

Can Naga Folktales Hope Back?: Situating Select Naga Anglophone Novels

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Abstract

Indigenous vision of hope is fed by intellectual, cultural, environmental, medicinal, and spiritual knowledge system. It is a precolonial repertoire of hope, which pertains to individual or/and community sustenance, resilience and wellness. It is strategically preserved and transferred from one generation to another through folktales. However, due to several forms of environmental violence to indigenous peoples, folktales have undergone cultural erasures at various levels. Consequently, the present-day indigenous peoples, devoid of indigenous hope, feel intellectually and culturally displaced. Therefore, folktales must be reclaimed and regenerated. This study proposes to create a roadmap to retrieve indigenous frameworks of hope (pertaining to ecoethical sustenance, resilience and wellness at community-and-individual level), which are embedded in the modern-day representations of folktales. For this, it takes up Naga folktales as delineated in select contemporary Naga Anglophone novels and seeks to retrieve Naga hope stories with a commitment to connect Naga peoples to their ancestral eco-conscious wellness frameworks.

Keywords: Folktales, Naga, Hope, Anglophone novels, ecoethical, sustainable

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Introduction

Indigenous frameworks of hope involve knowledge systems deeply rooted in notions of individual-and-community well-being, esoteric ideas, healing mechanisms, food security and resilience frameworks, and natural resource management techniques. These knowledge systems are passed down from one generation to another generation through folktales. But when an indigenous territory is annihilated by the agents of slow violence (Nixon 2011), what is lost in the process is not just an indigenous history and lived knowledge system but the very repertoire of indigenous hoping mechanisms. The loss is territorial, environmental, cultural, spiritual and intellectual wellbeing of an indigenous community. Geographical devastation leads to the community's loss of identity leading its members, especially the youth, to feel de-territorialized and dispossessed. Therefore, it is necessary to restore faith in indigenous hoping mechanisms which are rooted in the indigenous communities' rich repertoire of folktales. Folktales show how indigenous community draws its hope from its ecology which is fed by the mountain, forest or/and water principles. When this harmonious and sustainable relationship is labelled and subjugated by colonial and neocolonial experts as nonproductive, unintellectual or/and nonprogressive, indigenous writers, historians and conservationists strive to retrieve, archive and recontextualize precolonial indigenous ecology-based knowledge systems. The path of retrieving these enduring but embedded traces of precolonial indigenous knowledge is fraught with difficulties as indigenous situations have undergone conflicting history and hybridized cultural affiliations. Indigenous researchers and writers are 'always already' aware of an ambiguity: They can never fully record, decipher, or comprehend indigenous ecology and its well-being frameworks since indigenous history has been interwoven with colonial history and ideology. On the other hand, they shall never cease to write back an authentic history of their own. Consequently, indigenous writers—perhaps in a more advantageous position compared to indigenous historians or conservationists—use unique and innovative techniques to reconstruct the folktales. Folktales involve vivid environmental, intellectual, ethical, and territorial imaginings. Contemporary indigenous writers therefore use unique techniques to textualize folktales inviting readers to engage, imagine, recreate and to regenerate indigenous frameworks of hope. This study, therefore, takes up Naga folktales, as represented in contemporary Naga Anglophone novels, and interprets the embedded frameworks of indigenous hope which are fed by the principles of river, forest and mountain ecologies. It situates the Naga hoping mechanisms attached with indigenous cartographical reference points, environmental history, mysticisms, healing rituals, sustainable ways of natural resource management, food security and sovereignty, ecoethical living, and community-and-individual wellness and resilience frameworks.

Why Naga Hope?

