



Redefining Naga Identities: A Discourse on Myths in Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps*

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Abstract: Nagaland, a North-eastern state in India, is home to seventeen Naga tribes, each with a distinct culture and its own tribal traditions. It is a place of rich and vibrant cultural diversity, and each tribe maintains its own beliefs and traditions. These beliefs and customs are deeply embedded in myth and legend and are profoundly sacred to the Nagas; they constitute a defining element of Naga existence. This paper argues that Western interventions introduced under the labels of 'modernity' and 'civilization' attempted to interpret this multilayered culture, but these interventions have often proved detrimental to cultural discourse. Nagas have been depicted as barbaric, primitive and savage and stereotyped as the '*exotic other*' in terms of their physical characteristics, lifestyle and beliefs. The aim of the paper is to argue that these representations contribute to cultural erosion because they replace indigenous discourses with externally imposed definitions of culture and identity. Drawing on Mircea Eliade's concept of myth, the study explores myth not merely as a narrative from the past but as sacred history that helps create a community's identity and consciousness. Through this conceptual framework, the study examines how Naga culture has been misrepresented and misconceived and how Easterine Kire's award-winning novel *When the River Sleeps* seeks to redefine and reconstruct Naga cultural identity. The study employs a qualitative research approach, with textual analysis as its principal method, and reveals that myths function as active tools of resistance and identity construction rather than as passive inheritances of tradition. These functions are important for promoting cultural awareness and a sense of belonging. The analysis of Kire's novel illustrates how resilient Naga myths are in modern stories, how they provide counter-narratives to dominant representations and help redefine and authentically represent Naga cultural identity.

Keywords: Cultural Identity, Myths, Misrepresentation, Cultural Erosion.

1. Introduction

Nagaland is a state in the northeast region of India and became the sixteenth state of the Indian Union on 1 December 1963. It now includes 17 officially recognised tribes along with many more subtribes (Swu & Roy, 2025). The major tribes are Angami, Ao, Chakhesang, Chang, Kachari, Khamniungan, Konyak, Kuki, Lotha, Phom, Pochury, Rengma, Sangtam, Sumi, Tikhir, Yimkhiong, and Zeliang. Each tribe has its distinct customs, attire, social norms, and dialects, making it a rich hub of cultural diversity (Jamir, 2025; Swu & Roy, 2025).

Nagaland is a land of festivals, folklore, myths, and legends, which have been handed down orally from one generation to the next. These oral traditions reveal the rich cultural legacy of the Nagas and serve as a reservoir of knowledge for the Naga community (Hembrom, 2022; Malapane *et al.*, 2024). Such oral forms shape the cultural identity of the Naga community through folk narratives, songs, and rituals, influencing their customs and beliefs.



They serve as a living record of Naga history and offer deeper insight into the community's unique identity (Baishya, 2023; Bhattacharyya, 2024). Folklore also captures the cultural experiences of a community, reflecting its history, struggles, and feats. Since time immemorial, the Nagas have always revered their cultural belief systems deeply rooted in myths and legends. These myths must be preserved and, as mentioned, passed on from generation to generation. They act as practical guides directing paths and decisions, safeguarding sacred traditions and beliefs, establishing standard laws against defaulters, and so on (Malapane et al., 2024). In a state richly defined by its oral traditions, myths and legends dominate the construction of the cultural identity. In such a context, myths can be considered as the 'eyes of a culture' (Meyieho, 2012). Recent scholarship on Easterine Kire similarly shows how the interaction of orality and writing can preserve and transmit Naga cultural identity (Mandal & Singh, 2024).

However, the Nagas constantly experience cultural erosion due to misrepresentation and misconceptions of their multifaceted culture arising from outsider perspectives, which are tinged with prejudice, a lack of exposure, and limited understanding of the Naga culture. The conventional understanding of culture is often clouded by influences such as new religious belief systems, education, technological advancement, occupational structures, and so on. Even though Nagaland attained statehood more than six decades ago, somehow, the issue of misconceptions and misrepresentations of their culture and identity remains. Such a misunderstanding has led to the adverse portrayal of the Naga cultural identity, leading to stereotypes and assumptions, making discrimination against the Nagas inevitable (Bandyopadhyay, 2021; Jamir, 2025).

In this light, this paper endeavours to identify some of the prevalent misconceptions about Naga culture as perceived by outsiders and provide an emic perspective through a textual analysis of Easterine Kire's Award-Winning Novel *When the River Sleeps*. This novel is woven with myths, legends, and folklore that serve as a powerful medium to counter misconceptions and offer a nuanced understanding of Naga cultural richness. While there are studies that have focused on Naga myths as a repository for memory, tradition and cultural knowledge, less attention has been given to how contemporary Naga fiction reworks these myths and creates a sense of cultural identity and authentic Naga experience. By focusing on the Tiger-Man myth, the spirit world, and the heart-stone in the novel, this study explores how myth functions as a literary tool for cultural representation and identity formation.

This study makes three contributions. First, it addresses the gap by placing myth in contemporary Naga fiction as a dynamic form of cultural expression and resistance. The originality of this study lies in its focus on the narrative dimension of myth rather than on myth as a static cultural phenomenon. Second, through close textual readings of the Tiger-Man myth, the spirit world, and the heart-stone in the novel, it shows that indigenous belief systems remain living forms of knowledge. Third, through the perspectives of Eliade, Cuddon, Adichie, Bhabha and Spivak, it explains how the novel challenges colonial views and presents Naga identity from its own cultural context.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Conceptualising Myth

Myth is often associated with the unknown, irrational, and illogical. The projection of myths as mere superstitious beliefs creates a popular disregard for myths that endangers their role as a crucial building block for cultural construction and, hence, poses a great danger of the complete erosion and denial of one's cultural identity. Because the Nagas historically relied heavily on oral transmission rather than a single written script, their histories were preserved through oral narratives, including myths. A closer reading of such narratives allows a richer understanding of Naga society. Shikhu 2007, as cited in (Sebastian, 2019) argues that cultural, traditional, and religious myths have shaped Naga society through forms such as oral history and ritual, revealing understandings of the Supreme Being, creation, the universe, the animal kingdom, and worldview.

