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# **Preserving the Past, Envisioning the Future: Exploring Erosion of Oral Tradition in the Naga Community through Easterine Kire's *Son of the Thundercloud***

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## **Abstract:**

Nagaland, a Northeastern state in India, is deeply rooted in its oral tradition. This research paper aims to discuss the oral traditions of Nagaland by discussing their significance as a means of preserving the cultural and traditional identity of the Naga community. Considering Easterine Kire's novella *Son of the Thundercloud*, this study examines how the erosion of oral tradition has led to the degradation of the Naga culture. Through the analysis of the novella, this paper highlights the need to preserve the past in order to safeguard the cultural legacy for future generations. It explores how the decline of oral tradition has resulted in the gradual disappearance of Naga cultural practices and beliefs. Moreover, the study emphasizes the role of stories passed down from generations as a vital tool for preserving the essence of nature. The findings of this research contribute to the growing discourse on cultural preservation and press upon the urgency of revitalizing oral tradition as a means of safeguarding Naga heritage.

**Keywords:** Cultural Ecology, Folktales, Naga community, Northeast India, Oral Tradition.

## **Introduction**

We are part human, part stories.

Stories can be either bacteria or light: they can infect a system, or illuminate a world.

When we start telling stories we give our lives a new dimension: the dimension of meaning - apprehension - comprehension (Okri 114).

These lines by Ben Okri- a Nigerian storyteller in his essay *The Joys of Storytelling* (1998) speaks a lot about the tradition of telling stories and folklore. Now before we discuss more about the oral narratives and folklore, let's understand what folklore actually means? According to Dundes "folk" (Dundes 2) can refer to "any group of people whatsoever who share at least one common factor. It does not matter what the linking factor is-it could be a common occupation, language, or religion-but what is important is that a group...have some traditions that it calls its own" (Dundes 2). These oral mythical narratives and folklore remained the source of information about the tribe for many years. Mythical stories are narratives created by cultures to explain their origin, beliefs, and worldview. These stories based on myths have symbolic meanings which reflect the values and beliefs of the culture in which they have been created. It has been through the stories throughout history to provide a framework for understanding how humans relate to the natural environment and their surroundings. Cultural ecology expresses the idea that stories like these play an essential role in shaping how humans interact with the natural environment. Since, oral narratives form a significant part of the lives of these tribes; the tradition, cultures, myths, legends, etc. are passed onto them in the oral form. This leads to the emergence of various versions of a single story. The origin of these stories remains the same yet diverts into numerous myths with respect to the people, mood, situations, festivities, etc. "To write them down is to transform them, to endanger them, and ultimately may serve to deactivate them" (Brown 8). The dialogic conversation within the community, while a person is telling a story leads to yet another chain of stories, the essence of which dies when jotted down with ink. This also instils the sense of one community; one tradition in the people. These oral narratives and mythical stories have played a crucial role in shaping cultural ecology, providing a framework for understanding the relationship between humans and the environment. These stories in a way have been used throughout history to provide a means of connecting with the natural world on a deeper level, developing a sense of wonder and respect for it, and transcending the boundaries between humans and the environment.

## Discussion

Over the period of time, this tradition of oral narratives and mythological storytelling is dying with the death of the storyteller or more appropriately the generation of storytellers.

Shimri- a resident of Nagaland, in an interview to the *TOI* said, “time is against us. It is disappointing when we reach a particular village to find a majority of the elderly have passed away, and along with them stories, that have got buried forever” (Das). The storytellers are the ones who know some part of the truth and to preserve the truth, they should be necessarily preserved or at least their stories. The mythical stories and oral narratives of ancient societies are among the most important records of the society’s history, its religious foundations, and its value system. These oral narratives are formulated partially or entirely for the purpose of educating and socializing the listener. It is important to realize that oral narratives, whilst having a great deal of relevance to the maintenance of meaningful communities, are often dismissed by scientists on the basis that they are mythical and have no empirical basis. As a result, knowledge which has helped to sustain certain communities is endangered.

Easterine Kire, belonging to the Angami tribe of Nagaland explains the culture of her people and the environmental alterations undergone by the region by narrating them from a cultural and allegorical perspective. She presses on these problems by a simple retelling of the Naga myths and the role of patriarchal Naga society in oppressing and subjugating the nature. Through this novella she aims to explain how we heed towards our own degradation by not giving a thought to the myths and folklore that have been passed on through the generations one after the other. Kire’s novella is an expression of the dystopian aspect of the cosmopolitan society and her views are that of an environmentalist. i.e., of interdependence.

