



[Reimagining Sacred Landscapes: Indigenous Ecospirituality in Easterine Kire's Fiction]

Dr. Wedeu Mero

Department of English, St. Joseph's College Autonomous Jakhama Nagaland

Email id wedeumero@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

In this paper, I will argue that the fiction of the first Naga novelist to publish in English, Easterine Kire, is a sustained act of literary resacralization, bringing back the hills of Nagaland to a life as a sentient, morally consequential space that was suppressed by colonial administration, evangelical conversion and post-independence militarization. In the six novels that range from 2003 to 2022, the study moves beyond the frameworks of deep ecology and western nature mysticism, and establishes Indigenous ecospirituality as a new analytical framework based on Tenyimia Naga beliefs and cosmology, which sees the creator-ancestress Ukepenuopfu and the spirits that inhabit it, the terhuomia, as kinship and obligation rather than as resources. A close reading of the text and a qualitative motif-based coding of the corpus led to the identification of four intertwined mechanisms in which Kire reinscribes the sacred landscape: the attribution of agency and moral judgement to landforms; the narration of taboo as an ecological grammar rather than a superstition; the use of threshold figures like the weretiger and the seer to make species boundaries permeable; and the plotting of colonial and postcolonial history as a story of desacralisation, whose cure is narrative. It is also revealed that sacred authority in Kire is particularly gendered, with mothers, widows, seeresses and the stigmatised women known as the kirhupfumia, all holding this position, thus creating a combined argument for ecospirituality and feminist critique. The paper suggests that Kire's landscapes are not nostalgic escapes, but rather models of an ethics of restraint that provide a Northeast Indian archive for postcolonial ecocriticism largely overlooked in the Anthropocene debate.

KEYWORDS: Easterine Kire; ecospirituality; Indigenous ecocriticism; Naga cosmology; sacred landscape; Northeast Indian literature; animism; postcolonial ecocriticism; Anthropocene.

Received
25/06/2026

Accepted
10/08/2026

Published
17/08/2026

Article Type
Research Paper



Introduction

In 2003, Easterine Kire released her first English-language novel about the Nagas, *A Naga Village Remembered*. She created a pathway for the transmission of a body of cosmological knowledge, which had been carried almost exclusively orally by Tenyidie people, to come to the archive of Indian writing in English on its own terms. That channel became a unique project in the following 20 years. In *When the River Sleeps*, *Son of the Thundercloud*, *Don't Run*, *My Love* and *Spirit Nights*, Kire writes hills, rivers, forests and stones not as a backdrop to which human dramas are played but as actors in the drama, watching, testing, withholding, punishing and blessing. The setting of these novels is not described. It is addressed.

In this paper, this mode of address is taken as the object. Through its fiction, Kire is engaged in a continuous act of resacralisation, restoring the Naga hills a role as a sentient and morally charged space, one that three concurrent historical forces – colonial government, evangelical mission, and post-independence military – have sought to negate. The reimagining is not an embellishment. It has within it a message regarding the way humanity should live in a world that is not his or her own.

According to Cheryll Glotfelty, the founder of ecocriticism, “ecocriticism is an earth-centered approach to literary study, one asking how texts encode and shape the relation between the human and the physical environment” (Glotfelty and Fromm). From the very beginning, that project had a religious subtext. What a culture believes about the status of the non-human nature shapes what it allows itself to do to it, as Lynn White's much-discussed argument in 1967 suggested, when he saw history as a part of the ecological crisis that began with a desacralised, dominion-based cosmology (White). In subsequent work, Bron Taylor mapped out the deep spiritualities of nature throughout the world as a unified pattern, and he changed the focus of his enquiry to those forms of religiosity which do not consider the human being as the sacred axis but instead see the earth itself as sacred (Taylor). Kire's fiction is located in this problem space but also comes in at an angle not addressed by most ecospiritual literature, that of an Indigenous cosmology of Northeast India that was never desacralised, but only over-written.

It is unfortunate that the literature in the region has not been the subject of continuous ecocriticism. As for Northeast writing, the initial political and historical frames of the Naga conflict and the anthologising project that brought Northeast writing into the national fold have been explored by Tamsila Ao in his works on the Naga conflict (*These Hills Called Home*) and anthologising Northeast writing (Misra) respectively, but there is a relative lack of work that explores the environmental imagination of the field. In those few instances in which Kire has been studied ecocritically, it has been almost solely as a single novel, and typically as nature as benevolent provider, or as a posthuman playground. What is yet to be done is a study of the corpus, where the ecospirituality is presented as a structural principle throughout her work, and not as local colour.

A. Research Questions

The study is organised around four questions. First, what particular cosmological grammar—gods, spirits, taboos and obligations—structures landscape within Kire's fiction? Second, how does the fiction transform that grammar into an ethic that the reader not in that tradition can read? Third, in what ways does the fiction depict the historical break or rupture between Naga communities and that grammar and what does it offer as a cure? Fourth, how is sacred authority distributed by gender in the corpus and what does it do to the ecological argument?

B. Significance

There are three entries planned. Conceptually the paper separates Indigenous ecospirituality from deep ecology and neo-paganism, suggesting that the difference is that while deep-ecology calls for identification with nature the paper's ecospirituality Kire calls for the discharge of specific, inherited, place-bound duties. As a methodical approach it brings together close reading and a clear motif coding of six novels to make it possible to check the claims about the pattern instead of assuming them. It introduces a Northeast Indian archive to Anthropocene discussions at a time when Anthropocene discussions are searching for a different imagination of extraction but are drawing it from a very limited body of Indigenous imagination.

II. Theoretical Framework: Toward Indigenous Ecospirituality



The term 'ecospirituality' is somewhat generic, and that can be a problem for this section. In the current vocabulary it refers to any attitude where ecological care becomes linked to religious or para-religious feelings: an attitude of union with the non-human world, an attitude of intrinsic value given to the non-human world, and an attitude of disaversion of the human center. The intuition and its theological aspiration is well captured by Thomas Berry's influential formulation: The universe is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects (Berry). However, the term that is circulating does have a Euro-American accent. It is generally used to refer to an individual reorientation that has been chosen by individuals that have undergone a first training in the nature-culture split and are now trying to bridge it.