However, myths and history are often regarded as different entities. History brought with it language and the art of codifying. History is codified because it needs to preserve events that took place in the past. It needs documentation for its survival. It is because of this codification that history is regarded as valid and myths as irrational and illogical. Myths, on the other hand, do not need codification because of what Eliade explains as the concept of 'living myth' (Eliade, 1963). Myth, for Eliade, does not perish. It continues to live and influence the lives of individuals in a community that believes in it. Myth, in this sense, is timeless as it transcends the temporal realm and is neither tied to dates nor dependent on documented events to trace its development (Finley, 1965) and allows one to be



transported to the 'origin of time' to relive the 'beginning' (Eliade, 1963). This is the difference between myth and history, as history is time-bound and context-specific. Societies with their history documented are considered to have achieved their goal, while those that still believe in their myths are still lagging. D'Sa (1984) argues that historical consciousness transforms man from a primitive, archaic society to a modern society (13-14). History enables man to understand his present by allowing him to revisit his past and develop a better understanding of his future (7-21). Such understanding makes man aware of the changes in history and the changes that need to be incorporated in the future so that man does not repeat his past mistakes. This introduces man to reason, taking him away from the realm of myths, and making him a rational being.

Thus, myths are undermined and merely considered a legacy of the heathen past. However, myths are not static but are dynamic in nature (Meyieho, 2012). Though the essence of the myth remains, it can be reinterpreted and transformed through retelling, particularly when oral narratives are codified in written form. This vulnerability to interpretations is what Bäumer attributes to myths as the 'silent dimension of language' (Bäumer, 1996). In this silence, myths are exposed to as many interpretations as there are human situations, making them inexhaustible. For instance, the origin of the Nagas serves as a fitting example for such interpretations. The migration tales of the Poumai differ from those of the Tangkhul, though both are believed to have migrated from the Indo-Myanmar border. The Poumai tribe believed old man Pou to have led this migration of the Nagas to Makhel, where they dispersed to various sites, and the Tangkhuls are believed to have been led by a brave man called 'Shimray'. Though the Tangkhuls have different versions of their migration tales, historical facts prove the Tangkhuls to be descendants of Pou (Pou, 2016). Hence, myths are subjective; the truth depends on the people of the community who share the same myth. It is not a single 'truth' (Pattanaik, 2007) that is considered ultimate; rather, myth accommodates a plurality of truths. This sense of truth may create the 'other' by rejecting other people's truths, leading to different definitions of myths, a multiplicity of meanings and ambiguity. This changes the nature of myths and diminishes their significance (Meyieho, 2012). For example, in the Naga society, most of the myths are now seen as legends and folktales, such as the Weretiger myth which is considered a folktale of the past with its sacred attributes still intact (Ulin, 2001). As a form of oral tradition, myths become vulnerable to interpretation as they transform with every telling, unlike history. This understanding is also supported by Pou (2016), who states that Naga writings are "shared memories" and "shared story-banks", which provide a repository of collective experiences and cultural knowledge over time. Myths are not just a way to tell the story; they are ongoing records of identity and community memory.

2.2 Myths and Naga Cultural Identity

Myths are fundamental to culture, as every culture arises from a mythical context. 'Every culture is foremost mythical and not a system of meaning' (Meyieho, 2012). The meaning of the term 'myth' has been debated and, for a long time, was seen as something that 'cannot exist', 'fiction,' and 'illusion' (Eliade, 1963). However, myths hold a deeper significance beyond these misconceptions. Cuddon (2012) defines myth as a story that is not true, typically involving supernatural or supra-human beings. It is closely linked to creation, explaining how something came to exist. In this way, myth carries both feeling and concept (Cuddon, 2012), thereby serving as cultural foundations, explaining origins, shaping belief systems, and representing the emotions and ideas of a community. Recent studies have used a revisionist lens to redefine myths as 'true Stories' which are 'sacred' and of 'exemplary significance'. This is derived from the idea of myths in archaic societies (Eliade, 1963). For these societies, myths are considered 'living myths' as they guide human behaviour and give meaning to existence (Eliade, 1963). These myths are deeply ingrained in the culture that shapes the individual, helping individuals develop a deeper understanding of themselves (Panikkar, 1979).

The Nagas have a cultural heritage characterised by a richness of myths, folklore, and legends, which form an integral part of their unique identity. Meyieho (2012) states that myths show a collective essence that involves communities, which is fundamental to the cultural identities of the Nagas. Sharing myths through oral tradition is an indispensable part of Naga culture and traditions. It also acts as a source of unrecorded history. They are intricately woven into communal life, transmitting shared beliefs and moral codes of conduct within the community.

Folktales, myths, legends, and proverbs are not limited to entertaining children. Sebastian (2019) observes that they serve as principles and moral values that guide the functioning of the society. They are deeply connected to Naga culture and society. These stories convey lessons about virtues and the consequences of actions, whether



good or bad (Hembrom, 2022). Further, Pou (2016) records that Naga writing is also, “shared memories, shared story-banks” that facilitate the transmission of collective memory and the cultural knowledge of one generation to the next. Thereby, these stories enable the community to develop a sense of community and reconnect with their culture and cultural heritage, ensuring continuity in the transmission of indigenous knowledge systems. Myths are also a factor in linking the younger generation with the elders of the community. Knowledge and information are shared with young boys by village elders through myths, stories and legends, particularly in dormitories called Morungs (Alex, 2022; Hembrom, 2022). Sharing these myths will create a sense of belonging with the environment as well as the society and community (Hembrom, 2022). Karmakar's (2022) interview with Kire likewise foregrounds multigenerational indigenous knowledge, cultural traditions, and the heterogeneous character of Naga identity in her literary outlook.

Furthermore, myths are an important facet of education and help preserve cultural practices (Alex, 2022). Children are entrusted with preserving these traditions and beliefs and passing them on to the next generation through myths and oral narratives. Thus, myths become the building blocks of preserving history, reservoirs of knowledge that can give meaning to cultural life. The morals of these tales are not only essential to the individuals' moral development but also are part of the cultural fabric and connect past, present, and future generations.

