



# Beyond Folklore: Naga Traditions, Practices, and Social Dynamics in Easterine Kire's *Spirit Nights*

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## Open Access

Manuscript ID: BIJ-2025-ES-025

Subject: English

Received : 25.08.2025

Accepted : 06.10.2025

Published : 31.12.2025

DOI:10.64938/bij.v10si4.25.Dec025

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## Abstract

Customs and traditions are the shared practices, beliefs, and behaviors passed down through generations within a culture. Culture is an evolving system that shapes how people think, act, and interact with the world around them. It is transmitted across generations, influencing everything from language to religion. Culture encompasses the shared behaviors, beliefs, and values that characterize a particular group or society. Easterine Kire's *Spirit Nights* offers a profound exploration of Naga cultural life, folklore, spirituality and communal practices within the Chang Naga tribe. Rooted in an intricate web of oral customs, spiritual beliefs, and communal rituals, the novel becomes a powerful vessel for preserving and expressing Indigenous ways of life. Indigenous humanities is an interdisciplinary field that centers the worldviews, knowledge systems, cultural expressions, and lived experiences of Indigenous people. It combines the critical approaches of humanities such as literature, history and art with Indigenous perspectives and values. The novel chronicles the aftermath of a violated taboo that plunges the people of Shumang Laangyu Sang, into darkness, both literal and symbolic. Through the experiences of Tola, a revered elder and dream receiver, and her grandson Namu, the narrative foregrounds the interrelation of traditions, practices, and social dynamics that sustain communal identity. This paper analyses how Indigenous Naga cosmology, knowledge and rituals play a vital role in sustaining the balance of the community.

**Keywords:** Naga people, Seers, taboos, myth, transformation

Traditions, practices, and dynamics are the fundamental aspects of human societies. Together, they play a vital role in shaping how communities maintain cultural community, transmit knowledge, and negotiate social relationships. Traditions refer to inherited customs, rituals, and beliefs that provide a sense of identity and continuity across generations. They often include ceremonies, festivals, oral storytelling, and moral codes that preserve communal values and traditions. Practices are the enacted behaviors and activities through which these traditions are maintained and expressed. These can range from daily routines to spiritual observances. Dynamics involve the social and psychological

interactions within a community, encompassing relationships between individuals and groups. Within the framework of Indigenous Humanities, this paper explains how the novel highlights Naga culture, including the interplay between the land, spirit, story, and community. It values the indigenous way of life rather than treating it as a mere subject of study.

## Women's Knowledge and Authority

In the Naga society, women occupy a complex and paradoxical position. Though deeply respected within familial and cultural spheres, they are marginalized in legal and customary domains. The gendered



dynamics of Naga communities are embedded in oral traditions, clan systems, and customary laws, which both empower and restrict women. Kire utters, "Decision-making does not include women; it takes place in the house of the village chief. The customary law board, semang pachong, judges all cases and no women can become members of the board"(129). The law-framing and decision-making aspects of the society, being dominated by the tribesmen, lacked the contribution of women who are way better than the men in those spheres.

Women have traditionally been the bearers of oral tradition and spiritual knowledge in Naga communities. They pass down stories, rituals, lullabies, and folk songs that encode community memory and cosmology. Their role as nurturers extends beyond the domestic, into the cultural and spiritual realms. In the agrarian Naga societies, women are the backbone of the economy. They participate actively in cultivation, the collection of their farm produce, weaving, and livestock rearing. Their labor is indispensable, yet often undervalued. In the novel *Spirit Nights*, the female protagonist, Tola, gradually transforms into a seer. Initially, she does not believe in her visions and dreams. Grounded in the patriarchal belief that only men are eligible to be a seer, she refuses to be one and neglects her calling. Mvuphri positively snorted, "No women seers?" "Beyond this mountain there are great female seers who are much more powerful than male seers. My own mother was seer before me. Yes, didn't anyone tell you? For a long time, ignorant men have said, 'Old women and their tales!' and laughed them and laughed the truth of those tales away. Disbelief kills miracles"(Kire 84).

Tola's father is the last seer of their community. After his death, Tola begins to receive dreams and visions. But she does not consider it seriously, as it is customary for men to hold such titles. "Yes! I mean Tola! You should have gone to her. You are seer only of the calendar and crops and festivals. But she is the seer of men's destinies!" (84). Yet, the seer of Mvuphri knows of her innate abilities. After repeated visions, Tola finally ceases doubting her dreams. She also helps Namu in slaying the tiger and restoring the light over darkness.

### **Taboos and their Purpose**

A Taboo is a ban on something that is excessively repulsive, offensive, or sacred. Such prohibitions are present in all societies. A taboo acknowledged by a particular group or tribe helps in the cohesion of the group and helps it to stand out and maintain its identity. According to Joseph Campbell, taboos are "used in religion and mythology to test a person's ability to withhold from violating the prohibition given to them"(qtd. in Hydan 456). The most famous taboo of eating the forbidden fruit can be found in the Bible. In the third chapter of Genesis, Adam and Eve are placed in the Garden of Eden by God and are told not to eat from the tree of life. Eventually, they violate the law and are forced to face the consequences.

