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## LIFE-CYCLE RITUALS AND CULTURAL IDENTITY IN ANGAMI NAGA SOCIETY: FUNERAL, BURIAL, MOURNING, MARRIAGE NEGOTIATIONS, AND WEDDING CELEBRATIONS IN EASTERINE KIRE'S *A TERRIBLE MATRIARCHY*

Megono Chucha  
Assistant Professor  
Department of English  
Pfutsero Government College  
Pfutsero, India

**Abstract:** In oral societies, culture is preserved, carried and transmitted not through written records but through stories, songs, customs, ceremonies, memories, and every day practices which are passed down from one generation to another through oral tradition. The Angami Nagas like the other Naga tribes are also primarily an oral society where much of their traditional and cultural knowledge have been preserved and transmitted through oral tradition. Oral tradition encompasses a wide range of forms including; folktales, folksongs, myths, customs and rituals. In particular, the life-cycle rituals connected with marriage, death, burial and mourning forms an important aspect of the oral and cultural heritage and knowledge of the Angami Nagas. These rituals carry with them beliefs, values, family relationships, community responsibilities and memories of the past. Literature here becomes an important medium through which these knowledge and memories are preserved and transmitted. It is within this premise, the study examines the representation of life-cycle rituals in Easterine Kire's *A Terrible Matriarchy*, with particular focus on funeral, burial and mourning practices, marriage negotiations, and wedding celebrations. As a writer who is native to the Angami Naga society, Kire draws heavily from her own Angami cultural heritage which makes her works a fertile ground for analyzing and exploring matters of importance related to the cultural tradition and practices. The study then is positioned as an inquiry into how the life cycle rituals in the novel contribute towards the representation of the Angami cultural identity. A close textual reading of *A Terrible Matriarchy* has been conducted as part of the study while studies conducted on the Angami oral traditions have also been reviewed and discussed along with the close textual reading.

**Key words:** Angami Nagas; Oral Tradition; Life-Cycle Rituals; Cultural Identity; Easterine Kire; *A Terrible Matriarchy*

## INTRODUCTION

For the Angami Nagas, as for many Naga and other oral societies, culture has traditionally been transmitted through stories, songs, customary practices, rituals, memories, and everyday forms of communal knowledge. In such societies, oral tradition is more than a means of entertainment. It has been acknowledged and understood as a way of preserving history, values, beliefs, social practices, and knowledge for future generations. In his seminal study, Jan Vansina positioned oral tradition as a legitimate and organized form of historical knowledge. For historical research, he opined that the oral tradition can be viewed as a credible source, particularly for societies such as the Nagas which are primarily oral (as cited in Khiantge, et.al.2025). Similarly, in a study on the concept of *Kenyü* (genna or taboo) among the Angami society, Peseyie and Gaur (2024) opines that the Angami oral narratives serves as a repository of the community's cultural heritage.

Life-cycle rituals then form an important part of these oral tradition and these rituals that are connected to the different stages of life such as; birth, marriage and death become more than simply events in an individual's life but become important sources that contain invaluable cultural knowledge that are traditionally carried from one generation to another. For example, marriage rituals connect the individuals with families and established a kinship network. In the same way, death and mourning rituals establishes a network between family, community as well as those who have passed away. Such practices therefore serve as an important way of understanding and reconstructing cultural identity.

However, like other Naga societies, the Angami society has also undergone considerable social and cultural change. The coming of western education and Christianity has no doubt heralded an era of progress but it has also altered and modified much of the traditional beliefs and practices. Over the years, some have disappeared while some have become altered and some are retained in the form of memory and cultural representation. This is where literature becomes particularly significant. It provides a space for the preservation, transmission as well as the interpretation of these cultural memories and representation.

Within this premise, in the context of the Angami Nagas, the writings of Easterine Kire become particularly significant. Since she belongs to the Angami community herself, her writings reflect much of the Angami cultural memory and lived experience. Her works contain rich depictions of the Angami oral culture, intricately woven into her narratives. For the purpose of this study, her novel *A Terrible Matriarchy* (2007) has been chosen for the textual analysis. The novel unfolds as a narrative that traces the experiences and transformation of Dielieno from childhood to maturity and through the narrative, much insight has been presented into the traditional family life, customs, gender expectations, education, marriage, death, and the changing social values within an Angami setting. There is a huge body of literature that has dwelt on her works while examining patriarchy, gender roles and female experiences and identity but the life-cycle rituals represented in the novel have received comparatively less focus. The study therefore seeks to examine the funeral, burial and mourning practices along with the marriage related rituals in *A Terrible Matriarchy*. The study is another discourse to reveal how literature is an important medium through which cultural practices are remembered, represented and transformed.