In *The Deeper Necessity: Folklore and the Humanities* (1988), William A. Wilson talks about the importance of folklore in preserving cultural heritage. He says folklore is a link to the past and it illuminates the relationship between cultures. Wilson argues that folklore transcends the bounds of a single culture and is a means of understanding shared human experience. Universal themes of folklore, including stories and traditions, symbols, and values, promote a sense of belonging among people of various cultures. This view offers a more inclusive way of understanding culture by focusing on what binds people together rather than what separates them, thereby fostering respect and a better understanding of different cultures. In the same way, for the Nagas, the myths are not only a way to preserve cultural identity but also a way to understand the world they are part of. Naga folklore encompasses diverse themes, ranging from natural to supernatural elements, from animals to spirits, and from humans to nature. They rely on their rich collection of myths and folklore for reconstructing their idea of the past. For instance, the Ao Nagas consider the myth of *Lungterok* (Six stones) as their origin story. Similarly, the Zeliang tribe believes in the myth of *Ramtinkabit* as the stone responsible for their origin. Khamniungan folktales and folksongs also preserve a creation myth according to which the Khamniungan emerged from underground. Apart from these creation myths, myths like 'The Story of Nangle' of the Zeliang tribe serve as 'ideal tales' as they impart diligence and hard work as virtues for the young (Sebastian, 2019). All these myths reiterate Wilson's idea that folklore provides a deeper understanding of human existence, identity, and worldview. Traditionally, Nagas, as discussed earlier, have a rich oral tradition, which is a record of their history, culture, and identity.

However, most of the written history of the Nagas consists of accounts left by foreign anthropologists, missionaries, and British administrators, who largely recorded tales, legends, and myths, without attempting to understand their cultural meaning. These texts often interpreted Naga myths through a prejudiced lens, casting them as evidence of savagery or backwardness, thereby leading to a limited understanding of the Nagas and their culture (Stirn & van Ham, 2003). This tension between external misrepresentation and internal self-understanding is dramatized in *When the River Sleeps* through Vilie's dual identity as a 'fugitive' and a respected 'guardian of the forest'. On the one hand, the fugitive identity 'others' him, pushing him to run away from society; on the other, his community also recognises him as a protector whose life is bound to the forest and its spirits. Similarly, this conflict allegorically represents the Nagas' dual identity struggle—their pre-'civilization' identity, deeply rooted in their indigenous culture, and their constructed identity shaped by the 'civilization' process. The trial to prove Vilie's innocence is justified only through the pronouncement of his identity associated with his lineage. Vilie's favourable reputation as a 'guardian of the forest' works in his favour, in contrast to Heisa's reputation as a 'lover of drink' and a belligerent, quarrelsome man (Kire, 2014). Vilie comes from a lineage of warriors, but he prefers to be known as the hunter who protects the forest and its denizens (Kire, 2014). However, Vilie also derives his identity from his father, Kedo. Vilie always presents himself as 'Vilie, the headman of the village's Kedo clan' (Kire, 2014) to ensure he has a recognized history and moral framework. By naming his father, he represents both himself and his clan, showing that personal identity depends both on the history he inherits and how he lives in the present (Liezietsu, 2023). This highlights the idea that individuals are not only shaped by history but also play a role in shaping it. As Eliade rightly pointed out, 'man not only is determined by history but also determines history' (Eliade, 1963). History



can also be used to distort identity, as seen in the story of the two branded witch sisters, Ate and Zote. While this history confines Ate in fear and ignorance, Zote finds it liberating as it gives her the power to manipulate and control Ate. They belong to the Kirhupfūmia village, home to outcast women believed to have powers. 'All Kirhupfūmia are supposed to have the power of death at the ends of their fingertips' (Kire, 2014). While Zote has used her powers to harm others, Ate has never used her powers to harm anyone. The deception is clear when Zote asks Ate to point at a plant, and instead of the plant dying that very instant, like the effects of Zote's power, Zote reveals the dead plant only in the evening, thus: '... in the evening, she showed me that it was dead and completely withered' (Kire, 2014). Ate thus believes herself to be also infested with 'malignant power' (Kire, 2014) and agrees to live among the *Kirhupfūmia* as one of them. It is only through her encounter with Vilie that she realises this deception. 'You should not just accept what people say about you. It may not be true...You are what you believe you are' (Kire, 2014). Zote manipulates Ate's history and uses her past to control her future. 'I think she is using your past and the past of your ancestors to condemn you' (Kire, 2014). Not only Ate but also all the women of Kirhupfūmia village live in ignorance of their true past. The outcast women of *Kirhupfūmia* believed that their lives in this isolated village were their reality without question. They believed that whatever was told to them was their history and made peace with it. This reality became the community's reality and shaped their identity. This can be supported through the concept of 'New Reality' given by Eliade (1963) to show that reality is not only subjective but also individual and collective realities supplement and integrate with one another. Ate lived under the veil of ignorance without discovering the truth about her past. She was made to believe her history was the main cause for her isolation and lived in this world of binaries, seeing herself as the 'other'. By freeing Ate from the bondages of fear stemming from her past, Vilie ushers her into a 'new reality,' which Eliade says is a 'faith in sacramental brotherhood and unity in knowledge' (Eliade, 1963). The village symbolizes her confinement to her history, and now, with the revelation of the truth, she is able to move out of this confinement. She regains her faith in having a future. She was able to forge bonds with people like Vilie, Krishna's baby son, and Vilie's aunts. She is also integrated into village life with a new identity, as Vilie chooses not to reveal her history to anyone. She also gets married and lives a normal life, not bound by her restricting past. Therefore, it becomes crucial for the Nagas to actively construct their own identity, not allowing history, controlled by external forces, to dictate or influence the construction of their identity. In both incidents, Vilie and Zote dramatise how identities shaped by external labels can be questioned and redefined through 'writing back', aligning Kire's narrative with postcolonial resistance to dominant discourses.

