



# When The Tiger Eats The Sun: Indigenous Ecospirituality and The Ethics of Interconnectedness in Easterine Kire's Spirit Nights

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**Abstract-** Easterine Kire's *Spirit Nights* (2022) retells a Chang Naga story of sudden darkness as a crisis in the relations that hold a world together. This essay reads the novel through Indigenous ecospirituality, a term I use for worldviews in which land, animals, ancestors, and spirits are bound to human beings by obligations that are at once ethical, ecological, and sacred. I argue that the novel does not treat nature as a backdrop to a spiritual drama. Its environment acts, remembers, and demands a response, and so the failure of the sun registers as the failure of a moral ecology. Close attention to the cosmic tiger, spirit-stones and boundary markers, agricultural ritual, healing knowledge, and the presence of the dead shows how taboo, restraint, and reciprocity operate in the narrative as forms of environmental ethics. The essay also asks what it costs to read such an ethics too tidily, and it considers how Kire's decision to turn an oral story into a novel makes fiction itself a carrier of ecological memory. Placing Naga cosmology within current environmental humanities, the essay suggests that *Spirit Nights* offers less a program for sustainability than a different account of what counts as ecological knowledge.

**Keywords:** Easterine Kire; *Spirit Nights*; Naga cosmology; Indigenous ecospirituality; ecocriticism; environmental ethics; Indigenous knowledge

## I. Introduction

Environmental crisis has become a question about how we imagine ourselves, as much as a question about carbon and forests. Deforestation, species loss, displacement, and the erosion of local languages all trace back, in part, to the assumption that the nonhuman world is a stock of resources waiting for human use. Indigenous literatures have long worked against that assumption. In them, rivers, hills, animals, ancestors, and spirits are more often kin than commodities, and a person's standing in the world depends on how well those relations are kept.

Easterine Kire, one of the most widely read voices in contemporary Naga writing, has built much of her fiction on this ground. She draws on oral histories, remembered customs, and inherited belief, and she does so without treating them as folklore to be glossed for outsiders. *Spirit Nights* (2022) takes its premise from a Chang Naga story of a sudden and terrifying darkness; the publisher notes that comparable accounts survive among the Chang and Rengma Naga. The novel opens when the seeress Tola announces that the announcement that the tiger has eaten the sun (Kire). What follows is a communal effort to understand what has gone wrong and to bring the light back.

It would be easy to file this as a supernatural adventure set in a picturesque landscape. This essay argues for a harder reading. The darkness is not an interruption of ordinary ecological life by an alien force; it is the visible form of a disorder that the community understands in moral and cosmological terms. In the world of the novel, a failing sun, an angry tiger, a



disturbed stone, and a broken obligation belong to one field of cause and consequence. I call the worldview that sustains this field ecospirituality, and I use it to mean something more specific than a belief that spirits live in nature. It names a system of accountability in which human beings answer to land, to nonhuman beings, to the dead, and to the unborn.

My argument proceeds in four movements. I begin by situating the novel in existing criticism and by setting out the conceptual frame, which draws on ecocriticism and on Fikret Berkes's account of sacred ecology. I then show how the novel gives agency to the nonhuman world, first through the tiger and the darkness and then through sacred landscape. The third movement turns to practice, reading taboo, agriculture, and healing as forms of ecological knowledge. The last considers the dead, the ethics of interconnectedness, the danger of romanticizing that ethics, and the role of storytelling in carrying it forward.

The interpretive problem is not simply whether the narrative represents environmental care. It is how the narrative makes responsibility intelligible before a modern separation of religion, ecology, and governance can be imposed upon it. Its cosmological crisis cannot be reduced to an allegory for contemporary climate change: doing so would turn a culturally particular story into an illustration of a pre-existing global thesis. Instead, the narrative invites readers to consider the conceptual assumptions by which an event becomes recognizable as ecological in the first place.