Naga territory and its heterogeneous culture groups have been perfused with the history of layered migrations, British colonial violence and the Second World War (1939-45). Nagaland, valued for biodiversity and cultural diversity, is a treasure-trove of indigenous traditional knowledge systems. It is a significant section of the Himalayan ecology with two mountain ranges on the physical borderline and five major rivers Doyang, Tizu, Dhansiri, Dikhu and Dzukou. With its diverse topography, relief, climate, soil and vegetation, the place holds the

primary and the secondary forest ecosystem, pine forest ecosystem, grassland ecosystem, alpine and sub-alpine ecosystem, wetland and riverine ecosystem (Kire 2019a, 30). Environmental, historical, and literary accounts of Naga culture, by both indigenous and nonindigenous Naga scholars, present diverse data on the precolonial migration waves of the indigenous culture groups that migrated to the Naga Hills from southeast China and Burma over a long period of time. However, the scholars agree on one point that the Naga history and culture is so intriguing and baffling that every theoretical attempt suffers from some kind of inadequacy. Perhaps the most vital reason for this blackhole in Naga history is identified by Kire (2019a). She remarks, written documents of Naga migrations, settlements and cultural practices and transactions have been recorded by the Ahom kings during 1228 CE and by the British colonisers from 1832 onwards after the British invasions of the Naga Hills (2019a, 8). These narratives have othered the ‘powerful indigenous nation’ (Sanyu 2024, 2) history of almost forty ‘sub-nations’ (Sanyu 2024, 3) that have been inhabiting the Naga Hills at the tri-junction of China, India and Myanmar since centuries. Folk narratives of Naga migration and settlement by the Naga culture groups, according to Kire (2019a, 12), predate the nineteenth century written documentation of Naga history. These narratives were injected into the cultural memories and thereby traditions of the respective culture groups in forms of folktales and rituals. However, violent social, environmental, historical and political alterations during the precolonial, colonial and postcolonial times have resulted into corresponding alterations, erosions, and erasures of Naga folk culture and thereby Naga ancestral hope mechanisms.

The Naga Anglophone writers are painfully aware of the conflicted colonial history that has ‘interrupted the narratives of our people quite abruptly’ (Kire’s “Mapping Kohima” 2019a, 163). Kire (2019a, 224) wonders how the twentieth century modernised Naga people of Kohima were brainwashed into believing (and thereby into participating) that the battle of Kohima was the battle of the Naga people. Naga folkculture of hunting, gathering, cultivation--redeemed through everyday practices and regenerated by Naga folktales-- was now replaced by western ideas of urban expansions, extractive activities such as mining and stone quarrying (Martemjen 2017, 17). Colonial violence against the Naga culture groups have led to a sense of indigenous emasculation, environmental uncertainty and a sense of solastalgia for indigenous forest areas, diverse fauna, and flora. The Naga Anglophone school of writers are fusing Imagination along with archaeological, anthropological and environmental studies to codify, textualize and map Naga folktales. Representations of folktales are perhaps their most dependable tools for restoring ancestral knowledge systems and for countering cultural and environmental subjugations. Kire, the first Naga Anglophone novelist, uses indigenous expressions, legends and chants, customs and ceremony, spiritual faith intrees and riversto assert the universality of Naga folktales. Kire connects Naga folklores, archaeological origins, historical accounts, anthropological data and ecological location to recreate Naga hope stories.

Hope Mechanisms in Naga Folktales as Represented in Naga Anglophone Novels

Naga hoping mechanisms are crucial to Kire’s novels, and they almost become characters influencing the narrative flow of the texts. The novels are postcolonial eco-conscious articulations of what was/is lost to the agents of slow violence. Although written in English language, the texts are infused with Naga folk cultural terms and terminologies, which are loaded with indigenous culture-and-nature relationship and its functional values. Since,

colonial and postcolonial administrative policies and programs seem to ignore the importance of restoring vital elements of conservation of Naga biodiversity (Martemjen 2017, xv) and eco-ethical knowledge systems, the present section seeks to identify and problematize literary models of Naga folk narratives that seek to reclaim valuable frameworks of hope.