Many studies have already established the centrality of Naga myths as repositories of indigenous knowledge, ethical systems, and cultural memory, and as crucial resources for the construction of Naga identity. What has received less attention, however, is how myths are used in recent Naga writings in English as a conscious way to challenge colonial misrepresentations and to reshape Naga identity from an insider's point of view. This paper therefore examines Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps* to add to existing scholarship by reading Angami myths not only as keepers of traditions but as a form of cultural resistance through which Naga identity is re-imagined in the face of historical stereotyping, cultural erosion, and modernity. One of the objectives of the paper is to examine the nature of myths and to broaden the understanding of myths in the context of the Naga culture. The study goes further by analysing how myths function as agents for other forms of signification, specifically for the Nagas. Recent work on Kire has also examined the preservation of orality and cultural identity and the role of indigenous memory in contesting colonial representations (Mandal & Singh, 2024; Chaterji, 2025).

2.3 Colonial and Popular Representations of the Nagas

The absence of comprehensive documentation on Naga culture has contributed to misrepresentations, particularly in accounts by Western missionaries and administrators such as George Abraham Grierson, Verrier Elwin and Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf whose translations and generalisations have fuelled distorted images of the Nagas as cited in (Mao, 2025). To understand how colonial ideas influence the shaping of contemporary representations of Naga identity, Longkumer (2015) emphasizes the importance of examining the initial interactions between the British and the Nagas. The British were fascinated by Naga culture and accumulated a large collection of Naga objects, with an emphasis on portraying the Nagas as warriors and head-hunters. The historical fascination with Naga culture remains influential in shaping the modern-day understanding of Naga's identity (Longkumer, 2015). The colonial anthropological writings tended to stereotype them as exotic, wild, savage, ignorant, stubborn, and hostile to British interests (Yimchunger, 2019). This is reflected in Haimendorf's statement, 'I would soon be among



real savages' 1939:2 as cited in (Yimchunger, 2019). Likewise, it was recorded that 'The Nagas were barbaric, uncivilized, wild people who spoke in a manner of demons, dressed like demons, worshiped in a manner of demons, had annoying habits, and were demon worshipers' Clark, 1978, as cited in (Ukhrul Times Desk, 2021). This depiction has played a significant role in defining the contemporary identity of the Nagas and has been used to shape the discourses and conflicting narratives that continue to circulate (Yeptho, 2016). This concern also aligns with Mandal and Singh's (2022) analysis of colonial and cultural dispossession and the assertion of Angami Naga identity in Kire's fiction.

In the current scenario, the traditional customs and beliefs are often sidelined, and public discussions and media reports tend to emphasize negative aspects of the Naga culture such as those related to '...insurgency, ethnic problems, smuggling/drugs, underdeveloped infrastructure and inaccessible geography' (Pou, 2016; Barzun, 1937 as cited in Thounaojam, 2012). Acknowledging these challenges, in an interview with *The Hindu* newspaper, Kire emphasized that the foundation of Naga reality lies in folktales and the supernatural. Kire replied that:

...folktales and the supernatural go to form the basis of Naga reality... there is much more to the Northeast than just political conflict; there is a whole undiscovered world of ordinary people and their not so ordinary lives...it is not an ordinary tale, but the conflict between good and evil. (Daftuar, 2015).

Much discrimination arises from ignorance about Naga cultures (Bandyopadhyay, 2021). People from Northeast India, including Nagas, are othered for multiple reasons. Physical appearance has attracted racist slurs such as 'chinky', 'chini', and 'Chinese' (Bandyopadhyay, 2021), language described as 'deeply racist and reflective of ignorance and hostility' McDuie-Ra, 2012, as cited in (Bhodhimani, 2016, p. 90). Food-based discrimination also affects people from Northeast India, including Nagas (Bandyopadhyay, 2021; Jamir, 2025). In addition, notions of modernity and civilization have constructed the Naga past as savage and brutish, with labels such as 'head-hunters' and 'superstitious' becoming associated with Naga identity (Bandyopadhyay, 2021; Jamir, 2025). Discrimination persists, with men stereotyped as violent because of historical headhunting practices and women subjected to character-based judgments (Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, 2014). Such misconstrued depictions have adversely shaped perceptions of Naga identity and encouraged outsiders to associate Nagas with violence and primitiveness.

Recent misrepresentations are also connected to the cultural misappropriation of Naga symbols and material culture. Sumi (2020) shows how Naga traditional attire is commodified on e-retail platforms and marketed as 'fancy dress' or 'jungle wear'. Sumi further stresses that Naga textiles are central to identity formation because, in an oral culture, identities, stories, and culture are woven into textiles. These handmade textiles document social knowledge and conventions and embody living expressions of tribal knowledge systems, customs, values, and culture. Such appropriation and mislabelling reinforce the exoticism and perceived primitiveness often projected onto Naga cultural identity (Longkumer, 2015).

Such one-sided representations often function as political constructs intended to represent Nagas in an unfavorable light. Bhodhimani (2016) states, 'The prevailing impression of a so-called backward community is the result of an extensive process of myth fabrication and stereotyping which has been entrenched with the help of media representation'. The contention here is that the tales contained in the myths have not been closely analysed to derive their true significance, and have been misinterpreted in a rather distasteful manner, offending the very identity of the Nagas. Despite having a strong value system shaping their existence, Nagas continue to face misrepresentations leading to discrimination in India's Northeast. This paper urges the readers to rethink and re-examine the prevailing stereotypes and better understand the Naga culture.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by three main ideas. Firstly, following Mircea Eliade, myth is understood as a 'living' reality that shapes how people see themselves and the world, rather than a dead or primitive story of the past. Myth can open a 'new reality' in which individuals and communities rethink their history and identity. This concept is explored to understand the impact of the Tiger-Man myth, the spirit world and the Heart-stone as active forces that shape ethical behaviour, cultural memory and identity formation in *When the River Sleeps*. Secondly, drawing on Cuddon, the paper treats myth not just as fiction but as a narrative form that conveys both emotion and thought,



and that explains origins, values, and ways of living in a culture. The research examines the role played by these myths in maintaining and passing on the communal knowledge and the values that guide Naga social and spiritual life. Thirdly, inspired by Chimamanda Adichie's idea of the 'single story', the study reads colonial interpretations of the Nagas as narrow stories that paint them as 'savage', 'backward' or 'primitive' and sees Kire's novel as an act of storytelling that challenges these single stories by offering deeper, insider accounts. Adichie's framework thus offers an approach to the analysis of how Kire challenges reductive representations by foregrounding indigenous perspectives and cultural meanings.

