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Locating “Home” in a Liminal Space: A Decolonial Reading of The Black Hill and Sky is My Father: A Naga Village Remembered

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Abstract

Aims: *The paper Locating “Home” in a Liminal Space: A Decolonial Reading of The Black Hill and Sky is My Father: A Naga Village Remembered explores Indigenous notions of home and belonging. Both novels evoke a strong sense of place while challenging colonial ideologies. Indigenous concepts of home are deeply tied to unique ontologies and epistemologies, viewing home as an interconnected space of emotional, spiritual, and social well-being rather than merely a physical structure.*

Methodology and Approaches: *The study employs a qualitative and historical approach, analyzing how India’s Northeast was historically shaped through the colonial encounter, which influenced its inhabitants’ identities.*

Outcome: *These Indigenous narratives counter colonial stereotypes that depict the tribal world as chaotic, primitive, and unstructured. Instead, they reveal a deeply spiritual worldview centered on harmonious coexistence between the physical and spiritual realms. Another objective is to present Northeast India as a fluid, interconnected space, highlighting the Indigenous struggle for identity recognition.*

Conclusion and Suggestions: *While the article critiques colonial misrepresentations, it does not advocate for essentializing old traditions. It acknowledges the dangers of Western hegemony but also cautions against extreme decolonial perspectives that reject all Western thought, leading to new forms of exclusion. Examples include Hindu chauvinism at the national level and ethnic essentialism at the regional level.*

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Northeast India's liminal status served as the foundation for the region's creation as a "frontier" during colonial India and its transformation into a "borderland" during postcolonial India (Bhaumik 2009; Misra 2011). Despite being labelled as a "frontier zone" in colonial India or a "necropolitical zone" in postcolonial India, writers from the region have worked to challenge and subvert these misrepresentations of their land, people, and culture. Contemporary Northeast Indian literature depicts the continuities between the modes of governing colonial frontiers and post-colonial borderlands through literary narratives. These narratives embody an act of writing the margin into history as "an effort to disrupt the self-assurance of hegemonic frames, decentre the focus of historical enquiry" (Bhattacharya and Pachuau 1). In the context of Northeast India, "decentring" involves moving away from integrating the region's history into the national narrative and instead focusing on the diversity and heterogeneity that challenge uniformity, shifting attention from core zones to the peripheries. As the liminal narratives from Northeast India celebrate its "otherness" and emphasise its difference as part of its identity, it poses a threat to the metanarrative. The idea of authenticity frequently serves as the driving force behind the tension that develops when liminal narratives and the metanarrative clash.

Homi Bhabha's concept of the contestation between the pedagogical and the performative talks about the presence of counter narratives within the nation that "disturb those ideological manoeuvres through which imagined communities are given essential identities" (Bhabha "DissemiNation" 213). Hence, the counter-narratives of Northeast Indian communities are to be seen through the performative discourses of the people in the margins. Bhabha's questions in *The Location of Culture* invite an examination of how national identity is fragmented and cultural differences emerge within shifting ideological discourses:

How do we conceive of the splitting of the national subject? How do we articulate cultural differences within vacillation of ideology in which national discourse also participates, sliding ambivalently from one enunciatory position to another. What are the forms of life struggling to be represented in that unruly time of national culture? (211)

In the context of resisting both nationalist homogenization and rigid ethnic essentialism, these inquiries explore the struggles of diverse cultural expressions seeking representation within the fluid and contested space of national culture. The indigenous people's position as a space of continual change due to the colonial encounter and the postcolonial bifurcation of areas can be elaborated by Victor Turner's anthropological concept of the "liminal." Turner's concept of *liminality* refers to individuals in transitional phases between cultural states. These "threshold people" exist in an ambiguous space outside conventional classifications, neither fully belonging to their previous status nor yet integrated into a new one (Turner 95). Liminal figures, such as initiates in rites of passage, are often depicted as lacking social markers or possessions, emphasizing their in-between status. But while the liminal passage results in "[u]ndoing, dissolution, decomposition," it is also "accompanied by processes of growth, transformation, and the reformulation of old elements in new patterns" (Turner 99). Turner's notion of liminality, often employed for diasporic identities, can also be applied to the loss of cultural identity of the indigenous people due to the "colonial gaze." It is the ambivalent and shifting configurations of the liminal space that give rise to the strategies and resources through and in which cultural (ex)change is negotiated.

Colonialism imposed conceptual and spatial abstractions that disrupted organic tribal structures, causing lasting identity fragmentation. In *Multiculturalism and Intercultural Dialogue in North-East Region (NER) of India*, Hausing argues that the colonial project, grounded in an "orientalist episteme," granted administrative officials and ethnographers exclusive authority to interpret tribal lifeworlds, effectively marginalising the agency of the tribal "others" (404). This paternalistic approach silenced native voices, transforming fluid cultural mosaics into rigid typologies that later fueled identity assertions. British colonial administrator Alexander Mackenzie first used the term "North-East Frontier" in his 1884 text to describe the colonial jurisdiction of Assam, its bordering hill tracts, and princely states like Manipur and Tripura. He envisioned merging Assam with Eastern Bengal in the 1890s, referring to the area as the "North-East Frontier of Bengal" to define it as a distinct frontier zone within

Bengal (Mackenzie 1). Subir Bhaumik, in *Troubled Periphery: Crisis of India's Northeast*, describes the folding of diverse peoples and polities into a singular geospatial classificatory unit as a deliberate “colonial construct” aimed at consolidating political control and administrative order (1). Thus, the “Northeast” label originated as a geographical shorthand for colonial territorial management, rather than reflecting native cultural perspectives .