One of the most powerful representations of Naga folk narratives is the ‘Village of the Seers’ in *Don’t Run, My Love* (2017). Atuonuo and her mother Visenuo—dwellers of the ancient Angami village, Kija—are hardworking agriculturalists and are bonded with their community members. However, the mother-daughter duo is petrified to discover that the man who is in love with Atuonuo is originally a ‘tekhumevi’ (2017, 78), a weretiger. As the everyday rhythmic life of the duo is abruptly challenged by the intrusion of the supernatural demonic entity, they are faced with an uncertainty that could neither be resolved by the spiritual presence of Kepenuopfu (2017, 77) or the wellness knowledge system of the Kija village community. The duo needed to go beyond the natural boundaries of the land-forest to the supernatural realm of the ‘Village of Seers’ (2017, 81). The Village of Seers is a fluid location which is reachable, navigable, but non-chartable. While the geographical reference points of the Village of Seers are half-real and half-imagined, the Village is the most powerful form of postcolonial indigenous eco-conscious imagination—Naga ecotopia wherein ‘Food did not seem to be a problem’ (Kire 2017, 101). Citizenship here can be gained through self-transformation of a human seeker to a seer (who can access the realm of the supernatural). The seer needs to lead an ascetic life, value eco-ethical knowledge system and offer wellness to the seekers of the Village. The colossus wood apple tree is the Village’s only landmark which marks the liminal zone between physical and metaphysical realms. Although the lower branches offer ripe wood apples, they must not be plucked. The metacartography has ‘clear path’ (Kire 2017, 84) that leads the seekers from the wood apple tree through the woods to the village settlement. The dark marshy woods, sans insects or birds, has uncanny sounds of felling of enormous trees or growling of giant beasts. All through the path, the seekers need to realise and overcome the elements of both external and internal fears. The experienced Visenuo, can sense that ‘their progress slowed’ (Kire 2017, 84) due to Atuonuo’s ‘deep-seated fear’ (Kire 2017, 84). Here, the fellow seekers can never be fellow travellers. Every mission requires a separate journey through the one clear-and-dark path. The Village like any other precolonial Naga village has carved wooden gate embellished with warrior figures and Naga indigenous wealth and fertility symbols— ‘female breasts, hornbills, the heads of enemies and Mithun heads; shields and male ornaments like colourful headdress’ (Kire 2017, 87). Here, Seers come down to their chosen ‘fearful and apprehensive’ (Kire 2017, 89) seekers, protect them from deceivers in spirit forms, and offer them hospitality in their typical indigenous huts. The mother-daughter goes through the Seer Pfenu’s all-penetrating look and then engages into a psychotherapy wherein Pfenu contextualizes the natural and supernatural relevance and consequences of encountering a weretiger. Furthermore, Pfenu offers to take them to the Old Seer in the very next morning. The next day, the Old Seer explains the indigenous protocols of killing a weretiger and the protocols must be valued. The Village also shows how an ordinary human can transform into a seer and can thereby access the Naga spiritual world. For example. Pfenu was a seeker once, but she chose to stay back in the Village. She unfettered herself from her previous life of the vicious circle of perpetual worrying and searching for antidotes. Deterritorialized from her ordinary village, Pfenu has found a home in the Village here, has been able to realise that renunciation of worldly ties leads to ultimate happiness (Kire 2017, 100) which is essentially unadulterated by fears.

The eco-ethical deep bond between the Naga peoples and their indigenous forestland is described in one of the most significant metacartographies in Naga Anglophone literature—the Border Village (Kire 2014). It is situated on an apparently uninhabitable hilly terrain which the villagers call their home. The Border Village represents an extraordinarily ordinary Naga village meticulously built on the Naga Hills. Subale, the wife of the Village Chief, explicates to Vilie the deep connection between the older generations and the place. People of their generation cannot abandon the Border Village because their ‘umbilical cords are buried here, and we would always be restless if we tried to settle elsewhere’ (Kire 2014, 87-88). The houses here are like real Naga houses on the real Naga Hills. They are constructed on the slopes of the hill and a path is built above the houses. Every house is connected by steps cut out of the rocky surface on the hills. The only source of water supply is the river that flows down the valley. The villagers have carved footholds into the rock (Kire 2014, 88). To Vilie’s surprise the ‘desolate’ (Kire 2014, 88) Border Village ecology has been meaningfully used by its dwellers to practise sustainable ways of living. The determined dwellers cut woods from the neighbouring land-forest and roll them along the hillside for everyday uses. Despite farming hardships, the villagers preserve their food security by fishing from the local river, plucking bamboo shoots, growing spice garden at home, and by sustainably ‘manoeuvring’ (Kire 2014, 91) the rocky landscape to cultivate the ‘only piece of flat land we have for growing rice’ (Kire 2014, 91).