The present study adopts a qualitative, interpretive method grounded in close reading of the motifs identified in the novel and in dialogue with ecocritical and Indigenous-knowledge scholarship. Its claims concern literary representation, not empirical verification of Naga religious practices or environmental outcomes. This distinction matters because the ethical significance of narrative should not depend on proving that every customary restriction delivers a measurable conservation benefit. The text is read as a work of fiction that stages relationships, uncertainty, and the social transmission of meaning.

## II. Critical Context And Conceptual Frame

Scholarship on Kire has moved steadily toward ecological questions. Earlier work on *When the River Sleeps* treated forests, rivers, herbal knowledge, and spirit belief as parts of a single Naga ecological consciousness. Ngone and Imsong read Naga spiritual cosmology through oral narrative and several of Kire's novels, and Mero and Devi describe her fiction as a store of ecological knowledge and traditional wisdom. Work on *Spirit Nights* itself is recent and growing. Adak reads the novel as an "Indigenous ecotopia," stressing animism, ecopsychology, the cosmic tiger, and Tola's role as a mediator between human and spirit worlds. Esabella and Aravind trace the links among culture, ecology, and sustainable practice, while Herchandani and Kumari connect the novel's environmental consciousness to deep ecology, taboo, and sustainability.

These studies establish that ecology and spirituality matter in the novel. What they tend to do is name the two as parallel themes. I want to press on the connection: in *Spirit Nights* the spiritual is the form the ecological takes, and the reverse is equally true. The question that follows is how a cosmology generates obligations, and what happens in the story when those obligations are met or neglected.

Three theoretical resources help here. Cheryll Glotfelty's broad definition of ecocriticism as the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment (xviii) gives the field its basic task. Lawrence Buell's idea of the environmental text, in which the nonhuman world is a presence and not merely a frame, sharpens that task by asking whether the environment has a role in the plot (7-8). Buell's examples are drawn from American nature writing, so his criteria need adjustment for a text like Kire's, where the line between environment and agent is drawn differently. Berkes supplies the adjustment. His concept of sacred ecology holds that Indigenous ecological knowledge is carried in belief, ritual, and social institution, so that it cannot be extracted from its cultural setting without distortion .



Read together, the three suggest a way of reading in which the novel's religious and social life is examined as ecological practice.

Ecocriticism is useful here precisely where its inherited categories are placed under pressure. An approach that treats landscape as scenery might ask how accurately Kire describes a region; an approach that treats landscape as active asks what kinds of relationships are made possible when hills, stones, and creatures cannot be regarded as inert. Buell's account of environmental presence therefore provides an opening rather than a finished taxonomy. The reader must still attend to the particular grammar of agency established by the story (Buell).

Berkes's account of ecological knowledge embedded in social institutions complicates the temptation to separate practical knowledge from belief. Practices that outsiders might label spiritual can organize the timing of labor, limits on conduct, and communal obligations. This does not make ritual identical with ecological science, nor does it mean that all taboos are environmentally beneficial. It suggests that knowledge may circulate through more than explicit propositions and may survive in narrative forms that require interpretation (Berkes).

Kimmerer's writing offers a complementary language of reciprocity, but comparison requires caution. The traditions she discusses are not interchangeable with Chang Naga cosmology. Her work is valuable as an interlocutor on the ethical possibilities of relationship, not as a universal key to Indigenous thought (Kimmerer). Such distinctions protect the literary specificity of Kire's fiction while allowing a conversation across different approaches to human and more-than-human worlds.

### **III. A Nature That Acts: Darkness And The Tiger**

The first thing the novel does is refuse to let the environment stay still. When the sun vanishes, the community does not describe an eclipse. It describes an event with an agent and a motive, and Tola's cry places the celestial, the animal, and the human in a single sentence. The sky is not empty space above the village; it is a participant whose condition the village must interpret.