Kire's stuff needs another type. The scholarly resource is the rethinking of animism that has been championed by Graham Harvey and Nurit Bird-David. While animism is a cognitive mistake in the old evolutionary account, for which it was the false belief that inanimate objects were inhabited by souls, for Harvey animism is an etiquette, a series of practices which involve treating a world of persons, not all of them human, with the respect proper to persons (Harvey). Bird-David restates it as a relational epistemology, a epistemology of participation, not distance (Bird-David). Such systems are not a poor relative of naturalism, as Philippe Descola's comparative ontology has put it, but one of several coherent ways of composing world (Descola); when Ross explored the concept of perspectivism, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro revealed how, in such systems, the question of who counts as a subject depends on the position from which one looks (Viveiros de Castro); and the account of the semiotic life of forests, by Eduardo Kohn, dissolved the assumption that representation is a monopoly of human beings.

Val Plumwood brings the critical edge. In recognizing the non human as background, her diagnosis of hyper-separation, the ideological separation of reason from nature, allows for understanding the animist etiquette as a political stance and not a survival (Plumwood). The single structural parallel to Naga sacred geography (Rose) is Deborah Bird Rose's work on the Australian concept of Aboriginal country as a living entity that can be sick, healthy, lonely or cared for, and Robin Wall Kimmerer's vocabulary for the ethics of taking that Kire's hunters practise is reciprocity and the honourable harvest (Kimmerer).

A. Sacred Space, Reconsidered

It is well to start with Mircea Eliade's distinction between sacred and profane space, the former defined as the space that interrupts the homogeneous extension and as the space that gives birth to a world (Eliade); it is not such a good ending for this material. Eliade's sacred is fragmented; it is at isolated moments and gives continuity to the intervening moments through contrast. The sacrality is not punctual, but graded in the Naga configuration Kire narrates. It gets thicker as you get further away from the hearth and never really vanishes even near the centre, the deep forest. More closely, although it also fails to appreciate the level of reciprocal action that the landscape is understood to exert, Yi-Fu Tuan's phenomenology of place, in which undifferentiated space is transformed into place by the accumulation of value and experience (Tuan), is closer.

Therefore, this paper follows four layers of the framework as outlined in Fig. 1. At the base there is a cosmological foundation, the creator-ancestress Ukepenuopfu from whom the descent is reckoned. On top of it are the relational field with by-humans and by-terhuomia, and the human community. This field is regulated by a grammaticization of taboo, ritualization of restriction, reciprocity, and the narrated consequence. The whole is conveyed in narrative practice, and the fiction is not a report on the system, but an operation of it, and that is where Kire's fiction comes in.

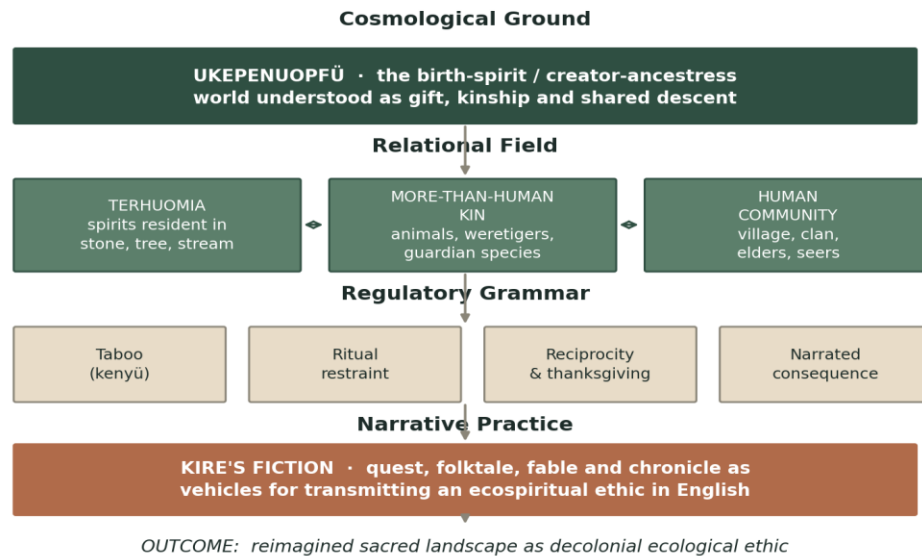


Fig. 1. A four-strata model of Indigenous ecospirituality as it operates in Kire's fiction, from cosmological ground to narrative practice.

B. The Postcolonial Frame

The analysis is situated in postcolonial ecocriticism as the landscapes analysed are also colonised landscapes. Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin's work on the structural interconnections of environmental and colonial injustice (Huggan and Tiffin), Rob Nixon's description of 'slow violence' that spreads across time until it becomes narratively invisible (Nixon) and Ursula Heise's critique on the limits of place-attachment in a planetary frame (Heise) all set the parameters. Although reading Kire's villages as a pastoral fantasy may be tempting, it must be read in the context of traditional ecological knowledge as a knowledge-practice-belief complex (Berkes) and the difference between the environmentalism of the affluent and the environmentalism of the poor (Guha and Martinez-Alier). These novels do not consider the nature of people. They are working in it and their spirituality is a working spirituality.

III. Review of Literature

The scholarship attainment on Kire has been rapidly but unevenly increasing. An early ecocritical interpretation placed *When the River Sleeps* in a context where nature is a source of empowerment and benignity, a place that protects its central character from human and spirit threats (Kishor). Pronami Bhattacharyya's more theoretically ambitious reading of this novel demonstrates that the novel itself works like a posthumanist exploration of the porousness of human/nonhuman/supernatural boundaries, while the movement she terms balance-in-transcendence (Bhattacharyya) represents Vilie's own growth. The reciprocal relationship between the Naga people and the environment is brought to the fore in a recent article which reads the novel as an advocacy of an ecological guardianship based on cultural heritage (Luireiphy). Comparative studies have placed Kire in parallel with Indigenous North American writing to document common techniques of narrative sovereignty (Patto).

