

The Interconnection of Nature and Indigenous Spirituality in Kire's *When the River Sleeps*

OPEN ACCESS

Volume: 13

Special Issue: 2

Month: February

Year: 2026

P-ISSN: 2321-788X

E-ISSN: 2582-0397

Citation:

Vijayalakshmi, R., and Marie Josephine Aruna. "The Interconnection of Nature and Indigenous Spirituality in Kire's *When the River Sleeps*." *Shanlax International Journal of Arts, Science and Humanities*, vol. 13, no. S2, 2026, pp. 172–76.

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.34293/sijash.v13iS2-Feb.10207>

R. Vijayalakshmi

Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of English

Kanchi Mamunivar Government Institute for Post Graduate Studies and Research Puducherry, India

Marie Josephine Aruna

Assistant Professor and Research Supervisor, Department of English

Kanchi Mamunivar Government Institute for Post Graduate Studies and Research Puducherry, India

Abstract

*The paper strives to explore Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps*, which depicts a richly layered indigenous worldview in which nature and spirituality are inseparably interconnected. This paper seeks to examine spiritual ecology in the Naga cosmology, where rivers, forests, rituals and oral traditions function as a living source of knowledge and ethical principles. Kire portrays nature as a sentient entity and a spiritually charged presence that shapes human understanding. The text further captures the relationship between the human and natural world through the protagonist Villie's journey towards ecological wisdom and spiritual belief. Through the depiction of medicinal herbs and their healing practices, the text highlights the significance of indigenous herbal practices as integral to both physical healing and sustaining the traditional ecological knowledge system. Thus, the study significantly contributes to the preservation of livelihood and the multigenerational indigenous knowledge of the Naga community.*

Keywords: Angami Nagas, Herbal Medicine, Indigenous Knowledge, Ecology, Nature.

Introduction

Easterine Kire is a prominent poet and novelist from the Angami tribe of Nagaland. It is a vibrant hill located at the far end of the north-eastern region of India. This place is an amalgamation of various indigenous cultures, culinary practices and languages. Kire's fiction illuminates the spiritual and ecological dimensions of Naga life. Her text *When the River Sleeps*, depicts nature as a sacred and sentient presence. The story is portrayed within a landscape and the unseen presence of spirits, animals, and elemental forces that reflect the moral and emotional depth of the people.

In *When the River Sleeps*, Kire illustrates the significance of indigenous knowledge in Angami life through the central character Villie. The text deeply demonstrates the spirituality and ecological wisdom, depicting indigenous knowledge as a lived experience. The term Indigeneity is defined as the ethnic population of any region, which is called as primitive, savage, lacking in development, and the

people are intertwined with the environment, while understanding that the contemporary recognition of indigeneity has shared certain characteristics, including historical continuity with pre-colonial or post-settler societies. These indigenous peoples maintain certain distinct socio-economic, political and linguistic aspects of their own and have a diverse history, culture and indigenous fortitude. The traditional knowledge of the indigenous people is considered inferior and naïve, even though they are considered the earliest settlers who have occupied the land over the years. The traditional knowledge of the indigenous communities about agriculture, medicinal, and culinary traditions, etc. These are the local knowledge of the Aboriginal communities, which has been passed on through one generation over another through the form of myths, stories and archetypes. Panchali Bhattacharya, in his article, elucidates the importance of indigenous knowledge and mentions that “Indigenous people made significant contributions to global knowledge, for instance, in medicine and veterinary medicine with their intimate understanding of their environment. Indigenous knowledge is developed and adopted continuously to gradually changing environments, passed down from generation to generation, and closely interwoven with people’s cultural values” (Bhattacharya, 751). It highlights that the indigenous traditional knowledge is a dynamic, transmitted from one generation to another, and it is culturally embedding relationship with the environment.

Literature plays a vital role in exploring the relationship between the human and the environment. Through the indigenous perspectives, literature depicts a profound representation of indigenous worldviews in which spirituality and ancestral knowledge are inseparable. The text foregrounds that nature as a sentient entity is imbued with myths, oral histories, and a spiritual relationship with the natural world. The experience of a spiritual entity through the central character, Vilie’s journey, articulates the indigenous epistemology, ancestral guiding principles and ritual practices. Thus, the literary works from the part of the north-eastern Indian subcontinent, evidence of cultural inheritance of an indigenous knowledge that has been considered as credulous and primitive. The collective archetype of these communities is immensely rich in tradition; the native writers from this region showcase their native knowledge base through the text.

Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative and literary analytical study of Easterine Kire’s *When the River Sleeps*, drawing from the theoretical perspectives of spiritual ecology and indigenous epistemology. While applying eco-spirituality as a lens, it utilises several key principles relevant to literary analysis from the theoretical framework of spiritual ecology emphasizes the sacred beliefs and underlying spiritual and moral consciousness that shape the human and nature. Indigenous epistemology provides an analytical framework of traditional knowledge of the community, specifically the native wisdom of Nagaland.

