Journal of Ethnology and Folkloristics 19 (2): 85–100
DOI: 10.2478/jef-2025-0019

FOREST, FOLK, AND FICTION: *RAIN-MAIDEN AND THE BEAR-MAN* AS A SITE FOR ECOCULTURE AMONG THE NAGAS

DEBAJYOTI BISWAS
Associate Professor
Department of English, Bodoland University
Kokrajhar (BTR), India
e-mail: dbiswas@buniv.edu.in
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5041-8171

PADDAJA ROY
Research Scholar
Department of English, Bodoland University
Kokrajhar (BTR), India
e-mail: paddajaroy@gmail.com
https://orcid.org/0009-0009-2226-9645

ABSTRACT
Forests are one of the most commonly recurring settings of folktales and oratures. In the popular imagination, forests are often seen as the site of the unknown, the non-human, enchanting and, mystifying, however, in the northeastern cultures of India, especially in Naga folklore, the forest provides a liminal space to the human and non-human through the confluence of spirits inhabiting all forms of body. Easterine Kire's collection of short stories *The Rain-Maiden and the Bear-Man* (2021), essentially dealing with the life and culture of the Nagas, encapsulates a multi-faceted representation of forests, orature and folklore juxtaposed with narratives that broach upon socio-cultural, supernatural, and ecological entanglements. This paper aims to read the representation of the spirits, forest and folk as portrayed in *The Rain-Maiden and the Bear-Man* as a strategy that blurs the human–nonhuman, human–environment distinctions vis-à-vis socio-ecological representations. Highlighting the prevalence of a sustainable life during the contemporary ecological crisis, this paper will take an ecocultural approach to show how certain traditions interact with their surroundings. Juxtaposing this with lifestyle changes brought about by modernity, this paper will rely extensively on the idea of eco-narrative. The framework of eco-narrative would trace the interaction of humans within the scope of nature thereby negotiating how narratives situate the discourse of folk culture.

KEYWORDS: ecoculture • eco-narrative • folk culture • orature • northeast India

ISSN 1736-6518 (print), ISSN 2228-0987 (online)

INTRODUCTION: FOLK, FOREST, AND FICTION

The natural world, in both fictional and non-fictional representations, has been portrayed as the provider of resources catering to human needs and sustaining human life. Non-human agency in such representations is often obliterated, and nature as a living entity is often unacknowledged (Neimanis 2015; Neyrat 2019). However, contemporary writing from northeast India negate the nature–culture binary that is generally prevalent in Western thought (Inglis and Bone 2006). As northeasterners, we can see a sharp contrast between our lived everyday experiences and the Western depiction of the nature–culture divide. In India, and more specifically in the northeastern part of India, there is a prevalence of worshipping various aspects of nature out of reverence for the spirit of nature. Literary representations from northeast India depict nature and natural elements as powerful entities, often enjoying equal, if not higher, status than humans. For instance, the Idu Mishmi tribe of the Dibang Valley in the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh holds the belief that tigers are their elder brothers. (Aiyadurai 2021)

The northeastern state of Nagaland, which consists of 17 major tribes, shares similar beliefs and stories. It is pertinent to note that the Naga tribes are not limited to Nagaland, as various clans and sub-clans inhabit other northeastern regions like Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, and Manipur, with some in neighbouring Myanmar. In Naga tribal myths, the fluidity between humans and non-humans and the spirit world are often interpreted as therianthropy, which is often considered a shamanic faculty in this context (Beggiora and Exley 2024: 155). Thus, such myths encapsulate beliefs and relationships between human–nature, and the spirit. Easterine Kire's *The Rain-Maiden and the Bear-Man* (2021), a collection of ten short stories based on Naga belief and folklore, explores this very human–nature–spirit entanglement by incorporating traditional beliefs and myths against a background of the human–nature conflict. In this anthology, forests become the primary setting of the stories, as in most of the myths and folklore that are prevalent in the northeastern region. Forests are one of the most recurring settings of folktales and oratures. In the popular imagination, forests are often seen as the site of the unknown, the nonhuman, enchanting and mystifying. With the expansion of urbanisation, forests are gradually being destroyed and pushed into the imagination where the image of the forest takes on a powerful symbolic role. In response to the contemporary environmental crisis and various socio-political issues, certain representations of forests and retelling of folklore and orature often signify human injustice and ecological derangement. A similar representation is found in Kire's collection, which invites us to consider issues that are ongoing in the spectrum of the Anthropocene, the human–non-human relationship with the environment as well as socio-ecological representations. The anthologised short stories touch upon various facets of the life, society, belief, and culture of the Nagas thereby also illustrating the dependence and significance of forests and Nature in their tradition and life.

This paper aims to read the representation of the spirit, the forest and the folk as portrayed in *The Rain-Maiden and the Bear-Man* as a strategy that blurs human–non-human, human–environment distinctions vis-à-vis socio-ecological representations. Highlighting the prevalence of a sustainable life during the contemporary ecological crisis, this paper will take an ecocultural approach to show how certain traditions interact with their surroundings. Juxtaposing this with lifestyle changes brought about

by modernity, this paper relies extensively on the idea of ecocriticism and eco-narrative. The framework of eco-narrative traces the interaction of humans with nature and other non-human agencies thereby negotiating how narratives situate the discourse of folk culture. The stories anthologised in *The Rain-Maiden and the Bear-Man* remove the nature–culture binary and encourage fluidity between the human–non-human and the spirit. In the first section, we argue that ecoculture can be used as a new theoretical tool in reading certain practices among the Indigenous Peoples in northeast India. In the second section, we discuss how and why Indigenous storytellers from northeast India, including Kire, have created a literary space to reconfigure the traditional cosmic world by negotiating the transformation brought about by Christianity and postcolonial modernity. In the concluding section, we reinforce the transformative role of storytelling in the times of the Anthropocene.

