

The Naga Belief System in Easterine Kire's *Sky is My Father*: A Naga Village Remembered-An Overview.

E S Beena¹, Dr P J Giftlin²

¹Reg. No.: 20223114012031, Research Scholar, Department of English and Research Centre, Nesamony Memorial Christian College, Marthandam, Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli, Tamil Nadu, India

²Assistant Professor, Department of English and Research Centre, Nesamony Memorial Christian College, Marthandam, Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli, Tamil Nadu, India

Abstract

Easterine Kire's *Sky is My Father: A Naga Village Remembered* intricately portrays the life, belief systems, and cultural practices of the Nagas, focusing on Khonoma village. The novel highlights the centrality of taboos, rituals, and oral traditions in shaping the Naga worldview. Rituals—ranging from funerals, childbirth, marriage, tiger hunting, and chicken sacrifices to Genna days and Terhase ceremonies—reveal the intricate interplay between spiritual, social, and communal life. This paper examines how Kire presents these practices, demonstrating that Naga religion and spirituality are embedded in everyday life, agriculture, and communal survival. It also explores patriarchal restrictions, showing how gender roles influence ritual participation. The study highlights the resilience of indigenous spirituality amidst colonial incursions and modern pressures, emphasizing how Naga faith sustains cultural identity and continuity.

Keywords: Naga belief system, rituals, taboos, Genna days, indigenous spirituality, oral traditions, Khonoma village

Kire's creative writing is rooted in her environment and the experiences it offers. Her authentic portrayal provides readers with a vivid sensory experience. The poignant narrative of a young girl maturing within Naga culture is captured in *Terrible Matriarchy*, where Naga traditions suggest that girls do not need education, affection, family support, or even a proper serving of meat with fat. *The Bitter Wormwood* depicts a lethal political struggle that ruins ordinary lives and brings the stench of gunpowder to the mountains' formerly pure air. In *When the River Sleeps*, readers are transported to the secluded mountains of Nagaland, a locale enriched with stunning natural beauty and supernatural allure. Within the pages of this book, the main character Ville navigates the forest in pursuit of his aspirations. Readers are drawn into a world where spirits are as tangible as humans. Kire's works delve deep into the experiences and emotions of the Naga people, encompassing their traditions, beliefs, reverence for the earth, tightly-knit communities, and the harmonious rhythms of a life intertwined with nature. This paper studies Easterine Kire's novel, *Sky is My Father*.

The origin of the Naga people remains uncertain, and both the meaning and origin of the name Naga are largely unknown. J.H. Hutton in his *The Angami Nagas with Some Notes on Neighbouring Tribes* writes that "the word 'Naga' is simply a European extension of the Assamese 'Naga' or the Hindustani 'aga' which means 'naked'" (5). Another theory claims that "the term 'Naga' derives from the Sanskrit word nag, meaning snake-worshipper; however,

many consider this unlikely” (Kire, *Walking the Roadless Road* 6). According to General Mowu Gwizan, the Chinese referred to the Nagas as Natcha, or “the people who ran away,” during the building of the Great Wall (qtd. in Kire, *Walking the Road Less Travelled*). Abraham Lotha, another Naga scholar, in *The Hornbill Spirit, Nagas Living Their Nationalism* mentions, “according to oral traditions, Nagas migrated from Mongolia and through Southwestern China and Myanmar to their current homeland” (5). Today, Nagas reside in both India and Myanmar. In India, they inhabit Nagaland, bordered by the Manipur Valley to the south, the Brahmaputra Valley to the west, and Tirap and Changlan in Arunachal Pradesh to the north.

