

Indigeneity, Resistance and Acculturation: Naga Tribe in Transition

Pooja Joshi

Easterine Kire, also known as Easterine Iralu, the first Naga novelist in English, is one of the prominent voices from the northeast region. She represents the colonial history and culture of the Indigenous people of Nagaland in her first novel *Sky is My Father: A Naga Village Remembered*, published as *Naga Village Remembered: A Novel* in 2003. In this novel, Kire weaves a narrative that highlights the impact of colonialism on the Naga people, particularly focusing on the Battle of Khonoma. The battle, which took place in 1879, was a significant conflict between the British colonial forces and the Khonoma village, known for its fierce resistance. Kire's storytelling delves into the cultural and social fabric of the Angami Naga community during this turbulent period, blending historical events with rich cultural narratives. In the novel, Kire covers the history of the Naga people from 1832 to 1900 and describes how colonial encroachment disrupts the connection of the Angami Naga people with their territory. Through this historical novel, Kire represents the marginalized history of the people of Nagaland and their Indigenous cultural identity to global readers.

History, whether documented through writing or passed down orally, serves as a lens through which communities view their past and understand their present position in relation to historical change. Indigenous peoples possess a unique cultural history that plays a pivotal role in defining their identity. This history encompasses their traditions, social structures, and ways of life that predate colonial influences. JRM Cobo in this context has remarked:

The term Indigenous itself refers to the people who have historical connection with their pre-colonial land and society. They see

themselves as distinct from other sectors of societies that today rule those areas. They are currently non-dominant sectors of society, but they are committed to preserving, developing, and transmitting to future generations their ancestral regions and ethnic identities as the foundation of their continuous existence as peoples, in accordance with their own cultural traditions.

The quote from Cobo succinctly encapsulates the essence of Indigenous identity as rooted in historical connections and a commitment to cultural preservation, highlighting the resilience and agency of Indigenous communities in maintaining their distinctiveness in the face of external pressures.

The Naga people of Northeast India may be termed as Indigenous because they also have historical continuity with their pre-colonial land where their cultural attributes like Indigenous knowledge, spirituality, and other markers of self-identification or indigeneity are formulated. Colonial rulers considered the native people as primitive and delineated certain areas of Northeast India on the basis of its ethnic identity. So, the indigeneity of the Naga people is the colonial artifact or colonial construction of “the rule of colonial difference” according to Partha Chatterjee (16).

Bill Ashcroft in *The Empire Writes Back* has stated that colonial discourse may be regarded as the system of statements that can be made about colonies and colonial peoples, about colonizing powers, and about the relationship between these two . . . the system of knowledge and beliefs about the world within which acts of colonization take place (37). This idea of discourse has its origin in Foucault. Fanon has also written about the indigenous being treated as the wretched of the earth or others who are native or uncivilized. He goes on to describe the position of colonized ones in respect of global power as he states, “The colonized, underdeveloped man is today a political creature in the most global sense of the term” (40). Samson and Gigoux in their book *Indigenous Identity and Colonialism: A Global Perspective* showcase the colonial experience of Indigenous people throughout the world and represent

colonialism as “political, social, economic, cultural structure nourished by powerful drives for land and authority” (iii).

What we label as Indigenous identity of any community and group is actually collective identity which is dynamic and is a process of self-recognition deeply rooted in their tradition and culture. In this context Weaver observes, ‘Indigenous identity is based on its facets—self-identification, community identification, and external identification’. Another critic Gibson has opined that the “concept of identity . . . within many [I]ndigenous societies retain an essential geopolitical element—constructed in relation to land” (55). However, the Indigenous identity of Naga people is attached to their cultural attributes and extends to their relationship with lands where those cultural attributes are formed, exercised, and given meaning.

The Naga people have a deep connection with the land they inhabit and their sense of valor and identity is related to it. Frantz Fanon in his work *The Wretched of the Earth* has also emphasized the significance of land to colonized native people. He writes, “For a colonized people, the most essential value, because it is the most meaningful, is first and foremost the land: the land, which must provide bread and, naturally, dignity” (9). Against this backdrop, the local people of Khonoma serve as the protectors of the territory as seen in *A Naga Village Remembered*, “Her warriors were muscular and wiry—a stock of men for whom an agility of mind was important as an agile body” (2). They are strongly against possession of their land even by the neighboring native community who live in Garipheju village. If they become the victim of the expedition of Garipheju village, they plan for the expedition to retaliate.

