

Easterine Kire's A Naga Village Remembered: An Insight into Naga History and Culture

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Abstract

The concept of history plays a vital role in human thought. It catalyzes notions of human agency, change, the role of material circumstances in human affairs, and the assumed meaning of historical events. However, the idea of a single narrative of history has been challenged and therefore many trends of writing history emerged. The post-colonial writers have also questioned the single narrative truth rendered from the perspective of the West. They revisit and rewrite the past to reflect the perspective of people whose narratives were otherwise unheard or neglected. Similarly, the native writers from the North Eastern states of India have also challenged the homogeneous depiction of the region. The present paper attempts to study the novel *A Naga Village Remembered* written by prominent Naga writer Easterine Iralu Kire. It intends to trace out the myriad ways in which the cultural clashes have created space for a hybridized culture and revisit history of Nagaland from insiders' point of view.

Keywords: Nagaland, Culture, British Invasion, Naga Identity

Introduction

Easterine Iralu Kire is a renowned Naga author. She has a huge body of works deeply rooted in their culture. She is a recipient of several awards; her work *When the River Sleeps* won The Hindu Literary Prize for Best Fiction in 2015 including Silver Medal for Best Creative Writing from the Bertrand Russell Study Forum, Madras, India; Governor's Award for Excellence in Naga Literature in 2011; Catalan PEN International Free Voice Award in 2013, in recognition of the work she has significantly contributed to literature and society. Her novel *Son of the Thundercloud* (Speaking Tiger) has been awarded both the Tata Book of the Year (2017) and the Sahitya Bal Sahitya Puraskar for 2018. In 2019, her novel, *When the River Sleeps* was given The Gordon Graham Prize for Naga Literature. Kire's works are

essentially rooted in Naga identity. She revisits history and serve to disseminate information and knowledge about history and culture of Nagaland.

Background

Nagaland, the sixteenth State of the Indian Union is a land of enchanting beauty and charm with rich flora, fauna and festivities of various tribes and subtribes. The cultural diversity is so rich that the customs, traditions and languages differ from one tribe to another and sometimes even from one village to another. The origin and ancestry of Nagas has been an issue of veritable disceptation among historians and the Nagas also have their share of legends and folklores regarding their origin and evolution through the ages. Dr. V. K. Nuh says “the Nagas are Mongoloid by race...”(qtd. in Kire, *Walking* 3). However, oral traditions of Nagas place their ancestors further back to a possible existence of Mongolia. Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee opines that these Indo-Mongoloids are none else than the *Kiratas* mentioned in the old Sanskrit literature. The early references of *Kiratas* can be traced in the *Yajurveda*, *Atharvaveda* and in the *Mahabharata* as well(qtd. in Joshi 7). According to Naga Scholar, V. Nienu the history and precise location of the various Naga tribes is still obscure and references to the Nagas by the outsiders are limited as well as unable to defuse controversies (72). The Nagas themselves have different stories about their origin. There are two aspects, one is mythological that describes the supernatural origin of mankind from a stone or in case of Konyaks, a pumpkin or a giant bird (Jacobs 13). The other aspect is oral history which describes movement of people in Naga hills from all directions. The royal chronicles of Manipur indicate that the Nagas must have settled in their hills around first and second century. The *Ahom Buranji* evidences that by the time Ahoms came to Assam in the 13th Century, Nagas were already living in their present homeland (Kire, *Walking* 6). The most logical conclusion about Naga origin and ancestry is, “No single people are the ancestors of the Nagas, nor did the Naga amalgamation of customs and beliefs arrive en bloc. The present arrangement has most probably been created by the interaction of the Naga groups in their present location: interaction with other Nagas, with Non- Nagas, with their environment” (Jacobs14).

The treaty of Yandaboo in 1826, made the way for British invasion in Assam and gradually to hilly areas resulting in the first British expedition began in the Naga Hills in 1832. The Nagas fiercely resisted the British invasion and there were frequent clashes between the British and Naga villages until British implemented non-intervention policy in 1857. Reforms introduced by the British along with the tribal friendly policies and the works of Christian missionaries made these tribal people attached to the white men. The Nagas who were in defiance with the British became by and large loyal subjects of the British. The loyalty of the Nagas towards the British can be noted by the role of Nagas during the Battle of Kohima. It is one of the major events in history of Naga Hills. The Battle of Kohima was a part of Burma campaign which was fought during World War II between the British and Japanese forces from 4th April 1944 and ended on 22nd June 1944. British colonization,

advent of Christianity, western education affected the culture and sense of identity among the Nagas.