ECOCULTURE IN NORTHEAST INDIA: NEGOTIATING HUMAN, NATURE, AND CULTURE

The way various cultures across India perceive nature is vastly different from what is termed as the Western perception of nature (Sharma and Biswas 2024). Val Plumwood (1993: 70) writes, "the body and the passions belong in Plato's account to a sharply distinct lower realm, homogenised and defined by exclusion, to be dominated and controlled by superior reason, and to be used in its service". Following this she further reminds us that the logic of Cartesian dualism hinges on "a total break or discontinuity between humans and nature, such that humans are completely different from everything else in nature" (ibid.). The Cartesian idea of dualism originates in René Descartes' (1993 [1641]) philosophical division between *res cogitans* (mind) and *res extensa* (matter). Similar thinking has also been conceptualised by Francis Bacon (2000 [1620]) in rationalising the dominance of science over nature. This dualism underpins much of Western metaphysical thought and has deeply influenced how nature and culture are conceptualised as separate and opposing realms. Critiquing the Baconian creed and Western domination over nature, Lynn White (1967: 1205) has also argued that "Christianity, in absolute contrast to ancient paganism and Asia's religions (except, perhaps, Zoroastrianism), not only established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God's will that man exploit nature for his proper end". The separation of nature and society as two distinct entities, assigning ontological priority to the former. This became a foundational principle of Western thought and perception which resulted in subsequent segregation and alienation from nature (Hunt and Berkes 2003: 53; Jarwar et al. 2024). However, the diverse cultures found in South East Asia and South Asia have a myriad animistic approaches to nature (Århem and Sprenger 2015; Guillou 2017; Erb and Ong 2018). In the *Rig Veda*, Earth and Heaven are often addressed as a single being thereby erasing the biblical gulf between the creator and the creation (Wilson 1850). The worship of trees, animals, and the close affinity of humans with nature was not only confined to the scriptures and epics, but also finds representation in various Indus Valley Civilisation artefacts, and even in contemporary religious practice and Indigenous lifestyles in India (Coates 1998; Danino 2011; Baindur 2015; Sharma and Biswas 2024). Even in contemporary times, various Indigenous cultures resort to worshipping various

aspects of nature. Traditional practices and rituals such as worshipping particular plant species, for example Basil (*Tulsi*), the Banyan tree, and *Sijou* (scientific name: Euphorbia splendens), as well as certain non-human creatures such as cows, snakes, and dogs, are still prevalent in cultures across India. Certain cultures also see themselves as parts of nature. For instance, the Idu Mishmi people, and the Naga people believe that tigers are their elder brothers and so killing a tiger is considered taboo (Aiyadurai 2021). Among the Angami Nagas *Kepenuopfü* means birth mother or the birth spirit and is often given representation in Kire's novels. For instance, in *When the River Sleeps* (Kire 2014: 191), the protagonist proclaims, "Sky is my father, Earth is my mother, *Kepenuopfü* fights for me!" as a prayer for protection. The novel showcases the life of Vilie the hunter and how he not only derives his sustenance from the forest but also sees the forest as his wife:

> The forest was his wife indeed: providing him with sanctuary when he most needed it; and food when his rations were inadequate. The forest also protected him from the evil in the heart of man. He felt truly wedded to her… (Ibid.: 51)

Thus, such beliefs and narratives often nullify or contradict the general Western perception which separates nature from human society, thereby rendering the Western knowledge system insufficient to perceive the human–nature or human–non-human relationship in the context of India vis-à-vis Indigenous societies. How then, must we configure our notions of broaching upon the narratives of negotiating representations of folk and forest, especially in fiction that contrasts with the Western perception of nature? David Abram, Tema Milstein, and José Castro-Sotomayor (2020: 7) in "Interbreathing Ecocultural Identity in the Humilocene", have expressed concerns at the poverty of nomenclature of what is termed 'nature' and how nature is often thought of as 'the other' of culture. In some Indigenous societies' concepts, such as *Pachamama*[1] among the Quechua people of South America, or *Minobimaatisiiwin*[2] among the Anishinabeg community in North America, show the relationship between a community and the elemental world, where hierarchies or human domination over nature do not exist. Since such concepts or worldviews do not exist in those communities, their languages do not have specific words to underscore the nature–culture binary. The same is true of the Indigenous peoples of northeast India. However, with the advent of Western religion, language, and modernity the concept of the nature–cultural binary has made its presence felt in their new life-ways. Recent trends in environmental humanities explore the human–nature relationship through the framework of cultural ecology, green humanism, postcolonial ecocriticism, and the like. While postcolonial studies are 'inherently anthropocentric', often overlooking environmental concerns (Huggan and Tiffin 2010: 3), ecocriticism as a discipline has not taken into account non-Western ecological concerns and practices (DeLoughrey and Handley 2011: 9; Banerjee 2016: 196). The portmanteau word 'ecoculture' encompasses ecology and culture thereby associating the surroundings and environment with our culture. Therefore, the framework of ecoculture attempts to challenge the tendency to conceive the environment as "separate from or a subsidiary of the economic, political, historical, and cultural and instead situates group and individual ecological affiliations and practices as inextricable from – and mutually constituted with – sociocultural dimensions" (Milstein and Castro-Sotomayor 2020: xviii).

