

**(Re)awakening of Naga Oral History and Culture: An Interview with Avinuo**

**Kire**

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*The hills and trees had been closest to mankind, caring for the human race since the very beginning. They could not bear to leave. And so, they stayed behind, aligning themselves with humans, and in doing so, became keepers of the forests and in time, turned portals between the two worlds, for they were often visited by their spirit kin. I am one of the last surviving of the first trees.*

(Avinuo Kire, *Where the Cobbled Path Leads*, 2022, p. 112)



*Avinuo Kire*

Avinuo Kire is a well-known writer from Nagaland, India, who teaches English at Kohima College, Kohima. Her writing explores Naga spirituality, identity, and cultural legacy while preserving the indigenous knowledge systems of Nagaland. Within a larger literary discourse, her works celebrate and reclaim the history and culture of the Naga people through a “decolonial approach [that] can be fused with postcolonial imperatives” (Baishya and Moral 184). Her body of works includes a poetry collection, *Where Wild Flowers Grow* (2015), and two short stories collections, *The Power to Forgive and Other Stories* (2015) and *The Last Light of Glory Days* (2021). Kire with Meneno Vamuzo Rhakhoa co-authored a collection of oral narratives, *Naga Heritage Centre - People Stories: Volume One* (2016) and she has also contributed in an anthology *The Many That I Am: Writings from Nagaland* (2019) edited by Anungla Zoe Longkumar. Jelle J.P. Wouters, a renowned social anthropologist and leading scholar on Naga culture and history underscores Kire’s novel, *Where the Cobbled Path Leads* (2022), as a pivotal text by calling her a “vanguard voice in the literary scene of Northeast India, with echoes far beyond” (Wouters para. 9).

Naga<sup>1</sup> literary works have their roots in oral traditions, which serve as the repository of the Naga people’s indigenous knowledge, cultural identity, beliefs, customs and festivals despite historical and modern upheavals, with “socio-political reality [being] contextualized in the contemporaneous world of the people while the cultural history is studied in relation to the oral tradition” (Pou xi). Among contemporary writers of Nagaland, Kire is notable for her nuanced and evocative portrayal of the oral tradition of storytelling, which deftly combines Naga myth, history, and folklore by privileging vernacular terms and idioms to enhance narrative realism and resist linguistic homogenization. In this context, Theyiesinuo Kreditsu succinctly articulates that “Kire’s deliberate use of vernacular tribal words without easily accessible translations represent a growing

trend among new Naga writers” (Keditsu 264). This makes her existing works a significant contribution in “emergent literature” (263), which fundamentally “emerge where alternative modes of literary expression are necessary or where dominant forms are awkwardly out of sync with sociality” (Harris and Hällén 5). Such emerging narratives enable self-representational subjectivities for Indigenous writers to foreground their localized culture onto the wealth of Naga’s cultural legacy, tradition and heritage as resistance to and dissolution of “the globalized melting pot” (Thakur 114) in the face of modernization and Christian missionary education. Consequently, this led to a substantial change in religio-cultural practices within Naga society, wherein the traditional animistic faith was considered as an evil and superstitious belief. It also delegitimized the relational kinship among humans, nature, spirits, and animals by reconfiguring it through Western dualistic philosophies of civilized/primitive, man/nature, spirit/matter, and mind/body, which left “indelible scars that could never be erased” (Chasie 255). However, through the documentation of Indigenous cosmologies, epistemologies, lifeworld, and oral tradition, contemporary Naga writers like Kire engage in the intervention of this cultural rupture through decolonial reclamation and revalorization of pre-colonial/pre-Christian Naga society. Kire asserts that this “is the first step towards preserving our oral narratives which constitute [both tangible and] intangible heritage” (Thakur 114).

In this interview, conducted via Zoom meeting on December 12, 2024, Kire discusses her deliberate contribution in positioning the Naga worldview through her writings, subverting prevailing grand narratives that frequently overlook Indigenous history and culture. The interview further emphasizes the significance of indigenous educational systems, such as the *Morung*<sup>2</sup>, which were formerly essential for passing down traditional knowledge, values, and worldviews. Kire

argues for the *Morong* system, which functions as a place of memory that can support the cultural (re)awakening of Naga oral history, even though its traditional significance has been fading due to the arrival of Christianity and the spread of the Western education system in Nagaland. Against this backdrop, Kire's *Where the Cobbled Path Leads* serves as a decolonial response to colonial interventions, aimed at preserving Naga culture without "losing its quintessence" (Thakur 114–115).