The Naga community has historically lived in small communal groups and continues to operate democratically. Their settlements consisted of various clans, with the founder of each village assuming leadership. Social, economic, political, and religious ties unified the community. The British colonizer had derogatorily referred to the Nagas as ‘naked; ‘primitive’, uncivilized, and ‘savage’ (qtd. in Kire, *Walking the Road Less Travelled*). As per the 2011 Census, fourteen major tribes coexist within Nagaland: Angami, Ao, Chang, Chakhesang, Khiamniungan, Konyak, Lotha, Phom, Pochury, Rengma, Sumi, Sema, Yimchunger, and Zeliang. Although each tribe possesses a distinct language, “their shared spirituality and religious beliefs, along with their mutual respect for the land as sacred and as the origin of their existence, strengthen the Nagas’ common identity as an ethnic group” (Imsong 31).

Every community has a spiritual leader who acts as a moral compass. Within the Ao tribe, there are no designated priestly families; the homeowner conducts simple household ceremonies, while a clan priest—typically an elder with deep knowledge—oversees important rites. Guests must leave the village before communal prayers commence, and no new visitors are allowed that day. Both men and women adorn themselves with jewellery. The Chakhesang people possess a rich cultural heritage, including songs, dances, stories, and rituals. They adhere closely to their Medanyi religion, worshipping Nunupi, a spirit that transcends gender. They believe in an afterlife in Kusamira, beyond Mount Tiyi, and do not subscribe to the concepts of heaven or hell. To appease spirits, they perform animal sacrifices during thanksgiving ceremonies. Their festivals center around agriculture, with rituals ensuring abundant harvests.

Indian society has historically been pluralistic. Although societal structures evolve over time, diversity and a sense of community remain strong. Clans and sub-clans play a crucial role in identifying and representing tribal communities. These groups feel deep loyalty to their homeland. The Cambridge English Dictionary defines taboo as “a topic, a term, or action that is avoided for societal or religious reasons,” while ritual is “a method of performing an action that remains consistent every time” (“Taboo”; “Ritual”). For the Nagas, rituals signify what is sacred and contribute to the creation of the sacred. Understanding local beliefs enhances comprehension of primitive societies, and taboos facilitate this understanding.

According to Henry Presler, taboos are “caution established to guard against supernaturally dangerous things like plants, person especially those possess mana” (qtd. in Longchar and Imchasenla 47) Regarding taboos in Northeast India, Kamei observes:

Taboo complex in the north-eastern region is so effective that it does not only control social behaviour 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 regulated behaviour, 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 (2019)

Kire's *Sky is My Father* masterfully illustrates Naga life through the story of Khonoma village, spanning two decades of the Levi family: Lato (Levi's brother), their mother Piano, Levi's wife Peno, and their children Sato and Roko. The historical narrative reveals transformations in the village due to British incursion, concluding with villagers returning from imprisonment. Beyond the Levi household, Kire gradually depicts the various layers of Naga traditions, including gatherings at the thehou (village community hall), Feasts of Merit for harvests, and Genna days.

The narrative transitions from celebrations to conflict—between Naga clans and the British, and between traditional beliefs and modernity. Naga tribes exhibit diversity in expression, language, and customs, but a shared belief in taboos and culture unites them. Kire notes, “The cultures of the different Naga tribes within Nagaland are varied and complex, encompassing their music, their literature both oral and written, the culinary customs of the people, and Naga art, all of which combine to form the unique culture of the Nagas” (*Walking the Roadless Road* 58).

Sky is My Father reveals the intricate and largely unexplored world of the Nagas through the exceptional representation of Khonoma village. Kire skillfully weaves into her narrative the folk beliefs in the ominous influence of spirits, as well as the hierarchical power dynamics prevalent in tribal society. The society is male-dominated, with patriarchy strongly restricting women's roles to domestic spheres. Naga women are excluded from participating in public matters. Men keep their activities concerning conflicts with neighbouring villages and the White invaders from women. Access for women to the village community hall is limited. Men find satisfaction in observing women diligently working from dawn on household tasks. At the start of the novel, the author introduces the taboo surrounding lashu, which pertains to mothers dying during childbirth. Kovi's wife passed away while giving birth, yet the Khonoma peasants in Nagaland strictly prohibit the performance of burial rites:

The strictest of taboos was upon the lashü death. No mourning of the dead. The dead woman was wrapped in a mat and taken out of the house through a new opening in the wall, and not the doorway; a lashü was the most abominable of apotia deaths. By late morning she was buried, hastily, tumbled into the pit and covered up with soil. Her husband and children were deeply grieved over her death, but they were too familiar with the taboos and feared breaking them by a public show of grief. (199)

Moreover, the villagers of Khonoma in Nagaland strictly prohibit showing grief openly for deceased women. Due to this cultural norm, Kovi and his daughter were unable to express their sadness.