From an ethnographic perspective, the monograph by J. H. Hutton (1921) provides the most comprehensive colonial description of Angami belief, including a description of Ukepenuopfu as a supreme being whose home is the sky and the terhuomia as lesser beings scattered around (Hutton). It is worth retaining as a methodological warning that Hutton's own



caution—that the danger in transcribing Angami ideas of the supernatural is the danger of giving form to what is deliberately unformed—is worth retaining. The ethnography by Michael Heneise on the Naga dream-life and personhood offers a modern corrective since it serves as a testament to the fact that spirit relations are not only alive and functioning in societies that are largely Christianized but also have continued to enjoy their longevity in the contemporary era (Heneise). Petekhienuo Sorhie's research on the carved village gate records the materialization of the sacred as a structure and the interpretation of the sacred as a promise of agricultural and reproductive fertility (Sohie).

A. The Gap

Three limitations recur. Literature is confined to the text and the majority of the literature focused on the novel and the rest of the corpus was used as a background. It is category bound, importing deep ecology, ecofeminism or posthumanism wholesale and then finding examples of them in the text; in most cases it seeks to reduce Naga cosmological categories to exemplars of Western theory rather than theory in its own right. It is historically thin: the ecocritical readings rarely make a connection between the sacred landscape and the political history of its dismantling, and the political readings of Bitter Wormwood and A Naga Village Remembered rarely register what it is that is being lost in the landscape of conflict – a cosmology, among other things. All three are discussed in this paper, which reads six novels together, which uses the words Ukepenuopfu, terhuomia and kenyu as analytic terms and which makes desacralisation an explicit object of study.

IV. Methodology

This study is interpretive, text-based and qualitative. It offers mostly close reading and a clear and explicit motif coding process that allows for checking the claims of the corpus.

A. Corpus

The six novels were chosen to represent both Kire's career and her two seminal styles: historical chronicle and mythic fable. The corpus and the aspect of the sacred landscape each text is read in is given in Table I. These texts are positioned in Kire's overall oeuvre, which contains poetry, children's books, and the ethnographic survey Walking the Roadless Road as well as Kire's own account of drawing on the myths of sleeping rivers (Kire, "Interview") in her work as a primary source.

TABLE I. Primary corpus and analytical focus

Primary text	Year	Dominant landscape form	Ecospiritual function analysed
A Naga Village Remembered	2003	Fortified village and its terraces	Landscape as ancestral covenant broken by conquest
Bitter Wormwood	2011	Militarised town and hillside	Slow desacralisation under armed conflict
When the River Sleeps	2014	Forest, sleeping river, heart-stone	Landscape as kin, teacher and moral examiner
Son of the Thundercloud	2016	Drought plain, Village of Weavers	Rain as sacrament; regeneration through sacrifice
Don't Run, My Love	2017	Fields, forest paths, Village of Seers	Permeable species boundary; consent and predation
Spirit Nights	2022	Village under prolonged darkness	Cosmic taboo violation and ritual repair



Fig. 2. Publication timeline of Easterine Kire's major fiction, 2003–2022. Texts forming the ecospiritual core of this study are marked in terracotta.

B. Coding Procedure

All novels were read twice. All episodes where an action taken by a landform, plant, animal, stone, weather feature or spirit had agency, imposed a duty, or caused a consequence were documented on the first pass. In the second pass, these episodes were classified into eight categories of motifs: sentient landform, spirit negotiation, taboo and restraint, shape-shifting, sacred object, ritual specialist, colonial disruption and gendered sacrality. Each motif was then given a score from 0 to 3 for each novel, indicating the level of its occurrence—absent, incidental, recurrent, structural (a motif on which the plot hangs for its resolution). The resulting matrix is given in Fig. 5. The coding is the present author's and is added as a tool for argumentation rather than as an inter rater validated instrument; it is used to demonstrate which readings are based on single passages, versus which are based on repeated patterning.

C. Position and Limits of the Reader

A critique of research which has been done on indigenous peoples, but not with them, is directly relevant to the study of a living cosmology in the medium of English-language fiction by Linda Tuhiwai Smith (Smith). Two protection measures are taken. Rather than being translated into theological equivalents of Western religions, cosmological terms are used in Tenyidie, and glosses are taken from published Naga and ethnographic sources, which is not to say that Ukepenuopfu is not a goddess or that terhuomia are not demons. There is no claim to modern day use of Naga religion, the thing all through is Kire's construction of his story, which is a mediated authored artefact, and not an ethnographic record.

V. The Cosmological Ground: Ukepenuopfu, Terhuomia and Graded Sacrality

If you want to understand Kire's use of landscape you must be familiar with what she's using it for. The creator is Ukepenuopfu, the creation root of which is feminine in construction, combining the roots of birth and mother, a name that was used to designate an ancestress, but not a patriarch—somebody who is the source and guardian of all things, and in the older accounts, the place of the dead who have lived well, in the sky. This is relevant to the ecological argument. The cosmos that

comes from a birth-giver is a kin cosmos. It is not a place of obligation, of the stewardship type, for it is not a place of management, it requires a relative attitude, an attitude of relationship.

Under the creator there lives a thick population that are the spirits of stones, trees, streams and forests, some good, some bad, many strong and powerful, and should be handled with care (Hutton; Heneise). The colonial literature listed a variety of them – guardians of wild animals who dictate whether or not a hunt is successful, a master-spirit of tigers who takes revenge on the dead, a master-spirit of stones, a master-spirit of water, master-spirits of crops, master-spirits of disease. The catalog is illuminating because it corresponds almost precisely to the practical ecology of the hill community – hunting, stone, water, crops, disease. The spirit world is not a covering over of the environment. It is the setting that is described in the register of relationship.

There are two results that follow which inform the author Kire's fiction. The first one is that the sacrality isn't dichotomous. This is depicted in a series of concentric circles radiating outwards from the Village Village hearth, through fields, to forest edge, deep forest, and finally, to the sleeping river, the Village of Seers, the country not found on any map. (Fig. 3: The more one steps away from the human, the more numerous the ritual restraints become; the quest plots that organize Kire's mythic novels are in this scheme, movements outward through the zones and back again. The second implication is that of the taboo or prohibition *kenyu*. A taboo is a rule that functions as a compressed instruction of the environment; a rule that compresses environmental instructions without needing to explain them, a rule that teaches an ecology where a Western reader is taught that taboo is an arbitrary superstition.