How do stories and narratives advocate a framework for conceiving the myriad representations of environment, culture, and humans? We argue that through ecocultural

representations of their traditions, Indigenous communities navigate the challenges posed by postcolonial modernity and modern religion. With the arrival of Christianity in the early 19th century, accompanied by the influences of postcolonial modernity, the traditional lifestyle of the Indigenous communities residing in the hills of northeast India underwent profound changes. Once deeply rooted in an animistic worldview, these communities now grapple with a transformed understanding of their relationship with the cosmos and their environment, shaped by the tenets of new religious beliefs. This transition from traditional practices to Christian ideologies often necessitates a departure from ancestral customs (Downs 1980), creating a complex interplay that challenges the very essence of their ethnic identity. The tension between preserving age-old traditions and adapting to contemporary values becomes a poignant struggle within these communities (Singh 1987). In some cases, revivalism (Terwiel 1996) among the Indigenous communities has gained traction in the social and political spheres, while the role of writers has become crucial in negotiating these changes as they become powerful agents who can suture the past with the present through critical and creative insight. An instance of cultural performance such as the annual Naga Hornbill Festival (a ten-day annual celebration in Nagaland, held from December 1st to 10th to promote the state's rich cultural heritage and diversity) which showcases the rich cultural tapestry of the 17 different Naga tribes, or preservation of spiritual spaces such as the Sacred Groves in Meghalaya state, show the process of infusing the past with the present. Through their writings, these writers reimagine and reconstruct traditional narratives, infusing them with contemporary relevance while maintaining their cultural significance. This rich and dynamic process allows for the preservation of residual folk culture, which is retold and reshaped with a new perspective that often incorporates Christian elements. For instance, in the poem "The Old Story-Teller", Temsula Ao (2013: 240) postulates the responsibilities of preserving their culture and tradition, while at the same time showing the changes brought about by colonialism and Western thought and knowledge:

> I have lived my life believing
> Storytelling was my proud legacy
> . . .
> Warriors and were-tigers
> Came alive through the tales
> As did the various animals
> Who were once our brothers
> Until we invented language
> And began calling them savage.

Similarly, Kire's *Son of the Thundercloud* (2016) weaves the popular story of the Tiger, the Spirit, and the Man, with the fabric of biblical allusion (Biswas 2018). Although Kire was reemphasising the socio-cultural transformation in Naga society, anthropogenic concerns afflicting the Naga society become apparent. Mamang Dai, a novelist from Arunachal Pradesh, has expressed similar concern in her novels *Stupid Cupid* (2009), and *Legends of Pensam* (2006) (see also Biswas 2023). Dai laments the gradual despoilation of nature and the destruction of social customs due to the emasculating influences of modernity in Arunachal Pradesh. These important literary works from northeast

India triangulate modernity, ecology, and culture in reinforcing the adverse impact of anthropogenic activity in the region.

Anthropologists Cymene Howe and Anand Pandian (2016) have analysed the spatiotemporal context of the Anthropocene epoch by postulating a possible outcome, thereby conceptualising fiction and forests as a platform to juxtapose and focus on culture and environmental change:

> What happens … when the destruction of forests for mineral resources is conceived from the standpoint of enduring indigenous relationships with the land, or the ecopolitics of those who insist on collaborating with the forest as a sentient being? … Lodged in such terms are stories that can help us to imagine the fearsome domain of human agency in unexpected ways… seek to confront the challenge of vision and sensibility, of finding new means of conceiving, engaging, and expressing the felt impasses of the present.

As ecoculture encompasses our environment as it does our culture, the geological and heterogeneous forces behind climate change and environmental upheaval as well as our lifestyle, the food we eat, and the stories we tell are all associated with and can be seen as the by-products of our ecoculture. The stories and narratives of northeast India abound in multifaceted representations of ecoculture, as can be seen in novels such as *The Forest Beneath the Mountains* by Ankush Saikia (2021), and *The Forest Wails* by Anuradha Sharma Pujari (2021). While these writers broach contemporary environmental issues in their fiction, Kire and Dai bring out poignant resonances of tribal ethnicity and tribal ecoculture. Kire's fiction is a conglomeration of folklore and mythical symbols which can also be interpreted as commentaries on socio-cultural and environmental scenarios. A recurrent setting of Kire's fiction and stories is the forests of Nagaland.

One prominent aspect of *The Rain-Maiden and the Bear-Man* is the amalgamation of the Christian faith and the traditional beliefs of the Nagas. The onset of colonisation in India brought forth the advent of Christianity and most of the tribes from the Naga hills were converted to Christianity. The author refers to the biblical story of how animals were created, but later laments the death of the war spirit and the age-old beliefs and traditions, such as those of were-tigers, *Kepenuopfü*, and others. Thus, in the anthologised story "The Weretigerman", while Kire (2021: 65–72) refers to the biblical allusion of the Lamb, she also associates the son with the spirit of the tiger. This implication is crucial because it shows the freedom one can exercise to choose between Christian practices and Naga traditional practices. At the same time, Christianity foregrounds the nature–culture divide as well as traditional Naga customs and practices, while also contrarily blurring the distinction between humans and non-humans–nature. The next section discusses Kire's work and how it transcends the nature–culture binary.

THE SENTIENT FORESTS, THE SPIRITS, AND THE FOLK WORLD

Unlike any other region of India, in the northeast, where much of the forest area is listed as 'unclassified', the administrative control and management of the forest primarily falls to rural people and communities, and Indigenous Cultural Institutions such as village councils, chieftainships, etc. (George and Yhome 2008). A deep-rooted connection

with forests is evident in the culture and traditional practices of the people of Nagaland and almost 80% of the natural resources are under the control of the different tribal communities living in that region. At the same time, both land and forest are treated the same in Nagaland and people do not differentiate these two landforms in their value, usage, and preservation (ibid.). Even items of cultural significance such as log drums, various items of agriculture and household items are made from wood and bamboo. Again, Naga myths, customs, and traditions also revolve around forests. To quote J. P. Mills (1926: 215), "The religion of the Ao [one of the tribes of Nagaland] is not a moral code. It is a system of ceremonies", and before the advent of Christianity, superstitious ceremonies and practices were handed down to the Naga people by tradition rooted in belief in deities and spirits. Every tree, plant, hill, and water body was believed to harbour spirits and demons, good and malevolent (Robinson 1841; Ao 2014). Similar traditions also exist among the Adi community[3] living in Arunachal Pradesh. For instance, Claire S. Scheid (2024: 108–109) writes:

> The *Epom* [a non-human entity believed to reside in the forest] is also a central figure in Adi cosmology: the first *Epom* was the brother of the first human, sparking centuries of quarrels between the siblings. Mythology describes how disagreements between the two determined wildlife characteristics and relegated the Adi to the plains and the *Epom* to the jungle. Multiple stories in circulation today describe hunters who have disappeared or fallen deathly ill after returning from the forest – misfortunes that are believed to have been caused by the *Epom* in response to the human's violation of the sacred jungle regulations.