Kire, in this allegorical fiction names her characters in such a way that they represent their sole reasons of survival. For example, she names her character- Rahalie, the hero of the novella, which means the “The Redeemer”, Mesanuo in Angami means “The pure one”, Pelevotso means “Faithful to the end” similarly, Kethonuo means “Truth” and Siezde is synonymous to “Future full of hope”. These names not only carry meanings with them but also behave appropriately. The story begins with Pelevotso i.e., Pele being told a story by his grandmother about the tiger widow and the death of her husband and sons by a tiger. The woman was impregnated by the raindrop which fell on her leading to the birth of the Son of the Thundercloud who would avenge the death of his father and all his brothers.

*‘One afternoon, the woman was drying paddy outside her house when, all of a sudden, the sun disappeared and a raindrop fell on her from the sky. She became pregnant and gave birth to a son. She was happy again, and the son grew up to be a mighty warrior who avenged his father and seven brothers.’ (Kire 9).*

According to Temsula Ao, a Naga writer and academic, "Nagas have an oral tradition that is rich and vibrant, passed down from one generation to the next through storytelling, songs, and performances" (Ao 101). The oral tradition of the Nagas includes various elements of folklore such as myths, legends, proverbs, and folktales. The myths and legends of the Nagas are often associated with their religious beliefs and practices. An important element of Naga folklore is their belief in the existence of supernatural beings such as ghosts, spirits, and demons. As A. Lanunungsang Ao, a Naga writer and researcher, explains, "The Nagas believe in the existence of a world beyond the physical realm, where spirits and supernatural beings reside" (Ao 73). The Nagas have various rituals and practices to appease these spirits, including offering sacrifices and performing religious ceremonies. The belief in supernatural beings is often reflected in Naga folktales and legends, where they are portrayed as both benevolent and malevolent entities. The Naga folklore is an important part of the Nagas' cultural heritage, and it continues to be passed down from one generation to the next through storytelling, songs, and performances.

According to this Mao-Naga myth, Tiger, Spirit and Humankind (man) were three brothers who came into existence through the miraculous union between the already existing first woman and the clouds of the sky. How the first human being, that is, the woman came into existence is not explained but her existence is taken for granted. This is perhaps because the earth is already there and its origin cannot be fully explained. The woman represents the reproductive power of nature...Subsequently she gave birth to a Tiger, Spirit and Man or human being. By the time the three children became adults, their mother was quite old and sick. So, the three brothers took turns to look after their ailing mother. When the Tiger looked after her, the mother used to become sicker with anxiety and her worry seemed to be intensified. The reason for this was that the Tiger used to touch the mother's body to identify the fleshy, good muscles which he could eat after her death. During the turn of the Spirit, the mother used to become more feverish and develop acute headaches. The mother felt at ease and relaxed only when the Man looked after her because he tended his mother with great care and concern (Mao 10).

The author in order to emphasize upon the importance of oral narratives, takes the help of above Naga myth of evolution. This myth depicts the story of man, tiger and the spirit as siblings. According to the myth, the Tiger, the Spirit, and the Man as distinct beings, but in reality, they are actually three separate facets of the Human. The humanistic component of

man, including intelligence, is favored over the two wild and supernatural qualities represented by the Tiger and the Spirit. From an ecocultural standpoint, Kire, in the novella has masterfully included this tale throughout to maintain alive the essence of a narrator in a tribe culture. The Naga origin story depicts the envisioned style of life: people together with the environment and supernatural. A story depicted in isolation and without the mutual authority by the

The novella also projects towards how the village was suffering from two kinds of famine: The first one which led to the starvation of the villagers, physically and the other one which led to their mental starvation. “No, I am talking about the famine of stories and songs. They killed all the storytellers who tried to tell them about the *Son of the Thundercloud*. They killed hope” (Kire 48). Measnuo also tells Pelevotso how once the land was inhibited by storytellers but with the passage of time, they were killed by the “dark ones” (Kire 64) - the people who did not want the oral narratives to thrive, propagate and to be passed on to the coming generations. With the passage of time, people forgot their traditions and the reasons behind believing in certain myths. This practice, with the passage of centuries led to intrusion of non- native or more popularly, the “alien ideas” and culture which appears not a good enough conductor for the progress and preservation of that indigenous community life. In his book *The Culture of Narcissism*, Christopher Lasch argues that modern society has become increasingly self-centered and obsessed with individualism, leading to a loss of communal values and a disregard for tradition. He writes, “The abandonment of traditional values has encouraged the spread of narcissism and the erosion of the social fabric” (Lasch 72). Lasch believes that the lack of respect for tradition and community has led to the adoption of alien ideas and culture, which can be harmful to society. In her book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Jane Jacobs comments that urban planning, that disregards the cultural and historical significance of a community can lead to its destruction. She writes:

The assimilation of new people into old neighborhoods does not inevitably or necessarily destroy the old neighborhood. But the greater the dissimilarity between the old and the new inhabitants, the greater the likelihood that the old will be destroyed (Jane 137).