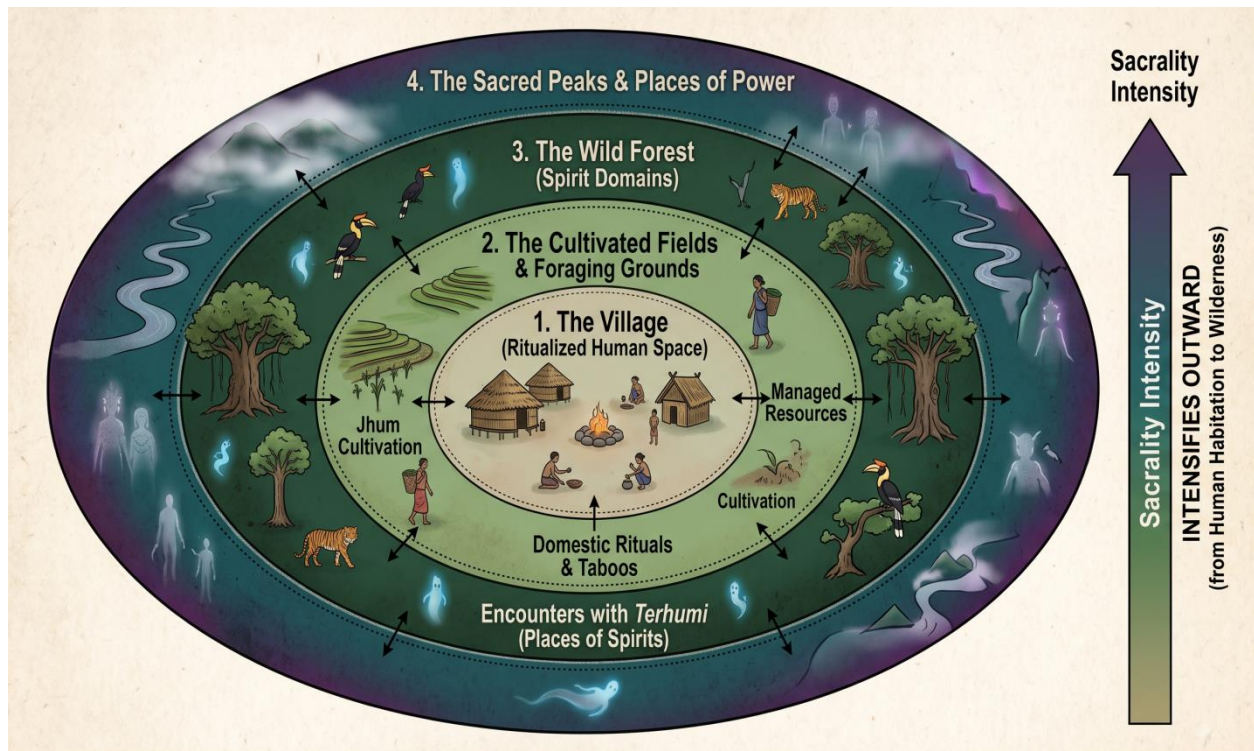


Fig. 3. Concentric zones of sacrality in the Naga landscape as narrated by Kire. Boundaries are permeable; sacrality intensifies outward.



This is not just literary building. The management practices it fostered were of significant consequence. Long ignored by administrators as wasteful, shifting cultivation is now recognized as a high-tech fallow-cycle system adapted to local soil and rainfall conditions (Ramakrishnan); in India the sacred groves that are spread across the country, protected not by legislation but by ban, have been found to be some of the most persistent refuges for biodiversity in the subcontinent (Malhotra et al.). The belief side of exactly this knowledge-practice-belief complex (Berkes) is described in Kire's fiction. When her characters see a ban, they're conserving something, too, without ever saying so.

VI. When the River Sleeps: The Forest as Kin and Examiner

In *When the River Sleeps* Kire has fully explored the idea of the graded landscape. A one-man hunter and forest guardian who has lived alone in the wild for decades, Vilie is pursued by a recurring dream, and embarks on a quest to discover the sleeping river – a stretch of water that at certain hours falls still, so that a stone plucked from the bed at that moment becomes charmed. The premise is directly taken from hunters' storytelling, those whose furthest penetrate into non-explored forest (Kire, "Interview"). The novelty is not invented, it is transposed, and the authority it has in the novel is of the same kind as the authority it has outside the novel.

A. Marriage to a Forest

The most innovative aspect of the novel is the concept of the forest as a spouse. Vilie's relation is not metaphoric love of scenery, but one of the obligations of kindred – residence, fidelity, dependency, mutual protection. When one reads through the relational epistemology described by Bird-David (Bird-David) the forest no longer becomes an object of knowledge for Vilie, but a partner of knowledge. The novel is a great example of a body of manners, of how to enter, how to ask, how to take, how to thank: read Harvey's account of animist etiquette (Harvey). The recipe Kire gives to Vilie's mom, *terhuomia pezie*, whose translation is "discovery of herbs" and "capture of animals," is the complete ethic in two words. Acknowledgment to every act of taking. There is no one's property in the forest: nothing can be taken as though it were free.

B. The Heart-Stone and the Ethics of Power

The novel's test case for the ecospiritual ethic is the heart-stone that Vilie eventually slips from the river. It gives power and a careful attention is paid to the nature of the power. The stone doesn't make the bearer invulnerable, it makes him responsible, and it attracts predators, particularly man. What's clear about the moral logic is that sacred power that is removed from the landscape is not a resource that belongs to the taker but a relationship that now asserts itself on him. This is where Kire's ecospirituality comes first to stand out from an environmentalist appreciation. The land is not a place of peace when worshipped. Raises the stakes.

The categories as such are mobilized in the posthumanist reading of Bhattacharyya, where Vilie's growth is effected by the transactions with the nonhuman and supernatural, while the distinctions between these orders are fluid throughout (Bhattacharyya). The only difference between the two readings is emphasis. Posthumanism refers to an ontological state of the dissolution of the human-nonhuman boundary. It's narrated as a normative one by Kire. Her forest is not just Vilie: it judges him; the operation hinges on his results.