The tribes hold the belief that the divine has a significant role in matters of procreation, controlling both birth and death. In the tribal communities of Northeast India, it is common for

both mother and child to die shortly after childbirth. The people believe that if the father does not assert his role immediately after the birth, evil spirits will take the baby away. Kire effectively illustrates this through the passing away of Kovi's wife:

Soon, there was a long moan from his wife, and Kovi stood up, expecting to hear the baby's cry any moment. But the midwife cried out, 'No, no, not this!' in such alarm that he burst into the room without waiting to be called. His woman's face was pale and hard, death settled on it surely and the sight froze his heart. 'Ah no!' he screamed, 'It cannot be!' and broke into terrible sobs. The midwife had recovered herself and she shushed him, saying, 'No, no mourning for a lashü death, it is taboo.' Kovi buried his face in his wife's pillow and muffled his cries in it. His heart was as stone as he recollected all that he had heard as a child about a lashü death. (199)

While the Khonoma Nagas enforce strict taboos against open mourning for women who die during childbirth (lashü deaths), Kire explains that funeral rituals are nevertheless performed with great precision, blending respect for taboo with ceremonial obligation.

At the time of Vipiano's death, Levi's family moves swiftly to perform the funeral rites. The body is wrapped in a mat and removed through a new opening in the wall rather than the main doorway, emphasizing ritual purity and preventing spiritual contamination. Levi rouses his sons to bring them back for the funeral before too many outsiders gather, ensuring the rites are carried out correctly and privately. His grandson, Ro-kokhoto, places seeds of Job's tear and other grains, along with a mug of rice-brew, into her carrying basket—a symbolic provision for the afterlife.

Piano's husband's male relatives kill a cow for the funeral meat. The front leg is strung on a rope and placed in her right hand, while the remaining meat is apportioned to the Livau, the ritual specialist who oversees the burial rites. At the appointed moment, the Siaphou-u enters carrying a black cloth, performs his ritual gestures, and exits, with a worker carrying his portion of the meat ahead of him. Even domestic practices reflect ritual order: that night, the household avoids cooking in the main hearth and uses separate utensils for the funeral meat, marking a clear boundary between the living and the dead.

Throughout these practices, Levi and the family carefully regulate grief. Lato, Levi's younger son, beats his mother's empty bed in sorrow, but Levi and Kovi intervene, reminding him: "My son, you will grieve the spirits, please cease; we must not mourn the dead to excess" (Kire 1521). This guidance illustrates the central role of taboo in channelling personal emotion into ritual discipline. The funeral, therefore, is both a spiritual obligation and a social practice: grief is restrained, yet ceremonial acts are exacting, ensuring respect for the deceased and alignment with Naga cosmology.

The novel highlights how Naga funerary practices intertwine ritual precision with taboos on mourning, balancing human emotion with spiritual and social responsibilities. Ritual actions, from the careful placement of grains to the specific handling of funeral meat, are inseparable from the community's moral and cosmological framework, demonstrating how death rites reinforce cultural continuity while regulating behaviour.

Kire depicts childbirth as a moment not only of joy but also of spiritual vulnerability. She narrates the ritual fathers followed to protect newborns from spirits. Kovi, awaiting his

child's birth, performs a protective ritual immediately after delivery: he smears saliva on his finger and touches the newborn's forehead. This act, as Kire explains, ensured that the spirits could not claim the infant before the father did, reflecting the Naga belief that a child must be ritually secured against supernatural forces from the very beginning of life.