Following this line of inquiry, the interview centres around Kire's folk-fantasy novel *Where the Cobbled Path Leads*, which deeply intertwines Naga oral traditions, legends, and cultural memory. The story follows an eleven-year-old, Vime, who, while grieving the loss of her mother's death and her father's upcoming remarriage to Khrile, finds a cobbled path leading to Kijübode (a mysterious tree) into the forest. The forest is shown as a transitional area that serves as a crucial location for cultural (re)awakening, where Vime interacts with Kijübode (which acts as a portal connecting the spirit and human realms), Tei (a mischievous forest spirit), and Hevüsa (a weretiger). Through these mystical experiences during her journey, Vime gains a deep understanding of her culture while learning to overcome grief by developing resilience, especially from her time spent in the *Morong*, exposing her to Naga cultural practices like weaving, ancient prophecy, headhunting, tattooing, war, folktales, etc. The novel examines the oral traditions, indigenous cosmology, ontology and Naga cultural history, addressing themes of self-discovery, identity, and the interdependence of nature and humanity, through an onto-epistemological recognition of Naga ways of life that negates "Christianity and its ontology of denial (of spirits, the agency of nonhumans, the unbeknownst)" (Wouters 2022, para, 5). Kire emerges as a "new Naga writer" (Keditsu 2023) whose writings fuse the elements of magic realism, dream, fantasy, folklore,

and oral history with modern complexities and events such as the Battle of Kohima and the Naga-India armed conflict.

**Bhagyashree Sakia and Binod Mishra:** What motivated you to compose *Where the Cobbled Path Leads*, and how does it represent your own ties to the Naga community and culture?

**Avinuo Kire:** Many things came together and took their space in the creation of the story — my faith and an ever-ceaseless wonder over this life and the afterlife. I had also wanted to write about a girl named Vime for some time and so I began the story, visualizing her in my head, allowing my imagination free rein, and I continued writing until it became a novel. *Where the Cobbled Path Leads* is a folk fantasy novel which blends fantasy fiction with Naga spirit stories — folklore, myths, history, also nature and Naga life in general. Conflict also forms a backdrop to the story. In this sense, it is very much a Naga story that places the Naga hills, its community and culture at the centre of the world.

**BS & BM:** Does using native or local terms in your stories make you worry about whether or not readers would comprehend them?

**AK:** On the contrary, I hope that the local tenyidie words will be instrumental in bringing the characters to life and make it easier for readers to visualize the story, which is set against the backdrop of quintessential Kohima during the seventies. I feel that infusing the narrative with local words, inflections, and colour is effective in creating a more realistic and convincing story. I also think that, unless central to the story, footnotes or italicizing are not required. I believe that readers are intelligent and should never be underestimated, and that as long as the reader is engaged, he or she should be able to follow the story without unnecessary interruptions. These may seem like little

things, perhaps, but I think they help retain authenticity and are instrumental in creating a voice that is the writer's own.

**BS & BM:** Have you faced any challenges in sharing Naga folktales with the worldwide audience? If so, how have you overcome them?

**AK:** No, I haven't. I am happy to say that the non-Naga readers find our folktales as fascinating and as revolutionary as I find folktales from other parts of India or the world. So, I haven't faced any challenges in that regard. In fact, something that literature teaches us over and over is that regardless of where we are from, human experiences remain the same. We actually share many similar stories.

**BS & BM:** *Morung* could be considered as the "site of memory"<sup>3</sup>, do you agree?

**AK:** Definitely — because it is, in a sense, a physical manifestation of the oral tradition which once richly prevailed.

**BS & BM:** Despite being a schoolgirl, Vime is ignorant of her origins which draws attention to the gaps in popular historical narratives that frequently leave out Indigenous knowledge systems. The importance of alternative venues in recovering suppressed oral histories is seen in her (re)discovery of the *Morung*, which could play a role in cultural (re)awakening. Do you believe that storytelling is a potent tool for bridging these historical silences and subverting prevailing grand narratives? How does your depiction of Vime's exploration of *Morung* relate to the larger struggles of indigenous groups in maintaining cultural identity?