Analysis of the text

Kire's *A Naga Village Remembered* published in 2003 is an important novel of English literature from Nagaland because it is the first novel by a Naga writer in English. It was republished in 2018 with a title, *Sky is My Father: A Naga Village Remembered*. It is a historical novel about colonial expansion to a small Naga village Khonoma from 1832 to 1880 which fought and defied the invading troops of the colonial power of Britain. The British occupation of Angami hills, cutting down of forests, taxing Angami people and forcing them into labour justified the attacks by the natives. Kire in her prose work *Walking the Roadless Road* mentions about collection of taxes and revenues imposed by the British. It "...was alien to the Nagas and the tax of Rs 3 per house was a great burden for an agrarian society not used to dealing in cash" (220).

Moreover, the British made the people work as labors. The novel depicts the condition of the people of Khonoma who were not paid well for their work as labors or sometimes were not even paid because they resisted to the British and fought more than the other villages. They also supported the other villages against the attacks on the British. Agitated by the raids by the village of Khonoma, the British administration gives the charge to political agent Damanant to overcome the issue. Damanant was irritated at Khonoma's stubbornness to yield to British administration. They had strongly resisted the forcible collection undertaken by him, which angered him immensely. He decides to negotiate and if there is no solution, chooses to crush the village so that others will not have second thought about an uprising. On the other hand, the warriors of Khonoma decide not to negotiate "We are not going to be coolies anymore for the white men" (106), and were ready for full scale war. When Damanant attacks with his force they killed him and thirty -eight men and many were wounded, the survivors escaped and went back to Kohima. As soon as the news of the victory of Khonoma reaches other Angami villages, it stirs them to rise against British. "The Angami warriors, numbering at least 4000 men with 300 guns, and the rest carrying spears and *daos* descended on the garrison at Kohima" (108) which led to 12 days siege. The garrison survived a long siege and then prepared for another assault on Khonoma.

Hence, with the intention of crushing Khonoma once and for all, the final expedition was made by British on 22nd November 1879. "The final expedition was in November 1879 when Brigadier General Nation commandeered a thousand men, added to which were colonel Johnstone's 2000 men from Manipur" ... The number of men mustered to attack Khonoma was approximately 3369" (13). This final expedition came to be known as the Battle of Khonoma which led to four months siege. Provisions were gradually running out and the lots of women and children of Khonoma were sheltering in other villages. Thus, the elders of the village decide to consider the situation and finally, negotiations for a treaty began and on 27th

March 1880, a treaty was finalized between the elders of Khonoma village and the representatives of the British and the war ended after four months.

The British colonisation of the area affected Khonoma not only politically but also culturally. The missionary efforts of the American Baptist Mission at converting the war loving Naga tribes received the support of the British Government. The Christian missionaries thought of themselves as superior and arrived with the intention of conquering the 'other world' through Christian religion, which they felt could be accomplished by replacing the indigenous' traditional ways of life by renouncing one's culture and value. In the story Kire mentions the actual white man Dr. Sidney Rivenburg who ran a Mission school in Kohima and used to do medical check-up of the people. People used to call him the old sahib for he had grown old in the Naga hills where he came to serve his god. With his mission Rivenburg treated his patients and continued to tell them of Gospel of Christ. The story mentions about Nisier, the second Angami man to convert and was the first to convert in Khonoma. In the story Sato, the son of Levi who used to attend Mission School of Rivenburg also makes his mind for baptism and becomes the follower of *Isu*(Jesus Christ). The novel portrays how a small Khonoma village which once stood together against British get divided after the introduction of Christianity. "The Christians built their houses on the new location across the river... Already many of them had been subjected to verbal abused by some of their village folk" (144). Of course, the positive impact of education, modernity, health services introduced by the missionaries and removal of head-hunting practice could not be denied but through conversion British were successful in dividing the close-knit community.