These ideas together support the main claim of the paper. Eliade helps explain how Angami myths in *When the River Sleeps* work as living forces that allow characters and communities to move beyond fear, shame and imposed histories into new understandings of themselves. Cuddon's view of myth draws attention to how particular myths in the novel carry emotions, beliefs, and social rules that guide Naga life. Adichie's 'single story' helps show how Kire's narrative pushes back against outside misrepresentations and creates space for Nagas to speak for themselves. To situate the study within wider postcolonial debates, it also draws on Homi Bhabha's concept of [hybridity](#) (2012) and [Gayatri Spivak's](#) (2023) reflections on subaltern speech. Drawing on Bhabha's concept of hybridity, the study shows how traditional beliefs and modern realities coexist in the novel, creating a dynamic cultural identity that defies fixed colonial categories. In part, Spivak's reflections on 'subaltern speech' offer a framework for examining how Kire foregrounds Naga voices and perspectives rather than privileging those of external observers. Postcolonial critics have shown how colonised people contest dominant representations through 'writing back' ([Rushdie, 1982](#)) and producing what [Bhabha](#) (2012) calls 'new forms of cultural meaning' in a hybrid 'Third Space' where identity is constantly renegotiated. These concepts inform the analysis of Kire's reinterpretation of Angami myths as cultural reclamation and narrative resistance. In this framework, Kire's reworking of the Angami myths becomes a hybrid, 'writing back' practice in which myth and storytelling work together to reconstruct Naga identity. [Das](#) (2024) similarly interprets Kire's representation of ethnic spirituality as a mode of postcolonial resistance through which cultural heritage, spiritual values, and ethnic identity are reconstructed.

4. Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative, interpretive approach based on literary and cultural analysis. Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps* was selected as the primary text because of its sustained engagement with Angami myths, oral traditions, identity, history, and cultural change. The unit of analysis was the individual textual episode in which a mythic figure, supernatural encounter, ritual action, symbolic object, or explicit conflict over identity was narratively developed. The novel was read repeatedly, and relevant passages were recorded in a manual coding matrix. Passages were included when they contributed directly to one or more of the study's research concerns: myth as living reality, myth as cultural memory, myth as resistance to reductive representation, and myth as a mode of identity formation. The analysis concentrated on three recurrent narrative clusters: the Tiger-Man myth, encounters with the spirit world, and the heart-stone. Coding proceeded in three stages.

First, passages were descriptively coded according to the principal motif, character, setting, and narrative function. Second, related codes were grouped into the four broader themes identified above. Third, the selected passages were interpreted through the theoretical framework: Eliade's concept of living myth and sacred models, Cuddon's account of myth as a bearer of cultural meaning, Adichie's critique of the "single story," Bhabha's concept of hybridity, and Spivak's reflections on representation and subaltern agency. Interpretations were checked against the immediate narrative context and against relevant scholarship on Naga and Angami cultural representation. The study does not claim statistical frequency or empirical generalisability; its purpose is close textual interpretation. To reduce interpretive overreach, claims are limited to what the novel represents, and broader cultural conclusions are qualified where the evidence is specifically Angami.

The passages selected for detailed discussion include Vilie's trial and lineage-based identity, Ate's experience of stigma and social exclusion, the Tiger-Man narrative, encounters with Kepenuopfu and the spirit world, and the search for the heart-stone. These episodes were selected because they connect mythic or supernatural material with questions of ethical conduct, belonging, inherited identity, and resistance to externally imposed descriptions. The analysis therefore moves from the treatment of myth as "story" to an examination of how the novel represents myth as a culturally situated way of interpreting identity and countering misrepresentation.



5. Textual Analysis: Myths in When the River Sleeps

The novel, *When the River Sleeps*, traces Vilié's journey into the spiritual realm, where his encounters with various people, spirits, and animals can be analysed as challenges to stereotypes arising from misconceptions about Naga culture. These are myths in the form of encounters that are embedded with values and beliefs that hold great importance to the shaping of the Naga society. The paper focuses on the following myths: The Tiger-Man myth, the Spirit world, and the Heart-stone. Together, these myths show how Kire brings together indigenous stories not just as folklore, but as living repositories of culture that delineate identity, spirituality and ethics. Their combined examination highlights the ongoing significance of Naga belief systems to the maintenance of cultural memory and to the fight against reductive depictions of Naga society.

5.1 The Tiger-Man Myth

One of the central myths in *When the River Sleeps*, as discussed above, is the *Tekhumavi* or the Tiger-Man myth. Like many postcolonial writers, Kire writes about her people's traditions to help preserve and redefine their identity, emphasizing important cultural practices like bark-weaving, lycanthropy, and soul-twinning (Roy, 2020). Through this myth, the novel introduces a traditional belief in which a human being shares a spiritual connection with a tiger, thus establishing the interconnectedness between humans, animals and spirits. De's article challenges the hierarchical division between human and non-human, claiming that Kire creates a "cosubjectivity" that imagines a shared sphere of existence and belonging, as human and non-human subjects are not placed in opposition but are placed together (De, 2023).

The myth depicts humans, the tiger, and the spirit as brothers born of the same parents. They lived in harmony till their father's death, and the responsibility of taking care of the mother shifted to her sons. It is here that evil creeps in and disrupts the harmony, forcing the three brothers to part ways. The tiger took off to the forest, the Spirit to nature, and man stayed back to look after their mother (Alex, 2022; Baishya, 2023; Bhattacharyya, 2024). This story explains origins and establishes exemplary values such as filial duty, shared responsibility and a deep bond between humans, animals, and spirits.

