Chapter V
SOCIAL ORGANIZATION : REFLECTIONS IN FOLKLORE

Social organization depicts the pattern of articulation relationships among the people belonging to different hierarchically organised segments of a given society. The sustenance and endurance of any society rests upon the nature of functioning of its various institutions like family, kinship, marriage and gender relationships. They, in turn, play vital role in politico-economic formations of the respective societies. The Ao-Naga narrative tradition reveals how these institutions function to regulate their personal as well as their community lives and continue their identities in changing times. Till date in Naga society, people tell narratives, proverbs and riddles to regulate the behavior of their children and sustain the norms and values in their family. In the current chapter Social Organization, the folklore genres such as folktales, personal narratives and proverbs told by men and women from different age groups are analyzed and interpreted to show how Ao-Nagas organised their society through the institutions of patriarchy, marriage and kinship. The chapter further focuses on the process of construction of masculinity and femininity of men and women in Ao-Naga society and explains functioning of the gender roles in different relationships in the family system. The family in Ao-naga society is depicted as citadel of human relationships.

1. **Ao-Naga Family (Aoer Kibong)**

Family is a basic unit of social organization for it is a miniature society. Family emerges as a group united by marriage, blood, or adoption, residing together, communicating with each other in their respective roles and maintaining a common culture.\(^1\) A family constitutes husband and wife, mother and father, son and daughter, brother and sister who interact and communicate with one another in performing their social roles. Such roles are defined by the expectations of the society and also the family. Like any other social group, the family (kibong) functions as a centrifugal and centripetal force for Ao-Nagas. They construct family by conducting legitimate
marriage between bride and bridegroom coming from two different clans of the same community. Marriage is considered more as an important affair between the clans and families. Men are supposed to be strictly monogamous. The Ao family is a nuclear unit which must exist independently of any direct parental authority. Care for the welfare of the parents is a norm of the society. After marriage, the couple begins a new family and maintains a separate and independent household. Ao-Nagas have patriarchal society wherein father heads the family and all the children carry their respective father’s clan name. For example, if the father belonged to a Jamir clan then all the children will be known as Jamirs. Once a couple marries and establishes a separate family, it becomes a full-fledged institution bound by all rules and regulations of the village in which it is a part. The community expects the couples in the families should adjust with one another keeping in view the children.

The following narrative explains how husband and wife smoothly operate their relations and sustain their families despite some petty quarrels.

**Narrative 5.1: Wife who returned home**

Once there was a couple. They had two sons. One day, without any reason the wife took her two sons and went to her father’s house. The husband was not happy with his wife’s attitude so he said to himself, “I did not ask her to go but she left home without telling me any reason; let her come back on her own. I won’t ask her to come”. He spent his days working and going to the field, taking care of the pigs and cooking for himself. On the other side, the wife was missing him and wanted to go back to the house but she could not do so as she was the one who left the house. She could no longer bear the loneliness One day, she decided see her husband. She held the eldest son in her arms, carried the younger son on her back, and told them, “Let’s go and see what your father is doing at home.” After reaching the house, they peeped through the door. They saw him cooking food for the pigs. The elder son shouted, “Father! We are standing here.” Hearing that, the father quickly replied, “Oh! Why are you standing there, come inside the house.” That’s how the wife returned home.

This narrative reflects the typical routine life of families wherein conflicts and negotiations are universal. The expectation of the husband towards the wife that she should return home on her own but not on somebody’s request is the genuine way of bringing realization on the part of wrong doers. It made his wife to become conscious of her unnecessary wrath on her husband and joined him with her family. The husband also behaved politely to incorporate his wife and children without taunting them. The narrator told that the wife picked a petty issue and left her husband. Hence she has no voice to re-enter. She deployed her children who successfully patched up
the conflict. The husband too accepted for he gains respect when he had a family with wife and children.

a. **Division of labour in the family**

The health of a family depends upon the consensus between men and women functioning in different relationships and on how they divide family labour among themselves. The family functions as a unit when it could operate on division of labour in the domestic realm. In Ao-Naga society such harmonious relations exist in domestic life. In traditional society, the prestige of a family depended upon the virility of men who were supposed to perform head hunting (the ritual of head hunting is described in the following chapter). The spears required for the hunting, *daos* (big knife) and the shields were manufactured by men. The implements used for weaving and spinning were made by both the men and women. Despite the domestic chore, women played major role in agricultural operations. The folktales show how women and men participate in *jhum* cultivation. The tales further show the problems with regard to child rearing at home during the times of agricultural operations. Men controlled the community resource and the social systems and women took care of the family as well as the domestic economy and the production. Women are exclusive custodians of weaving and spinning and this job is forbidden for men. It is based on the belief that if men touch the implements then bad luck follows and the clothes that weave will go wrong. According to J.P.Mills, “A poor chance of getting a good husband would be an Ao girl who did not know how to spin and weave and make for the family. It is one of her most important duties, which it is absolutely forbidden for a man to share in Ao-Naga society.” Safeguarding the village from enemies be it humans or animals was considered the most important duty of the male members in the village. The following narrative shows how the entire village community including people, spirits and even the new men that enter a village protect their villages from their enemies.