The ‘Unclean Forest’ (Kire 2014, 79), close to Rarhuria, is a mythical forest that tests Vilie’s resilience and wellness frameworks. Hunters are drawn by melodious forest songs sung by spirits into the Unclean Forest. The songs have the magical power to draw ‘you out of yourself’ (Kire 2014, 76-77). Vilie enters the forest late in the evening and builds a temporary shelter under a huge tree by gathering branches and leaves. In the morning, Vilie goes to the nearby stream to wash his face and looks at a momentary reflection of a spirit in the form of a young girl. That night, Vilie is attacked by angry spirits. He feels a heavy weight on his chest. His throat is choked. But he has the integrity to reason with the overpowering spirit: ‘If I have done anything wrong, tell me so I can atone, for I have done nothing wrong deliberately’ (Kire 2014, 83). When grief and fear overwhelm him, Vilie suddenly remembers the seer’s words: Vilie must assert his own spirit over the external spirit. The very remembrance of it offers Vilie superhuman power. He finds his voice back, expands his chest and announces, ‘Mine is the greater spirit! Depart from me’ (Kire 2014, 84). This act frees him and illuminates the unclean forest from inside. In his sole struggle with the spirits of the Unclean Forest, his most powerful weapon is his self-assurance: ‘He had not caused any injury to any of them’ (Kire 2014, 84). The Unclean Forest with its angry spirits illudes the hunters and tries their inner strength and integrity. Furthermore, the Forest examines the eco-ethical commitments of Naga hunters. Vilie’s gratitude to the forest flora and fauna plays a great role in winning the unequal battle between himself and the menacing spirits. Vilie applies the ‘rules of hospitality’ (Kire 2014, 80) learnt from the ‘old people’ (Kire 2014, 80) and his mother. He acknowledges the forest for every firewood or herb he gathers for staying alive in the Forest. Therefore, he is confident of his existence here:

The forest was his as much as it was theirs. He has not caused any injury to any of them. Strengthened by these thoughts, he sat by the fire ... (Kire 2014, 84).

Apart from esoteric understanding of forest spirits and preserving his integrity and ecoethics, Vilie needs food and medicine to survive in the Unclean Forest. He plucks tender leaves of

the indigenous tree fern *senyiega* to make himself a nutritious broth and gathers wild ginseng for making a paste to apply on his ankles and wrists. Moreover, Vilie soaks the roots of the ginseng in hot water and drinks the mixture because he has ‘faith in the restorative properties of the plant’ (Kire 2014, 81). The healing and nutritional value of forest resources is an integral part of Naga wellness system. Vilie is able to survive in the Unclean Forest because he has been well initiated in the Tenyimia knowledge system by his mother and the older people. Vilie is an outsider to the Unclean Forest and has no intention of inhabiting the forest. He is forced to dwell in the Forest for two days. Vilie is prepared to fight the deceptively beautiful spirits present in the Forest with honesty and integrity. He also applies his indigenous staying alive techniques to not only save his life but also to strengthen his body and mind.

‘Village of the Kirhupfumia’ (Kire 2014, 124) with twelve houses in it is a rich repertoire of Naga indigenous woman knowledge system. It can be reached after taking every left turn at every crossroad, and after crossing all the fields. The Village looks like any other village with houses and grazing cows. It is inhabited by Kirhupfumias, a minority group of women considered to have supernatural power of maiming, blinding, and killing people by pointing fingers at them. They are outcasts in their own villages and have come to dwell in the Village of Kirhupfumia. Forced to flee from their villages, they have no choice but to settle in this village.