This whole episode of conflict between the Naga people and the British Army began when the British colonial forces made the first expedition in Nagaland to find a route from Manipur to Assam through Nagaland so that they could protect themselves from the Burmese attack. This ensued the clash between the colonial forces and the Angami people of Khonoma due to the dislike of native people regarding intrusion into

their land. The whole clash between the two parties did not prove to be fruitful. Easterine Kire here observes, “British entry was resisted fiercely by spear-wielding warriors who saw the expedition as an incursion into their lands. They rolled down rocks on the intruders but were overcome by the modern weapons” (viii). On the contrary the British forces launched many attempts to raid and attack the village of Khonoma. As a result, the people of Nagaland felt deeply affected and humiliated due to the fear of losing their Indigenous identity. They turned furious and violent and, reacted against the colonial power. The natives also realized that “their liberation must be achieved and can only be achieved by force.”

After bearing the burden of repetitive expeditions, the Angamis retaliated heavily against the British Government. They took revenge on the white man at Piphe by killing Bogchand who led the white man’s soldiers and ordered them to burn down the houses of the Merhu clan. The Angami people along with the men of Mezo attacked the soldiers of Bogchand and killed them. This act of the colonized local people infused in them a sense of victory and self-esteem over the colonial power. Kire writes “But it was a matter of honour, you see? A man is not a man if you let another man kill your kin and torch your houses and you do nothing about it.” (8). In this way, community bonding and collective consciousness place a crucial role in the life of the Indigenous people of Nagaland to save their tribes against the outer forces.

The sense of inferiority among the Angami community regarding their power to protect their land created a guilt complex in them. The guilt complex triggered violence in the Angami Nagas and for them violence became a tool of psycho-effective survival and agency. Due to this guilt complex, they again took the step of attacking the white soldiers at Shupfu, Manipur. This invasion was a collaborative venture of the people of Khonoma, Viswema, Phe sema, Kigwema, Mima, Kidima, and Kikruma. A series of exploitation and ill-treatment as labourers, collection of excessive revenues under pressure, the defeat in the raids and imprisonment as convicts aggravated their guilt complex and instigated them toward a more violent step. This is how violence can be seen as a

repercussion of deep sense of guilt. In the raids that followed, the Angami men became more ferocious and brought back the enemy heads by the hundreds (76). Now they became so violent that though they knew it was foolish to attack the white man, they were obsessed with the thought of war. The natives increased their raids on British territory and the British Government attempted to suppress their agency. They launched 22 raids between 1850 and 1865, and 232 British subjects became victims of the raids.

They attempted to spoil the revolutionary spirit of the Angami people so that the natives of other clans do not raise their voice: "So long as Khonoma is allowed to go unpunished over the murder of Damant, the other villages will make bold to rise against us. The spirit of Khonoma must be quenched" (101). But the consequences were opposite. In this regard, Easterine Kire remarks, "The white man's effort to humiliate and suppress them had had the opposite effect on them" (76). To uproot the full dominance of the British Government, the Khonoma warriors along with the warriors of Viaswema, Chedema, Secuma, Jakhama, Jotsoma, Piphe, and Tsiepama attacked after the Kohima garrison and the battle of Khonma, "the severest fighting ever known in these hills" (Mackenzie 137) started.

About the fierceness and horrible scenes of the war Kire describes as follows: "The Angamis began shouting on 16 October, the first shot landing harmlessly but growing deadlier as they kept up a steady assault on the little garrison" (93). The natives of the Semo clan concentrated on shooting and killing the white officers. The joint venture of the natives and their revolutionary zeal represent their Indigenusness or show their love for land. It is their love for land that leads them toward the path of decolonization. Violence becomes the only medium of decolonization to the Angamis as it is a part of a struggle for psycho-effective survival and a search for human agency in the midst of the agony of oppression. The Angamis were culturally bound to be obliged to their land because their relationship with their land allows them to engage in ways that foster their connection to each other, to non-humans, to present, past, and future relations. Their sense of being Indigenous is related to their

land and community. Their love for land is quite obvious in Levi's attitude toward his village:

How good it was to be back in the village, to be among his people. Impulsively he picked up a bit of soil and smelled its earthiness. He felt bonded to the village, bonded to the land, and feeling surged up in him that he'd never known before. I should feel so strongly for a mistress, he mused, smiling to himself. (Kire 51)

Women in Nagaland also have great love and admiration for their land; they always support and inspire the warrior spirit. They never hesitate to send their husband and sons to the war field. The native workers under British government had felt culturally obliged to join their village men in the attack of Shupfu (47) and the men of Khonoma were culturally bound to avenge their fallen men (105). So, land was there in their cultural consciousness which reflects their Indigenous identity. The native Angamis also owe to their land and ecology in terms of their nurturing which is apparent in Siezo's utterance, "Sky is my father, Earth is my mother, I believe in Kepenoupfu" (71).