Historically, Northeast India was never a unified political entity or under a shared administrative system before British colonial rule after the Anglo-Burmese War (1824–1826). According to Samrat Choudhury in *Northeast India: A Political History*, no ancient Indian empire extended its rule into this densely forested, isolated region that separates peninsular India from Southeast Asia and China (1). The region historically remained distinct and relatively isolated from the rest of India. Sandhya Goswami, in *Troubled Diversity: The Political Process in Northeast India*, highlights that unlike the rest of India, which shared social values rooted in the caste system and cultural interconnections, the Northeast existed on the periphery, maintaining limited ties with the rest of the nation and fostering connections with Southeast and Central Asia (xxiv). Colonial rule marked a turning point in ending the Northeast’s historical isolation by establishing political ties with the rest of India. However, these connections remained superficial, lacking meaningful social and cultural integration.

Defining Northeast India as a distinct “frontier” zone directly impacts the region’s diverse communities, subjecting them to external spatial classification and control. Before the 1870s, the territory of Northeast India lacked defined boundaries, with vague district lines. The British began consolidating control, establishing the Inner Line Permit system in 1873 to regulate colonial access to hill areas. Framed as a protective measure for hill tribes , it primarily served to safeguard British plantations and extractive industries from tribal disruptions (Kundra xviii). The establishment of the inner line enforced a rigid technological boundary, reducing the fluid hills-plains meshwork into fixed, rationalistic legal categories. It is important to note how colonial rule became a cultural tool of identity formation and assess the crucial role it plays in the tribal imagination. Joy L.K. Pachuau, in her chapter “Framing the Margins: The Politics of Representing

India's Northeast," from her book *Being Mizo: Identity and Belonging in Northeast India*, identifies three key ways in which the Northeast is constructed—through popular culture and local interactions, state narratives, and academic discourse on tribal communities. Pachuau highlights the significance of examining the Western study of “primitive” societies and the epistemological framework that influenced their interpretation, which is crucial for critiquing anthropological works in the postcolonial era. Since knowledge and power are intertwined, anthropology is seen as a “colonial tool” that is involved in the “objectification” of their subjects, as well as in the “denial of co-evalness” to the “primitive other” (Uberoi, et al. 14). Pachuau importantly notes that postcolonial Indian anthropologists and sociologists, such as S C Roy, G S Ghurye, and N K Bose, either followed colonial scholars like J H Hutton and Verrier Elwin, or, even when adopting an “anti-colonial” stance, were still influenced by the demands of “nation-state building” in the post-independence era (Pachuau 64). The anthropologist's nationalist agenda sought to dominate and overshadow local or particular perspectives, making them subordinate to a singular, nation-building framework. This resulted in the portrayal of “tribes” as part of a “greater tradition,” diminishing their own unique social structures as “little traditions” (Sinha 1958).

Therefore, post-colonial studies, which challenge Western views of the “other,” also require an examination of how post-colonial states maintain hegemonies over their own minority groups. The Northeast as a region is one that resonated with unfamiliarity and “not knowing.” The assessment of the centre is also based on the knowledge that the “tribes” of the Northeast lived in a “pristine” space that needed to be “protected” due to its geographic and cultural uniqueness, and that the people themselves needed to be “guided” into adopting modern forms of administration and existence. Even the constitutional provisions have been questioned on several grounds and are perceived as a tool of domination, although they have occasionally been considered as coming from a state dedicated to defending the democratic rights of its citizens and preserving its minorities. Tilottoma Misra, in her introduction to *The Oxford of Writings from North-East India*, says that:

the indigenous communities from Northeast India have been seen as living in ‘enchanted spaces’ bearing unpronounceable names. Significantly, for mainland India, the region known as the ‘North-East’ has never had the privilege of being at the centre of epistemic enunciation, except perhaps at some ancient time when Assam was recognized as the centre of occult knowledge associated with tantric worship, magic, and astrology, and strangely enough, the imagination of the ‘mainland’ has even today not outgrown those constructs of the mysterious ‘other.’ (xviii)

What is clear from this is that the site— “enchanted spaces”—is as much a construct as the subject— “the mysterious ‘other’”. The notion that location/site is both constructed and instrumental in shaping individual identities becomes particularly relevant when examining colonial narratives that portrayed India’s northeastern region as exotic and its inhabitants as savages. Post-colonial discourse challenges rigid binaries of the colonizer and colonized, viewing imperialism as a fluid process. It rejects essentialist ideas of cultural authenticity, promoting ethnic pluralism while also critiquing internal hierarchies of dominance. In the context of Northeast India, this approach calls for an analysis of how Indigenous communities have been pushed to the margins through historical processes rather than seeing them as inherently belonging to a liminal space. This historical experience is significantly connected to the idea of indigenous articulation of home because of the fact that “[t]he processes of homemaking is a cultural one” (Wise 299). J. Macgregor Wise asserts that the usage of cultures goes beyond mere “symbolic, or meaning-specific, plane alone” but consists of “expressions” that have “the effect of shaping space and therefore the experience of that space.” This process he calls it the “ways of territorializing, the ways one makes oneself at home” (Wise 300). The next section explores the reasons behind the indigenous resistance to colonial forces attempting to displace them from their territory and the philosophy behind their “ways of territorializing,” even resorting to violence and death.

Indigenous peoples have frequently experienced disruptions to the concept of “home” as a stable place, caused by the border-making processes of dominant groups, including colonial rulers and later independent nations. These geopolitical

changes have reshaped the region's landscape and redefined relationships with those who give meaning to their lives, thereby shaping their very essence as human beings. The obliteration of the indigenous people's land, history and culture is based on "the white mythology" of colonial discourse. The white mythology perpetuates the idea of an "empty land" or "empty country," thereby hinting at not only the availability of land for conquest but also at the supposed lack of local histories (Eeden 32). Colonizers justified their claims over indigenous lands by either declaring them as *terra nullius*, as seen with Australian Aborigines, or by enforcing land tenure reforms, as with the Maoris in New Zealand. In Northeast India, the British employed a combination of these two strategies to establish control over tribal territories.