Even natural occurrences such as rain and thunder, famine, and floods, and even illness and disease, were believed to be caused by spirits and demons, which is why people often sought answers for maladies or misfortunes in seers and forests. Sociologists have defined the pre-modern Naga religion as animistic, emphasising "defied [sic] manifestations of nature and propitiation of spirits both benevolent and malevolent" (Ao 2014: 43). Thereby, people didn't see themselves as entities separate from nature but as dependent on it, and even parts of nature as illustrated in Kire's (2014; 2021) literary works. Thus, narratives are often dotted with a mixture of animism, supernaturalism, and superstition. However, the practice of building temples or shrines did not exist and the Naga people made sacrifices by offering eggs, fowl, pigs, and dogs to please the keeper (spirits) and deities of the site and to ward off any evil spirits from harming them. They worshipped the spirits without objects and material images (Ao 2014: 48). Thus, the relationship of the Naga with the land is not limited to material and economic fulfilment but it is social, and heavily ritualised, a glimpse of which is often found in the folklore of the various tribes of Nagaland.

Folklore that was passed to the younger generations from their elders was seen as a significant way of preserving cultural traditions while at the same time explicating the importance of storytelling. Folktales and oral narratives, apart from offering various solutions, customs, and practices, also fostered a sense of community instilling a sense of history and belonging. The storytelling practice of the Nagas was also seen as a type of education with stories exchanged as a form of learning. This practice was crucial in developing a sense of identity by identifying their rich culture and disseminating history. (Longkumer 2019: 75) Although the Naga have had over a century of formal

education, much of their folklore and many of their oral narratives continue to exist in oral tradition, with some appearing in fiction. *The Rain-Maiden and the Bear-Man* (2021) offers tales woven in magic realism juxtaposed with oral narratives from Nagaland. The stories depict certain beliefs and culture of the Nagas while at the same time encapsulating socio-ecological changes aggravating the contemporary derangement of human and nonhuman.

The eponymous story of the collection, "The Rain-Maiden and the Bear-Man" (Kire 2021: 1–6), not only tells the story of two mythical creatures, the Rain-Maiden who was deeply loved by the Bear-Man, but also exemplifies the cruelty abounding the human world, sharply contrasting it with the kindness of the Bear-Man, which the latter endeavours to conceal. The Bear-Man was a human once but had turned mysteriously into a bear, "Son of a man who set out hunting but then did not return for two years, who had wandered into the woods and there been turned into a bear" (ibid.: 3). This instance not only projects forests as the site for the supernatural and magical but also shows belief in *Tekhumiavi*, which Kire (2014: 235) defines as a were-tiger, "a phenomenon amongst the Tenyimia people[4] where certain members of the tribe can transform their spirits into tigers". In the early years of the 20th century, J. H. Hutton, the British Anthropologist in *Leopard-Men in the Naga Hills* (1920), recorded the Naga practice of projecting one's soul into non-human animals. Similarly, Michael Heneise (2016) also talks about therianthropy and the Naga tiger-man. Similarly, Naga folktales abound in transformation tales, be it of were-tigers, or hornbills. Such tales of transformation also exist amongst other tribes and cultures. For instance, a Jakwil Shangma Snal from the Garo Hills in the Indian state Meghalaya, said that the Achiks (hill people) believe that human beings can transform themselves, consciously or unconsciously, into animals such as tigers, elephants, deer or any other beast or reptile at their own will and could retain that form as long as they desired (Rongmuthu 1960: 112–113). Such narratives portray how certain beliefs often identify humans as part of nature. When identified thus, forests become a sort of homely shelter for them. At the same time, there are certain taboos against killing some animals (such as tigers), and customs for funeral rites after such an act.

After the man turned into a bear, he was afraid that the Rain-Maiden might scoff at his ugliness so he retaliated with the cruelty he had received from the human world:

> She thought I was kind – no one has ever said that to me. People think I am a troublemaker. They're always trying to shoot me. Small boys throw stones at me with their slingshots. The flesh wound from the hunter's gun last summer still troubles me. No, people don't think I'm kind at all. And other animals…if they saw me going soft they'd be all over me. (Kire 2021: 5)

The human world is often portrayed as cruel and selfish in the narratives of human–non-human relationships. The character of the bear-man also encapsulates the Janus-faced perception of the world of human and non-human–nature:

> Bear man was half-man, half-bear – not a man in a bear's body, as his father had been. Only half of him understood the world of men. The other was all bear, attacking humans if they ever stepped into his hunting grounds. This same half didn't mind the bees swarming after him. (Ibid.: 3)

Thus, after his transformation, his perception of the human world changed. He started acknowledging the cruel side of humans and associated with non-human beings as his kin. The transformation into a bear-man also made him question his true self and identity, for he "struggled with his true self and the image (of being unkind) which he had built up over the years for his protection" (ibid.: 6). Another story, "The Man Who Became a Bear" (ibid.: 59–64), a continuation of the first story, narrates the part where the bear-man, out of hunger, was going to eat corn from the fields but the villagers ended up shooting him. The narrative is significant here for the bear-man's perspective changes after turning into a bear. When the bear-man saw a she-bear approaching with a bear cub, he was terrified that they would attack him, but they did not, thus identifying animal kinship.