**Narrative 5.2: Otsii of Samataba (tale of Samataba)**

Once upon a time there was a pond (*awatsun*) in Mopongchuket village. People used to adore the pond as there was a powerful devil in it. People offered eggs, chicken and pigs to the devil to appease and extend protection to them and their village when the dangers approach them. The devil was so powerful that it can even lift the cows from one place to the other. It made friendship with villager who could inform any danger in the village. The devil also informed him whenever it left the village. One day, the *Ahoms* from Assam came to attack the villagers. They
took bath in the pond. They killed and cooked a dog for their food. The villagers could not do any thing. The devil frightened them and drove them away in the night. When they were running away, the villagers chased and killed the Ahoms. They left their daos and the villagers kept them inside the trunk of a tree near the pond because they were scared to use them. Formerly this pond was called süngkotenep. One day when the villagers were going to fields, they saw a big snake on the tree. They planned to kill it with spears, catapults, bows and arrow. But they could not. At this juncture, a young man came. His name was Samataba which means that ‘who did not get meat’ from village, Chungtia. He came to Langpangkong range from his village because he was denied by the Council of his village to become its member. According to the custom, no new member should enter into or leave the village when such an act of killing is happening. However, he was asked to kill the snake. He requested the snake, “asa nükä meta, azü nükä meta, kü tenung samataba kü madang ko teplakzukang” (I did not get meat, I did not get even rice beer, my name is Samataba, come and fall before me) and killed the snake with catapult.

These two narratives establish the division of labour in the society at domestic as well as in the public realms. Accordingly the works are divided for both men and women but he performed house keeping in the absence of his wife (see narrative: 1) but soon the roles were regulated and reached the societal expectations towards organization of a family by its members.

b. Family inheritance (Kibong Shilem)

Since the Ao family succession is through the male line, sons, brothers, nephews, cousins are the order of preference for inheritance of properties. Sons born from different wives are brothers and they have legal right to inherit their father’s ancestral property. In contrast to the Aos, the Konyak-Naga follows a different practice when it comes to inheritance. The Ang (Chief) has only one Angya (queen) and the rest are categorized as concubines. Only the sons of the Angya can inherit the Ang’s kingdom or only the sons of the Angya have the right to heir of the kingdom. Ang system is hereditary. The family possesses both the ancestral properties and self-acquired properties. The father of the family has absolute power over the family property and the sons and grandsons have no right to claim partition of properties against the father. Landed property is regarded as a common fund for maintenance of the family and the sons are the co-owners with their father in the landed property. Therefore, the father has no right to dispose of landed property without the consensus of the grown-up sons. Likewise if the father dies and the eldest son takes the place of the father, he has no right to dispose of immovable properties without reasonable grounds against the interest of the other sons.
In a family, the eldest son is accorded first preference in the property of the father. He is entitled to choose among the shares of the father’s property. According to Tajen Ao, the rule of primogeniture is the guiding principle for succession.\textsuperscript{10} Even if there are many sons in the family, the eldest son takes the place of the father and acts as guardian of the property. This shows that the eldest son plays an important role in the family when it comes to taking care of the family responsibilities. The younger male siblings may sometimes imitate the elder, or show disrespect by avoiding his duties to the elder brother. This is revealed in the proverb, “Like a star is brighter than moon” (\textit{Ita dangbo petinu tesangwaba ama}).\textsuperscript{11} This particular proverb is used when elders are not being treated as elders by the younger ones or a lowly person tries to be big or high though he/she has nothing, standing out of his social position.

If there is no son to inherit the father’s share in a family, then the brother or uncle or nearest male kinsmen take the preference in succession. Preference for succession between the kinsmen is chosen by counting the degrees of kindred. Among the kinsmen, the choice of heir is preferred to a person who is the descendant of the eldest son of the ancestor. If the above system fails then the clans as a whole do the succession.

c. Status of an Ao woman in the family

In a family, when a daughter is married she goes out of her father’s family and comes under the authority of the husband. The children of the daughter are considered as the children of a family of other clan. Therefore the daughter and her children have no place in her father’s family. The daughters are regarded as subordinate members and do not become co-owners with sons and do not inherit property of the family. The property belonging to the mother after her death can be distributed among her daughters. Tug for property sometimes occur within the families with the parties playing tricks regarding the property. This situation is clearly shown in the following tale.