The tiger is the novel's most compressed image of this logic. It is recognizably an animal, with the weight and menace of a hunting predator, and it is also a cosmic presence large enough to swallow the sun. Readers who insist on sorting it into "natural" or "supernatural" will find the sorting resists them, and that resistance is the point. The distinction between nature and supernature belongs to a worldview in which the physical and the spiritual have been pulled apart. Kire's narrative begins from the opposite premise.

Because the tiger acts, the human response cannot be purely instrumental. No hunter's skill or warrior's strength settles the matter. The crisis demands that the community read signs, consult the seeress, recall inherited knowledge, and act with courage and moral seriousness. Power over the problem is replaced by relationship to it. Here the novel quietly unsettles anthropocentrism, since it will not let human beings be the sole authors of events. Adak makes a related point when he reads the tiger as both a biological presence and a psychological one inside the Chang Naga world, and I would add that the two registers do not compete. The tiger is dangerous in the body and meaningful in the mind because, in this cosmology, those are not separate kinds of truth.

Darkness changes the ordinary conditions of collective life. Its importance lies not only in the loss of illumination but also in the collapse of predictable rhythms through which people coordinate work, safety, and expectation. The community must respond to an event that exceeds any individual's knowledge. Read in this way, the absence of sunlight dramatizes dependence: what appears most constant in the environment becomes suddenly unavailable, exposing the fragility of human control.



The tiger's doubleness resists a familiar critical move in which a supernatural figure is translated into a purely symbolic one. To call it merely a metaphor for fear would remove the cosmological force of the story; to treat it solely as a literal predator would miss its place in the narrative's structure of explanation. Its literary work occurs between these possibilities. The tiger makes agency visible where a modern naturalistic account might perceive only an event. The novel thereby challenges the assumption that ecological understanding begins when spiritual interpretation ends.

Tola's interpretive authority is significant because it makes the response to crisis a matter of listening. Rather than rewarding immediate domination of a threatening creature, the narrative foregrounds discernment and communal attention. The distinction is ethical: the question becomes what the community owes to a disturbed order, not simply which technique will restore a desirable condition. The novel's environmental imagination is thus organized around answerability rather than mastery.

#### **IV. Land As Archive: Sacred Landscape, Spirit-Stones, And Boundaries**

If the tiger shows that the nonhuman world can act, the landscape shows that it can remember. Forests, fields, stones, and boundaries in the novel are read through inherited stories, and the reading is not decorative. A place is sacred in the novel's terms because it holds histories, ancestral presence, and the memory of what has been done there. Knowing the land is therefore inseparable from knowing who one is and to whom one belongs.

Spirit-stones and boundary markers make this concrete. To move or disrespect one is not a neutral act of rearranging earth; it is an offense against a settled moral order. Recent criticism has noted the importance of such taboos in the novel's ecological design, and I want to draw out what they imply about how Indigenous environmental ethics is stored. In a modern regulatory vocabulary, restraint on land use appears as policy or conservation law. In the world of *Spirit Nights* the same function is carried by taboo, ritual duty, and ancestral authority. The community does not need a separate category called "environmental protection" because the protection is built into what it means to be a responsible person in that place.

The landscape can thus be called an archive in a literal sense. It preserves cultural memory in a form that is walked on, farmed, and avoided. To respect it is to honor the ancestors who shaped the rules and the descendants who will inherit the consequences. This is why damage to a sacred site registers in the novel as a rupture in community and cosmos together.

To describe land as an archive is to argue that memory has a spatial form. A boundary can register a history of agreement, inheritance, and prohibition without appearing as a written record. The force of the marker depends on a community's capacity to remember and transmit the obligations associated with it. In this sense, landscape is not a neutral setting upon which culture is projected; cultural continuity is enacted through repeated encounters with particular places.

A spirit-stone offers an especially useful example of the difficulty of translation. An instrumental reading asks what practical environmental purpose the restriction serves. A relational reading asks how the prohibition shapes the person's posture toward a site that is not available for unrestricted use. The second question does not eliminate the first, but it refuses to make usefulness the only basis of value. Restraint can express recognition of a relationship that precedes individual choice.