Forests are also seen as the sight of plenitude and bounty in contrast to the human world where fields and orchards are heavily guarded and no sort of trespassing is allowed. For instance, when the bear-man sees the field of corn, he assumes, "he [the bear-man] had not eaten for such a long time. Surely, they won't miss a few ears [of corn]" (ibid.: 64). When he sees humans, he is hopeful that the humans will hear his plea and help him. But what transpired was quite contrary to his expectations. The villagers saw the bear as hostile and a threat – something which we, as readers, are aware of – and they end up attacking him. Thus, in this narrative, the forest becomes a site of safety for non-humans, a haven where non-human beings can remain safe from human destruction. No sooner did the bear-man cross the threshold of the jungle and enter the agricultural land of the humans, than the former was shot. Again, at the same time, the forest also becomes the site of transformation, where, along with physical transformation, the perception of the mind also changes.

"The Weretigerman" (Kire 2021: 65–72) tells the story of how certain men were destined to become tigermen. Tsaricho and his grandfather were said to be were-tigermen, however, Tsaricho's son was different: "The lad attended the Mission school and sang the songs of the Lamb" (ibid.: 67). Here, one can notice the transformation that takes place due to the influence of Christianity. The story further shows how Tsaricho's son would fear the sight of the tiger's marks unlike his father, Tsaricho, symbolising the close-knit relation that the were-tigermen had with tigers. The story also shows how his grandfather's spirit was attached to that of the tiger: "From the day the tiger was killed, Tsaricho's great-grandfather began to die too" (ibid.: 69), thereby depicting the Tenyimia tribe's *Tekhumiavi* phenomenon. It can also be argued here that despite the wide-scale acceptance of Christianity and Christian beliefs, the Naga traditional and animistic beliefs were preserved as well as upheld in their oral narratives and folklore, with the imagery of the forest providing the platform for broaching their traditional beliefs. As Stefano Beggiora and Victoria May Exley (2024: 154) observe, "The theme of brotherhood between men and tigers is also found widely in the traditional cycles of the Nocte and Minyong[5] legends". A version of the Mishmi[6] story proposes that the two brothers, man and tiger, were conceived simultaneously in the womb of the same mother and even grew up together, while the Tagins[7] of central Arunachal believe that men and tigers were "born in the same time frame from the same ancestor" (ibid.: 147). According to an ancient Angami Naga legend, in the forest, there is a source of blood or reddish water which vests men with the ability to transform into a tiger (ibid.: 155;

Hutton 1920: 42). Thus, the forest becomes a site for the transformation of the human and non-human and provides a threshold to negotiate the spiritual world.

Another anthologised story, entitled "Forest Song", (Kire 2021: 7–18) shows the efficacy of spirits on humans. People believed that if someone listened to the forest song (sung by the spirits), they would be lured into the forest and go missing, and even if they returned or were found, they would undergo a startling change (ibid: 9). When Bise's mother Zeno disappeared suddenly, people assumed that she had been lured by the forest song. However, when they saw that she suffered physical injuries, they doubted whether it was the work of the spirits: "Didn't you notice her face was black and blue? That she couldn't get out of bed for three weeks because two of her ribs were broken? Have you ever heard of spirits beating up people?" (ibid.: 11). This instance foregrounds the belief that even when spirits are at times seen as malevolent beings, they are believed not to be as evil-minded as humans. A similar narrative resonates in *Legends of Pensam* by Dai (2006: 136):

> Their granary doors had been broken and all their precious beads and jewels were stolen. The thunderstruck victims could not imagine how anyone could have done such a thing.
> 'It is like the work of spirits.'
> 'Maybe it was the spirits.'
> 'Who else would do such a thing?'
> 'Don't blame the spirits. Only men do such things!'

A similar representation is recurrent in the story "Forest Song" as well. When Zeno was chased by Bise's father, fearing for her life, she ran deep into the forest. She kept running until she stumbled upon an unknown woman. When Zeno told the woman that an "evil man" was chasing her, the woman assured her she was safe and sheltered Zeno in her company. However, Zeno never returned home and people opined that the forest spirits had taken her away. This instance exemplified another superstition: the people believed that names have power over destinies and that Zeno's name could be misinterpreted as 'the-one-who-can-be-taken', hence the spirits took her away. However, the story ironically highlights how people at times fail to identify the fear and evil residing amongst them and often misinterpret the world of non-human and more-than-human entities as malevolent. Therefore, much like in the story "The Rain-Maiden and the Bear-Man", the forest here too becomes a site for shelter from human atrocities.

In a similar context, in the story "The New Road" (Kire 2021: 19–24), the boundaries between the human and spirit world are blurred and the evil is given a nuanced representation, which further aggravates the human–non-human discourse. Nonetheless, there are stories and beliefs that portray certain aspects of the non-human as evil.

In the story "River and Earth" (ibid.: 25–34), Kire tells a Nigerian tale about a river spirit known as *mammy-wota*, i.e. mother of the water, in Nigeria and how the *mammy-wota* had consumed a young man after giving him all the riches of the world. Kire then connects the Nigerian story of *mammy-wota* to a similar Naga anecdote of an encounter with a river spirit. However, Kire (ibid.: 31) also justified the river spirit's attack on men: "It was a mistake to build on the river-bed. It angers the spirits because it is a taboo." Similar taboos are also prevalent in other northeastern states. For instance, in the story "The Scarlet *Haophi*[8]" (Chanu 2019: 108–130) from the anthology of Manipuri short sto-

ries *Wari* by Linthoi Chanu, despite the warnings of the elders a family had built their home on a marshland that happened to be a sacred groove (trees believed to be inhabited by gods and worshipped by people, cutting them was forbidden). When they start living there, some mysterious spirits take away their child only to return it after many days. Such stories not only focus on ancient superstitions and beliefs but also highlight how nature and traditions suffer oppression at the hands of reckless and unplanned development.