Narrative 5.3: Distribution of property

Once upon a time, there was a rich family. Unfortunately, the mother died leaving her two daughters with her father Tamayangba. Before she died many clothes, necklaces and ornaments were left with Tamayangba for their daughters. Since he was getting old, he decided to share the property of his wife to his daughters. He constantly worried that his daughters may
fight after his death for the property of their mother. So he chalked out a plan. He pretended as if he was dead due to illness while his daughters arranged for his memorial service. They then started to mourn over their father’s dead body (When a person dies, people mourn by singing songs of praise about him). The first daughter sings to his father, “oh Apa Tamayangba yatem dangko kongo konga den dang chowng nupasii” (oh Father Tamayangba, why are you leaving us. When you were alive you always wanted to have food with dry meat in the evenings. The father then understood from the song of her first daughter that her mourning reflected more accusation rather than concern for him even in the matters of food. He then listened to the younger daughter’s song. She sang, “Father Tamayangba when you cross Meyutsüngba’s (Lord of justice) place, shout and go down saying, ‘Yangrenmenla’s (her name) father is coming down.” After listening to his daughters’ song the father comes to the realization that his younger daughter loved him more than the elder daughter. So after they had finished singing, he got up from his coffin much to their astonishment. Later the father distributed the property to them. The younger daughter received all the good clothes and the beautiful ornaments whereas the elder daughter received only the ugly ones because she was rude towards her father.12

Ao women enjoy considerable privileges in family and society. They are mentioned as follows13:

- A girl can be named after her father’s family but she cannot name her children after her father’s family.
- In the past, except in certain religious offerings which are restricted only to priests women participated in all social and religious activities and also danced together with the opposite sex.
- A woman cannot inherit property, movable or immovable, though she may be given a gift. She has the right to sell it if she so wishes.
- If a woman receives immovable property or otherwise from her father in the form of gifts during his lifetime, it remains hers till her death, after which it goes back to her father’s heir.
- On her marriage, her separate property does not merge with that of her husband.
- She cannot become a member of the Tatar Putu Menden (Village Council).
- In the past, she could not become a Patir/Putir (Priest) though she may be the oldest person in the village. She is debarred from performing religious rites and sacrifices. However, she can assist her husband in family worship. Earlier, there were medicine women, diviners, tiger women and prophetesses among the womenfolk.
- She cannot participate in public debates or discussions but can counsel and advise her husband at home to a certain degree.
- She cannot inherit landed property. She is not liable for any debt of her ancestors or her heir.

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2. **Patriarchy in Ao-Nagas**

Like any tribals of India, the family of the Nagas in general and the Ao-Naga in particular is patriarchal in character where father or husband is the head of the family. He performs certain political, social and religious duties sanctioned by their respective families and clans. The institution of patriarchy emerged to pattern family as a basic unit of society. In a patriarchal set up, the male in different gender relations operates hegemonic roles in the family and plays a vital role in decision making in every aspect of family life basing on their respective gender norms. Sons succeed not only property and assets of their parents but also the duties and responsibilities of the family and name of the clan. Men have privileged position over women even in family matters like choosing life partners to the children. In the majority of homes of a patriarchal family, the man is the figure who financially supports a family while the woman stays at home and cares for the children.

a. **Construction of masculinity**

The masculinity of Ao-Naga community is construed upon strength and ability to take care of their family on one hand and their kin group on the other. As a patriarchal society, the social status of a man is dependent on his heroic performances like headhunting as a member of a group in a society. ‘Might was considered as right’ in Ao-Naga patriarchy. A man being the head of the family is respected and recognized by the society and peer groups for having knowledge about the knowledge system of the people, the art of social interaction, perseverance and pervasiveness in public and domestic realms. Men who are indecisive are teased with nickname *lapi* (sissy or chicken-hearted) in the community. They are considered as womanish and are not well honoured in public. In every family decisions it is mostly the man’s advice, plan, and viewpoint are applied. Every Ao village is a democratic republic in which a citizen irrespective of wealth and rank has the right to participate. But only the male member performs the role of citizens. The Ao village council of elders is known as “*Putu Menden*” and the members of this council are known as “*Tatars*”. Only the male members can take part in the village council (*Tatar Putu Menden*). Women are not allowed to become a member of the *Putu Menden* and they were not recognized as a member of the council and could not participate in policy-making.
matters and have no privileges. Even in hearing of the petitions, women’s ‘say’ is not being privileged and sometimes ignored. There are evidences in the folktales wherein the helpless women resorted to metaphysical worlds like hell and heaven and their lords for proper judgments even after their death. The extent of a woman’s learning or privilege was less emphasized in this regard. In the following narrative, the narrator metaphorically identifies Naga women with the heroine in his narration.