The research work undertaken in this paper is based on an interpretative approach. The approach of the author towards her own indigenous tribal community, the Nagaland, as well as her treatment of the traditional wisdom of that community. Particular attention is paid to local knowledge and the indigenous identity.

Literature Review

Scholarly interaction with Easterine Kire’s *When the River Sleeps* have increasing focusing on the ecological consciousness that is intertwined with ethical and ecological dimensions of nature. Several ecological reading foregrounds indigenous ecological wisdom and spiritual entity. Been and Giftlin (2025) have focused on Kire’s portrayal of the forest and spiritual landscapes, herbal knowledge and the human interaction with the natural world. Ecocritical studies scholars have also depicted indigenous ethics in the narratives of Manisha and Rathee, both of whom have interpreted

the river, forest, and spirit, challenged anthropocentric attitudes, and foregrounded restraint and respect for nature.

Moreover, other scholarly article focuses on the role of myth, folklore, and interpreting supernatural elements; these readings underscore the spiritual belief and communal values. It has treated nature and spirituality as symbolic rather than as an integrated knowledge system. This study builds on the critical shift by foregrounding the interdependence of nature and spirituality as the founding principles of indigenous knowledge.

Angami Spiritual Ecology: Rituals, Dreams, and Sacred Forests

The novel opens up with the central character Vilie, a forty-eight-year-old solitary hunter, whose journey through the forest becomes a pilgrimage of self-discovery, as lead to the pursuit of a dream. Vilie has lived in the forest for twenty-five years. He often encounters spirits in his dreams, it symbolize the struggle of living within a sacred forest. However, driven by the dream, he calls “The forest is my wife” (Kire, 9), which reflects emotional intimacy with nature by equating the forest with his wife. Kire draws upon the sacred bond between the human and the natural world. In Angami cosmology, the forest is a sacred entity and inhabited by the ancestors’ knowledge. “He began to think that leaving the forest would be the same as abandoning his wife” (Kire, 9). This demonstrates the act of leaving the forest, symbolically equivalent to abandoning one’s own wife, because both represent the sacred relationship. While walking away from the forest is a moral and spiritual betrayal. In return, the forest nurtures the protagonist, Vilie, by providing shelter, food, a sense of belonging, shaping his identity, values and knowledge. This depicts that spirituality and ecology are inseparable in the text.

The spiritual ecology is a holistic approach that explores the relationship between spirituality, religion and environment. It is not a physical or material in nature but has profound spiritual and ethical dimensions. Spiritual ecology develops in individuals to a deep sense of respect for the natural world; it intricates the harmonious relationship between humanity and the environment. The prominent philosopher and spiritual leader Jiddu Krishnamurthi, in his book *On Nature and the Environment*, offers a fundamental connection between the human and natural world, promoting the idea that humans are not separate from the natural world but an integral part of it. Within the framework of Spiritual ecology, Self- realization acts as the catalyst for environmental consciousness. When individuals align with their inner selves, extended empathy towards the environment and have a deep commitment to ecological stewardship.

The Spiritual ecology articulates when Vilie encounter the tiger and is addressed by the name, “Kuovi! Menuolhoulie! Wetsho! Is this the way to treat your clansman? I am Vilie, son of Kedo, your clansman. I am not here to do you harm. Why are you treating me as a stranger? I come in peace. You owe me your hospitality. I am your guest!” (Kire, 26), while invoking the tiger, it shows the profound connection and understanding with humans. This reinforces spiritual consciousness; animals are regarded as sentient beings capable of responding to ethical conduct rather than to brutal force. The portrayal of the forest, spirits, and natural forces guides participants’ conduct. Vilie’s recurring dreams of the sleeping river reflect the spiritual visions of Angami life. Dreams are a form of communication between the human and spiritual worlds. The river, which reflects the novel, is imbued with sacred significance, as the river “Sleeps” implies an awareness and power that transcends human understanding.

In addition, the Kire presents the weretiger, a legendary creature, the mythic presence of the novel and being rooted in Angami folklore: Among the Angamis, the weretiger ritual was a closely guarded one. Men whose spirits were turning into weretigers would began to behave strangely. They would stop and stare for long periods at an object not visible to anyone else. Some men pounced

on cattle and scratched them, all the while making grunting and mewling sounds. The weretiger, locally known as Tekhumiavi, is not simply a mythical creature. The tiger is not demonized, yet it is respected as powerful and sacred. The person's spirit is transforming into a tiger; this belief reflects the profound spiritual connection between the human and the natural world. This transformation is not always physical but spiritual, symbolizing a continuum between human and animal life. The strange behaviour of the men and staring at something invisible to others, suggesting that the individual is becoming attuned to another dimension of reality, one in which spirit, animals, and humans coexist within the same sacred landscape. This represents the indigenous cosmology as deeply rooted in spiritual ecology, where humans, animals, and the environment are inseparably connected.