Parallels can be drawn to such narratives to refer to the contemporary ecological crisis and environmental disruptions at hand. Such stories take into consideration the existence of the non-human and the unknown and posit the perils and precarity that might occur if the boundaries are not respected. Such folklore and narratives highlight the harmony which traditional belief and indigenous knowledge systems maintain between humans and Nature, a harmony that has been disrupted at the advent of colonial modernity and worsened by capitalistic and so-called 'developmental' practices. Such narratives also see the forest as the space of spirits while protecting the forest from human exploitation. In Naga culture and folklore, forests are also seen as the site for spirits and demons. The anthologised story "The Man Who Lost His Spirit" (Kire 2021: 35–43) shows how a man brings back his spirit from the forest. This is similar to the traditional practices of healing which were popular among several tribes even beyond the Naga hills. In central Arunachal Pradesh, among the Digaru, Miju, Idu and other tribes, some powerful shamans are more than healers because they can also control the consciousness and can even communicate with the deities of the forest and influence the behaviour of animals such as tigers (Beggiora and Exley 2024: 147). "The Man Who Lost His Spirit" also upholds the traditional faith of the Naga: "Sky is my father, Earth is my mother, I believe in *Kepenuopfü*" (ibid.: 42). *Kepenuopfü* refers to the supreme God or their birth spirit and the close association of the character with the sky and earth shows how dependent the people were on Nature. It can also be asserted here that, when referring to biblical anecdotes, Kire associates the Naga tribal practices and the indomitable Naga spirit with the tiger spirit by showing that the war spirit cannot be mellowed by the Lamb. Kire foregrounds the traditional Naga beliefs and practices to further highlight the distinction of nature–culture which is predominant in Christianity. On the contrary, the traditional pre-Christian Naga beliefs and practices show an inter-relationship between the human, non-human, and the spirit. A similar portrayal is also shown in the novel *When the River Sleeps* (Kire 2014): each time the protagonist of the novel, Vilie, is attacked by mysterious forces, he cries out "Sky is my father, Earth is my mother, stand aside death! *Kepenuopfü* fights for me." (Ibid.: 105) This worked like a protection charm.

A similar context is found in the *Bhúmi súkta* of the *Atharva Veda* as well: "I am the son of Earth, Earth is my Mother" (Griffith 1895). *Son of the Thundercloud* (Kire 2016) also depicts a similar context and encapsulates how nature plays an important role in sustaining their livelihood, and how their beliefs and faith revolve around the non-human and the forest by identifying certain characters as parts of the non-human–nature itself.

The story "The Silver Dzuli" (Kire 2021: 73–81) resonates with the mythical transformation, "He felt his whole body dissolving into nothingness…oneness with the illimitable sky and the immortal warrior-spirits" (ibid: 75). A similar representation of the humans being turned into spirits is found in *Son of the Thundercloud* (Kire 2016) where

both the sisters of the tiger-widow undergo a mythical transformation and become spirits. The story "One Day" (Kire 2021: 53–58) depicts the creation myth of how God came down to earth one day and created life, various animals, and birds as well as 'man'. But, man, smaller than most other animals, was frightened of the bigger beasts and therefore requested God to give him strength or protection. One day, God complied and gave him a 'firestick' but instructed man not to light it unless necessary for it was extremely powerful. He did not abide by God's words and, unable to retain his curiosity, lit it. Angered by that, God took it away but man begged and begged God to give it back. So, God instructed man how to make one. After man made another firestick, he killed an elephant. Parallels can be drawn from this story to illustrate the activities of humans as a geological force (Chakrabarty 2021: 209) rendering the Anthropocene epoch, portraying relentless killing of animals and species, destruction of forestlands and glaciers for selfish motives thereby bringing climate change and environmental derangement. Ankush Saikia's *The Forest Beneath the Mountains* (2021) corresponds to the destruction and devastation carried out by man by dint of the power he wields. The act of man's merciless killing of other animals is not a recent development but has been in prevalence since the ancient days; how the activity of hunting went from being a necessary method of survival to being a royal game and later a merry sport illustrating the cruelty inherent in the human world. It can be asserted here that such narratives, by broaching a return to the past, an enquiry into the mythical and mysterious, often give space for ecological and social contemplation. Thus, forests become the site of ecocultural discourse where human activities in the Anthropocene are negotiated and interrogated.

CONCLUSION

In the context of a sustainable future and environmental derangement, one might argue the relevance of storytelling, myth and folklore. However, to quote Barbara Henderson (2022: 101), "As storytellers, our gift to the globe lies in the *what ifs*. *What if* humanity chose a path of less consumption and more creativity? *What if* we chose a path of less interference and more imagination?" Thus, narratives and stories offer a platform for contemplation and interrogation: what if non-humans wielded the power that certain human beings wield today? What if non-humans could narrate their own stories, in their own language? Narratives and stories enable us to chart a sustainable future by retracing the traditional and indigenous knowledge systems and negotiating the contemporary global and planetary crisis (Chakrabarty 2021). Narratives provide space for analysing and questioning 'technology' and 'development' in the name of modernity while at the same time acknowledging the rampart machinery of corruption. Certain institutions, departments and capitalistic ventures engage in corrupt practices and give way to destroying the environment, agricultural lands turn into graveyards of harmful fertilisers and genetically modified crops, while factories and industries generate rampant wastes and pollution. Such instances often probe the ambivalent roles of development and science-technology and the destruction and pollution that has occurred in such a short span of two centuries. Even the depiction of nature–non-human in various audio-visual media such as the Discovery channel is informative and insightful, but is not free of the Western perception of nature, which sees it as a separate entity.