C. The Kirhupfumia and the Cost of Sacred Power

A celebration of Naga cosmology would be complicated by the novel's portrayal of the *kirhupfumia*, women who are believed to carry a lethal spiritual energy and thus are barred from village life. These are not Kire's villains; they are victims of a system that acknowledges and does not know how to handle the power of the female spirit, so it must be expelled to the forest's fringes. The forest is then doubly charged: it is the place of the sacred, but it is also the place of what the community cannot tolerate. Kire does not provide an easy to use solution for ecospirituality. It is provided as a system with an ethical remainder, and the remainder is gendered.

VII. Son of the Thundercloud: Drought, Rain and Sacrament



What's true for the register of the quest is true for the register of the fable: When the River Sleeps works in Son of the Thundercloud, which pushes the sacralised landscape further towards the miraculous. A man, who has lost his family to the famine, walks out of his village through a country as desolate as his grief until two women who have waited 400 years for rain guide him to the Village of Weavers, where a single raindrop impregnates a widow, whose son is destined to kill the spirit-tiger.

Here, the ecological argument is carried by hydrology. In this novel, rain is not weather, it is sacrament; the material that brings the sacred into matter and creates life. Drought, on the other hand, is not a climate coincidence, it's a moral state, it's the manifested expression of a rupture in the relation. The four-hundred-year waiting period transforms ecological time into narrative time and yields the effect a realist frame can't achieve: ecological injury becomes plot. It is the representational challenge that Nixon speaks of: slow violence is difficult to tell because its impact is diffuse and delayed (Nixon). This is where Kire's mythic mode comes into play, fitting four centuries into a walk.

The spirit-tiger completes the pattern. It is not a meat for slaughter but a force to be reckoned with whose life is forfeit to those who kill it and whose life is interrupted when it is taken. The novel will not have the easy equation that reverence for nature equates with safety. In Kire, the restoration of the site is a matter of paying the right price, with the coin of sacrifice being the currency in use—a connection more Romantic than Rose's account of country being one that requires active stewardship (Rose).

VIII. Threshold Figures: Don't Run, My Love and Spirit Nights

Two later novels focus on the border itself. The setting for Don't Run, My Love is in Kija, an ancient village of the Angami people, where people work their fields individually: the widow Visenuo and her daughter, Atuonuo. A young hunter named Kevi comes to harvest to offer assistance and venison, he is handsome, generous and it becomes clear, a weretiger. Atuonuo rejects his offer and reject equals pursuit equals love. Mother and daughter move to the Village of Seers for advice but not salvation and they seek their cure closer to home (Sengupta).

The novel does two things at once, and the simultaneity is the point. It is an ecospiritual story, and is a drama of a landscape where the species barrier is truly permeable, where the man coming from the forest can be the forest, and where the only reaction is to adhere to inherited protocols, not disbelief or panic. It is a feminist parable – a parable of consent – a woman has a right to refuse and is punished for it by a predator that can take shape. The weretiger is then a single entity with both arguments. Read ecologically, it's the permeability of the human; read politically, it's a name for what predation looks like when it's face to face. But the novel concludes with the resilience of women, and with the tree which protects the village, not with running away—with rootedness instead.

Spirit Nights goes to the stars. The novel begins with a scream from the seeress, Tola, announcing that the tiger has devoured the sun, in a reference to one of the dark-time accounts of Chang and Rengma, traditional tales of times when the world is plunged into seemingly endless night. In the spirit world, a taboo has been broken, the villages are engulfed in darkness and loneliness, and only with wisdom, courage and a journey to other worlds can light be restored. This form of literature took a center stage in Indian literary recognition with this novel's citation by Sahitya Akademi in the year 2024 ("Naga Writer").

Spirit Nights is the literary embodiment of the ecospiritual thesis in the corpus. Ecological catastrophe is not about a failure of the mechanism but a failure in the relationship, is not experienced by the individual, but the community, and is not about technical repair but ritual and narrative repair. Written during pandemic lockdowns, the darkness of the novel is double, and Kire's presentation of the human as a new beast struggling in the immensity of creation is a displacement of the human from the centre of the novel, one that Plumwood argues was impossible for the Western tradition to make for itself (Plumwood).

IX. Desacralisation and Its History

Kire's mythic novels are often read like outside of history. They do not and the missing half of the argument is provided by the historical novels. A Naga Village Remembered tells the story of the British attack on Khonoma and the obliteration of

a fortified village, whose stone terraces, gates and groves were not just a means of defense but a material expression of a cosmology (Sorhie). The campaign's destruction is legible in two ways: first as a military defeat, and second as a severing of a covenanted relationship between a people and a place. The same landscape played out in the Second World War in Mari and in Bitter Wormwood the long-term consequences as the hills are turned into a military zone, and the connection between the land and the people subject to control through checkpoints, sides and terror. The transmission of authoritarian custom through households is charted in A Terrible Matriarchy.

These novels, read together, tell of a four-part sequence as illustrated in Fig. 4. Colonization, conversion and extraction disrupt an intact cosmos in which landscape is a kin and moral agent. The next step in the process of Rupture is Amnesia, wherein taboo becomes Superstition and place becomes Resource—the one that decides, which is the one that can't simply outlaw the old way but also makes it incomprehensible. In Kire's project, amnesia is answered by 'narrative recovery' - the process of re-telling landscape as sacred, in the language of the coloniser, for those who no longer access it in the oral system.