**AK:** While historical fiction stories certainly cannot be read as history textbooks, it can still be a valuable receptacle of the past, especially for traditionally oral societies. While writing about

Vime's, in my choice of words, 'cultural (re)awakening', I remember my own personal reawakening. During history classes in school, we learned about ancient as well as medieval India, its illustrious history, about the struggle for independence against British colonial rule, and we even read about the American War of Independence, etc. But I never learned about my own Naga oral history and our struggles. My history wasn't part of the syllabus. I suppose, I subconsciously wove my own experiences into Vime's. India is a country of multiple narratives but there is often the danger of a single grand narrative eclipsing the histories of minorities.

**BS & BM:** The Hornbill festival is celebrated annually in Nagaland to promote its tradition and cultural heritage. This festival is named after the hornbill bird, which prominently features in many Naga folktales, and also highlighted in your novel through the folktale of a girl who transforms herself into a hornbill. Do you consider this festival an alternative way of preserving Naga culture?

**AK:** I think the Hornbill Festival is a fun platform for both Nagas and non-Nagas to come together and experience a glimpse of each other's culture. But it's important to keep in mind that this festival is only a very superficial, albeit exoticised 'representation' of Naga culture. One should rather visit the Naga villages in order to get an authentic sense of the culture and the traditional way of life.

**BS & BM:** What can we learn about Naga craftsmanship from the intricate motifs and patterns on clothes other than the social rank of the wearers?

**AK:** For me, weaving is a kind of identity expression. The textile that is produced through weaving is a kind of symbolic writing. For us, just like any other ethnic tribe, we have a wide variety of traditional textiles and fabrics, which are not only worn for fashion or aesthetic purposes, but are a form of specific identity or expression. The fabrics not only denote the social rank of the wearers

but also say something about the environment that we live in and our relationship with it as well. So, certain animals and cowrie shells are edged as motifs on fabrics, not on all fabrics but on some. Traditionally, weaving is a woman's domain, and till today, certain shawls are meant to be worn by men, and some are to be worn by women only. The shawls can denote the social status or rank, and even the bravery of the wearers. For example, there are certain clothing that are meant only to be worn by men who have seen or participated in the battles. And certain ones are meant to be worn by very small children and young girls, just by looking at them, what specific *mekhela* they are wearing can reveal whether she has started maturing or not. Then, after she starts menstruating, that means she is of marriageable age now, so she will start to wear a particular *mekhela*. Moreover, certain clothes are only for married women, while others are only for elderly people. So, it can be seen as a form of symbolic writing, without conversing, where one can read through the clothes a person is wearing. So that's how it's a kind of identity expression. Till today, there are specific shawls with cowrie shells that only men who have social status can wear. Back in those days, people used to give feasts of merit, so the rich men who had given the feast to the entire village could earn the right to have a shawl. But today we don't have feasts or merit or all these practices, but another alternative is that someone who is rich and has contributed a lot to society, such a man can wear certain clothes today. It is not so rigid today, but back then this was very solemnly observed and anyone who wears certain shawls without earning the right to wear them can be taken to task by the village elders, so that's how weaving serves as a means of individual or even collective identity.

**BS & BM:** Your novel narrates a folktale about a girl weaving wings from black and white yarn to transform herself into a hornbill. She predicted that young men would adorn themselves with

her feathers after her metamorphosis. What is the significance of the Hornbill folktale for Naga communities?

**AK:** Many stories abound in the Naga hills regarding a hornbill ancestor. Different tribes will have different variations of the hornbill story, as is the case with most oral stories. The version which has been told to me is about a young girl who was mistreated by her stepmother and therefore wove wings so that she could transform herself into the hornbill and fly away. Perhaps the Hornbill folktale is a story of hope and resilience through physical and supernatural metamorphosis. Shapeshifting.

**BS & BM:** Nature and spirituality are integral parts of your narrative. How do you view the relationship between spirituality, nature, and Naga cosmology?