Jacobs believes that when new ideas and culture are forced onto a community without consideration for its history and traditions, it can lead to the destruction of that community’s identity. A major problem with modernization is that as the world becomes more and more

dynamic, the relationship between men and nature is also being impacted because of this modernization. The present society has been adversely affected due to numerous reasons primarily cosmopolitanism and industrialization in the name of development of society and the infrastructure. As a result, people have become very materialistic and money minded. In today's world, people have not only lost their love and compassion for the environment that they are living in, but they have also encouraged a decrepit condition of their ancient system of knowledge, which may have otherwise maintained the link between man and nature.

The so-called dark forces as termed by Kire in the novella symbolized by the tiger are the geopolitical developments and other ecological distortions by humans which has led to a considerable change in the way indigenous communities led their lives a few decades ago. People have moved on and given up the indigenous culture that they've been following since time immemorial which has led to several unwanted ecological distortions. These dark forces have contributed significantly to the present-day crisis faced by the various indigenous communities in the world. The various kinds of unwanted droughts, famines or the environmental changes such as global warming, etc. also have direct relation with the cosmopolitan way of life that we lead today. These so-called dark forces have turned realities into stories and further into myths.

They build fences, they hoard and guard, they want the trees and rivers and the stars to bend to their will...but when the storytellers were killed, one after the other, people slowly forgot what they had been told, or believed they were just myths, and they allowed their minds to accept the darkness (Kire 64).

In the novella, Kire also talks about a very intimate relation between the nature and the preserver of nature to project the natural connection between humans and the nature and therefore names one of her characters, Mesanuo. The significance of "seed grains" and the way in which the nature rejuvenates after the rains share a very close cultural bond as well. The headman gifts these seed grains as present to Mesanuo and enquires how the drought-ridden village turned into a happy, fertile village overnight to which she replies:

It's called birthing, headman. The earth has birthed trees, rocks, stones and grain, just as a mother birth her offsprings. The trees and rocks are the sons of the earth. Take care of them and they will take care of your children (Kire 46).

There are various ecological elements mentioned, such as the seed grains, the river, etc. The seed grains are actually the precursors to life "food for the future", while the river

was a source of life for the village. “No one came empty handed. There was food in the river and so the villagers called it ‘our mother’. Then the drought came.” (Kire 45).

## Conclusion

People control their destinies. If they choose to believe something dark, they can bring drought upon themselves. So long as the storytellers were alive, there was hope and compassion in people’s hearts, and their minds received and accepted that. However, when the storytellers were killed, one after the other, people slowly forgot what they had been told, or believed they were just myths, and they allowed their minds to accept the darkness. So the drought came as a result of people rejecting the joyful stories and accepting the dark stories (Kire 64).

Every community has its own folk culture, tales, beliefs and traditions. The Man, Tiger and the Spirit are considered to be the siblings in the Naga mythology, the human, is just a variation of a degree and not a different kind and therefore, killing a Tiger is considered a taboo. The novel also showcases how after killing a tiger, one is not allowed to enter the village directly. The person needs to go through the process of purification before considering himself free of the animal killing. When Rahalie killed the tiger, he was not allowed to enter the village premises to which he replied “It was not I, *Apuf-o*. It was the spear who killed Tiger” (Kire 131). Such customs such as this or not killing a pregnant deer, etc., are meant to preserve the environment and ecosystem as a whole. Here Rahalie represents the last generation of storytellers of the Naga community whose purpose of life is to propagate the ancient tales and myths in order to protect and maintain the natural ecological order. The headman and the villagers at the same time represent the world at large, the humankind which has this innate human nature of dissatisfaction. The novella thereby represents the importance of a belief system in a community. Rhalietuo is projected as the redeemer, the person who wishes to save the disappearing Naga culture by killing the spirit tiger but in turn gets killed by his own people who didn’t have faith in their own stories and myths. Indigenous communities today need people who take pride in their culture and act as pillars of strength by keeping intact the knowledge passed on to them by the elders.

The older people of the village would often say, ‘It’s the best place to live in. We are blessed. Our young should not think there are lands better than this to build a home. They belong here, they must take the place of their ancestors.’ They feared that if the young were not taught to love the village, it would soon be abandoned (Kire 12).



The erosion of traditional social structures has ultimately led to the breakdown of community ties. As the Naga people navigate the complexities of modernization, it becomes essential to find a balance between embracing new ideas and preserving their rich cultural heritage. Only through a thoughtful and inclusive approach can the Naga community hope to restore a sense of cohesion, while cherishing their unique identity, folklore and their way of living.

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