In pre-colonial Northeast India, territoriality and identity were fluid, with indigenous peoples having mobile connections to the land. However, colonial intervention imposed fixed territorial boundaries, leading to a conflict between indigenous identities rooted in movement and the colonial state's focus on fixed territorial identity (Pachau 101). Surveying tools that pinpointed the precise locations of peaks and rivers as well as their separations from one another were necessary to establish dominance over the region. Concurrent with the mapping of the terrain, the mapping of the inhabitants took place. The people were initially described as "raiders," "horde of wild tribes," and "savages." While ethnic clashes over land and resources existed, tribal affiliations and identities were more fluid before colonial contact. This is clearly illustrated in *The Black Hill* when Kajinsha, during his visit to Sommeu, tells Marpa:

'We are people who belongs to these valleys and rivers. We can wander at will travelling behind a wall of mist, find shelter with a friend, and disappear with the wind like invisible men who have no regard for boundaries laid down by any authority.' For Kajinsha and his people, and even the residents of Sommeu, empires and borders meant little. Their worlds could not be divided up, for they had lived in these lands for centuries, while empires had come and gone. (Dai 106)

Indigenous resistance to these fixed territorial identities has been a central theme in the region's history. Although ethnic conflicts have occurred among indigenous

communities, their fundamental way of life has been rooted in mutual respect. Similarly, in Easterine Kire's *Sky is My Father: A Naga Village Remembered*, she mentions that an important reason for Deputy Commissioner Damant to invade Khonoma was the report of "19 raids between 1850-1865" (Kire 67). While the reasons behind the invasion have been varied—the main purpose of British expedition to the interior Naga hills was to find a route from Manipur to Assam via the Naga country to secure the borders from the Burmese invasion (Kire 217); while the other reason for the invasion of Khonoma was the continued raids on British subjects in Assam by the warriors of Khonoma (Kire 220)—it is the emphasis on "raids" by the villagers of Khonoma that requires particular attention. According to Joy L.K. Pachuau, the construction of these attacks on British subjects as "raids," was "the result of an inherent difference in the perception of territory and territoriality for the British and the inhabitants of the hills respectively." She argues that while "raids, headhunting, movements that evoked impermanence and momentariness, did not require permanent sites" (Pachuau 221), the British felt the need to lay down a "clear and defensible boundary" to determine the "limit of our jurisdiction" (Pachuau 100).

The displacement experienced by tribes due to colonial expansion and imperialist conflicts emphasised their struggle to assert ownership and maintain their cultural identity amid colonisation and inter-tribal tensions. Gupta and Ferguson have stated that: "it is not only the displaced who experience a displacement . . . For even people remaining in familiar ancestral places find the nature of their relation to place ineluctably changed, and the illusion of a natural and essential connection between the place and culture broken" (qtd. in Duyvendak 14). The predicament of those who find their homeland become unfamiliar is aptly exemplified in *The Black Hill* by the collective cry of the people: "'Hai... ever since the arrival of these people our lives are changing,' they said" (Dai 191). Dai feels that the collective fear and superstition have suffocated the lives of her people. Yet at the same time, she gives us an insider's perspective on how vulnerable they had been in the past. She writes, "History had shown them that no matter how friendly they were, in the end the migluns brought only

death and destruction” (Dai 192). The fear of “death and destruction” is validated by the deaths of Kajinsha and Fr. Krick towards the end of the novel.

Dai’s depiction of the indigenous resistance to colonial and missionary interventions hints at the subversive nature of postcolonial defiance against colonial supremacy. The 1839 incident of the assassination of Colonel Adam White and his eighty men by the Mishmee people reflects their deep sense of nationalism and distrust toward foreign intruders, who brought destruction despite initial friendliness. In *Legends of Pensam*, Dai uses the phrase “the assault on the hills” to describe both the colonisation of its people and the exploitation of their land and resources. In the “Songs of the Rhapsodist” section, she refers to Noel Williamson, a British political officer, who was killed along with his companions while mapping the wilderness and tracing the river’s source. The event known as the Massacre of 1912 or the Abor Expedition of 1912, where the British sought to survey the Siang River, is viewed by the Adis as an attack on their land and ecology. In the novel, the shaman narrates this event through a song, framing the killings as a justified response to the British expedition, with the British sepoys, armed with guns, depicted as attackers. The narrator remarks: “Why should anybody look at a man with disgust when he was a man of the land and the other was a visitor trying to conquer the village with lies and bags of gifts?... It was only a matter of time before the migluns learned that all men were not afraid of guns and loud voices” (Dai *Legends of Pensam* 51).

In *The Black Hill*, the arrival of Father Krick and the establishment of trading posts by the colonial officers near the native land heightened tensions among indigenous clans. Due to the importance of keeping their land secure from foreign intruders, Kajinsha’s first marriage was the result of an alliance to “cement the promise of his father’s clan to guard entry into Tibet from intruders coming from the South” (Dai 78). When Gimur wonders, “How the mere features of a landscape could ignite such love and ferocity” (Dai 70), only years later would she realize when returning to her native village this spiritual connection with her land when she says: “. . . All this time my heart and its longing have been tied up with these features—these hills, this sunset, this cold dawn and icy wind. The land has bred this. This is my desire. My life!” (Dai 71). This emotional

outburst of Gimur is closely linked with the term “Mebo” itself—her home. The term denotes that it was not only a place of “desire and nostalgia’ but also about its history “when brothers have lived together” (Dai 26-27). Edward Relph argues that a home is not just a physical plot of land, but a place shaped by the lives and activities of its inhabitants over time. It becomes an essential part of their identity, providing a space for personal growth, and therefore must be preserved (78).