‘... We never chose to be the way we are. It is the destiny life chose to give us.’ (Kire 2014, 132)

Consequently, the Village is an amalgamation of knowledge systems pertaining to multiple indigenous ancestral villages from where the Kirhupfumias have been outcasted. The Kirhupfumias have used their indigenous knowledge systems to build a self-sustained village republic. In fact, the people from their ancestral villages come to their village seeking knowledge on ethnobotanical medicine:

Now we live here [the Village of the Kirhupfumia] and we don’t need anyone anymore but they need us. When they need us to tell them what herbs would be good for curing tumours and other ailments, they come to us with offerings. (Kire 2014, 132)

The dwellers here can be found engaged in ‘weaving or herding cows or husking grain’ (Kire 2014, 127). They maintain a communal grain pounding house with mortars where women pound grain (Kire 2014, 145). Every house has a backyard kitchen garden. The Village maintains two water supply systems—the lower pool for washing clothes and the upper pool for cooking. Every Kirhupfumia has a house equipped with everyday Naga indigenous food security tools for farming: ‘rain-shields’ from plantain leaves, ‘long-handled spades and hoes,’ ‘scythe;’ preserved foods like ‘dried herbs’ and ‘fermented soya beans;’ and herbs hung out for drying (Kire 2014, 129). The Kirhupfumia Village shows the indigenous ecofeminist ways of hoping and homing even in the most difficult of times and in the most dystopic situations.

Presence of rivers is important to Naga biodiversity and its people. The mythical ‘Sleeping River’ in Kire (2014) assumes the power of Spirit: It pushes Vilie ‘down and under, down and under, and the water rushed at him as though it would strangle him’ (Kire 2014, 102). The

riverstands for the terrifying force of nature with the stone of wisdom at its heart. The heart-stone offers spiritual power and allows its owner to discover the inner spiritual self. It empowers the owner to ‘combat the dark forces that are always trying to control and suppress us’ (Kire 2014, 201). The heart-stone from the depth of the mythical river symbolizes Naga indigenous wisdom. It is this wisdom that allows the heart-stone owner to perceive its worth and to thereby live in harmony with nature. However, the heart-stone is of no use to its owner unless the owner is intellectually ready to acknowledge its spiritual value and importance in society. The territorial representations of the Sleeping River are vivid and mystical. Almost like the woods surrounding the Village of Seers, the land here bears the ‘deafening’ (Kire 2014, 99) absence of birds and insects. The Sleeping River is (perhaps) the only river ecology in Kire. Its mystical location beyond the Border Village, complex ecology and spiritual networks stimulate deeper indigenous understanding of river dynamics, and spatial significance in the context of Naga riverine ecosystems. Not only the river metacartography of the Sleeping River, but the land metacartographies of the Village of the Seers, the Border Village and the Village of the Kirhupfumia are potent signifiers of the precolonial Naga indigenous hoping mechanisms.

Conclusion

The present study makes an exploration of some of the loaded folk narratives as delineated in contemporary Naga Anglophone novels. It does so with an eco-ethical commitment to restore the Naga hoping mechanisms in an otherwise dystopic Naga wasteland. Colonial environmental, cultural and food violences; the most horrific war situation during the Second World War; denial of the nation-state status to the Naga peoples and historical erasures of precolonial Naga indigenous knowledge systems have adversely affected the indigenous epistemologies and subject positions. As a result, the Naga people, irrespective of their generational positionings, bleed from a sense of identity crisis and feel a perennial sense of displacement. Longkumer (2019, 1) notes that long before realising what it is to be displaced, she was always already displaced. And this sense of displacement has passed down from one generation to another generation. Longkumer’s great-grandparents were hegemonized to abandon their knowledge system. Their understanding of Naga ethics and morality was challenged by the nineteenth century American Baptist Mission. However, the indigenous pain of displacement has remained undocumented. Longkumer laments, ‘there are no written records of what impact this had on the psyche of my ancestors’ (2019, 1). A recent study by Mussi (2023), in the context of the First Nation young adults, suggests that the only meaningful way to connect the indigenous youth to their knowledge system with the purpose of spiritual healing is through fiction. Longkumer (2019, 5) too prescribes a similar remedy: ‘Nagaland holds many [folk] stories in her, each with the need for telling.’ Almost every folktale has a hoping mechanism waiting to be methodologized.

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