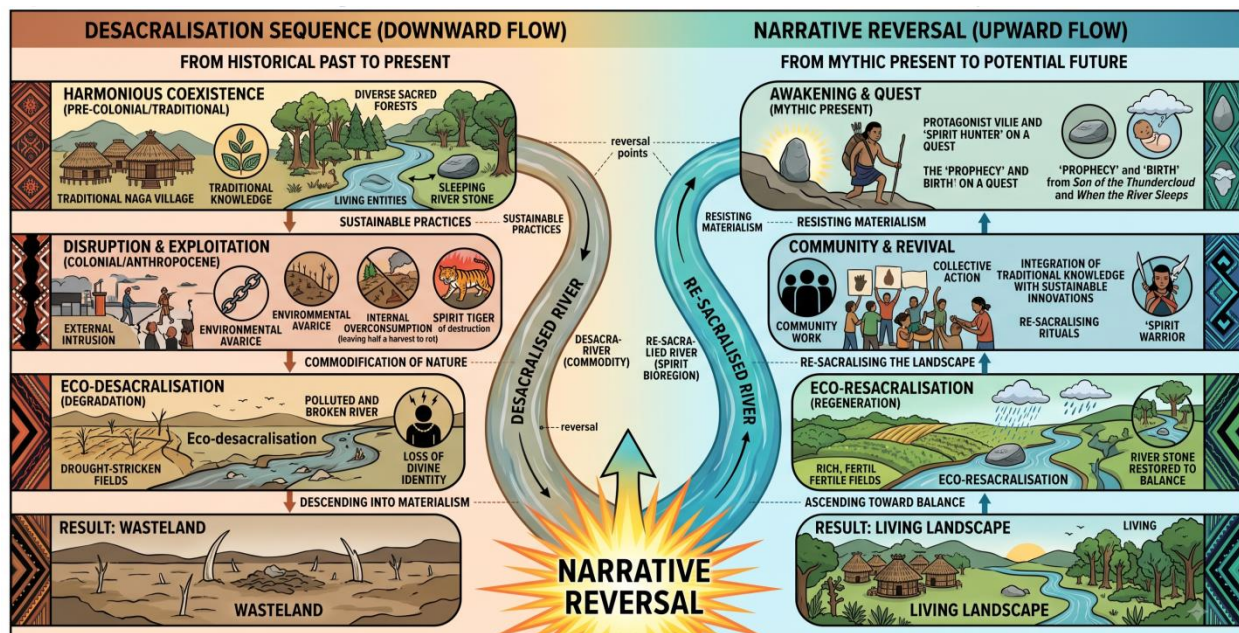


Fig. 4. The desacralisation sequence and its narrative reversal across Kire's historical and mythic fiction.

The connection between environmental and colonial injustice is brought to the fore by the linkage of Huggan and Tiffin (Huggan and Tiffin). The reclassification of Naga land as unadministered wilderness, shifting cultivation as primitive waste (Ramakrishnan) and terhuomia relations as heathen error were not three separate colonial judgements, but one; they all had precisely the same consequences: they cleared obstacles which a sacralised landscape can place on the path of extraction. The temporal aspect of the damage is slow violence, and Kire has discovered the fable, the quest, the chronicle, the narrative form to make it visible at the two ends of the timescale, something Nixon's slow violence cannot.

It's important to note what Kire doesn't do. She doesn't write her conversion as an entirely lost cause, or her Christian characters as lessened. The moral centre of Bitter Wormwood is an old man who has gone through the entire series and has a Christian formation and a whole relationship to his hills that is intact. It is not the case that one religion supplanted another, but



rather that something was interrupted which is not necessarily one's religion, and which can be addressed in other ways besides religious restoration.

X. Gendered Sacrality

There is a remarkable consistency in the distribution of sacrality between the corpus, and Fig. 5 makes it visible that in four of the six novels gendered sacrality is coded structural. Its creator is an ancestress, whose name consists of birth and mother (Hutton). The seeress Tola sees the breach in the cosmos during Spirit Nights. The two women who have waited 400 years for rain have the knowledge to change the direction of the traveller in *Son of the Thundercloud*, and the miracle takes place in the body of the tiger-widow. Visenuo and Atuonuo serve as the ethical and moral protagonists in *Don't Run, My Love*. The village's kirhupfumia have a strength which the village is afraid of. Against this, the questing protagonists Vilie, Pelevotso, are male and it has been rightly remarked that Kire's journey stories give the men the movement and the women the knowledge.

It's not a mistake that that's an asymmetry; that's an argument. In these novels, the importance of movement is qualified and sometimes urgent; the importance of knowledge is durable. Women are present in the sacred centre from the margins of the social order: widowhood, old age, exile, unmarriageability. The transmission mechanism is made explicit in *A Respectable Woman* which reconstructs Kohima from a daughter's recovering of her mother's wartime testimony and in Rosi Braidotti's account of the posthuman subject as constituted through relation rather than the bounded rational individual (Braidotti) in which a line of transmission is brought into focus.

The ecological impact is immediate. Where the landscape is the product of a birth-giver and mediated by women who are outside the mainstream of social contract, the ecospiritual ethic is bound up with a challenge to the gender order that marginalises them. Kire does not add feminism to her Ecology. The two come together as one offer, the seam of which is manifested in the kirhupfumia.

XI. Discussion

The pattern is also summarized in the corpus level in Fig. 5. There are three takeaways here. First, the motifs that at all times/recurrent intensity are present in every novel, including those realist, are those of sentient landform and spirit negotiation and taboo; the ecospiritual grammar is not limited to the mythic mode, but extends to all of Kire's novels. Secondly, the motifs coalesce: shape-shifting and the ritual specialists are both on the rise and on the fall, as are gendered sacrality and the permeability of the species boundary; they all rise together and fall together, and therefore cannot be thematically packaged as two distinct motifs. Thirdly, both the historical and the mythical novels are distributed in ways that are near complementary in terms of colonial disruption and the mythic motifs; when these two novel types are thus seen in tandem, they seem more like two facets of the same project than two stages of a career.