**AK:** A strong awareness of spirit activity forms the basis of traditional Naga spirituality. The spirit and physical human worlds often merge or co-exist as one. And so, it feels quite natural to tell a story about life in the Naga hills, interweaving supernatural elements into the narrative. After all, what is perceived as ‘magic’ for one person is another person’s lived reality.

**BS & BM:** The prophecy associated with Chüsenu speaks of a battle towards the end of days. How do you interpret this ancient prophecy, and what does it represent in the broader context of the narrative and the cultural themes explored in the story?

**AK:** Until it comes to fulfilment, prophecies remain shrouded in mystery. Chüsenu is an ancient Naga, perhaps Angami Naga, a prophecy which speaks about a place where all people will come together for a final battle towards the end of days. One challenge I faced while writing this novel was the verification process of spirit stories and rituals involving a belief system that is no longer

practiced, and therefore, almost forgotten, especially with the passing of the elderly generation of oral narrators. A particularly tricky one was to verify the Chüsenu prophecy. To my knowledge, the only documented source was from the colonial anthropologist J. H. Hutton's *The Angami Nagas*. But I really wanted to learn about this prophecy from an old voice. This was quite a challenge, but I was fortunate that, ultimately, an uncle helped me clarify the little that is known regarding this prophecy through a Khonoma elder in the village.

**BS & BM:** How can Indigenous literature from Nagaland contribute to the preservation of oral tradition, cultural heritage and Indigenous knowledge of Naga tribes in a world that is modernizing rapidly?

**AK:** The culture of minority groups and indigenous people all over the world is always endangered and vulnerable to being undermined by globalization and the growing propensity towards cultural homogenization. I think this is even more so the case when it comes to Indigenous groups like the Nagas with oral history, because for us, the way our stories and heritage were passed on is through the oral narratives and *Morung* system. But today it's no longer practiced. So, we are in very real danger of losing knowledge about our heritage and past. I think that's where Indigenous literature plays a role, and I am talking about written literature, that doesn't mean written literature will replace orality but how the written words can assist in preserving the oral tradition and culture. Naturally, Indigenous literature, like fictional stories I think, cannot be read solely as a history textbook, of course. But it can be a medium for preserving or bringing the past to life. I believe that the beauty of the stories, especially the fictional ones, is that they not only educate but also provide spaces to acquire knowledge through the experiences of the characters in the stories, allowing one

to truly understand the culture of an ethnic society from an emic perspective. Thus, Indigenous literature essentially contributes to preserving heritage and cultural awareness and building intergenerational and cross-cultural communication.

**BS & BM:** Regarding the significance of cultural preservation in particular, what message or effect do you want your readers to take away from your work(s)?

**AK:** While writing the novel (*Where the Cobbled Path Leads*) I drew a lot of inspiration from my roots, the Naga folklore, myth, history, and just life in general so in that sense it is very much a Naga history and story that places Kohima and Naga hills in the centre of the world through the tree Kijübode, but alternately I hope and would like to believe that it's a local tale with universal relativity. Most of all it is a story about love, hope and transformation. I hope that readers will be able to feel that.

**BS & BM:** What are you planning to work on next?

**AK:** I am currently working on my next book, which is based in Nagaland as well. But of course, stories often take a life of their own, so we shall see.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The Naga people are the Indigenous tribes that mainly inhabit the state of Nagaland in northeastern India, along with portions of Manipur, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, and northwestern Myanmar. They share a common cultural and historical identity despite having different languages, customs, and oral traditions.

<sup>2</sup> Morung is a traditional educational hub and social setting of Naga communities. For the Naga tribes, the Morung is much more than just a structure; it is a focal point for communal education, identity creation, and cultural life. According to tradition, a Morung is a sizable dorm with elaborate carvings where young men without wives (and in certain tribes, women as well) would live, study, and work for the community. Even though many of the Morung's traditional roles have been superseded by Christianity, their memory endures. To reclaim and honor their Indigenous past, some villages today maintain or reconstruct Morungs as cultural heritage hubs.

<sup>3</sup> The term “site of memory” (*lieu de mémoire*), coined by Pierre Nora, describes locations, artifacts, symbols, or even rituals where memory solidifies and persists. However, when the inherent continuity of experienced memory is broken, these spaces which are more than just actual places are where collective memory adheres. See Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire” (University of California Press, 1989).

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