For the purpose of the study, a qualitative approach has been adopted which is primarily based on close textual analysis of *A Terrible Matriarchy* (2007), by Easterine Kire. Rather than using the entire novel, selected passages dealing with death, mourning and marriage have been examined in relation to their social and cultural meanings. Further, the textual analysis is supported by historical and ethnographic accounts of Angami society, particularly J.H Hutton's *The Angami Nagas* (1921) and some other recent studies on Angami oral culture and the writings of Kire. However, it needs to be

noted that the focus of the study is not to determine whether Kire's writings are an exact record of the Angami culture but rather to understand and explore how a literary text remembers, represents as well as reinterprets the cultural practices. In short, the paper seeks to present how the life-cycle rituals in *A Terrible Matriarchy* can be read as a form of cultural memory.

### **LIFE-CYCLE RITUALS AMONG THE ANGAMI NAGAS AND AS REPRESENTED IN A TERRIBLE MATRIARCHY**

For oral societies, life-cycle rituals are of particular importance as they provide one of the ways through which cultural knowledge is remembered across generations. According to Encyclopedia Britannica (n.d), these life-cycle rituals can be understood as rites of passages which marks significant transitions in a person's life and helps the individuals move from one social standing to another. In the context of tribal societies, such rituals are not only merely ceremonial but they give social meaning and involve the wider community and their repeated practice becomes a means of transmitting cultural knowledge. For instance, rituals related to marriage establish the relationship between families and kin groups. Similarly, mourning and funeral rituals associated with death brings the community together in responding to death. Here, one may state that rituals serves as important means through which societies are able to express their understanding of family, kinship, morality, social responsibility and belonging. Therefore, life-cycle rituals can be seen as living cultural practices through which a community preserves its identity while also adapting its traditions in the face of the persistent changing socio-cultural contexts.

As already mentioned above, the Angami Naga society is also predominantly oral as it is one of the major tribes inhabiting the hills of Nagaland. Shohe (2021) in a study conducted across on the Naga villages across Angami and Sema tribe noted that ritual practices for almost every aspect of life was common to all Naga tribes while stating examples such as the ritual for house construction, life cycle rituals, rituals for health and prosperity, for protection from natural calamities and so on. Historical accounts as well as oral sources retrieved from the memories of the older generation also reveals that customary practices traditionally accompanied the important stages of life and these practices helped in keeping the individuals connected to the family, clan, village and ultimately to the wider community. With regard to the earliest historical accounts, J.H Hutton's *The Angami Nagas* (1921) remains one of the most detailed accounts of the Angami social organisation, customs, religious beliefs, marriage, and death rituals. The work was originally published in 1921 and it contains separate discussions of marriage, religious beliefs, *genna/kenna*, death, and related customs. However, it needs to be noted that the Angami society was never completely uniform as there are differences in dialect, ritual practice and social organization.

### **MARRIAGE AMONG THE ANGAMI NAGAS AND AS REPRESENTED IN A TERRIBLE MATRIARCHY**

Among the many traditional ritual practices, marriage occupies an important position in the traditional Angami social life as it marks an important transition in an individual's life. The rituals surrounding marriage differs across cultures and contexts but it is a universal phenomenon which is treated as important across all contexts. In the traditional Angami society, marriage was more than a personal relationship between a man and a woman as it involved questions of family, clan, social relationships, customary obligations and the establishment of a new household. Shohe (2021) also notes that it was through marriages that families were merged and stronger alliances were sustained. Hutton (1921, p.219) records that the Angami's followed a monogamous and exogamous form of marriage.

In traditional Angami society, marriage negotiations generally began from the boy's family. Usually, an elderly person would serve as a *liethomia* (a messenger) who would be associated with both the families. He would be sent by the boy's side of the family to the girl's side as a *thenu lie kechümia* to initiate and negotiate the marriage. Marriage considerations traditionally take root when the young men and women become of age and enter the peer groups known as *pele*. The young man would take notice of the girl they favor from the peer group and would inform his parents of his choice who would then prepare for sending the formal proposal known as *thenu rüsa* (Neichürizezo, 1989, as cited in Kire and Keyho, 2024). Parental consent was considered very important. After the necessary customary rites, the couple was recognized as a married couple and the status of being married was also expressed through customary practices. Unmarried women were required to keep their heads shaved as a sign of chastity and purity while married women were allowed to grow their hair (ibid). In the same light, there are oral sources that narrates how in the olden days the establishment of a new hearth with three stones constituted an important part of the marriage rituals. The building of the hearth becomes symbolical within the Angami society as the kitchen hearth becomes more than a place for cooking, it is the place where families came together after a day of work, it is also the place where parents would counsel and guide the children with traditional values and customs. The kitchen hearth for the Angami Nagas occupies a very important place and therefore the construction of the hearth with three stones as part of the marriage ritual was particularly significant. The hearth becomes an important symbol representing the establishment of a household and the transition of the bride into a new domestic and social relationship.