Angami Herbal Traditions: Ethnobotanical Categories and Practices

The traditional knowledge of the north-east considers the supernatural as a manifest part of the natural world. Through Vilie's journey across the forest, Kire embeds herbalism and indigenous ecological wisdom. The forest is a conscious healer, an ethical instructor, revealing the profound connection between human life and the natural world. Kire's portrayal of herbal medicine reflects a living exchange between people and their environment; these observations were acquired from the ancestral knowledge. When Vilie suffers a nettle sting, it is the tiny hollow hairs on the plant's leaves and stems that cause immediate itching and burning, and his companion Idele uses a remedy on him, an ancient naga's forest remedies from the "Rock bee honey It's a cure-all. Let's get some on your wound". She smeared honey generously over the swelling skin and covered it with a leaf, which reflects the spiritual beliefs that the land itself provides care and protection, reinforcing that indigenous knowledge and survival are sustained through harmony with nature. When Vilie himself gets wounded, he uses a paste of Ciena for the smaller injuries. In the same way, when Ate is harmed by her sister Zote, her scalp is bleeding, and Vilie finds a rock bee honey to put on her wound. Through the vilie's use of herbal remedies, it echoes the practical and symbolic role of nature in nurturing resilience and communal wellbeing. On the other hand, Vilie finds a "Vilhuü nha, he made a paste out of the leaves and stuck it on his injury and let the brown juice seep into his open skin. The bleeding stopped immediately" (Kire, 49). It shows that faith and practical knowledge work together.

Moreover, these incidents depict the integration of indigenous herbal knowledge. The narratives underscore the forest, which heals, teaches and sustains. The use of herbal knowledge is a holistic healing practice of the Angami community. Based on the traditional knowledge from the ancestors, their traditional remedies, "he recalled the names of herbs that he should not be without, Ciena or bitter wormwood and was good for warding off evil spirit involve medicinal herbs like Ciena and Tierhutiepfü, a soft leafed plant with a rather unpleasant smell" (Kire, 32), while Ciena was good for warding off evil spirits, Tierhutiepfü was a blood purifier, Similarly " Native tobacco was a good cure for wounds. Tobacco paste on open wounds could stop blood flow and often used by villagers on wounds" (Kire, 192), highlighting that these traditional herbs were supposed to be good for several ailments. Kire, the portrayal of traditional knowledge of the Angami tribes, particularly herbal medicine, is deeply rooted in their community. The textual depiction of the herbal medicine as a living source of knowledge that ensures survival and harmony with nature. Through the protagonist Vilie, Kire illustrates the sacred forest, medicinal plants, antiseptics and natural remedies, showing that the traditional knowledge is inseparable from nature.

Conclusion

Easterine Kire's, *When the River Sleeps* articulates the spiritual ecology by foregrounding the intricate interconnection between nature and indigenous spirituality, and through the text demonstrates a written identity of her own indigenous community, the Tenyimias. The text also showcases the necessity of herbal medicine as a vital repository of indigenous epistemology, embodying centuries of ecological knowledge transmitted through oral tradition. These medicinal plants are the sacred agents between the human and spiritual realms. The traditional knowledge is a cornerstone of indigenous identity, preserving cultural wisdom while emphasizing a deeply spiritual and ecological relationship with the land. Ultimately, Kire's narratives affirm that nature is both the teacher and healer; it reclaims the indigenous knowledge as a sustainable, ethical and reinforces the idea that the abandonment of nature results in the erosion of human values and ethical consciousness.

Work Cited

1. Aurélie Choné. Ecospirituality. Aurélie Choné; Isabelle Hajek; Philippe Hamman. Rethinking Nature. Challenging Disciplinary Boundaries, Routledge, pp.38-48, 2017. fhal- 02926650f
2. Beena, E. S., and P. J. Giftlin. "Ecological Wisdom and Indigenous Spirituality in Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps*." *International Journal of Early Childhood Special Education*, vol. 17, no. 7, 2025, pp. 106–118, <https://doi.org/10.48047/intjecse/v17i7.7>
3. Bhattacharya, Panchali. "Reviving the Indigenous Knowledge of the Tenyimia Nagas in Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps*." *Humanities & Social Sciences Reviews*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2020, pp. 751–758, <https://doi.org/10.18510/hssr.2020.8190>
4. Kire, Easterine. *When the River Sleeps*. Zubaan, 2014.
5. Manisha and Anu Rathee. "Ecology, Myth, and Indigenous Ethics in Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps: An Ecocritical Study*." *International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences*, vol. 10, no. 6, Nov.–Dec. 2025, pp. 498–503, <https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.106.70>
6. Roy, Ash Narain. "Revisiting Indigenous Epistemologies of North East India." *Heinrich Böll Stiftung*, 10 Sept. 2020, <https://in.boell.org/en/2020/09/10/revisiting-indigenous-epistemologies-north-east-india>
7. Spiritual Ecology. *Cultural Ecology*, 13 Nov. 2023, <https://blog.culturalecology.info/2023/11/13/spiritual-ecology/>