This myth, when seen through Eliade's concept of the 'living myth', functions more than a traditional story. While it gives an understanding of the past and serves as an exemplary pattern for behaviour through the bond between the three brothers, it continues to shape the Naga understanding of existence. The myth is also in line with Cuddon's view of myth as a narrative that carries both feelings and concepts and explains how a culture should live. It emphasizes responsibility towards one's mother, and the continued relationship between the three brothers reveals values that guide communal life such as coexistence and respect for the environment.

The significance of the myth becomes clearer when seen against colonial and popular representations of the Naga culture. *Tekhumavi* has often been misinterpreted in colonial and popular discourses as evidence of 'savage beings' and 'wildness' (Heneise, 2016). In these misreadings, the idea that a man can share his soul with a tiger blurs the boundary between human and animal in a way that seems to confirm stereotypes of the Naga as less than fully civilised. By contrast, Heneise (2016) situates *tekhumavi* within a long tradition of human-animal co-essence rather than a mere superstition.

Adichie's notion of the 'single story' helps to clarify what happens when this myth is displaced from its cultural context. The meaning and essence of the myth are dismissed and a single, narrow portrayal of the Nagas as violent, irrational and close to the 'beasts' is shown, flattening the complex narrative of brotherhood and ecological connection into a confirmation of existing prejudice. Kire's rewriting of *tekhumavi* 'writes back' to these narratives by returning to the myth's ethical centre which is the respect for parents, peaceful coexistence, and courage in both physical and spiritual worlds. Kire's statement that 'Knowledge is always powerful...so that you go out into the world with knowledge of both, and not disrespectful of either world as some people are...' (Kire, 2014, p. 28) directly challenges the dismissal of such myths as mere superstition and affirms the continuing relevance of indigenous values as ways of knowing. Bhabha's idea of hybridity and the 'third space' further breaks clear lines between human and animal, culture and nature, body and spirit. This in-between zone becomes a space where Naga identity is re-defined not



only as 'wild' and 'savage' as portrayed by outsiders, but also as a deep and respectful bond with the surroundings (Bhattacharyya, 2024).

Roy (2020) notes that Kire portrays storytellers in Naga culture as both cultural guardians and healers, emphasizing their role in preserving the community's identity through oral traditions. Their retellings of *tekhumavi* allow Naga voices to speak their truth, thus making the myth a living, hybrid story preserving ancestral values, and challenging 'single stories'. Kire's efforts to revive these traditional stories enable the Naga people to reclaim their authentic identity and challenge the stereotypes imposed by others (2020). While the Tiger-Man theme underscores the interdependence of human, animal and spirit, Kire adds additional stories of the spirit world, where the sacred and the divine fuel individual and communal life.

5.2 Sacred Authority and the Spirit World

The episode in which the novel's protagonist, Vilie, invokes the name of the Supreme Being Kepenuopfu when confronted with a dire situation reveals the Naga belief in a supreme power capable of offering protection. Often, he encounters evil spirits that try to harm him or attempt to get the heart-stone, but he repels them simply by uttering '*Kepenuopfu zanu tsie la mha talie*,' meaning 'in the name of the creator-deity, retreat at once' (Kire, 2014). Though he is equipped with his gun, he is rendered helpless. 'Your gun is useless against the things of the spirits for these are not flesh and blood' (Kire, 2014). Through this, Kire shows the limitations of physical power and the authority of spiritual knowledge.

These experiences have an impact on Vilie's journey, making it difficult for him to face these challenges with force. The gun repeatedly malfunctions, and the power of the invocation is proof that survival is more about knowledge of the spiritual realm than sheer muscular strength. The invocation of Kepenuopfu demonstrates the relationship of respect and interdependence between the spiritual and physical realms. Also, 'Spirit stories are essential to make people believe in the supremacy of man for his survival' (Sebastian, 2019). Such stories are passed on from past generations to instil bravery and remove fear from the minds of the younger generations (Baishya, 2023).

Eliade's concept of origin myths helps us understand why *kepenuopfu* and spirit stories are important. It is not merely a religious utterance but represents the continued presence of the sacred within everyday life. According to Eliade, myths often explain how something 'began to be' (Eliade, 1963, pp. 6-8). They usually concern creation and origins, which involve the intervention of Supernatural Beings. Because of such involvement, myths are revered and seen as exemplary. Myths cannot be questioned or challenged as they reveal the workings and touch of the supernatural. The invocation demonstrated Eliade's argument that myths remain meaningful because they provide models for behaviour and conduct, and connect individuals to sacred origins. In Naga society, each clan traces its lineage through specific origin myths that it considers true accounts of its ancestors. These narratives, as reflected in Kire's novels, form an essential part of Naga oral tradition.

Eliade also says that the main function of myth is to reveal 'exemplary models for all human rites and all significant human activities- diet or marriage, work or education, art or wisdom' (Eliade, 1963). This helps explain why such narratives continue to occupy an important place in Naga life as these myths act as guides and set examples for people to follow. Hence, some rituals and practices continue to function without requiring external validation or explanation. The only reason for validation is the imitation of the supernatural being. Panikkar (1979) notes that such myths 'provide no space for argument' because they are treated as universally binding. The man exists because the 'Supernatural being exercised creative powers in the beginning' (Eliade, 1963). For Naga society, such imitation shapes their existence and being. Various practices have persisted simply because the omnipresent Terhoumia, the 'Creator', demanded or acted out. For this reason, myths are given sacred attributes and form an integral part of primitive societies. The behaviour and conduct of man are in resonance with that supernatural being which gives them their reality and existence.

This significance of the spirit world becomes clearer when viewed against the colonial representations of the Nagas. Outsider accounts have often misconstrued such beliefs as evidence that the Nagas are 'irrational' and 'primitive' because these beliefs did not conform to externally imposed standards of 'civilization' (Liezietsu, 2023).



Such interpretations reduce complex belief systems to signs of backwardness and ignore the cultural meanings attached to them.