Similarly, regarding external aggression, Easterine Kire notes in the preface of her novel *Sky is My Father: A Naga Village Remembered* that from the 1800s onward, the outside world started to forcefully intrude upon the village life of Khonoma. The British colonial forces launched their first expedition into Nagaland in 1832 to establish a route between Manipur and Assam for protection against Burmese invasions. This led to a clash with the Angami people of Khonoma, who resisted the intrusion into their land. The British launched multiple raids on Khonoma, deeply affecting the Indigenous identity of the Nagas. The Angami people of Khonoma resisted British intrusion from the moment they entered until 1880 when a major offensive against the village ended in a stalemate. After enduring multiple expeditions, the Angamis retaliated, but their resistance was ultimately unsuccessful as they were overpowered by the British, who used modern weapons against their spear-wielding warriors. Despite their defeat, Pelhu, the village head, initially refuses to make peace with the British due to the loss of his clansmen. However, after pressure from his villagers, for the sake of their women and children, he reluctantly agrees to a treaty, expressing his anguish over being forced to “wash” his hands in his “brothers’ blood” (Kire 106).

The British expeditions and tortures severely undermined the Angamis’ sense of valour and dignity, which were closely tied to protecting their land. In response, the Angami warriors frequently raided Assam to demonstrate their power, aiming to show the British that Khonoma was different from other villages and that its people were still capable of resistance: “that there are men still living here” (Kire 38). Between 1850 and 1865, the Angami people launched 22 raids into British territory, resulting in 178 British subjects being killed, wounded, or taken captive. In 1879, British political agent Mr Damant, after receiving reports

of Khonoma's defiance, planned an expedition to crush the village and deter other uprisings. When Damant and his group arrived, the villagers of Khonoma killed him and 39 others, declaring, "We have ousted the white man's rule" (Kire 89). The British efforts to humiliate and suppress the Khonoma people had "the opposite effect" (Kire 76), strengthening their resistance. The Khonoma warriors, along with those from neighbouring villages, launched attacks against the Kohima garrison, leading to the Battle of Khonoma, which was described as the "severest fighting ever known in these hills" (Mackenzie 137).

Home is more than just a physical structure; it is tied to identity, security, and belonging (Somerville, 1992). For some, like nomadic tribes, a house does not define home. Instead, the concept of "rootedness" better captures the deep connection between place and a sense of being. Indigenous perspectives on home, framed as a sense of 'rootedness,' are grounded in reciprocal relationships with family, community, ancestors, cultural narratives, and self-determination (Christensen, 2013; Nabokov & Easton, 1989). Therefore, being rooted and at home means a deep connection to their ancestry, language, traditions, community, land, and spiritual practices, emphasising an interconnected relationship with all of creation. This signifies a reciprocal relationship with the spirit present in all forms of existence, including plants, animals, water, land, and fellow humans (Bowra and Mashford-Pringle 1). Such connections should be nurtured with good intentions, in a respectful and harmonious manner. Thus, for Indigenous people, the concept of home is deeply intertwined with their relationship with nature. This contrasts with, or complements, the Western perspective, where home is primarily defined as a physical dwelling (Blunt & Dowling, 2006).

In Aboriginal English, "Country" represents the interconnected relationships (tangible and non-tangible) and beings (human and non-human) that shape a homeland through reciprocal care and obligations (Rose 1996). This concept is expanded by including the relational aspects of home, emphasizing the meanings and experiences created through these connections (Panelli 2008; Prout 2009). The relationship between home and Country is not simple or direct. William E H Stanner highlights that the Western notion of home falls short in

conveying Indigenous understandings of Country, which encompass deeper spiritual and relational connections to the land:

No English words are good enough to give a sense of the links between an Aboriginal group and its homeland. Our word ‘home’, as warm and suggestive though it may be, does not match the Aboriginal word that may mean ‘camp’, ‘heart’, ‘country’, ‘everlasting home’, ‘totem place’, ‘life source’, ‘spirit centre’ and much else in one. (Stanner 230-1)

The term in Aboriginal English extends beyond the emotional and security-based concepts of a Western home to include the intricate relationships between humans and non-human entities that uphold homelands through reciprocal care. By framing the Country as home, we recognise Indigenous worldviews where human and non-human elements are inseparable. Indigenous ontology recognises the interconnectedness of spiritual, material, and human beings in nurturing “homelands” through reciprocal care (Rose 1996; Wright 2015). It rejects rigid binary distinctions like mind/body, nature/culture, and human/non-human, embracing a more holistic understanding of existence.

When understanding the concept of home for Indigenous people, it is essential to recognise that their cultures are “formed around a relationship to the land rather than the permanence of a physical structure” (Greyeyes and Vipond 20). An excerpt from *The Black Hill* reads thus:

Maybe this is how it happened: when the first wave of tribesmen came south from the harsh mountain passes, looking for new land, they found this clear space in the middle of dense forest. ‘What is this?’ they cried. ‘It is a desirable place! This is where we will live and build our homes.’ Then many clans lived together, but soon the founding fathers were afraid there would not be enough water for everyone, so though they liked the place and wanted to continue to live there, family groups eventually dispersed to settle elsewhere. But the name ‘Mebo’ stuck, meaning both desire and nostalgia for the long-ago time when brothers have lived together. (Dai 26-27)

The above quote gives us an understanding of the term Mebo—the home of the heroine, Gimur. The term denotes that it was not only a place of “desire and

nostalgia,” but that it has its own history about “when brothers have lived together.” The place Mebo, in this sense, is not simply a plot of land but it is a place shaped over long periods of time “by the common affairs of men and women” (Relph 78). Relph argues that such a place “cannot be bought” because it becomes “a context within which he (the inhabitant) can expand and become himself” and so “it must be preserved” (78).