In this context, it can be asserted that storytelling is one of the ways to broach concerns about the environment and sustainability. Considering the limitations of Western paradigms of perceiving nature, narratives and oral literature accommodate traditional and Indigenous knowledge systems. Kire's retelling of Naga folktales in the platter of fiction reinstates the role of storytelling as imparting education, identifying their rich culture and disseminating history. Kire's fiction, by representing folklore, portrays their way of life and philosophy, bringing out a connectedness to the natural world and thereby heralding the possibility of a sustainable future. By accommodating the non-human world of animals, trees, spirits and magic, Kire interweaves ecocultural representations of the natural world of forests lakes and rivers in Naga myth and experience. Kire (2021: 71) shrouds the narrative in supernaturalism and mystery: "Could it be, he wondered, that there was some truth in the story that Man, Spirit and Tiger were once brothers?", thereby giving voice to the generally voiceless non-humans in the Anthropocene and thus questioning the position of humans in the greater scheme of precarity and nature.

NOTES

1 *Pachamama*, a fertility goddess in Inca and Andean mythology, implying the regenerative as well as destructive power of mother earth.

2 To keep communities and individuals in line with natural law, the Anishinabeg community believes that good life and continuous rebirth is central to their value system. *Minobimaatisiiwin* implies honouring life in every from, of past and the present, maintaining a balance between humans and the ecosystem.

3 The Adi are one of the major tribal groups in Arunachal Pradesh, inhabiting in the Himalayan hill districts of West Siang and East Siang. The name 'Adi' translates to 'hill people'. They have several sub-tribes. They are known for their traditional way of life, which is intricately linked to the region's bio-resources, sustainable agricultural and day to day practices.

4 Tenyimia is a collective group of Naga comprising of the Angami, Chakhesang, Rengma, Pochury, Mao, Poumai, Zeliangrong, Maram, Thangal and Inpui tribes.

5 Minyong is an ethnic group primarily living in northeast Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh. Their language belongs to the Tibeto-Burman language family.

6 The Mishmi people are an ethnic group of Tibet and Arunachal Pradesh, India.

7 The Tagin are a major tribe in Arunachal Pradesh, located primarily in Upper Subansiri district.

8 *Haophi* is a traditional winter shawl made by Manipuri tribes.

REFERENCES

Abram, David; Tema Milstein and José Castro-Sotomayor. 2020. Interbreathing Ecocultural Identity in the Humilocene. – *Routledge Handbook of Ecocultural Identity*, edited by Tema Milstein and José Castro-Sotomayor. London; New York: Routledge, 5–25. DOI: https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351068840-1.

Aiyadurai, Ambika. 2021. *Tigers Are Our Brother: Anthropology of Wildlife Conservation in Northeast India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Ao, Lanukumla. 2014. Deforestation in Nagaland: A Historical Perspective. A Doctoral Dissertation. Kohima: Nagaland University. https://nagalanduniv.ndl.gov.in/items/a628c207-3b45-4bef-9f05-9ef2231c39c0 (accessed October 20, 2025).

Ao, Temsula. 2013. The Old Story-Teller. – *Book of Songs: Collected Poems 1988–2007*. Nagaland: Heritage Publishing House, 240–242.

Århem, Kaj and Guido Sprenger, eds. 2015. *Animism in Southeast Asia*. New York: Routledge. DOI: https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315660288.

Bacon, Francis. 2000 [1620]. *Novum Organum*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Baindur, Meera. 2015. *Nature in Indian Philosophy and Cultural Traditions*. Singapore: Springer. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-81-322-2358-0.

Banerjee, Mita. 2016. Ecocriticism and Postcolonial Studies. – *Handbook of Ecocriticism and Cultural Ecology*, edited by Hubert Zapf. Berlin; Boston, MA: De Gruyter, 194–207. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110314595-012.

Beggiora, Stefano and Victoria May Exley. 2024. Coexistence in the Anthropocene: Tigers and Humans of the Dibang Valley. – *The Oriental Anthropologistt: A Bi-Annual International Journal of the Science of Man* 24 (1): 141–165. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/0972558X241227858.

Biswas, Debajyoti. 2018. Confluence of Myth and Reality in *Son of the Thundercloud*. – *MZU Journal of Literature and Cultural Studies* 5 (2): 152–173.

Biswas, Debajyoti. 2023. Urban Spaces and Fading Culture in Mamang Dai's Fictions. – *The City Speaks: Urban Spaces in Indian Literature*, edited by Subashish Bhattacharjee and Goutam Karmakar. New York: Routledge, 157–165.

Chakrabarty, Dipesh. 2021. The Climate of History: Four Theses. – *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 197–222.

Chanu, Linthoi. 2019. *Wari: A Collection of Manipuri Short Stories*. India: Notion Press.

Coates, Peter. 1998. *Nature: Western Attitudes since Ancient Times*. Berkeley, CA; London; Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press.

Dai, Mamang. 2006. *Legends of Pensam*. India: Penguin Books.

Dai, Mamang. 2009. *Stupid Cupid*. India: Penguin Books.

Danino, Michel. 2011. For the Love of Nature: Two Essays on India and Nature. – *Indian Culture and India's Future*. New Delhi: DK Printworld, 88–103.

DeLoughrey, Elizabeth and George B. Handley. 2011. Introduction: Towards an Aesthetics of the Earth. – *Postcolonial Ecologies: Literatures of the Environment*, edited by Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George B. Handley. New York: Oxford University Press, 3–39. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:osobl/9780195394429.003.0001.

Descartes, Rene. 1993 [1641]. *Meditations on First Philosophy*, translated by Donald Cress. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company.

Downs, Frederick S. 1980. Christianity as a Tribal Response to Change in Northeast India. – *Missiology: An International Review* 8 (4): 407–416. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/009182968000800404.

Erb, Maribeth and Chin Ee Ong, eds. 2018. *Theming Asia: Culture, Nature and Heritage in a Transforming Environment*. New York; London: Routledge. DOI: https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203732373.

George, Jacob and Khrietuo Yhome. 2008. Community Forest Management: A Case Study of Nagaland, India. – *Digital Library of the Commons*: 1–13. https://hdl.handle.net/10535/2185 (accessed July 5, 2025).

