Forest's keeper, treated injured forest residents.

Vilie had been convinced for a few weeks that Seno loved him too, and he was unsure how to approach her. When she passed away, Seno claimed that the man from the tree sat by

her bed, telling those attending to her, "He's holding onto me, Mother!" In an uncontrollable state of grief, her family wept over the earthen mound that served as her burial site for days. Vilie had a dream: he wanted to find the dozing river. He was constructing a stone wall at the border of the forest when he had the thought, "The forest is my wife, and I am not answerable to anyone." His own words came back to him the following morning, when the typical twinges of loneliness seeped in.

He wished her a wonderful day and asked her, "Where are you going?". Vilie awoke one morning with a fever that lasted two whole days and nights, as well as an unquenchable thirst. Vilie spotted squirrels climbing and descending a tree while taking a nap beneath it. Vilie prepared a paste out of their leaves because he lacked the courage to kill them for food. He lit a small fire and ate slowly, continually looking past the woods.

Vilie had to have spent close to three hours ascending the first hill. Elephant grass, as tall as Vilie or taller, covered the entire length of the plateau's summit. His captors positioned themselves behind him to prevent him from escaping, while the elders arranged themselves in a straight line in front. Vilie allowed them to do as they pleased, since he understood that any opposition would only result in harsher abuse. The old men said that ghosts would play music from the forest to lure people into the dirty woods, where they would die and join the ghosts in their world.

Vilie hid among some thorny shrubs as he awaited the approach of the men, who were speaking loudly and could hear their voices. When Vilie heard Teiso's voice, he crept closer and, using the light from the torches, confirmed that it was Teiso Yhokha. Vilie told them he was heading towards the border communities when the incident happened. The elders sat lined up in front of him, while his kidnappers stood behind him to block his escape. Vilie had never heard a forest song before.

The legends of the impure woodland and its spirits captivated him. Kani is a shaman from Dichu, a northern Indian town. The shaman advised Vilie that, while seeking stones that bring money is not improper, it is preferable to seek information on how to live in peace and have faith in other people. Vilie and Kani were walking along a path close to a dozing river. They could hear a variety of sounds coming from behind them, starting with the cackling of elderly women and the shrieks of malevolent widow-women spirits.

"Retreat now in the name of the creator-deity!" Kani uttered these words, causing the terrible noises to abruptly cease. Villagers believe that every time a person crosses the river on a general day without work, it is a day of thanksgiving for saved lives. For what seemed like an eternity, Vilie struggled against the river until the waters finally released her and receded. Behind them, they could hear a variety of sounds, starting with the cackling of geriatric women, a sound of vindictive triumph. Vilie felt more at home in Subale's home than his own because she provided food and presentation.

He ate while keeping one eye on the woman at all times, observing her every motion and wondering what was so unsettling about her. After Vilie's remarks pierced her heart, Ate acknowledged that she genuinely wanted to know if her touch could cause harm to others. Zote, Ate's sister, warned him to protect the heartstone from those who would misuse it, like his sister Vilie. Kirhupfùmia village's two water springs were properly maintained. Only cooking was allowed in the top pool, which was off-limits for washing.

They would make offerings in exchange for advice on how to treat illnesses and lower fevers. Vilie and Ate witnessed Zote deliver plague globules, lizard-like monsters, and boils to the townspeople. As Zote moved from house to house, spitting into each doorway, the entire village caught fire. They witnessed mothers and kids fleeing into the woods in desperation. Long after they left, the village continued to hear their ululations.

Vilie discovered Ate sprawled out on the ground and held her until she stopped trembling. They were expecting the spirit to visit their home, but instead, it got up and started to leave the community. Vilie felt oppressed by the pervasive melancholy that dragged her down. Once again, Ate collapsed to the ground in a dead faint. When the sisters left their hometown, Ate was nine years old.

Although Ate had little knowledge of their ancestral villages, she used to feel as though they were her extended family. Vilie wanted to tell her that he was proud of her, but he wasn't sure how to say it.

Kire, for example, uses the power of language to explore the true state of Nagaland, a decision that ultimately led her to pursue exile. She had decided that their story and viewpoint needed to be shared because "the Nagas have a very unique and striking identity, and they want this to be honoured and respected" (Kire 2018, ar. 8). She was particularly troubled by the

steady destruction of tradition and history, as well as the shady and organised tactics of cultural appropriation that served to portray the Naga people and their way of life as exotic and museum exhibits. She resisted this subliminal neo-colonial exploitation through her poems. In a 2004 International Congress of PEN in Norway, Kire asserted that "the telling of a tale is a spiritual practice that is a vital element of the healing of a people's psychological traumas." Naga literature is confronted with negative neo-colonial attitudes. The publishing houses' hopes for the area are incredibly low. Believing that Naga writers can only produce politically charged or unusual traditional literature in a poor language is a mistake.

As she firmly thinks that "Nagas still retain a heightened awareness of the spiritual," the writing she produces discusses the challenges that the people went through and sheds light on the lost culture, such as the intense spiritual world of the Naga people. She used oral histories to represent the legacy and the tradition.

Folklore is defined as "all knowledge, understanding, values, attitudes, assumptions, sentiments, and beliefs communicated by words of mouth or by customary instances." It is an important method of documenting the past because it includes a traditional, non-institutionalized portion of a culture.

Contemporary Naga writers like Easterine Kire have been working to dismantle the pre-conditioned obstacles that prevent the Naga people from awakening to their true cultural space in the "external" world. Her works, when included in important academic discussions, offer a practical strategy to halt the growing cultural theft. This makes her books a must-read. She has instead come to represent the deeply ingrained cultural characteristics that have been passed down through the ages, and in her story, she extols "the participatory mystical of primitive man with the earth on which he inhabits and which bears the spirit of his ancestors" (Jung 1976).