With the first child, a girl, his wife did not have much trouble. As the baby squealed into the world, Kovi quickly smeared saliva on his finger and touched it to his daughter's forehead with the words, 'I am first.' That ensured that the spirits could not claim the child before him. He did the same for his second child, a boy. There had been too many deaths of newborns in the village because their fathers had not been alert enough to stake claim before the spirits. So Kovi waited in the house that morning, pacing up and down or crouching by the fire till he would be called into the birthing room. (191)

Kire also highlights the Naga age-group system as a central feature of social organization. Levi, who belongs to an older age-group than his younger brother Lato, has already undergone initiation. After this stage, young men were expected to contribute to communal life by earning thekra through labor in other people's fields. Their earnings were used to sponsor the collective feast of the age-group at Sekrenyi, the great New Year festival. As Kire notes, "Levi's age-group had gone through the rituals of initiation, and were now earning thekra by working in other people's fields to be paid in money or grain" (Kire 235). This practice shows how age-group rituals intertwined agricultural work, economic exchange, and the reaffirmation of communal solidarity, while also preparing young men for full participation in the village.

The tribal lifestyle in Northeast India centers around agriculture, which meets their fundamental needs. They labor diligently on their land throughout the day. However, during the Khunuo lievi, known as genna days or days of rest, they refrain from working in their fields. Among the Nagas, a genna signifies a form of collective devotion to God. These days are observed as non-working days by the villagers. According to tradition, breaking the genna day is believed to bring misfortune to the crops, causing damage from pests, birds, and animals, whereas those who observe it are thought to enjoy prosperity. In addition to genna days for crop protection, the Nagas also designate genna days to prevent soil sterility and to ensure its fertility, "They had successfully held the genna to prevent the paddy dying, and another genna to prevent sterility of the soil as well as the genna to ensure the fertility of the soil. It should go well for this year's harvest, they said to one another" (Kire 831).

Thena day falls under the category of genna, during which the Naga people focus solely on agricultural activities, "But, it being Thena, no one did other than field work. Thena was part genna and part ritual" (822). The Naga community resides deep within the forest, living in a primitive manner and holding beliefs in spirits that influence their daily existence. These spirits govern their lives, and the Nagas do not harbour any negative feelings toward those who perform the necessary rituals. Through indigenous knowledge passed down from their ancestors, they have learned how to appease the spirits.

In the Naga village of Khonoma, the clans observe the Terhase ritual on the decline of the full moon to make amends with the spirits. Each clan takes part in this ceremony by presenting a chicken to spirits situated far from their usual dwellings. Piano is glad that her

fieldwork is complete, as she can now help her brother, reflecting the communal nature of agricultural labor in Naga villages, where family members assist one another during crucial farming periods. She has never violated a genna day, a traditional no-work day intended to ensure the fertility and productivity of the fields, and she has no intention of starting now. This leaves her with about five working days before the Terhase, a ritual held on the decline of the full moon to make peace with the spirits, “She had never violated a no-work day before and had no intention of starting now. So that left her about five working days before the Terhase. The moon was already diminishing, and on the decline of the full moon, Terhase would be held, the ritual of making peace with the spirits” (289). The timing of Terhase and the observance of genna days illustrate how agricultural activity in Naga society is closely intertwined with ritual and spiritual practices, highlighting the villagers’ belief in the reciprocal relationship between humans, nature, and the spiritual world:

The priests of Thepa and Thevo clans partake in this ritual. The Thevo priest announces loudly, “The Thevo priest, an old man with fierce eyes, called loudly: 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. (289)

In addition to abstaining from work, genna days among the Khonoma Nagas involve strict social taboos, including restrictions on speech. For instance, when Piano received an unexpected visit from relatives who had married into another village, she carefully avoided direct interaction, explaining her behaviour as adherence to the genna: “Hei, it is a strict genna day today, so I am just talking to myself and to this boulder here... Let our visitors not think that we are rude, but let them understand that we have to honour the spirits, as they also do in the places where they come from” (Kire 1153). By speaking to a boulder rather than to her guests, Piano demonstrates the meticulous observance of social and spiritual norms on these days. This practice reflects the broader Naga belief that spiritual forces govern both human and environmental well-being, and that even minor deviations from ritual protocols, including verbal interactions, could disrupt the balance. Thus, the observance of genna encompasses not only refraining from agricultural labor but also adhering to codified patterns of behaviour that safeguard the community’s spiritual and social order.