Griffith, Ralph T. H., transl. 1895. *Hymns of the Atharva Veda*, 12.1.12. https://sacred-texts.com/hin/av/av12001.htm (accessed November 11, 2025).

Guillou, Anne Yvonne. 2017. Potent Places and Animism in Southeast Asia. – *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* (Special Issue: *Potent Places in Southeast Asia*) 18 (5): 389–399. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/14442213.2017.1401324.

Henderson, Barbara. 2022. Just Imagine. – *Fantasy and Myth in the Anthropocene: Imagining Futures and Dreaming Hope in Literature and Media*, edited by Marek Oziewicz, Brian Attebery and Tereza Dědinová. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 101–102. DOI: https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350203372.ch-014.

Heneise, Michael. 2016. The Naga Tiger-Man and the Modern Assemblage of a Myth. – *Anthropology and Cryptozoology*, edited by Samantha Hurn. New York: Routledge, 91–106.

Howe, Cymene and Anand Pandian. 2016. Introduction: Lexicon for an Anthropocene Yet Unseen. – *Society for Cultural Anthropology*. https://culanth.org/fieldsights/introduction-lexicon-for-an-anthropocene-yet-unseen (accessed July 5, 2025).

Huggan, Graham and Helen Tiffin. 2010. Introduction. – *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*, edited by Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin. New York: Routledge, 1–24. DOI: https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203498170.

Hunt, Iain J. Davidson and Fikret Berkes. 2003. Nature and Society through the Lens of Resilience. – *Navigating Social-Ecological Systems: Building Resilience for Complexity and Change*, edited by Fikret Berkes, Johan Colding and Carl Folke. New York: Cambridge University Press, 53–82.

Hutton, J. H. 1920. Leopard-Men in the Naga Hills. – *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 50: 41–51. DOI: https://doi.org/10.2307/2843373.

Inglis, David and John Bone. 2006. Boundary Maintenance, Border Crossing and the Nature/Culture Divide. – *European Journal of Social Theory* 9 (2): 272–287. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/1368431006064188.

Jarwar, Mazhar Ali; Stefano Dumontet and Vincenzo Pasquale. 2024. The Natural World in Western Thought. – *Challenges* 15 (1): 17. DOI: https://doi.org/10.3390/challe15010017.

Kire, Easterine. 2014. *When the River Sleeps*. New Delhi: Zubaan.

Kire, Easterine. 2016. *Son of the Thundercloud*. New Delhi: Speaking Tiger.

Kire, Easterine. 2021. *The Rain-Maiden and the Bear-Man*. New Delhi: Seagull Books.

Longkumer, Yimsusangla. 2019. The Socio-Cultural Aspect of Folklore and Folktales Among Ao-Naga Community in Nagaland: A Historiography. – *Suraj Punj Journal for Multidisciplinary Research* 9 (5): 70–83. https://spjmr.com/gallery/8-spjmr-937.f.pdf (accessed July 5, 2025).

Mao, X. P. 2009. The Mao Naga Myth of the Origin of Tiger, Spirit and Humankind. – *The Morung Express*, August 27, 2009. https://morungexpress.com/the-mao-naga-myth-of-the-origin-of-tiger-spirit-and-humankind (accessed July 5, 2025).

Mills, J. P. 1926. *The Ao Nagas*. London: Macmillan and Co. https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.143112 (accessed July 5, 2025).

Milstein, Tema and José Castro-Sotomayor. 2020. Ecocultural Identity: An Introduction. – *Routledge Handbook of Ecocultural Identity*, edited by Tema Milstein and José Castro-Sotomayor. London; New York: Routledge, xvii–xxiii.

Neimanis, Astrida. 2015. No Representation without Colonisation? (Or, Nature Represents Itself). – *Somatechnics* 5 (2): 135–153. DOI: https://doi.org/10.3366/soma.2015.0158.

Neyrat, Frédéric. 2019. *The Unconstructable Earth: An Ecology of Separation*, translated by Drew S. Burk. New York: Fordham University Press. DOI: https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv8jnzp4.
Plumwood, Val. 1993. *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*. London: Routledge.
Pujari, Anuradha Sharma. 2021. *The Forest Wails*, translated by Bhaswati Parashar. Noida: Walnut Publication.
Robinson, William. 1841. *A Descriptive Account of Assam*. Delhi: Sanskaran Prakashak. https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.279285 (accessed July 5, 2025).
Rongmuthu, Dewan Sing. 1960. *The Folk-Tales of the Garos*. Guwahati: University of Gauhati. https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.105523 (accessed July 5, 2025).
Saikia, Ankush. 2021. *The Forest Beneath the Mountains*. New Delhi: Speaking Tiger.
Scheid, Claire S. 2024. The Jungle Lord and the Natural Order: Adi Narratives about the *Epom*. – *The Oriental Anthropologist: A Bi-Annual International Journal of the Science of Man* 24 (1): 108–140. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/0972558X241230660.
Sharma, Susheel Kumar and Debajyoti Biswas. 2024. The Environment in Hindu Consciousness: Revisiting the Sacred Texts. – *Environmental Humanities in India. Asia in Transition* 25, edited by Debajyoti Biswas and John C. Ryan. Singapore: Springer, 35–49. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-97-3933-2_3.
Singh, B. P. 1987. North-East India: Demography, Culture and Identity Crisis. – *Modern Asian Studies* 21 (2): 257–282. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X00013809.
Terwiel, B. J. 1996. Recreating the Past: Revivalism in Northeastern India. – *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 152 (2): 275–292. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1163/22134379-90003014.
White, Lynn. 1967. The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis. – *Science* 155 (3767): 1203–1207. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1126/science.155.3767.1203.
Wilson, H. H. 1850. *Rig Veda*. Bangalore: The Bangalore Printing and Publishing Co. Ltd.