Numerous taboos are observed in various situations by the Naga people. They practice these taboos even today in order to uphold their clans' uniqueness. Some taboos observed by the tribe can be seen as a tool to instill discipline among the fellowmen and follow a healthy way of life. They do not marry within the same clan and restrain from claiming other's land as their own. The taboos are:

- Marriage within the same clan is strictly prohibited. This taboo maintains that members of the same clan are brothers and sisters and they share the same blood therefore marriage is not admissible between them. They may marry outside the clan.
- It is taboo to claim land belonging to others. This taboo is accompanied by a curse on violators. If a person trespasses on another person's land boundaries, it is believed he would meet some ill fate that will cost him his life. The curse for this violation would affect his children and grandchildren too. This is a very serious taboo attended by the greatest of curses and is applicable even in the modern day.
- There is a very strong taboo on wasting food. The consequences of wasting food is sickness and even famine could follow. Members of the tribe are taught to use food carefully by avoiding wastage. (Kire 114)

The taboos followed by the people show that these taboos apart from distinguishing various groups, also serve other purposes. They are drafted to establish a good society. The rules furnished are strictly meant for the well-being and maintenance of a well-built group or clan.



The novel *Spirit Nights*, is inspired from the “Chang Naga” tale. It is a Naga oral tale of a tiger swallowing the sun after a taboo is broken. This causes a cosmic darkness which makes a few characters to venture in order to restore the lost harmony between human, spirits and nature. Namu, in order to save his people, jumped into the mouth of the tiger. Namu is “the chosen person who can kill the tiger which has eaten the sun”(Sarma and Sheeba 210). He is the one who has to do the task of bringing light to his village, which is now engulfed in darkness:

*Namu ran like a madman down the path, ululating loud war cries that echoed back to the village. He kept running until the tiger loomed in front of him, the fire from its eyes searing Namu's skin, causing him to throw away the wormwood torch. Namu held up his great-grandfather's spear and kept charging on. At the last moment, the tiger opened its mouth so wide that Namu ran headlong into it.(Kire 113)*

With the help of his grandmother, Namu realizes that it is a duty bestowed upon him to redeem his people. Kire compares the violated taboo to the wrongdoing of people. She metaphorically compares it to the violated taboo in her world of fiction. In the novel, a catastrophe occurs because of a broken taboo, which shows that human action causes cosmic disruption. She brings in the cosmic change to state firmly that the whole world is linked. The Naga people do not consider themselves a separate entity, but rather entwine their existence with that of animals and spirits.

*. . . darkness lasted for six days and six nights until a man came out of his house and saw a six-tailed tiger on the roof of his neighbour's house obstructing the light. The man quickly retrieved his bow and arrow and shot the tiger dead, and the villagers came out to cut off the six tails of the tiger, after which the light immediately returned. The religious ceremony celebrates the triumph of good over evil.(Kire 93-94)*

The Chang Naga clan celebrates on the myth of the tiger killing. Namu in the novel *Spirit Nights*, kills the tiger with the help of his grandmother, Tola. She shows up at the right moment when Namu is deceived by the tiger and is diverted from his goal. But, finally he slays the tiger with his spear and banishes the darkness. Then they chop the six tails of the tiger. “Each tail stands for different forms of

pride. Rebellion. Arrogance. Greed. Hatred of all that is good. Self-seeking. Envy” (Kire 129). Through her literary work, Kire shows that one must remove the toxins from the mind to lead a good life. The tiger here represents the evil in one's mind.

Kire reclaims and reimagines the voices of women who are often silenced in historical narratives. Her work is grounded in Indigenous humanities, which prioritizes Indigenous knowledge systems and oral traditions. She challenges the patriarchal representations of Naga society. The character, Tola, is transformed from a feared spirit to a seer of men's destinies. By guiding the chosen one, interceding with the spirit world, and finally gaining recognition from the same community that once shunned her, Tola redefines what it is to be a Naga woman.

Women emerge not only as nurturers and spiritual guides but also as powerful agents of transformation. Their roles are, however, challenged by the same community that depends on the women's labor, wisdom, and resilience. Ultimately, *Spirit Nights* reveals that the purpose of women's knowledge and authority is not only to preserve cultural memory but also to regenerate it. Through their wisdom and spiritual insight, women become the carriers of traditions and practices of a community. Taboo functions as a tool of control in the Naga community. It preserves the social order and cultural identity. Unlike the taboos of other communities, which may seem useless at some point, the taboos of the Naga community seem to be more like a set of rules for the well-being of the clan.

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