Narrative 5.4: Menangsangla and Nokshiloba

Once upon a time there was a woman named Menangsangla. She was a well-known woman because of her ability to practice magic. She was married to Temjensoba, but not so long after their marriage he passed away so she became a widow. In the village where she lived, there was a man named Nokshiloba who waited so long for Menangsangla because he wanted to marry her but unfortunately she refused to live with him. This really hurt him. One day, Nokshiloba did not go to the field. That day, he rolled a mat made of bamboo and hid the mat under the floor of Menangsangla’s house. After that, he informed and raised an alarm to the villagers that he has lost his mat. The villagers who were in the village started to look for the mat. Later the mat was found in Menangsangla’s house. Next day, she was called by the village elders. She begged the elders not to call her a thief as she did not steal his mat, but the village elders did not listen to her plea since the mat was found at her house. After the case was over, in front of the village elders, Menangsangla told Nokshiloba, “When you die, I will also die on the same day and both of us will be judged in Meyutsungba’s place (god of judgment) to know whether I’m right or wrong.” Then she left the place. One day Menangsangla heard that Nokshiloba had died. Suddenly she also died on the same day exactly as foretold by her. Her granddaughter also died that day.

Her granddaughter rose up from death within a short time and narrated one story like this, “I died along with my grand-mother and Nokshiloba so we all went together to Meyutsungba’s place and reached at the same time. After that Meyutsungba started to judge between grandmother and Nokshiloba by asking them to each throw a spear on a tree. Nokshiloba aimed and threw but was not able to touch the tree and broke his spear, whereas grandmother brought her anem (weaving tool), aimed at the tree and threw the anem with all her strength. It went straight and nailed itself on the tree. After the test was over, the god told them, ‘on the earth when you two were alive, you Nokshiloba called Menangsangla a thief but it is not true. Today through the test it is proved that Nokshiloba is wrong.” This was the story told to the villagers by Menangsangla’s grand-daughter. After hearing the story they come to realize that Menangsangla was actually telling the truth.

In the above folktale, the case was not trialed from Menangsangla’s perspective and was falsely accused as thief by the elders even as she once rejected the marriage proposal from the accuser. He felt that his ego and masculinity were offended by her refusal to marry. So he subverted his anger in such accusations which would stigmatize her life in patriarchal society.

Though in traditional societies, men acted as family priest, women were not ignored and their presence was mandatory for the sacred as well as secular rituals. At the same time there is no dearth for women in Ao society who could negotiate and successfully manage mundane life even in the absence of their husbands. Undaunted
by misfortunes, the women could boldly and patiently handle the complex situations and mould their children to suit the needs of their families. Though women in Ao-Naga worldview are secondary to men, they have innate will and perseverance to wait till their day comes to settle the issues in their respective families. The following narrative narrates the story of how one woman could strategically take revenge through her sons upon the culprit who killed her husband.

Narrative 5.5: Taking revenge for a father’s death

Once upon a time, in koridang village there lived a family. They had two sons. When the sons were young toddlers, the Sangtem tribe killed their father and took his body away. When the sons were growing up they felt the absence of their father so they questioned their mother, “Where is our father, where is our father.” The mother only told them to get matured. Soon after the boys reached the age of twelve and thirteen years, one day the mother cut a sutsüng zü (cane) and dried it on the fire. She told his sons to sharpen their dao (a large heavy knife used as a weapon) they went inside the house to meet their mother. She took out the dried cane rope and told them, “If you can cut this rope in one go then I will tell the name of the person who killed your father, otherwise I will continue to stay unspoken.” But the sons could cut the rope into two pieces in one slash, so the mother narrated the entire story about the man who killed the father. She told them, “Go to his place and tell him that you will stay with him and work for him. And when he is satisfied and trusts both of you then take him for fishing to the river and killed him there.” They paid attention to their mother’s advice and stayed with the old man for many years. After the harvest was over, the boys requested the old man to go for fishing. He decided to go. When they reached the jungle, they killed him. In this way the sons took revenge. Their life-long enemy was killed because of their wise mother.

Naga men are obliged to protect their community and fight for the common cause of their people. In the process they may even neglect their family and children. The following folknarratives substantiates how the communitys’ self of the Nagas predominate their personal selves.

Narrative 5.6: Devil and the Old man.

The story is believed to have happened when there was no distinction between gods and human beings. This story occurred before the separation of the village Changtongya yimsen (which was called Mangdangtakong before) from Changtongya . There was an old man called Punaziingba. One day he went to the jungle to set up sang (traps) to catch birds. After sometime he went to check the traps. To his surprise a devil named Oanglemla was found caught in the trap instead of the birds. When the devil saw the old man, she pleaded with him, “Old man, please do not kill me. I will bless you with good food till you die.” But he refused and said, “Oh devil why should I spare you. I will kill you at this very moment.” When the old man did not listen to her she once again said, “Since you are going to kill me I will also break your plate.” But the old man killed the devil and went back home. Upon reaching home, he found that his daughter died at home. When the devil said I will break your plate, she had actually meant that his daughter would die. He met his villagers and told them that he had killed Oanglemla. But they did not believe him because according to their belief nobody could kill a devil. He wanted to prove them wrong so he took them to the site where the devil was killed. When they reached the
place, they only found the dried body of the devil. That is why the place was called Mangdangtakong which means dried body.  