This interpretation also has a political edge. When place is understood only as alienable property or exploitable material, the obligations attached to local histories become difficult to articulate in dominant administrative vocabularies. Fiction can preserve a vocabulary of responsibility that is not exhausted by ownership. Yet the narrative should not be used as



evidence that every inherited boundary was uncontested or that customary authority was uniformly equitable. The archive is a site of obligation and potentially of disagreement.

## **V. Taboo, Work, And Healing As Ecological Knowledge**

Taboo deserves separate attention, because it is where the novel's ethics is most clearly stated. Certain actions are forbidden, and the prohibition rests on the belief that they disturb a relationship that sustains everyone. A boundary marker must stay where it is; a spirit-stone must be treated with respect; certain spaces may not be handled as morally empty ground. Violation produces consequences that cross categories, from the social to the spiritual to the ecological and finally the cosmic. The novel thereby links right conduct to environmental balance in a way that modern environmental discourse, with its focus on benefit and risk to humans, often does not. Here nature is protected because it is already part of a web of obligations, and the human interest is one strand among many.

Agricultural life extends the same logic into daily labor. Farming in the novel is neither a purely economic transaction nor a technical skill. It is tied to seasonal rhythm, communal work, and gratitude, and the knowledge it requires, about water, soil, crops, and weather, lives in practiced bodies and is handed down through habit. The harvest ritual is especially telling. Thanks offered to the Creator do not merely perform piety; they acknowledge that survival rests on forces no one controls. A human community that farms in this spirit will cultivate humility alongside crops, since it understands itself as cooperating with processes it did not make.

The novel's treatment of healing makes the same point from another side. Plants and herbs appear as parts of an inherited body of knowledge, not as raw material, and the reciprocal relation between a community and the plants it uses depends on attention, restraint, and respect. One might call this an ethics of care in place of an extractive ethic. It also amounts to an alternative epistemology, since what the community knows about plants is validated by long relationship and not by laboratory abstraction. The stakes are not only literary. When languages, oral traditions, and practices disappear, the ecological knowledge they hold often disappears with them, and *Spirit Nights* can be read as a refusal of that loss.

Taboo is sometimes dismissed as the opposite of rational environmental management. Kire's fictional world makes that opposition unstable. A prohibition may work by shaping habits before an individual calculates immediate benefits. Its effectiveness, within the narrative, depends on shared memory and on a willingness to treat certain actions as consequential even when their effects are not instantly visible. This is a different account of moral motivation from one centered on personal preference or short-term utility.

Agricultural ritual further reveals how the novel links production with acknowledgment. Crops depend on human effort, but also on weather, soil, seasons, and relationships that no farmer can independently command. Gratitude marks that asymmetry. Such an ethic does not reject skill or labor; it situates them within a wider field of dependence. The resulting perspective is not anti-technology but anti-sovereignty: it contests the idea that successful cultivation proves human independence from the processes that sustain it.

Healing knowledge complicates the distinction between human bodies and ecological surroundings. The plant that offers therapeutic possibility belongs to a habitat, a tradition of recognition, and a history of careful use. When knowledge is transmitted through practice and story, losing the social conditions of transmission can be as consequential as losing access to a species. Nevertheless, the novel does not establish clinical efficacy, and literary analysis must not convert its representation of healing into a medical claim. Its contribution lies in the ethical and epistemic status it grants to sustained attention to living environments.

## **VI. The Dead, The Unborn, And The Time Of Responsibility**



Ecospirituality in the novel extends across time as well as space. The dead are not gone; they continue in another realm and remain part of the community's imagination and obligation. The land is where this continuity becomes visible, since it holds the memory of earlier generations and the promise of later ones.