In Dai’s work, the land is portrayed as deeply intertwined with the people, symbolizing the soul of their ancestors. Gimur recalls the shaman’s words: “The land belongs to us. It is the soul of our ancestors. Where would we be, what would we do, without this land?” (Dai 70). In one of her poems “Tapu,” Dai describes her people’s custom of ritually designating a piece of land as a consecrated territory:

Here we have marked the land
with upright branches and stones,
and consecrated territory
with song, and the leap of the warrior

returning triumphant. (Dai “River Poems” 13)

Dai highlights the Indigenous people’s deep connection to the land, portraying it as a living entity intertwined with their beliefs, traditions, and ancestral heritage, emphasising the interconnectedness of all aspects of life. The “black hill” is not just a setting but an active character carrying emotional history and memory. The hills and mountains are not merely physical spaces but integral to the tribes’ worldview, beliefs, and philosophy, shaping their existence. Indigenous philosophy views nature as a sacred, coexisting force rather than a resource for exploitation, contrasting with the colonial and Lockean perspective of claiming land through its exploitation. Their relationship with nature is rooted in reciprocity and respect rather than dominance is illustrated in *The Black Hill*, where Kajinsha tells Fr Krick:

My father also told me that everything in the earth and the sky is connected since we are born of the same mother. It is very simple. We belong to the land. The land is a good mother. I take only what I need.

Animals and trees offer themselves. We help each other survive. Tell me priest what do you think of our land. (Dai 141)

Indigenous perspectives on nature challenge colonial misrepresentations. In *Legends of Pensam*, a British officer portrays the forest as menacing and dangerous, reinforcing a fear-based colonial narrative:

(One officer wrote in his notebook: ‘The forest is like an animal. It breathes all around us and we never know when it will suddenly rise up like a green snake out of the decaying vegetation or descend on us like a mantle of bats reeking of blood and venom. The trees are enormous and sinister. They stand all around us and you can feel them looking down and waiting. One fears to move. (Dai *Legends of Pensam* 52)

In contrast, the Adis, represented by the old headman, see their land as vibrant, filled with life and beauty. His words counter the colonial depiction, asserting the dignity and richness of their home rather than the imposed image of horror and savagery:

‘They think we are a village of horror, but it is not true! The leaves of the orange trees glisten. The hills are radiant with the light of the sun. The laughing children tramp to school down the same steps of stony earth that the soldiers marched up. These days many visitors are finding their way, the curious migluns shielding their eyes and asking for help to enter the maze of stories that the miri remembers and restores to life. . . We are not a village of shame.’ (Dai *Legends of Pensam* 55-56)

The colonizers likened Indigenous peoples to animals because of their preference for living on the land rather than in permanent dwellings. By imposing fixed territorial boundaries, they disrupted the natives’ nomadic way of life. Since Indigenous identity is deeply connected to the land, this disruption leads to a sense of “rootlessness and disconnection” from their identities (Greyeyes and Vipond 20). Therefore, reclaiming their home involves rekindling the bond with the land and the natural world it encompasses. Oral tradition plays a crucial role in preserving indigenous identity and history. In contrast to the colonial preference for written records, Dai presents storytelling as a powerful means of restoring life and asserting identity. The phrase “the maze of stories” highlights

the richness of oral culture, which the *migluns* (outsiders) fail to understand. In *The Black Hill*, Kajinsha's final words— "Tell them about us, ... 'Tell them we were good. Tell them we also had some things to say. But we cannot read and write. So we tell stories'" (Dai 288)— emphasise the importance of storytelling in ensuring that their voices, experiences, and heritage are not forgotten.

In *Sky is My Father: A Naga Village Remembered*, the native people of Khonoma are portrayed as protectors of their land, described by Kire, as strong and agile warriors (Kire 2). They fiercely guard their territory, even against neighbouring communities like Garipheju village, and are prepared to retaliate if attacked. Although inter-tribe and inter-clan attacks occurred, they were not acts of mere barbarity, as colonial accounts suggest, but were conducted as matters of "justice" and "honour." Kire aptly illustrates this through the characters' conversation, referred to as "man's talk," about the feuds between the two Mezorla clans (Kire 7). In the conflict, one clan enlisted the help of "the white man" to attack and burn the houses of the Merhii clan. In response, the people of Khonoma supported the Merhii clan by killing Bogchand, the police officer leading the white man's soldiers, along with twenty-two soldiers (Kire 8). What is significant in this episode is the ethical motive behind such killings and revenge against attacks:

'But it was a matter of honour, you see? A man is not a man if you let another man kill your kin and torch your houses and you do nothing about it. We have a name for such men—"Thenumia", women!' he spat out the word. 'That is what drives a man to battle, the need to prove himself worthy of defending his village and his womenfolk, and to earn ornaments of war. (Kire 8)

In "The headhunting culture of the Nagas: reinterpreting the self," Venusa Tinyi has argued that the practice of taking revenge through practices such as "headhunting" among the Nagas has a "deep-rooted connection with some of the fundamental values of life, namely, equality, justice and freedom" (93). On the moral implications of such a practice, he writes:

In the absence of a larger political organization beyond the village authority to deal with questions of justice in terms of inter-village feuds,

revenge cannot be simply dismissed as immoral and savage. The reason is that the community expects revenge whenever a wrong is done to one party by another party (both within and outside the village). . . . If someone took revenge within or outside the village in order to defend the honor of a person or a village, it would never be interpreted as unlawful or morally wrong. Rather it was looked upon as a virtuous or rightful act. This was perhaps due to a very strong sense of equality rooted in our culture. (Tinyi 96)

The Naga resistance against colonial forces, which justified annexation and invasion under a civilizing mission, stems from their belief in equality and freedom as sovereign villages. This explains their persistent challenge to external dominance and their passionate struggle to reclaim their rights to live as free and equal people. The Angamis' strong connection to their land is central to their identity as Indigenous people. Their relationship with the land shapes their bonds with each other, non-humans, and their past, present, and future. This deep connection to their land and community is reflected in Levi's attitude toward his village, highlighting their explicit love for their land:

How good it was to be back in the village, to be among his people. Impulsively he picked up a bit of soil and smelled its earthiness. He felt bonded to the village, bonded to the land, and feeling surged up in him that he'd never known before. I should feel so strongly for a mistress, he mused, smiling to himself. That was what this village did to her men, she bonded them to her so strongly that they were always striving to prove themselves men enough for her. Perhaps that was the explanation for the desire that drove out onto the battlefield, soul-thirsty for the danger and the thrill of coming so close to death. (Kire 51)

The Angamis' deep attachment to their land is so strong that they are willing to do anything to protect it: their desire to prove themselves worthy of it drives them even at the risk of death. Women in the Angami community also share a deep love for their land, motivating the warriors and supporting their participation in battle. Even the native workers under British rule felt culturally obligated to join in attacks to defend their village (Kire 47), reflecting the strong cultural bond to

their land, which is central to their Indigenous identity. The native Angamis recognise their land and environment as a source of nourishment, as reflected in Siezo's statement: "Sky is my father, Earth is my mother, I believe in Kepenoupfu" (Kire 71), illustrating their deep spiritual connection to the natural world.

Both Dai's and Kire's novels highlight the sacred connection between Indigenous communities and their land, which serves both as a source of sustenance and a symbol of dignity. Fanon underscores the deep significance of land for colonized peoples, as it represents their survival, identity, and self-respect in the face of colonial oppression. Indigenous knowledge emphasises connectivity, viewing both living and non-living entities as sacred. Land is central to their history, culture, and spirituality, embodying ancestral significance. Indigenous peoples see themselves as caretakers of the land, fostering respect, reverence, and sustainability. The next section discusses the interdependence between humans, nature, and spiritual realms, integrating physical, spiritual, and cultural dimensions of existence.

Christianity is frequently misidentified with colonialism because of its historical association with missionary efforts and imperialism. Studies reveal that it was often employed as a means of colonial control rather than solely for spiritual purposes (Iskarna, 2018; Miah & Halim, 2024). Christian studies often employ language that reflects colonial biases, depicting indigenous cultures as inferior while glorifying missionary work. This framing perpetuates the misconception of Christianity as intrinsically tied to colonialism, overlooking its cultural diversity (Volpicelli, 2009). Nonetheless, Norman Etherington in *Missions and Empire* highlights the tension between missionaries and political colonizers, noting that missionaries were often sidelined in the colonization process. They were sometimes seen as problematic, particularly for educating indigenous peoples beyond their expected subordinate roles (Etherington 9). However, missionary accounts, shaped by a biased belief in the superiority of Western Christianity, often misrepresented indigenous beliefs. Missionaries aimed to convert and civilise, while European powers sought exploitation. They introduced healthcare and education to address physical and spiritual needs,

enabling Bible literacy. However, their efforts were accompanied by a condescending view of indigenous peoples as primitive and savage. While the colonial enterprise depicted colonized peoples as subjugated subjects, the missionary enterprise portrayed them as spiritually ignorant and superstitious, requiring education and cultural refinement (Etherington 6-8).

Spirituality is a debated concept, distinct from religious belief, as it focuses on empowerment rather than control. In contrast, religion can sometimes be anti-spiritual and restrictive (Bigger “Secular Spiritual Education?” 60-64). Spirituality emphasizes non-material forces, such as spirits and unseen powers, offering a framework to reflect on life, relationships, and the mysteries of existence. Spirituality often involves beliefs in spirits, the supernatural, and respect for ancestors, which formed the basis of early religions. Practices like taboo, denoting sacred or forbidden spaces, were similarly spiritual. Today, these beliefs and sacred sites are being re-evaluated as meaningful cultural expressions rather than mere superstition. Although pre-scientific societies often misunderstood causation, attributing disasters to supernatural forces and using rituals to appease these perceived agents, these beliefs were not primitive or pre-scientific but they were a way of observing, interpreting their experiences in the world, and addressing fundamental human concerns (Bigger “Ethno-spirituality: A Postcolonial Problematic?” 5).

Ethno-spirituality begins with the premise that indigenous peoples were not uneducated savages but rather possessed wisdom appropriate to their knowledge and cultural context. It is deeply tied to Indigenous worldviews, encompassing ways of life, socio-cultural practices, and sacred traditions. It is ingrained in rituals and spiritual knowledge, reflecting intellectual and cultural depth unique to each Indigenous community. Indigenous people viewed their world through a mythological lens, understanding their environment well through observation of nature and animal behaviour. They personified natural elements like wind, weather, and the heavens as powerful forces that could be unpredictable and dangerous. Life’s outcomes, such as success or failure in hunting, were explained through these elemental myths. Mignolo argues that decoloniality of knowledge begins with breaking away from Western epistemic

dominance (Mignolo “Delinking” 463). By rejecting Western modernity, Indigenous communities reclaim their narratives, representing their identities, lifestyles, and belief systems from their own perspectives to challenge dominant societal portrayals (Smith 172).

In his article “Ethno-spirituality: A Postcolonial Problematic?”, Stephen Bigger emphasises the need to eliminate the impact of “missionary influence,” particularly their interpretations of animism and totemism, in order to truly understand “indigenous thought process” (7). In the physical world, the native people know their material world very well through their predictability:

The land was there for him to explore at will. The trees were a swathe of green that revealed its secret to this man who knew their hidden paths and the frozen routes over the mountains that kept tribes apart. ...

‘If we follow the river we will reach my home,’ Kajinsha said to Gimur.
‘And all animals and birds have a map. We can follow in their path.’ (Dai 35)

Indigenous communities possess deep knowledge of animal behaviour, natural signs, seasons, and food sources. However, they also recognise unseen forces and dangers, which they explain through elemental myths, personifying natural elements like wind and weather. They believe that all events have causes, acknowledging forces beyond human understanding. Spirits are seen as continuing to exist after death. Their perspectives are not primitive but rather a unique way of observing and analysing their experiences based on their worldview.