However, Kire also observes that Christianity has been nativized in Nagaland. In *A Naga Village Remembered* Sato compares Christianity and his old religion and finds similarities between the two religions. "He thought of *Isu* on the cross as a chicken sacrifice much greater than all the chicken sacrifices the Angamis had made. *Isu* was the chicken being sacrificed for man to be free from disease and the ailments ...spirits could bring upon him...(139). Sato's comparison of the two religions is an instance of hybridity. Thus, the nativized form of Christianity where the Naga worshippers found elements in their own culture that have affinity with Christian teaching resulted to hybrid Christianity which incapacitate the superiority of Christianity. Kire in her other works *A Terrible Matriarchy*, *Mari*, *Bitter wormwood* show various instances where Naga people despite being converted to Christianity, still followed their old beliefs and taboos. "'A *fire genna*", Anyie replied. 'It is taboo to light a fire in the fields today...' Though we were Christian, we abided by these cultural practices..." (*Mari* 5). Kire has highlighted the nativized form of Christianity. The monolithic power of the colonizer is dismantled because both colonizer and colonized subjects are implicated in the ambivalence of colonial discourse.

The Angami people used to live a communal life where individual interest of member is not important but their works were directed by the interest of the community in general. The elders of the community used to closely observe the growth and development of the child

in relation to the age group he is identified with. In the novel, the youngsters are taught community life not only by their parents but by the elders of the community as well. For instance, Kire mentions about *Kichuki* (house where young men learned various practical skills, art, and the oral history of the people), Levi and his age mates were constantly taught about how to behave and live in a community. The elder's counsel suggestively cites:

If you are at a community feast and take more than two pieces of meat, shame on you...This is the key to right living – avoiding excess in anything – be content with your share of land and fields. People who move boundary stones bring death upon themselves.... Never be arrogant, respect yourself sufficiently so that you fulfil the responsibilities of manhood. But it is one thing to be responsible and quite another to be arrogant. A real man does not need to roar to show that he is a man.... Obscenity of speech does not prove anything; keep that in mind. (*A Naga Village* 25)

Kire also demonstrates many rite-rituals, feasts and beliefs and family and social structure of Angami tribe of pre-Christian era. Storytelling forms an important tool of oral literature. It links people, places, generations and memories. In *A Naga Village Remembered* Kire mentions about the storytelling performances throughout the novel. She mentions about the dormitories and *theshou* - a community house where youths are engaged through storytelling. Elders are supposed to share stories and transmit cultural knowledge to youngsters. "It was good to be called a *theshou no*, a child of the *theshou* it meant the such a person was well versed in the stories and customs of the village" (25). The purpose of telling is "to integrates, to educate and to entertain all the peoples. The children and the adults the human, animal, and mythic people all depend on the telling of the myths and tales, for within the stories are what is essential and meaningful, what is real" (Frey 176). Taboos play an important role in Naga tribes. The parents and elders always teach their children the importance of abiding by the rituals. "*If you break the taboos, you break yourself...*" [emphasis in original] (*A Naga Village*31). *Genna* days is one of the important days which gets mentioned by both Kire and Ao. *Genna* days are the days when doing work is considered a taboo. "So the *genna* was a death to those who defied it but life to those who abided by it" (*A Naga Village*72). The belief in the spirits and dream is another predominant feature of Naga society that is mentioned by both the authors. They mention about spirits and stories that villages were full of. It was believed that dream is a way through which spirits direct or signal. There were dark places of the forest, dark water sources etc. which were prohibited and around these places nestled stories. Elders used to tell "*If you honour the spirits, they will bless you, if you defy them, you will learn how mortal man is*" [emphasis in original] (*A Naga Village*70).

Conclusion

Kire's *A Naga Village Remembered* brings into advent of imperialism in Naga hills and the influence of the British on the Angami tribe of Nagaland. It foregrounds the changes in the culture and society with British colonialism, advent of Christianity, literacy and western

education. The author also reflects the norms, traditions, rites and rituals of Angami life and provides the reader an insight into their culture.

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