The novel also presents how Naga households meticulously prepare for a ritual sacrifice on a day when no work is permitted. At Keviselie’s house, the family begins early, selecting a red rooster for the ceremony and arranging themselves according to strict ritual norms. Keviselie instructs his family to wear their garments in the correct order, ensuring that the embroidered portions are properly displayed, and to remove knots from their pigtails, demonstrating attention to even the smallest details. The sons touch the chicken first, followed by the women, illustrating the structured and sequential participation required in the ritual. Keviselie then recites an invocation, asking for the proper execution of the ceremony and abundance of the food, before wringing the chicken’s neck and cooking it over a fireplace using “phrie and kurhi wood” (425), which are ritually prescribed for the ceremony:

On the no-work day, Keviselie's household rose early and got ready as Keviselie brought out the chicken of sacrifice, an all-over red rooster. As he came out carrying the chicken, he

instructed his family, 'Check that you are wearing your garments in the right order.' All of them did as he said including his four-year-old son. People always took care to wear their bodycloths with the embroidered portion showing in front. Keviselie then pronounced some words at which all his three grown sons removed the knots from their pigtails, and took turns in touching the chicken. After that it was the women's turn. When everyone had touched the chicken, Keviselie took the chicken from his wife and spoke loudly:

'May the ceremony I am about to perform take place in the proper manner; may all the food prepared for the ceremony be abundant.' His face was unsmiling as he said this. He then wrung the chicken's neck until it died. (425)

Kire's account shows that every step—from preparation of garments and selection of the sacrificial animal to the use of specific firewood—is performed with deliberate care, reflecting the spiritual discipline, household organization, and communal involvement that are central to Naga ritual practice. The narrative emphasizes how ritual observances are carefully orchestrated to ensure proper execution, maintain cultural traditions, and reinforce social cohesion.

The practice of chicken sacrifice to the supreme deity is common among tribal communities in India. In Naga culture, this offering is referred to as *geisu ruotho*, a ritual performed by the Nagas for their own safeguarding against evil spirits. Priests play a crucial role in this ceremony. In *Sky is My Father*, Piano, Levi's mother organizes the *geisu ruotho* after the marriage ceremony for her son and his wife. The priest loudly announces the offering of the sacrificial chicken to the spirits, declaring: "We refuse to accept disease, death, or any ill encounters with spirits from any place, and therefore we are substituting your life with this unblemished chicken which is greater than your life, and we will appease the spirits with it..." (Kire 955). Afterward, two men take the responsibility of placing the sacrificial chicken at a designated spot on the road. It is clear that the religion of tribal society profoundly influences their lifestyle. Unlike most people, who perceive religion merely as one element of their everyday existence, tribal beliefs are intricately woven into their daily lives, rooted in the conviction that a supernatural power governs the world. Their religious laws dictate their rituals, but the primary aim is to protect themselves from the dangerous supernatural forces that could affect their lives. Rituals serve as a means to communicate to the malevolent spirits that they acknowledge their existence and are always available for help. However, it is also quite frustrating that in today's societal framework, the tribal communities experience significant cultural disparities compared to the rest of the country's populace. Their traditional culture binds them together and nurtures strong emotional connections among them.

Rituals also accompany tiger hunts and sacrificial offerings. Vilau, after hunting a tiger, performs detailed rituals including dividing food into thirty-nine portions and observing *genna* for five days. Chicken sacrifices, called *geisu ruotho*, are conducted to appease spirits, organized by priests.