In *A Terrible Matriarchy* marriage is one of the principal ways through which the novel presents the relationship between individual choice and community expectations. For the older generation which is represented particularly by Vibano, marriage is not primarily a matter of romantic choice but mostly a family matter. It is considered mandatory for a girl to be prepared for marriage by learning the domestic chores. Vibano, the grandmother's understanding of a girl's future is primarily connected to marriage and domestic responsibility and she therefore takes the task of training Leno for the role she believes will eventually fall upon the granddaughter. The centrality of the family's approval in marriage is particularly evident in the case of Bano who received a marriage proposal but she is aware that "it is up to your Grandmother and what she decides". This directly shows the limited role of the young woman in the decision-making process. It also illustrates that marriage negotiations involve the authority of the older generation. Bano's personal choice becomes secondary.

The most detailed illustration of marriage and its related customary practices are provided in the section presenting Vini's marriage to Nisano. It presents the customary practice of the marriage proposal being taken to the girl's house by a mediator, who is usually a female relative of the boy. In the novel, the Grandmother herself acts as the mediator. Marriage as already highlighted above is not a personal choice but a collective social process involving families. In the novel, Grandmother's role in serving as the negotiator does not only show her approval of the marriage but she also presents Vini's social and economic standing to the girl's family. She says; "*I am settling the Vurie field for him which is the biggest in the area*" (Kire 208). This connects marriage to property and economic security. The wedding ceremony was big with the Grandmother funding it. As part of the feast, "*five cows and a gwi*" (Kire, 207) were butchered and served. This shows how the Angami weddings were communal events where food was shared as part of the celebration. In the traditional Angami social fabric, feasting and communal sharing have always been associated with important social occasions. The union of Vini and Nisano can be understood as not merely a personal union but a communal event.



The perspective of the Grandmother towards marriage echoes the traditional understanding of marriage in the Angami society. Marriage was seen as a social institution which is closely connected with material security and continuity of the family line. For the Grandmother, marriage is associated with stability, family, social suitability, economic security, responsibility, children and social responsibility. The marriage of Leto and Vimenuo in the novel serves as a counter point to the marriage of Vini and Nisano which also represents the perspective of the Grandmother. Leto chooses Vimenuo but Grandmother strongly opposes his choice based on her knowledge and judgments about her family background, family reputation and economic status. But Leto goes against his Grandmother's wishes and marries her. This conflict reveals the changing perspective of the younger generation towards marriage, and how individual agency is becoming stronger in marriage. In this sense, one may note that marriage is presented as a site where the conflict between tradition and modernity is becoming felt.

In *A Terrible Matriarchy*, marriage is therefore represented not simply as a union between two individuals but as a social institution involving family, kinship, property, gender expectations and community values. The marriage proposals received by Bano, Leto's relationship with Vimenuo, Vini's marriage to Nisano, and Grandmother's views on marriage comes together in revealing the customary expectations and changing attitudes surrounding marriage in the Angami social world represented by Kire. What is most significant is that, marriage in the novel is presented as both a means of cultural continuity and a site of cultural change. Kire has not only documented Angami marriage customs but also how those customs are lived, negotiated and sometimes challenged by the younger generations.

#### **DEATH, FUNERAL AND BURIAL RITUALS IN THE ANGAMI SOCIETY AND AS REPRESENTED IN A *TERRIBLE MATRIARCHY***

Rituals and customary practices surrounding death, funeral and mourning also provides clear examples of how life-cycle rituals connect the individual with the community. Among the traditional Angami Nagas death was accompanied by specific practices concerning the treatment of the body, burial, mourning, and ritual restrictions. Hutton's (1921) account records that traditional Angami burial practices varied according to the circumstances of death. Hutton's account provides a particularly striking example concerning childbirth. He records that when a woman died during childbirth or before the completion of the prescribed period of *genna*, she was removed from the house through an opening made in its side rather than through the ordinary doorway. A later study records that the burial was treated differently based on the nature of the deaths. Those whose deaths were unnatural would be buried outside the village gates (Jamir, 2015). The manner in which a person died could influence how the body was treated and where the burial took place.