Bigger explains that living communally without personal privacy exposes indigenous people to psychological pressures such as jealousy, selfishness, and abuse of power. These negative emotions are often perceived and represented as evil spirits, which are then managed and expelled through ritual practices (8). In Mamang Dai’s *The Black Hill*, the female protagonist, Gimur, cautions Awesa against laughing loudly by the riverbank at night, fearing that evil spirits might overhear them and become envious of their presence (Dai 157). Kajinsha, the protagonist, invokes benevolent spirits, seeking their protection over his family by offering a sacrifice to keep death away (Dai 258). Shamanism is depicted through

various instances, including Father Nicholas Krick's visit to the Mebo community, where he learns about the role of the *Miri*, or shaman. Lendem explains that the ghost of a dead warrior roams in search of a victim, and if a person is weak, the spirit can possess them. Only a powerful shaman has the ability to drive the spirit away, highlighting the indigenous belief in spiritual forces and the role of shamans in maintaining balance (Dai 184). This reflects indigenous beliefs where the material and spiritual worlds are deeply interconnected, blurring the boundaries between the tangible and intangible.

In *Sky is My Father: A Naga Village Remembered*, the people of Khonoma practice various rituals to appease both benevolent and malevolent spirits. One such ritual involves the father smearing saliva on his finger and touching the newborn's forehead while declaring, "I am first," to prevent spirits from claiming the child (Kire 6). They believe that failure to perform this ritual may result in the child's death. All ceremonies are conducted with strict decorum to avoid offending the spirits, as any mistake could bring harm to individuals, families, or even the entire clan. This can be seen as a societal mechanism to ensure that men take responsibility for their children. Kire also describes the ritual of making peace with spirits, known as "terhase" (Kire 148) or "Spirit Vo-o" (Kire 149). During these rituals, Thevo priests plead with the spirit, asking for peace between the people and the spirits to prevent calamities, death, and disease. They emphasise honesty and the mutual respect between humans and spirits.

The Indigenous people of Khonoma village have a deep spiritual connection with nature, believing that animals, plants, stones, rivers, hills, forests, and streams are inhabited by spirits. This worldview sets them apart from the materialistic perspective of the West. They perform various rituals and festivals, such as "Terhünyi" and "Sekrenyi," to honour spirits and ensure a good harvest (Kire 20). Additionally, "genna days" are observed when no work is allowed in the fields, as violating these days is believed to anger the spirits and cause infertility in the land (Kire 148). There are two instances where tigers are killed, followed by the ritual of "tekhu kete" (Kire 149) to appease the spirit of the tiger, which is regarded as their "elder brother" (Kire 15). Before any ceremony, the villagers offer sacrifices, such as killing a chicken (Kire 24), to ensure the

ceremony proceeds properly and to prevent evil spirits from disrupting the sacred proceedings.

Mamang Dai explains in an interview that while *The Black Hill* is rooted in historical events, much of it revolves around “imagined journeys, both interior and exterior” (Mallick 3). It explores what could have happened if two individuals, who might have shared common ground, had met under different circumstances. Father Krick’s character offers a unique perspective on how an outsider can overcome stereotypical views of indigenous people. Through his physical and spiritual journey, he comes to realize that the indigenous people, whom many see as “uncivilized and debased natives,” treated him well (Dai 184). His desire to truly “know them” leads to personal transformation, and ironically, in trying to convert them, he himself changes and is “not the same man that he was” after his encounter with them (Dai 145). Krick undergoes a spiritual transformation during his journey through the Mishmi hills. This journey takes him beyond just the physical landscape of the jungle, as Dai describes, and into a deeper, more introspective exploration of his own soul (Dai 162).

In *The Black Hill*, the natives do not undergo conversion to Christianity through Father Krick’s mission, while in *Sky is My Father: A Naga Village Remembered*, Sato does embrace Christianity. Sato struggles with the conflict between his traditional Indigenous culture and the new religious teachings he encounters. While attending the Sekrenyi festival, he feels repulsed by the idea of being initiated into his family’s religion. He experiences guilt, torn between his attraction to a gentler man named Isu and his desire to return to school. The psychological influence of the new religion prevents him from fully appreciating his own cultural rituals, and he knows that choosing to be initiated would displease Chaha (Kire 119). Sato begins to see similarities between Indigenous spirituality and the new religion, particularly in the shared concept of a creator deity. However, he ultimately prioritizes the new religion. He acknowledges the reverence in his own faith but chooses to accept Rivenburg’s religion, telling his family that he now considers the new God his own.

Sato believed that the creator deity they worship and sanctify themselves to during Sekreyani, known as Ukepenoupfu, has a different name in the new

religion. In this religion, he is the father of Isu, whose son he is, and Isu is symbolised by their chicken sacrifice (Kire 126). The idea of identifying commonalities among various religious beliefs is referred to as “syncretism” or “syncrenism,” a term frequently used by scholars of religion. Historically, missionaries viewed syncretism negatively, seeing it as the blending of faiths and condemning it as “apostasy.” This condemnation unintentionally validated indigenous beliefs in spirits and deities, reinforcing dualistic views and leaving a lasting impact on local spiritual perspectives (Stewart and Shaw 19-23). Kire’s novel emphasises how the imposition of a new religion weakened indigenous identity, while also demonstrating that through conversion, indigenous people have developed their own interpretation of Christianity. This has led to what historians refer to as an “ascribed” identity, which differs from an “imposed” identity, as it reflects the agency of indigenous people to shape and redefine their own sense of self.