Seen through a broader theoretical lens, Spivak states that colonial writers often spoke about indigenous religions as 'primitive animism' without listening to the believers' experiences and explanations. In the case of *Kepepuofu*, Naga religion was seen as irrational, but Kire's novel gives space to the Nagas to articulate their own perspectives. Bhabha's framework also enables *Kepepuofu* to be understood not as a relic of the past but as a living practice that continues to guide choices and relations. Vilie's world occupies a space that is neither purely traditional nor purely modern, where guns and spirits, forests and villages, the creator deity, and everyday survival coexist and constantly reshape Naga identity. The spirit world therefore functions as a powerful counter-narrative to colonial misrepresentations of Naga spirituality and remains integral to Naga society, carrying sacred attributes that continue to influence modern life. These narratives provide not only historical context but also serve as active guides for behaviour and social organization (Baishya, 2023). These myths have remained strong and continue to serve as a way to preserve cultural identity and social cohesion. Whereas the spirit world lays the sacred foundations of Naga life, the myth of the heart-stone carries over into the moral sphere, connecting spiritual power with humility, responsibility and ecological awareness.

5.3 The Search for Heart-Stone

This novel of Kire also shows how humans and nature are interdependent and how ecology should be taken into consideration (Bhattacharyya, 2024). Kire says, "The forest is not safe for those who don't know it, but it is safe for those who do" (Kire 2014). This statement does not see nature as an external adversary to be conquered, but rather as a living entity that reacts to human attitudes and actions. The juxtaposition of danger and kindness implies that harmony and coexistence are based on knowledge, respect, and reciprocity. This characterisation highlights an indigenous ecological frame of mind in which man and nature are interdependent. The central theme of the novel revolves around the protagonist who undertakes a journey to find the heart-stone. Kire's depiction of the entanglements between humans, spirits, and nature resonates with Bhattacharyya's notion of a "posthuman ecological framework" that emphasizes relational ways of being and our responsibility for the environment, in which the distinction between the human and the more-than-human is fluid and blurred (Bhattacharyya, 2024). The protagonist believes that immense power lies within the stone and the person who owns it will be blessed with power over the spiritual and human realms. This is the primary reason why both the spirits and men want the heart-stone. However, it can be taken from the riverbed only by those who have a kind heart and a teachable spirit (Kire, 2014). This is reinforced when Vilie is warned of material greed "If you are grasping at wealth, you are going to lose something that wealth cannot buy for you. You will lose knowledge of the spiritual. And you will lose the power it offers you. That is true power; that is the only power to aspire to because it gives you power over both the world of the senses and the world of the spirit" (Kire, 2014). This is a passage that talks about power as something more spiritual and moral than materialistic. In the comparison of wealth with spiritual knowledge, Kire claims that true authority derives from humility, wisdom and knowledge about physical and spiritual worlds. The heart-stone then serves not just as a conduit for supernatural strength but as a measure of moral strength. Selfish and greedy people or spirits driven by ambition will not be able to lay their hands on the stone. Vilie is one such character who is seen as virtuous, not driven by any materialistic desires. Vilie is guided by his dreams and his motivation is to protect it from human greed and act as a guardian of the stone rather than pursue personal gain. His stance is consistent with the novel's ethical framework, and the journey he undertakes is presented as a moral awakening rather than as a pursuit of power.

Zote can be seen as a contrasting character who exhibits greed and thirst for power. She seeks revenge and wants to destroy the ancestral village that cast her out; however, she is ultimately killed by the ancestral spirits. This serves as a warning that nature's powers, if used for personal gain without moral responsibility, may lead to adverse consequences.

The heart-stone can be read as Eliade's concept of living myth. It is not only a magical object but a model of how humans should relate to power and to the spiritual world. The myth explains that access to extraordinary power is conditional on virtues such as humility, teachability and care for others, thus offering an exemplary pattern for behaviour rather than control. In accordance with Cuddon, the stone not only invokes fear, desire, hope and



temptation but also carries ideas of justice, restraint and right conduct. Through both Vilie and Zote, the myth explores how inner motives shape the outcome of contact with sacred power, thus, combining emotional experience with clear ideas of what kind of person should be entrusted with power. The myth also challenges the 'single story' of Nagas as 'living within wild nature' (Tzudir, 2003), implying that the Nagas are wild-natured. In this narrative, the forest and the river are sacred spaces that respond to human intention. The myth insists that nature has its own rules and that only those who respect these rules, such as Vilie, are endowed with its power. If one's greed is unchecked, one loses a sense of spirituality and connection to one's surroundings (Baishya, 2023). In this way, Kire 'writes back' to earlier accounts by presenting an insider's view where Naga relations with nature are guided by ethics and spiritual awareness. Bhabha's idea of hybridity and third space can also deepen the understanding of heart-stone as the stone sits at the threshold between the human and spiritual worlds, traditional belief and modern desire. It is coveted by those shaped by modernism but belongs to a mythic order that recognises only humility. This in-between space becomes a Third Space where Naga identity is renegotiated, where characters like Vilie and Zote must choose whether to live by values of guardianship or possession.

Kire's novel also highlights the symbiotic relationship between humans and nature, highlighting the need for ecological awareness (Bhattacharyya, 2024). Kire's portrayal suggests that living in harmony with nature is only possible through understanding and respecting the delicate ecological balance (Jana & Dutta, 2022; Manisha & Rathee, 2025). The role of forests as sources of human sustenance and as dwelling places for spirits, as described by Lkr and Martemjen (2014), is one reason the Nagas protect and revere them. This understanding further strengthens the dedication of Nagas to protect the forests and environment (Beena & Giftlin, 2025). The myth of the heart-stone teaches us that nature's power and abundance are available, but only to the virtuous, kind and humble people. This deep commitment enriches the Nagas' understanding of Mother Nature, instilling a dedication to safeguard and conserve the environment (Beena & Giftlin, 2025). The myth of the heart-stone embodies this philosophy that access to nature's abundance is conditional upon virtues of humility and spiritual awareness.