She endeavoured to incorporate this into her writings, focussing on the distinctive lives of the typical Naga people and striving to spread awareness about Nagaland and its unique way of life. She makes a conscious effort to depart from the conventional analyses conducted by academics who concentrate on exotic, ethnic, and anthropological viewpoints to explore Nagaland and its culture. Kire claims that she has encountered reviewers who only search for overtly political themes and narratives in her books. Despite this, the current discourses focus specifically on these concepts, even drawing parallels to magic realism in Africa and Latin



America. Contrarily, the focus of this study is to delve deeper to find more profound universal values in accordance with Jungian philosophy, which places mystic phenomena on a par with science and rationality.

*When the River Sleeps*, a book by Kire contains mystical themes in which humans and spirits cohabit on the same axis, reinforcing Kire's beliefs that the natural and the supernatural coexist on the same plane. Kire illustrates a variety of Angami Naga customs, together with their rules and morality's attention to the uncharted territory of Naga culture. She creates a tapestry of the material and spiritual realms that highlights the magnificent pattern of stability and happiness. As a result, she leaves a profound impact on the reader. The revival of myths and traditions, which are archetypal pictures drawn from the deepest recesses of the collective unconscious, is what Jung believes any outstanding piece of art achieves: "That is the secret of outstanding art and of its effect upon us. As far as we can tell, the creative process entails the unconscious activation of an archetypal vision, as well as the development and shaping of this image into the final product. We can return to the purest springs of life because the artist gives it form and transforms it into the language of the present (Jung 1976).

Writing was Kire's first choice since she believed it was the finest way to preserve and spread her culture's long-standing customs and heritage. Kire confidently responds, "But when you trust me as a storyteller and begin to accept my stories by believing them, your faith wills them into visibility" (Kire 2018, par. 10). Because "Big Indian publishing houses don't think the North East will sell," winning the prestigious Hindu literary prize for this novel has served as a consoling balm against the suffering she and her North East writer brethren have endured (Kire, 2012, par. 6). She says that non-Nagas could get rid of the burden of neo-colonialism "by giving Naga writers and writers in similar situations the chance to be published and read by a lot of people" (Kire 2004, p. 9).

In 2015, Kire won the Hindu Prize for her novel *When the River Sleeps* (2014), which delves into the impact of oral storytelling on the Angami community's psychology and way of life. She illustrates the cultural connections between oral stories (like the tale of the sleeping river) and personal myths (like the hero's dream), revealing the culture through the hero's journey, or "monomyth." Ukepenuopf, their ancestral supernatural force and birth spirit, has shaped Vilie like a fabled hero. There is a legend in their town about the sleeping river that claims that if one can remove a stone from the river's centre, it will provide him with

unimaginable power. This myth is a part of Vilie's collective unconscious, and when it manifests in his dreams, it becomes his "personalised myth."

Throughout Vilie's quest, dreams catalyse "the call to adventure." He is on his way to discover the new physical, psychological, and spiritual worlds. In this "monomyth," the seer imparts to Vilie knowledge of the paranormal world. Vilie is aware that, on a supernatural quest, spiritual wisdom is more important than physical toughness. Vilie embarks on his quest by crossing the border into a spirit-ruled region, where he encounters spirits, a weretiger, and malevolent spirits, all in pursuit of self-purification and a deeper focus on transcendental matters. The hero fights the threats with patience, kindness, and determination, as well as with physical and mental weapons.

When Vilie and Kani enter the sleeping river area, Vilie's road to difficulties begins. Vilie's search for the heart stone is comparable to Campbell's "monomyth" hypothesis. The hero's ultimate skill test is "meeting with the goddess (embodied in every woman)." In Vilie's case, the goddess mother manifests herself through the female figures Kani and Ate. While Ate assists Vilie in defending his life, Kani explains to him the stone's mystical and paranormal properties.

When Vile first encounters the Kirhupfmia sisters, he cleanses Ate's heart with the heartstone and dispels the myth that she possesses evil power on the tip of her finger. "Despite their horrific deeds, each individual harbours a semblance of goodness that Vile constantly seeks to rekindle" (Kire 171). The book makes the case that there is an unexplainable coexistence and connection between the natural and supernatural realms. Only a thin boundary, or none at all, separates the natural from the supernatural in magical realism. Kire Vilie naturally crosses over into the supernatural world, hoping that the forest will shield him from human evil. Spirits are pursuing him, with one of their leaders jumping on Vilie's back and yanking out his hair in a furious fit.

His quest for the heart stone and interaction with the spirits changed Vilie's heart in an enlightening way. As soon as they enter the Land of the Sleeping River, there is a beautiful silence in the story, and all the bird music stops. The widow spirits are a cross between the extremely hazardous market spirits of Manipur and the new androgynous Naga spirits from the east. The book *When the River Sleeps* portrays the kind-hearted young woman Ate as a

representation of Kirhupfmia ladies. Kire combines the tale of Seno with information on the Naga people's cultural environment, superstitions, beliefs, and customs.

Vilie has spent 25 of his years in the forest, where he protects the gwi (Mithun) and the forest, and despite the loss of his beloved Seno, he has never felt the need to go back to his village. People claim to have used stinging nettles to cure anaemia, eczema, arthritis, sore muscles and joints, and gout. As a result, Kire depicts nettle harvesting in the book. In *When the River Sleeps*, Shimreichon Luithui recounts how crucial it was for them to learn one another's languages as trading between the Zeliang relied on a barter system. The word "genna" is derived from the Angami Naga term kenna, which means "it is banned."

All Naga tribes observe Genna, and they continue to do so, albeit to varying degrees, even in Christian villages.

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