Further, mourning was more than an individual's private expression of grief. Death involved the participation of relatives and the wider community. Even today, funerals among the Angami Nagas are a communal event where the grieving is not done by the family of the deceased alone. In any funeral, it is still common to see relatives, neighbours and the community flocking in with shawls and gifts in kind or cash as a sign of their last respect to the departed soul. Pigs and cows will be slaughtered to be shared among all those who came to pay their condolences. In the novel, *A Terrible Matriarchy*, one can also find references to the rituals surrounding death and mourning. Death, in the novel, occurs at several significant points and each occurrence has a different effect on the family and the narrative.

One of the earliest important deaths in the novel is that of Pete, Lieno's sickly brother. Pete has been physically weak from childhood, and his death affects the entire family. The narrative recalls the experience of the family around his illness and death, particularly the emotional effect it has on his mother and siblings. The death of Pete also changes the grandmother. It may be stated that Pete's death presents death as a deeply personal family experience which also became one of the major turning points in the family. Lieno's mother never fully recovers from it while it deteriorates Vini's behavior into alcoholism. The novel shows how the dead can continue to shape the lives of the living through continued grief which continues in the family.

Another significant observation in the novel is how Kire presents mourning as an emotional and social process. Kire does not give a detached description of the mourning customs but instead, she lets the readers experience it through Lieno's family. In this light Nino's grief makes an interesting case. The death of Pete comes after a long illness and his death therefore seems unavoidable making it easier to come to terms with but the death of Vini which came later was followed by alcoholism and his own choices making the grief more different and complicated (Sindhu and Bose, 2024), thereby suggesting that the nature of mourning was dependent on the relationship with the deceased as well as the nature of death.

The death of Vini provides very clear illustrations of how mourning was also socially regulated. Vini leaves his wife and a son behind and as dictated by custom, a widow returns to her parental house after a year of mourning and tending to her husband's grave for a year (Kire, 235) but Grandmother decides that she and her son will remain. Nisano and her son went on to live with Grandmother though there were talks and they were able to visit Lieno's family only a month after the first death anniversary. In the novel, it is shown that after Vini's death, Nisano does not only become a grieving wife but it is seen that her entire social standing changes. This is consistent with the patrilineal structure which is represented throughout the novel, in how women without sons stood the risk of losing access to their husband's property, as Nino explains that "widows without sons lost all their husband's property to other male relatives" (Kire 250). Nisano is however protected from this threat because she has Salhuo, a male heir.

A rich depiction of the practices surrounding death can be found in Chapter 27, in the passages detailing the death and burial of Grandmother. Kire (258-265). After Grandmother's death, Lieno along with the nurse and Bano washed and prepared her body before moving her to another room. The body is not left unattended but is accompanied by relatives, clansmen alongside family. The personal belongings that would be buried with her were prepared and checked by Bano while the other women came in with new body clothes to be lain over her body. All these shows the funerary customs followed by the Angami Nagas. Another similar account in the novel can be found in the first chapter of the novel which mentioned the death of Grandfather. There was a night long vigil and before his burial there were eulogies given by many people (Kire, 7). This practice of night vigil and giving eulogies are also significant as it shows the funerary customs among the Angami Nagas. The important thing to note here is the communal nature of the death and funeral practices among the Angami Nagas. The deceased is not treated as belonging only to the immediate household as seen in how the relatives and clansmen gather to participate in the final rites.

After the death of Grandmother, her house becomes a space of memory. She is gone physically, but her presence continues to linger in the house that she once lived, through sounds and unexplained occurrences (Kire, 266-282). In the Angami worldview, the death continues to occupy the emotional and cultural world of the living and Kire shows this by presenting the spirit of the Grandmother whose physical body has been removed from the household, but her presence remains attached to the house, the people and the memories associated with her.

## CONCLUSION

In an oral society, life-cycle rituals are among the ways through which cultural knowledge is remembered, practiced, and passed on. In the Angami context as well, marriage, death and mourning rites brings together the family, kinship, community, belief and social values and through repeated performance, these practices become a living form of oral tradition. The study of *A terrible Matriarchy* by Easterine Kire as attempted in this paper has shown how literature can serve as a medium through which such living cultural knowledge can be preserved and transmitted by weaving it within the everyday experiences of characters in the narrative. Kire's descriptions of marriage negotiations, wedding celebrations, funeral preparations, mourning, widowhood, and remembrance of the dead provide glimpses into an Angami world in which customs are learned through family, community, observation, and participation. These practices are therefore not merely cultural details added to the narrative; they become ways of remembering and representing a collective past. In short, *A Terrible Matriarchy* becomes more than a fictional account of an Angami family but it becomes a literary space where aspects of Angami cultural knowledge are remembered, recorded, and made available to future generations.

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