This has ethical weight. If ancestors, the living, and descendants belong to one continuing network, then the present generation cannot treat the land as private property to be spent. It holds the land in trust, in the older sense of that word, and its duties run backward to those who handed it down and forward to those who will receive it. What the novel presents is an intergenerational ecological ethics, grounded in belonging and not in calculation. Contemporary discussions of sustainability often reach for this idea in secular terms, and Kire's narrative shows what it looks like when it is carried by cosmology.

Intergenerational responsibility changes the scale on which an environmental act is judged. A decision may appear convenient in the present while damaging the conditions of future belonging. The narrative's attention to ancestral continuity resists that narrowing of time. Land carries meanings that a single generation did not create and therefore cannot fully own. Responsibility is less a contract among presently consenting individuals than a relationship with people who cannot all speak at once.

The presence of the dead should not be flattened into an abstract metaphor for historical memory. Within the story's cosmological frame, ancestral relations are part of how reality is understood. Literary criticism can describe the ethical effects of this representation without claiming authority to adjudicate its spiritual truth. The point is that the imagined community does not end at the boundaries of the living present.

## **VII. Interconnectedness As Relational Ethics**

The principle that organizes all of these threads is interconnectedness, and it is best understood as a claim about obligation and not about metaphysical unity. The novel suggests four relations. Human beings depend on land, water, plants, and animals, so nature is a partner in human life and not an outside sphere. The visible world interacts with the invisible, and spirits and ancestors shape how events are understood. Crisis is collective, so that one person's act may fall on the whole community. And knowledge and responsibility pass between generations as a cultural inheritance.

What these relations produce is an ethic that is relational, not individualistic. The question it poses is not "What may I take from nature?" but "How should I live inside a network of relationships I did not create and cannot leave?" The prolonged darkness dramatizes the cost of forgetting that question. No technological mastery lifts it. Only a renewed understanding of the community's place in the web resolves the crisis, which suggests that in Kire's world ecological breakdown is also a breakdown of relationship.

The term interconnectedness can become vague if it means only that everything influences everything else. Kire's narrative offers a more demanding version: relations create duties, and duties may limit action. Dependence is not merely a scientific description of linked systems; it is an ethical condition requiring care, restraint, and responsiveness. The community's crisis makes these duties visible by showing that consequences cannot be contained within the intentions of an isolated actor.

This account also differs from a sentimental picture of universal harmony. Relationships can be frightening, asymmetrical, or difficult to interpret. A powerful nonhuman presence does not become harmless simply because it belongs to a shared cosmos. The ethical achievement lies in negotiating a world that cannot be reduced to human preferences. Such negotiation requires humility without guaranteeing certainty.



### **VIII. Against Easy Harmony: Cautions For Reading**

It would be a mistake to present all this as a tidy lesson. Indigenous ecological ethics is often described in terms that flatten it into a timeless harmony with nature, and Shepard Krech has warned against the myth of the "ecological Indian," which converts complex histories and practices into a flattering stereotype. Readers of *Spirit Nights* should keep that warning in view. The novel does not depict a world without fear, loss, or error. Its darkness is frightening, and its community must struggle to respond. *Taboo* can be read as ecological wisdom, but it can also be read as social control, and a careful reading ought to acknowledge both without collapsing one into the other.

There is also the question of who is reading and from where. Robin Wall Kimmerer has argued that Indigenous and scientific ways of knowing can inform one another while remaining distinct. A literary critic borrowing the vocabulary of ecology to explain Naga cosmology risks translating it into a framework that was never its own. I have tried to let the novel's categories lead, using theoretical terms as aids and not as final authorities. The aim is to understand what Kire's story claims on its own terms and then to ask what it contributes to wider conversation.

Krech's critique is important because praise can reproduce a colonial simplification in benevolent language. To label Indigenous people naturally conservationist may erase historical variation, social conflict, and the pressures imposed by changing political economies (Krech). The novel's ecological imagination should therefore be examined as a specific narrative construction, not treated as a transparent report on the environmental behavior of all Naga communities.