As far as the spiritual connection of the community is concerned, the Angamis encapsulated their faith in hunting, gathering, farming, family, and community life. One of the most common features of Indigenous spirituality of the Naga people is that it is based on enduring connections to lands, and is rooted in memories, dreams and experiences. Long-term associations with all animate and inanimate beings are embedded in legends, myths, stories and orature passed down the generations. (Samson and Gigoux 125). For example, the Angamis hold that man, spirit, and tiger were brothers who were born out of the combination of sky and earth. Kaviselie dreamt of a short-tailed gwi which indicates the Creator's willingness for him to earn a title. They worship the creator deity Ukepenuopfu and sanctify themselves on the occasion of Sekreyani. But they suffer from spiritual dispossession when they become victims of cultural colonialism by the American missionaries.

Later to create an organized religion, the missionaries started to take an influential care of the natives. They gradually started building churches

and missionary schools, gave free treatment to the needy people and started to transform their Indigenous bent of mind. They gave education in English to the Angamis. The establishment of churches and schools represented the usage of state apparatus; the colonial Government became slowly successful in colonizing the Indigenous knowledge system of the natives. The burning example in Kire's fiction is Sato who became the victim of the civilizing mission of the white people. His father Levi sent him to the mission school in Kohima so that he could learn the war tactics of the whites. But here, he developed love for Christianity and started to show resentment for his own Indigenous spiritual beliefs. Levi declares,

How is it, my son, that you have turned your back on all that we have taught you of what is good of our ways? The white man killed your grandfather's brother and burnt your grandfather's house four times. Do you hear me, Sato, four times! You have the blood of your ancestors in your hands. (Kire 127)

This shows how cultural colonialism initiated the loss of Indigenous cultural identity. The Naga people faced strong cultural dispossession when some of them were baptized by the missionaries. The spiritual dispossession affected the Indigenous cultural identity of Naga people as it involved their loss of confidence in their own ways of dealing with conflict, affliction, and suffering. Nisier is the first man who was baptized and converted to Christianity in 1897. Nisier's conversion gave an impetus to cultural change as he became the emblem of native conversion. Sato was greatly inspired by it. Slowly, Khonoma became the little band of believers of Christianity. These converted native men started dominating their ancestral culture as they became preachers and started influencing their people. Cultural colonialism deteriorated Indigenous identity and created a breach in the relationship among the Indigenous people.

Easterine Kire in her first work of fiction *Sky is My Father: A Naga Village Remembered* has vividly captured the life of the Naga community during the colonial regime and also highlights the cultural dispossession of the Angami Nagas. Till now, the Indigenous identity of

the Naga people has been brought out through colonial discourses. It is for the first time that an author like Kire has represented the unique culture and cultural identity of the Nagas by weaving such a poignant tale of history and tribal life together. But the trajectory of their identity development has been fractured through cultural genocide, land dispossession and ongoing cultural assimilation. Through, the continuous reaction to the social, political, and cultural invasion of colonialism, and the non-Indigenous religions and cultures, they become differentiated and protect their otherness. Archana S. has made a valid statement in this regard that Easterine Kire as an Indigenous writer also attempts to decolonize herself through her writing and performs her duty as an Indigenous storyteller who passes the history of Khonoma “to a new generation in much the same way that a more sophisticated nation would bequeath its younger generations with material evidence of a brave, indelible past” (xv).

Works Cited

- Archana, S. “Fictional Matrices of Cultural Dynamics and Anti-colonial Longings in Easterine Kire’s ‘Sky is My Father’ and Chinua Achebe’s ‘Arrow of God’.” *Pune Research: An International Journal in English*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2018, pp. 1-9.
- Ashcroft, B., G. Griffiths, and H. Tiffin. *Postcolonial Studies: The Key Concepts*. Routledge, 2007.
- . *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures*. Routledge, 2002.
- Chatterjee, Partha. *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*. Princeton UP, 1993.
- Cobo, J.R.M. *Study of the Problem of Discrimination Against Indigenous Populations*. Economic and Social Council (UN ECOSOC), 1986.
- Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Grove Press, 2005.
- Gibson, C. “Cartographies of the Colonial/Capitalist State: A Geopolitics of Indigenous Self-determination in Australia.” *Antipode*, vol. 31 no. 1, 1999, pp. 45-79.
- Iralu, Easterine. *A Naga Village Remembered: A Novel*. Ura Academy, 2003.

- Kire, Easterine. *Sky is My Father: A Naga Village Remembered*. Speaking Tiger, 2018.
- . *Walking the Roadless Road: Exploring the Tribes of Nagaland*. Aleph, 2019.
- Samson, C., and C. Gigoux. *Indigenous Peoples and Colonialism: Global Perspective*. Polity, 2016.
- Weaver, H. N. "Indigenous Identity: What Is It, and Who Really Has It?" *American Indian Quarterly*, vol. 25, no. 2, 2001, pp. 240-55.