The Mishmi mythology suggests that tigers and humans share a maternal lineage, with humans considered the younger siblings. Ambika Aiyadurai, in her study, presents the story from a native perspective: "My older brother is a tiger. If he consumes raw meat, he may one day consume me as well" (308). In the narrative, the younger sibling hunts a deer and leaves it

with his elder brother while he gathers firewood. The tiger, however, consumes the raw meat, prompting the younger brother to complain to their mother. To resolve the conflict, the mother devises a plan: the first to cross the river would kill the other. The tiger swims, while the human uses the bridge. Through the mother's cunning, the human succeeds, shooting the tiger with an arrow. The tiger dies, and its remains are transported to a distant place. Later, a bird discovers the bones, mistakes them for eggs, and perches on them, resulting in the tiger's rebirth.

This story reflects the Mishmi worldview, emphasizing the moral and spiritual relationship between humans and animals. The narrative conveys lessons about responsibility, cunning, and the consequences of actions, while also underscoring the belief that tigers are sacred kin. In Northeast India, killing tigers is traditionally forbidden, and rituals are performed to prevent the spirits of tigers from causing harm, illustrating how mythology informs ethical conduct and cultural practices within indigenous communities.

In *Sky is My Father*, Vilau hunted a tiger and underwent a series of rituals as a result. He constructs a new cooking area using split bamboo and prepares the food himself. Additionally, as part of the ritual, he slaughters a pig and removes the right leg to offer it to the tekhu-u (the individual who injured the tiger). He must divide his food into thirty-nine separate servings and eat only after counting them carefully. For the next five days, he observes genna (non-working days), and on the fifth day, he is required to store the remnants of his fireplace and put away the cooking stones before fetching water to complete the ritual, "The next five days would be genna days for him. On the fifth day, he would store the remains of his fireplace and put away the cooking stones. Then he would fetch water again in order to complete the tiger killing rituals" (324).

For the Nagas, marriage is both a personal commitment and a communal ritual, involving a series of rites designed to harmonize human, ancestral, and spiritual interests. When a young man is ready to marry, one of his female relatives, ideally his paternal aunt, proposes to the woman he has chosen. Upon acceptance of the proposal, the couple is given a brief period to become acquainted and share their aspirations. If either experiences a bad dream or if a relative from either family dies during the engagement process, the marriage cannot proceed. If everything unfolds as planned, the marriage is deemed successful. On the second day of the marriage, the bride and groom intentionally avoid each other so that further ceremonial rites can take place. They first venture into the fields together on the third day. Again, an elder performs a ritual for the newlyweds during the third or fourth month. An elder washes the mouth and legs of a chicken and then invites the couple to touch the chicken before swinging it back and forth, bestowing a blessing for a long, healthy life. Subsequently, the elder kills the chicken outside the village entrance.

Piano, Levi's mother, oversees the marriage rituals for Levi and his wife. Piano realizes that neglecting these rituals could negatively affect her son's marriage. She is aware of the taboos and their repercussions. Kire, through Piano, conveys, "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" (298).

Easterine Kire's *Sky is My Father: A Naga Village Remembered* vividly portrays the life, spirituality, and cultural practices of the Nagas, focusing on Khonoma village. The novel illustrates how taboos, rituals, and oral traditions shape everyday life, from birth, marriage, and death to agriculture and festivals like Genna and Terhase. Kire highlights the interplay between patriarchal social structures, gender roles, and ritual participation, showing how indigenous spirituality sustains cultural identity and communal cohesion. Through careful depictions of funerary rites, childbirth rituals, tiger hunts, and sacrificial ceremonies, the novel underscores the Naga belief in a reciprocal relationship between humans, nature, and the spirit world. By interweaving historical events, village life, and mythological narratives, Kire captures the resilience and continuity of Naga culture amidst colonial pressures and modern influences.

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