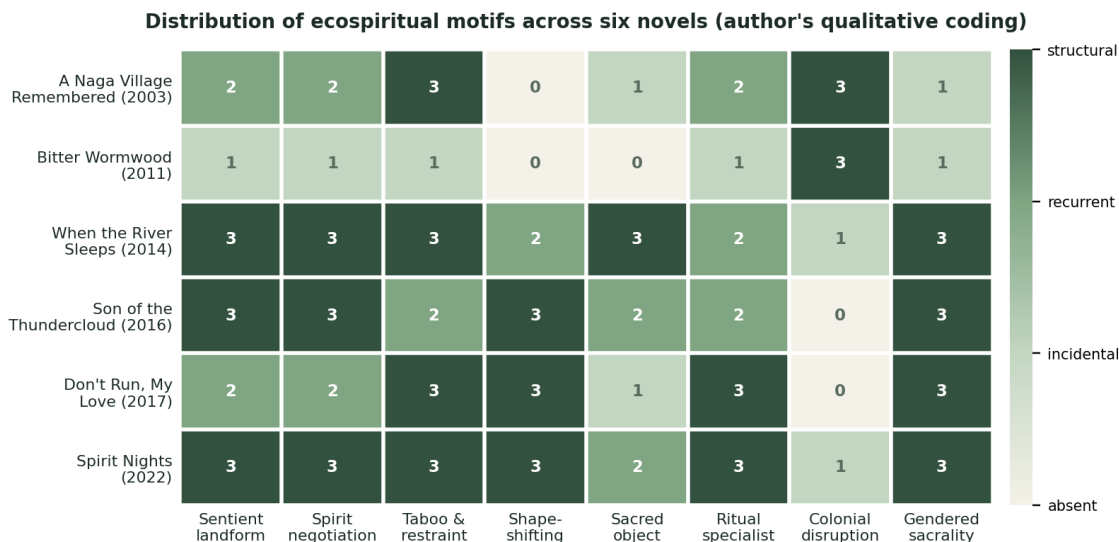


Fig. 5. Distribution and intensity of eight ecospiritual motifs across the six-novel corpus (author's qualitative coding; 0 = absent, 3 = structural).

A. What Distinguishes Indigenous Ecospirituality

A theoretical claim can now be made with explicitness. Classical deep ecology asks the questioner to expand the scope of identification until there is no distinction between himself and nature, and the ethic that ensues is one of expanded sympathy. In Taylor's mapping (Taylor) dark green religion is a family of orientations characterized by the sacralization of nature and the rejection of centrality of humans, frequently as a deliberate reorientation of people that grew up naturalistic. Kire's ecospirituality is different in three ways. It's not elected, it's inherited – one is born into a set of relations, not converted to them. It is specific, not general – obligations are made to this stone, this grove, this river, this season, and do not extend to a generalised reverence for nature. It is taken seriously, not merely with good intentions: violation has consequences in the world of the text, and so it is taboo, not sentimental, its operative category. A good bit of Euro-American ecospirituality does not, as does Kimmerer's honourable harvest (Kimmerer) and Rose's cared-for country (Rose).

B. Reimagining as Decolonial Practice

When you read the word reimagining in the title to this paper, take it in a very particular sense. Kire is not creating a sacred landscape, but rather a landscape that is sacred. She is making a relation to place that was lost in the colonial archive, and lost to the developmental state, intelligible in the novel form, in English prose. There are three elements to that act. It is an epistemological claim, meaning that the terhuomia relationships are knowledge production, not the 'remainders of wrongfulness' (Harvey; Bird-David; Heneise). It is an archival intervention; an insertion of Naga cosmological categories into a literary system that did not have a space for them (Misra; Smith). And it's an ethical suggestion for today: remember how to be a "relative" – the right answer to ecological crisis may be less about new technology and more about things we already know.

Heise's caution applies and should be stated (Heise). The Indigenous ethics of obligation that is local, specific and inherited does not lend itself easily to planetary issues and the risk of Indigenous ecospirituality being received by metropolitan readers as spiritual raw material is there. The Indigenous ethics of obligation that is local, specific and inherited does not scale easily to planetary issues, and the risk of Indigenous ecospirituality being received by metropolitan readers as spiritual raw material is



there. Kire's texts are not only particular, they do not let it be received like that. They're stubborn about these hills and to refuse generalisation is an argument.

XII. Limitations and Directions for Further Research

The results are limited by four restrictions. The research does not examine Kire's oral repertoire, with which his English-language texts are connected, and does not provide any answers to the question of how what is transformed in the process of changing from an oral to a written repertoire. The motif-coding is single-coder and interpretive, and would benefit from multiple coders to add to the corpus-level claims. The paper does not make an ethnographic claim for the present belief of the Nagas, nor should the description of Ukepenuopfu and terhuomia be interpreted as a description of what is happening in the dominant Christian culture of the present day (Heneise). And the sacred landscape is strictly confined to novels, leaving aside Kire's substantial poetry and children's work in which it can play differently.

Four directions follow. Comparative analysis of Kire with other writers of the Northeastern countries such as Tamsula Ao (Ao) would determine whether the grammar found here is authorial or regional one. The study would examine if readers not of the tradition get these landscapes as an ethical proposition or as an exotic setting. The results of the translation study of Kire's Norwegian, German and Croatian editions would demonstrate what survives the second linguistic passage. The literary reading can be checked against the community whose cosmology it interprets, as Smith describes (Smith) in collaborative work with Naga scholars and knowledge-holders.

XIII. Conclusion

Easterine Kire's fiction adopts the idea of a sacred landscape, one that does not settle for the settlement that created landscape as scenery, the settlement where the sacred is elsewhere. In her novels, the hills of Nagaland are inhabited by agents, which are graded by sacrality, tabooed, and continuously connected to kinship, reckoned from a creator-ancestress. The forest embraces a hunter, a raindrop feeds a child, a tiger eats the sun, a stone taken from a sleeping river brings a power, a debt.

These, as this paper has contended, are not ornaments of a folkloric style, they are elements of an ethic, and an ethic of a certain kind: inherited, not chosen; specific, not general; enforced, not felt; a critique of a gender order that concentrates and punishes female sacred power. It has also said that the mythic and the historical are not two but one project in Kire's corpus, where the fables are a model for a real relation to place and the chronicles tell of its erosion, so that the fiction as a whole is a reaction to desecralisation and not a flight from it.

So ecocriticism in the Anthropocene is about what Kire doesn't give. She doesn't provide a portable spirituality – a spirituality that can be removed from the hills in which it arose. She provides a description of the price of living with the land as a relative, and of what was sacrificed when a people had to stop. The last irony in an account that has been honoured at the centre of the literary system it is a product of, is that it comes in the coloniser's language (“Naga Writer”) and that irony has done the repair work.