The narrative shows how Ao-Naga men cannot be bargained even by gods or devils to meet their personal welfare and wealth and they always are for the community. In the above tale, as the old man knows that the devil is detrimental to community’s safety, he could not be persuaded by the devil for his self. He sacrificed his daughter for the village.

3. Kinship

Kinship is one of the oldest and most imperative determinants of social organization in tribal societies. It represents socio-culturally recognized relationships constructed on the basis of marriage, procreation or adoption. Generally, kinship gets expressed by terminology and attitude. The former denotes the kin terms or words that technically name the relationships that exist among the members of the family. The latter refers to the description and interpretation of those relationships prescribed and determined by the norms and values, worldview of their respective communities/groups. In a nutshell, kinship of any community delineates the articulation of meaning of kin terms with the behavioural norms and code of ethics the persons involved in kin-relations. The basic kin-terms like father, mother, brother, sister, wife, husband, children cross cousins etc had their predetermined roles to play in domestic as well as in public spheres of life. In social interaction, while the people are performing their respective gender roles reveal their ‘selves’ through their expressive behaviour mostly in allegorical verbal genres like proverbs, riddles, songs, folk narratives, rituals or amusements. All these expressions are the manifestation of the people’s relationships in both personal and communal levels. Hence kinship is a broad term that encompasses several aspects of social life -institution of marriage based on clan (kidong) system, family, inheritance, adoption etc.

a. Ao-Naga kin relationship in social life

In the Ao-Naga family every individual is a member of a clan. Clan is a group of people that trace their descent from a common ancestry. Since the Aos belong to a patriarchal family, descent is traced through the male line, and children belong to the same clan as their father. These clans are also exogamous where individuals cannot
marry another member of the same clan. In one Ao village, there were two lovers from the same clan. They wanted to marry and start a family but because of the fear of being ex-communicated from the village they didn’t get married. But the village council according to the custom fined them a pig because three daughters on different year were born. Later the man married a woman from different clan. The customary law is sternly imposed on intra-clan marriages. The couple of such marriage will be excommunicated and even their offspring is not allowed to partake in the family inheritance. In Longkhum village, in the late 1980’s one couple who were married to the same clan were ex-communicated from the village. Even cross-cousin marriages are not allowed for three generations. Monogamy is strictly emphasized to prevent adultery. Conjugal infidelity is considered as adultery. To substantiate such an adultery act taking place, an account happened in one Ao village is narrated. There was a family who had seven children. During a trip to Assam with his sister-in-law for marketing (who was also a married woman) the man impregnates his relation. So the customary law fined both in cash and in kind. Those who are caught in adulterous relationship are fined in cash/kind. Normally three to six pigs are to be paid by the culprit. The fine varies from village to village.

The rules of marriage and family succession are dealt with in the following pages

b. Family succession

In succession, sons, brothers, nephews, cousins etc are the order of preference for inheritance. The sons born by a man and his wife are full brothers among themselves. The sons born by a man but with more than one wife are also full brothers; they are all joined in respect of father or ancestral property. The sons inherit the property of their father jointly and the grandsons are joined with their fathers in the property of their grandfather. In a family, if there is no son then the father’s brother or uncle or nearest kinsman take the preference in succession. Preference for succession between the kinsmen is chosen by counting the degrees of kindred. Among the kinsmen, the choice of heir is preferred to a person who is the descendant of the eldest son of the ancestor. If this procedure failed then the clan as a whole will succeed.
Again in a family, if there is no son and many daughters then (in the present times) the father distributes the lands or house which has been bought by him to his daughters before he dies. For this, witnesses are needed. Witness can be someone who is the eldest from the kins or from the clan. The kinship is so important that, during any important feast if a pig or cow is killed, the owner gets the head and the remaining shares are disturbed according to seniority within the clan. An Ao woman inherits the belongings of her mother, sister and maternal aunt. If her husband dies leaving to her the minor children, she become the owner of the family property till they become matured. There is no question of division of property between the mother and the son. The son will claim the property of the father.

If the last man in the clan/family has no male successor, he can adopt (mesujet, mesutet) only a minor orphan boy as an heir for inheritance. The custom ordains that the father has no right to pass on his ancestral nor clan’s landed property to his foster /adopted son. He can give his house or other possessions. If the man does not adopt, then after bequeathing his property to his daughter or sisters the remaining property will be inherited by his clan relatives. Again if there is no son then the husband has the right to give 1% of his property to his wife and the remaining goes to the relatives. However for every succession/inheritance transaction, witness of the elder members in their respective clan or kin group is mandatory for reducing litigations in this regard. The inheritance implies not only to assets but also to debts.