There is a related methodological danger in turning every sacred practice into an instrument of sustainability. If a taboo deserves respect only because it protects biodiversity, the critic has already subordinated its spiritual meaning to an external measure. Conversely, an uncritical celebration of taboo can conceal questions about authority and exclusion. A responsible reading holds these tensions together: the novel makes a compelling case for relational accountability, while the ethical evaluation of particular practices remains open to context and debate.

The same caution applies to the language of Indigenous knowledge. It is neither a single system nor a relic untouched by modernity. By reading Kire as a contemporary novelist actively reshaping inherited material, rather than as an ethnographic spokesperson for a fixed tradition, criticism can recognize both cultural continuity and literary innovation.

### **IX. Storytelling As Ecological Memory**

The novel's final ecological contribution lies in what it is. *Spirit Nights* grows from an oral narrative, and the publisher notes that Kire reshaped a story told by the Chang Naga into fiction. Oral traditions tend to carry ecological information indirectly, folding knowledge of seasons, animals, landscapes, and duties into stories that people remember because they are compelling. When such a story enters the novel form, it enters a new archive, one that reaches readers far outside the community.

The gain is considerable, and so is the risk. Writing preserves what might otherwise fade, but it also fixes and exports something that was once spoken, heard, and answered within a particular community. Kire's practice of retelling, rather than merely recording, seems to me a response to that tension. What the novel keeps is less a body of facts about the Naga environment than a way of standing in relation to it. In this sense literature becomes a vehicle of ecological memory, and the act of reading becomes, however modestly, a participation in that memory.



Retelling is an active process of selection, pacing, characterization, and emphasis. The novel form can make an inherited narrative available to readers who do not share the circumstances of its oral performance, but that accessibility changes the relation between story and audience. An oral account may have been embedded in particular occasions and local interpretive communities; the printed novel travels through publishing networks and literary criticism. Its movement produces new opportunities for recognition and new risks of abstraction.

The environmental significance of the novel therefore cannot be confined to the beliefs it depicts. It also resides in the work of cultural transmission. A story can train attention: it can teach readers to notice a stone as more than material, a creature as more than a resource, and a season as more than a unit of production. Such training does not substitute for ecological policy or scientific inquiry. It widens the moral imagination through which policies and inquiries are judged.

Kire's fiction ultimately proposes that the preservation of ecological knowledge may involve preserving forms of narration and the relationships they sustain. This is a literary claim with broader implications, but it remains rooted in the distinctive imaginative achievement of *Spirit Nights*: a world in which cosmic disturbance, local responsibility, and collective memory are inseparable.

## X. Conclusion

*Spirit Nights* treats the natural and the spiritual as one world of consequence. Through the darkness, the cosmic tiger, sacred ground, spirit-stones, farming, healing, the dead, and the discipline of taboo, Kire builds an ecological imagination that cannot be separated from ethics. Her central insight is that human beings live inside a web of relations that includes animals, plants, land, ancestors, spirits, and seasons, and that a strain on one part of the web will be felt across the rest. The novel does not hand readers a policy. It changes the terms of the question by suggesting that ecological knowledge may live in myth, ritual, taboo, and oral history as well as in data, and that sustainability is as much a matter of how people understand their place as of technology or regulation. For ecocriticism, this is a reminder that Indigenous literature does more than illustrate environmental themes; it supplies alternative ways of knowing that deserve to be read as such. In Kire's hands, interconnectedness stops being an abstract idea and becomes a way of living, one that asks for reciprocity, restraint, reverence, and responsibility.

The value of this reading is not that it extracts a universally applicable conservation formula from a culturally particular narrative. Rather, it shows why environmental criticism must remain attentive to different accounts of agency, knowledge, and obligation. *Spirit Nights* asks readers to imagine responsibility as something owed across species, generations, and visible and invisible worlds. That question remains relevant without requiring the novel to speak in the vocabulary of contemporary policy.

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