Works Cited

1. Ao, Temsula. *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone*. Zubaan, 2006.
2. Berkes, Fikret. *Sacred Ecology*. 4th ed., Routledge, 2018.
3. Berry, Thomas. *The Dream of the Earth*. Sierra Club Books, 1988.
4. Bhattacharyya, Pronami. "Ecology of the 'Other': A Posthumanist Study of Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps* (2014)." *Humanities*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2024, article 19, <https://doi.org/10.3390/h13010019>.
5. Bird-David, Nurit. "'Animism' Revisited: Personhood, Environment, and Relational Epistemology." *Current Anthropology*, vol. 40, no. S1, Feb. 1999, pp. S67–S91, <https://doi.org/10.1086/200061>.
6. Braidotti, Rosi. *The Posthuman*. Polity Press, 2013.
7. Descola, Philippe. *Beyond Nature and Culture*. Translated by Janet Lloyd, U of Chicago P, 2013.
8. Eliade, Mircea. *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*. Translated by Willard R. Trask, Harcourt, Brace & World, 1959.
9. Glotfelty, Cheryll, and Harold Fromm, editors. *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. U of Georgia P, 1996.
10. Guha, Ramachandra, and Joan Martinez-Alier. *Varieties of Environmentalism: Essays North and South*. Earthscan, 1997.
11. Harvey, Graham. *Animism: Respecting the Living World*. Columbia UP, 2005.
12. Heise, Ursula K. *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global*. Oxford UP, 2008.
13. Heneise, Michael. *Agency and Knowledge in Northeast India: The Life and Landscape of Dreams*. Routledge, 2019.
14. Huggan, Graham, and Helen Tiffin. *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*. 2nd ed., Routledge, 2015.
15. Hutton, J. H. *The Angami Nagas: With Some Notes on Neighbouring Tribes*. Macmillan, 1921.
16. Kimmerer, Robin Wall. *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*. Milkweed Editions, 2013.
17. Kire, Easterine. *Bitter Wormwood*. Zubaan, 2011.
18. ---. *Don't Run, My Love*. Speaking Tiger, 2017.
19. ---. "Interview with Easterine Kire." *Tell Me Your Story*, www.tellmeyourstory.biz/newentries/interview-with-easterine-kire. Accessed 24 July 2026.
20. ---. *Mari*. HarperCollins India, 2010.
21. ---. *A Naga Village Remembered*. Ura Academy, 2003.
22. ---. *A Respectable Woman*. Zubaan, 2019.
23. ---. *Son of the Thundercloud*. Speaking Tiger, 2016.
24. ---. *Spirit Nights*. Barbican Press, 2022.
25. ---. *A Terrible Matriarchy*. Zubaan, 2007.
26. ---. *Walking the Roadless Road: Exploring the Tribes of Nagaland*. Aleph Book Company, 2019.
27. ---. *When the River Sleeps*. Zubaan, 2014.
28. Kishor, N. "Nature in Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps*: An Ecocritical Reading." *SMART MOVES Journal IJELLH*, vol. 5, no. 1, Jan. 2017, pp. 1–7, ijellh.com/index.php/OJS/article/view/1838. Accessed 24 July 2026.
29. Koehrsen, Jens. "Eco-spirituality in Environmental Action: Studying Dark Green Religion in the German Energy Transition." *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2018, pp. 34–54, journal.equinoxpub.com/JSRNC/article/view/4916. Accessed 24 July 2026.
30. Kohn, Eduardo. *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human*. U of California P, 2013.



31. Luireiphy, T. P. S. "Intersection of Ecology and Literature in Kire's *When the River Sleeps*." *International Journal of Scientific Research in Science and Technology*, vol. 11, no. 21, Dec. 2024, pp. 86–89, ijsrst.com/index.php/home/article/view/IJSRST24116517. Accessed 24 July 2026.
32. Malhotra, K. C., et al. *Cultural and Ecological Dimensions of Sacred Groves in India*. Indian National Science Academy, 2001.
33. Misra, Tilottoma, editor. *The Oxford Anthology of Writings from North-East India: Fiction*. Oxford UP, 2011.
34. "Naga Writer Easterine Kire's *Spirit Nights* Wins Sahitya Akademi Award 2024 in English Language." *Nagaland Tribune*, 19 Dec. 2024, nagalandtribune.in/naga-writer-easterine-kires-spirit-nights-wins-sahitya-akademi-award-2024-in-english-language/. Accessed 24 July 2026.
35. Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Harvard UP, 2011.
36. Patto, W. M. *Native Voices in the Work of Easterine Kire and Thomas King: A Comparative Study*. 2014. Nagaland University, PhD dissertation.
37. Plumwood, Val. *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason*. Routledge, 2002.
38. Ramakrishnan, P. S. *Shifting Agriculture and Sustainable Development: An Interdisciplinary Study from North-Eastern India*. UNESCO/Parthenon, 1992.
39. Rose, Deborah Bird. *Nourishing Terrains: Australian Aboriginal Views of Landscape and Wilderness*. Australian Heritage Commission, 1996.
40. Sengupta, P. "Review of *Don't Run, My Love*, by Easterine Kire." *Muse India*, no. 78, Mar.–Apr. 2018, museindia.com. Accessed 24 July 2026.
41. Smith, Linda Tuhiwai. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. 2nd ed., Zed Books, 2012.
42. Sorhie, Petekhrienuo. "Ethno Cultural Heritage Carved in the Art of Tenyimia Kharu." *ShodhKosh: Journal of Visual and Performing Arts*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2024, pp. 558–572, <https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i1.2024.1142>.
43. Taylor, Bron. *Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future*. U of California P, 2009.
44. Tuan, Yi-Fu. *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*. U of Minnesota P, 1977.
45. Viveiros de Castro, Eduardo. "Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, vol. 4, no. 3, Sept. 1998, pp. 469–488.
46. White, Lynn, Jr. "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis." *Science*, vol. 155, no. 3767, Mar. 1967, pp. 1203–1207, <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.155.3767.1203>.