Debt (Sentsü)

Customary law imposes the responsibility of debt clearance on debtor. As mentioned, if the father fails to pay back the loan, his successor, be it his wife or uterine son or distant heir should clear it off. According to Ao custom, direct heir is liable to pay the debt with full interest but the distant heir is to pay the debt of the deceased with half of the interest only. Direct heir includes son, grandson and great grandson and also brother of the deceased; distant heir includes cousin, nephew, uncle and other paternal blood relations. According to the custom, debt will continue to last generation to generation against the heir until it is paid up. Interestingly till date in Ao-Naga society there are several families being crushed in the cycle of debts made
by their predecessors. Even the personal possessions like vehicles, lands secured by purchase etc, are sold to meet the purpose.

The following personal narrative explains how the Ao-Nagas abide their custom of debt-repayment as per their norms and nourish their identity.\textsuperscript{28}

**Narrative 5.7: Custom of debt-repayment**

In a village of Longkhum, there was a family. He had two sons and one daughter. But the father divorces his wife and left his family without leaving any property. Later he re-married a widow and moved in to the house of new wife. Unfortunately when he died the debts made by him were forced to be repaid by his first wife and his children by her. Ironically, the new wife and her first husband children were exempted from repaying the debts made by her second husband.

c. **Clan (kidong) system**

Clan is also an important kin group which is a unilateral descent group. It includes a set of kins whose members consider themselves to be the descendants of a common ancestors and blood relatives of each other that stand, work and help each other in many ways. Hence, the members of a clan do not marry each other. In other words, the clan is an exogamous kinship group. The members have common traditions that maintain their social set. In the social set-up of the village, the clan has the role of authority and law. If a dispute arises between individual members of the clan it is then settled at the clan level. They have common property like land, money or grain. The land is enjoyed by the members on the basis of seniority in age. No one has the right to sell or dispose the clan property otherwise the person is fine in cash or in kind.

The clan as a unit of village polity has its own organization with chosen leaders where the senior male persons take the major responsibilities. Clan functionaries are arranged on the basis of seniority in age among the kindred. The study of kinship helps to understand clearly the marriage system and the gender and power relationships of the Ao-Naga.

4. **Ao marriage system (Ao Kipa Lembu)**

Like in any other tribal communities, the basic unit of social organization of Ao-Naga is family. The identities of Ao-Naga lie in the establishment of a legitimate
family (kibong) only by the custom of marriage (Kiyimba). By emphasizing on strict rules of exogamy and endogamy, Ao-Naga society prevents the possibility of asymmetrical marriage and emerged as a strong institution (Kipa lembu). Exogamy can be defined as a social rule that prohibits a person from marrying within a defined social group of which he/she is a member. According to the rule of exogamy a man or woman can marry only outside a certain group. In the word of Folsom, “Endogamy is the rule that one must marry within one’s own caste or group. However, it is seldom permits marriage of close kin.”

Asymmetrical marriages in Ao-Naga communities occur due to match making between (i) parallel cousins is strictly prohibited and (ii) paradigms of rich and poor are considered seriously, especially in the past. Since it is patriarchal society wealth and valour of bridegroom and genealogy of the families are considered as main determinates of marriage. The following personal narrative substantiates how rich and poor paradigms still govern the match making even in these contemporary times.

Narrative 5.8: The rich girl who became spinster

Once upon a time in a village, there lived a rich family. They had a daughter. She was very beautiful. Since they belonged to a rich family they lived a luxurious and delighted. The rich daughter fell in love with a poor boy, but he was very handsome. However, when the girl’s parent heard about their love affair, they insulted the boy saying, “How can a poor boy marry my daughter. He has nothing.” Whenever the boy visited the girl’s house her parents used to insult him very badly. So one day, the boy told his lover, “Even though I love you very much your parents are against this affair so we will never be able to get married.” But the girl told him, “Whatever comes in our ways, I will marry you.” But the girl’s parents went to his home and ridiculed him. The boy was offended by their insult so he decided to make a plan. In the night when all the villagers were about to sleep, he went to his lover’s house and called, “Uncle, uncle, why are you closing your door? I came to your house to say a word, but since you don’t want to open the door, let me just say this and go. I came to say that I won’t be able to marry your daughter, let her get married to some other boy.” After saying this he left. All the villagers heard what the boy had said. Next day they talk to one another saying, “Even if they are rich they don’t have the right to insult the boy like that even though he belonged to a poor family.” After that, no boys from the village came forward to marry her. Even though all her friends got married, nobody came forward to marry her. At last her parents decided to let her marry a boy who was from a rich family. The boy was ugly and short so she did not like him. She told her friends, “He is so ugly, I don’t like him, but since my parents are forcing me to get married to him I have no other choice but accept his proposal.” This was heard by the boy and he got very angry. He went to her parents and said, “Uncle (okü), I’m not fit to marry your daughter since I’m ugly and short. I’m sorry I can’t marry her.” After saying this he went away. Even though she was from rich family and beautiful, no boys in the village came forward to marry her. Therefore, she remained as spinster till she died.