The Naga myth of Longterok holds that the Ao-Nagas' ancestral origin is from the six stones and supports the idea of the mystical heart-stone. This is key to understanding the connection between stones, origin and moral order and their sense of belonging (Sekhar et al., 2018; Changkiri, 2023). Through these myths, Kire conveys the significance of indigenous knowledge and how it is still relevant to the present Naga society. Taken together, the myths of Tekhumiavi, the spirit world, and the heart-stone demonstrate that myth in *When the River Sleeps* is not just folklore but also a living repository of cultural knowledge. These stories help to maintain traditional values, to make moral decisions, to establish spiritual values, and to resist the stereotype of Naga identity. In retelling these myths, Kire rescues indigenous epistemologies and affirms the ongoing relevance of these epistemologies in the present day Naga society.

6. Discussion

In *When the River Sleeps*, myth is represented not merely as folklore but as a culturally situated system of knowledge through which ethical duties, communal memory, and identity are narrated. Read together, the Tiger-Man myth, the spirit world, and the heart-stone form an interconnected structure rather than three isolated stories. The Tiger-Man narrative foregrounds kinship, duty, and relationships among humans, animals, and spirits; the spirit-world episodes dramatise the limits of physical force and the importance of culturally transmitted knowledge; and the heart-stone narrative examines the ethical use of power, humility, and responsibility. This integrated reading supports Eliade's account of myth as a model for conduct while also showing how Kire places myth within a contemporary literary context. The novel's intervention becomes clearer when these narratives are read against colonial and popular descriptions that reduced Naga communities to labels such as "head-hunters," "savages," or "heathens" (Yeptho, 2016). Rather than repeating those descriptions, Kire restores the ethical and cultural contexts in which animal kinship, spirit invocation, and sacred objects acquire meaning. In this sense, the novel "writes back" to reductive representations and complicates the "single stories" identified by Adichie (2009). The analysis does not establish the empirical effects of these myths across all Naga communities; it demonstrates how the novel represents selected Angami myths as sources of knowledge, moral orientation, and cultural continuity.

This interpretation also resonates with Spivak's critique of representational practices that deny marginalised subjects agency (Spivak, 2023). Kire's novel affords narrative agency to particular Naga and Angami characters by



allowing their beliefs, relationships, and ethical vocabularies to shape the story from within. Bhabha's concept of hybridity is relevant because the narrative does not present tradition and modernity as mutually exclusive. Forests and villages, guns and invocations, inherited beliefs and contemporary experience coexist within the same narrative world. The resulting identity is dynamic rather than fixed, and it resists the colonial binary that positions Indigenous traditions as incompatible with modern life. The comparative examples concerning Africa and Native American representation are useful only at the level of a shared representational problem: dominant narratives often simplify culturally diverse communities. They are not treated here as direct cultural equivalents of the Naga context. Their limited comparative value lies in showing how repetition, romanticisation, and selective emphasis can transform complex histories into stereotypes. The primary analytical focus remains Kire's representation of Angami myth and identity.

The findings therefore extend existing scholarship in three ways. First, they show that the selected myths are structurally connected within the novel and collectively organise its treatment of duty, sacred authority, power, and belonging. Second, they demonstrate how close textual analysis can distinguish the novel's representation of Angami cultural knowledge from broader and potentially overgeneralised claims about all Naga communities. Third, they clarify that the novel's resistance to misrepresentation occurs through narrative form, character perspective, symbolic objects, and culturally embedded ethical choices, rather than through simple preservation of folklore. These findings support the argument that myth in Kire's fiction functions simultaneously as literary form, cultural memory, and a mode of critical response to reductive representation.

Table 1. Theoretical functions of myth in *When the River Sleeps*

Myth	Eliade (Sacred Origins)	Cuddon (Cultural Meaning)	Adichie/Spivak/ Bhabha (identity/ Resistance)
Tiger-Man	Origin narrative of Cosmic kinship, as sacred foundational myth	Communal ethics (duty, harmony with nature, as lived social values)	Challenges stereotypes through counter-narrative reading
Spirit-World	Living presence of sacred power (continuous sacred reality)	Moral guidance (Courage, respect for the unseen) (ethical culture code)	Legitimation of subaltern voice, melds traditional and modern realms (hybrid identity formation)
Heart-stone	Exemplary model of stewardship (ritualized moral order)	Ethical use of power (humility, ecological balance an environmental ethics system)	Upholds communal responsibility (resistance to individual greed narrative)

The study's contribution is therefore threefold. First, it develops a focused reading of myth as an active narrative mode of cultural resistance and identity formation in *When the River Sleeps*. Second, it integrates myth criticism and postcolonial theory while keeping the claims anchored to specific episodes and characters in the novel. Third, it distinguishes Angami-specific textual evidence from broader claims about Naga identity and identifies the limits of literary analysis as evidence for contemporary social practice. The study consequently contributes to scholarship on Kire by showing how mythic narratives can preserve cultural memory, challenge reductive descriptions, and create space for internally articulated understandings of identity.

7. Conclusion

This study examined how Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps* uses the Tiger-Man myth, the spirit world, and the heart-stone to challenge reductive representations and to construct alternative understandings of identity. The analysis shows that these elements function in the novel as more than decorative folklore. They organise ethical relationships, connect characters to inherited forms of knowledge, and provide narrative resources through which externally imposed labels may be questioned. The findings are specifically grounded in Kire's representation of Angami cultural material and should not be treated as a complete account of all Naga communities.

The study further demonstrates that Indigenous storytelling remains significant in postcolonial literary contexts because it can preserve cultural memory while also responding to historical and contemporary



misrepresentation. By combining myth criticism with postcolonial approaches, the analysis identifies myth as a literary and epistemological force within the novel. At the same time, the study is limited by its focus on one novel and on selected Angami myths; it does not provide empirical evidence of how these traditions operate across present-day Naga communities. Future research may compare myths from other Naga tribes, examine additional works by Kire and other Naga writers, and investigate how oral narratives are adapted in education, digital archives, community storytelling, and contemporary cultural policy. Such work could broaden understanding of both shared values and tribal differences while supporting the documentation of oral traditions in local languages and English.

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Does this article screen for similarity?

Yes

Conflict of Interest

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