Therefore, the critique of Christianity in Northeast India should not merely equate it with colonialism, as many external scholars often do. Instead, the focus should be on how Western missionary accounts misrepresented indigenous beliefs, influenced by their sense of superiority rooted in Western Christianity. The concept of religious syncretism can play a crucial role in the decolonial process. Walter D. Mignolo warns against the darker aspects of Western modernity, highlighting the dangers of a singular dominant narrative. However, decolonial thought also has its own darker side—the idea that all aspects of Western thought can be entirely discarded in favour of a purely postcolonial or indigenous perspective. This approach risks creating new hierarchies of exclusion. In India, examples of this can be seen in the rise of Hindu chauvinism at the national level and ethnic essentialism at the regional level, both of which reflect the complexities of the decolonial process. In Easterine Kire’s novel, Sato’s conversion to Christianity and his interpretation of it through the lens of his indigenous beliefs validate his indigenous spirituality as a source of wisdom rather than outdated traditions. Likewise, in Mamang Dai’s novel, the bond between the native Kajinsha and the missionary Fr. Krick, along with their eventual sacrificial deaths, symbolises the importance of transcending ethnic

boundaries. The novels highlight the need to embrace hybrid identities while preserving one's cultural roots.

Paul Memmott introduced the term "spiritual homelessness" to describe a state in which the interconnected experience of self, family, Country, and home is not realised. This results in a fractured and unfulfilled sense of relational identity, leading to a profound disconnection from both self and place (Memmott 59). Indigenous people from Northeast India, albeit living in their own land, often find themselves in a state of spiritual homelessness due to the border-making processes and the geopolitical changes within the nation-state. Social connections that existed before the formation of postcolonial states have been pushed into a "secret, shadowy, paralegal existence" (Saikia and Baishya 3). Communities across Indian borders illustrate the fluidity of "home," which transcends fixed geography and is defined by enduring familial, historical, and cultural ties that cross national boundaries. The indigenous people's conservative outlook should not be simply mistaken for xenophobia. Rather, it is essential to recognise their cultural philosophy of life and how they integrate and negotiate with the alarming external influences. This understanding can foster a path toward harmonious coexistence and growth.

Using the framework of "power geometries," Indigenous expressions can be understood as a "consequence," not a cause, of their integration into the modern nation-state. This perspective aligns with Farhad Dalal's concept of the "social unconscious." As Dalal put it:

in some rudimentary way existing "we's" must be part of the forming "I's" from the start of the developmental process. To elaborate: a particular individual is born into a pre-existing social milieu; thus the "I" of the individual must of necessity be built out of the existing "we"; however a "we" can only exist in relation to something designated "not-we" the relations between "we" and "not we" is always a power relation. Thus the individual is constituted at the deepest of levels by *pre-existing power relations in the world*. Thus possibilities available to any individual are constrained by the power relations in the milieu into which the individual is born. Thus the nature of the so called true individual

authentic self cannot be other than fundamentally constituted by where it is positioned in the power relational field. (547 italics added)

In this sense, identity and self are shaped by one's position within the communication field. This positioning, in turn, is influenced by the social unconscious, which, for indigenous peoples, has been constructed through the socio-genetic impacts of colonialism and the continuity of colonial governmentality in postcolonial India. The writers, Mamang Dai and Easterine Kire aim to bridge the gap between historical facts and distortions by reconstructing the "pre-existing power relations," or rather the pre-colonial indigenous life, offering detailed insights into their traditional ways, ethno-spirituality, and resistance against colonialism. Kire's and Dai's novels challenge colonial narratives that portray Indigenous societies as disorganised and lacking depth. Rooted in animism, these belief systems view nature as spiritually alive and govern life in a structured, harmonious way. The study emphasises that indigenous understandings of the home/homeland are deeply rooted in specific ontologies and epistemologies. Indigenous perspectives often view home as a holistic concept that encompasses not just physical shelter but also emotional, spiritual, and social well-being. This understanding contrasts with the more fragmented view of home in Western cultures, which may separate these aspects. These perspectives highlight the interconnectedness of people, land, and culture, suggesting that home is not merely a physical structure but a relational space that embodies cultural significance and identity.

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End notes

¹ The term “colonial gaze” is understood as a mechanism by which colonial power exerted authority over colonial spaces. It connotes spatial, economic, and cultural inferences. These inferences are founded on ideological assumptions and mythic constructs that strive to create stereotypes of other subject peoples and cultures. Mary Louise Pratt, in *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, analyses a radical turn in colonial studies which saw a shift from the colony and colonized towards the colonizers’ outlook. She explains that the rationalizing gaze, or what she calls “planetary consciousness,” of the Europeans have a “sense that theirs was a universal ordering system that would conquer and bring under the high modern lens all the flora, fauna, and land of the world ‘out there’” (Nelson 163). This controlling, modernising technique is a crucial aspect of the colonial gaze.

¹ Before colonial rule, the region now known as Northeast India was home to diverse ethnic groups led by indigenous kings and tribal chiefs. The Ahom kingdom dominated the Brahmaputra Valley in Assam, while areas like the Cachar plains, Jaintia plains, Khasi Hills, Garo Hills, Mizo Hills, North Cachar Hills, Karbi Anglong/Mikir Hills, and Naga Hills were governed by local chieftains. The kingdoms of Manipur and Tripura were independently ruled by the Manipuri/Meitei and Tripura/Twipra monarchs, respectively. Over time, the British expanded their control over these territories, ultimately consolidating them under the colonial Assam Province after annexing powerful entities such as the Ahoms in 1826.

¹ The British introduced the term “tribe” as a constructed social category shaped by anthropologists and reinforced by state practices. Colonial anthropologists emphasized tribal resistance to the state while downplaying internal conflicts, and this identity was institutionalised through the legal designation of ethnic groups as Scheduled Tribes under the Constitution (1950). The region’s politics of identity and unity were actively shaped through practices of representation, classification, and demarcation. Colonisers used writing, exploration, and mapping to define the region’s features and establish its geo-body. Pre-19th century narratives depicted

it as a distant, forested land of exotic beings, blending notions of savagery with efforts to domesticate it through political histories, forest exploration, mapping, and cataloguing tribes. These narratives made the region legible and reinforced colonial sovereignty and authority.

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