The above narrative is an experience of somebody told by a narrator. The narrative shows how a woman gets victimized in the domestic politics with regard to
marriage. The girl is dejected by her paramour as well as the groom and remained as loner in the family system.

Ao-Naga constructs antiquity to the systematization of their marriage norms and rules through their customary law. They believe that the marriage law (Kipa lembu ozung) was framed and passed by the ancestors at Chungliyimti (presently in Tuensang). Among the Ao-Naga there are six major clans (kidong) both from Mongsen and Chungli group (Ken). The six clans are: Pongen, Longkumer and Jamir of Chungli group; and Imchen, Longchar and Walling of Mongsen group. The ancestors of the Aos having lived for three aso (generations), all religious, social, political, ethical and civic rules and traditions were formulated in the Ar salong (cane platform) at Chungliyimti. According to Panger Imchen, “One of the ancient Ao cultural practices that has not been distorted or changed either by modern education or Christianity is the strong network system of marriage laws and procedures and its impact on individual and communal ethical standards upon which the framework of the Ao social structure was built.” The folktales give a vivid picture of marriage system that makes them distinct from other group of Nagas.

a. Institution of Marriage

The system of Ao marriage is based on exogamy, where one clan cannot marry to the same clan otherwise excommunicated from the village. They can return to the clan only if they are separated by their own will or by death. Their children are called Adianuza (child of brother-sister). They lose their identities; inheritance and status of any kind in the society and their names are erased from their original father’s family name. Even the child is affected in the society. The following narration clearly shows how Ao society is strictly against the practice of exogamy. The following tale explains how two lovers of the same clan decided to discontinue their relationship because of the strong law against the practice of exogamy.

Narrative 5.9: Two lovers of same clan

Once upon a time, there was a boy and a girl. They were in deep love. They wanted to marry and live together. But they knew that their wishes will never be true as they belonged to the same clan. Their love is compared to the Rusuiayong (name of a river). In this river, how long the legs and hands are placed it just fades away. It means to say that the deeper and stronger their love become, the laws and regulations of the village also become equally strong until it was
impossible for them to get married. So feeling deep regret, they sang this song together, “Kidongžül la ira ipa mezamirarma, kajo mira mira meli küsa teri tongtanger, esabo kodanga melembor” (we belong to the same clan so we can never get married).  

This is a frequently told tale in the society with regard to the unfulfilled wishes of the people. In Ao society, one of the social ties in the community is rooted in inter-clan marriage that directly or indirectly supports mutual understanding and kinship. The young men of one clan marry the young women of another clan through the inter-clan marriage system; relationship and understanding among the clan are promoted.

As mentioned, those who break the law of marriage were punished by the village council and were excommunicated from the village. In some cases, their children were forbidden from taking part in any of the social activities and were insulted in public by the villagers. Even today, the family married to the same clan is not regarded by the society even if they are from well-to-do families. That is, illegitimate children have no place in the Ao society, either religious or secular.

As discussed elsewhere, the Aos strongly condemned the practice of endogamy. Marriage between close cousins is also not allowed even though they belonged to different clans. For example, if the girl’s father and the boy’s mother are brother and sister then marriage is prohibited because the blood relationship becomes too close. It shows that their parents are from the same father based on scientific experience, cousins from the maternal side are not married, only from fourth generation they can marry. Though cross cousin marriages are sanctioned by customary law, each match making requires a gap of third generations. The reason for such prohibition is to protect the upcoming generations from physical disorders that surface due to close kin relations. The people strongly convicted that if endogamy is practiced the couple’s children too is affected in the future in negative ways. People especially become careful to marry their children. The people know that there will be no support from the society. Whatever good things they try to do it will never happen in the right way, like the yam plant where its upshot crept anti-clockwise to the support pole. The mentioned tale explains why practice of endogamy is against by the people.
Narrative 5.10: Man who married to his cousin

Once upon a time, there was a man called Mangmesoba who married his paternal cousin sister against the advice of parents and other senior relatives in the village. After the marriage, he planted a yam in his field but its upshot crept anti-clockwise to the support pole. Seeing it he realized that his marriage with his own cousin sister was unnatural for him and divorced her. The yam was called Mangmeso.34

As mentioned, marriage within the same clan is not permitted as it amounts to incest. Incest constitutes a cultural taboo in the Ao-Naga society. They are ostracized from the villages. If the people comes to know about the relationship then it become picky for choosing a life partner from that family. During my field work one narrator35 told me that, a certain village is not allowed to have marriage relationship with a certain village because in the past, one brother and sister (siblings) had a long affair which brought bad news to the village. The fear of ostracize and shame is keeping the people away from such relationship. Otherwise in contemporary society, people practice such affair secretly. The same narrator informed that, he has seen with his own eyes where two siblings were staying together in one separate house helping together in the field etc but having secret relationship.

Marriage is considered as very important in the family. The society expects all young men and women to marry. It is the duty of the parents to let the children get married and raise their own family as the Ao-Naga is a nuclear family. The following tale shows the duty of a mother in encouraging her daughter to get married. She also teaches metaphorically the pleasure one derives from conjugal life.

Narrative 5.11: Daughter who refused to marry

Once there was mother who wished for her daughter to get married at the earliest, but the daughter never listened to her mother. The daughter would always say, “I will not get married, I will not get married.” In the past, getting married was considered very wonderful and important for both boys and girls since there was no education like the present time. Marriage was the only way to set up a family. The person who does not get married was looked down by the society. Thus the mother tried to convince her daughter. She was very disappointed with her daughter’s behaviour. One day, the daughter was lying on the lap of her mother. The mother took a feather, turns round, and round inside her daughter’s ear. The daughter felt the sensation so pleasant and told her mother, “Wow! Mother it’s so good; it’s so good, do it again.” Then the mother replied back, “That’s why I’m telling you to get married if you really want to feel good like this.” Only then the daughter realized her mistake and decided to get married.36

The narrative symbolically explains the pleasure a woman seeks from the married life. The narrative explains the very conception of marriage in their life style.
It is observed that the Ao-Naga marriage system is very rigid where their focus is mainly on the bloodline and considers that marrying within the same clan is marrying their own brother or sister. According to the customary law no husband or wife can marry another’s wife or husband while they are still husband and wife. The law deals with every divorce, so marriage was regarded very significant. According to Tajen Ao, Ao marriage is a social contract. Temsula Ao, says that if a term is to be coined for the form of marriage among the Aos, it may very well be called a contract by consent. By studying the term contract it can be understood that contract is an agreement or deal which last for a while and then got expired. Here the term contract used by the two writers can be argued because by studying the marriage system of the Ao-Naga, it is not just an agreement between the girl and the boy, but also within both the families where rituals and ceremonies are followed till the end. The marriage is an institution which is rigid and strict. With the coming of Christianity, the Aos started considering marriage as a more sacred union. Marriage is the most important matter in their entire system of social recognition, political participation and religious sanctity. Therefore the Aos give much thought to marriage laws and system.

**b. Divorce (Balaluyuba) and re-marriage**

In Ao society, theoretically divorce and remarriage are accepted norms but governed by community’s values and customs. There is no ceremony connected with divorce and the couple simply separates after dividing the household properties. The fact that there is no such rule that binds a woman to marry her dead sister’s husband or husband or husband’s brother speaks volume about the degree of independence of women in the society. Though re-marriage after divorce or after the death of one’s spouse is considered normal and natural, practice of plurality of wives or co-wives does not exist.

Divorce can be sanctioned on several pretexts like wanting of issue, poverty, family interference, adultery, conversion, unsoundness of mind, incurable disease, ill-treatment, desertion, conjugal infidelity, childlessness, inability of men and women to perform the roles prescribed to them by the family and society etc. Remarriage had also been an age-long practice which occur only with the either death or divorce (legally accepted by the customary law) of the consort. Once divorce is done they go
their separate ways and if anyone tries to act in an unusual manner then they are dealt accordingly.

However, divorce and living apart is condemned in the AO-Naga worldview. The society expects complementary relationships but not contradictory life styles. The following narrative substantiates how ‘living together’ in a family is required than being as loners.

Narrative 5.12: Wife who played competition with her husband

A long time ago, a couple who were married happily got divorced because of some misunderstanding. After the divorce, both stayed in separate houses. The husband used to go to the field along with the villagers in the morning and returned only in the evening. The husband led a normal life. But the wife wanted to play competition with her husband so she used to go alone to the field early in the morning holding a lighted bamboo torch returning from the field very late after everyone is back home from the field. She did so for many days after the divorce. One morning, on the way to the field a voice told her, “Alu ponga temsenla pesūno ni tali metepla, nabo nuzingabopo matoksatsüji.” (Going early and coming late from the field only allows more mosquitoes to bite you but you will never be able to compete with your husband). She was shocked to hear that voice because it was none other than god who was warning her. This made her realize her foolishness. After that, she lost all her interest in competing with her husband. From the next day onward she went to the field along with the other villagers.

The above is an interesting story which conveys the massage that men and women are two distinct genders that play complementary roles but could not exchange their role behaviour for they have to satisfy their role expectations by the family as well as the society. The story establishes gender asymmetry in Ao-Naga society. The tradition warns her that going early and coming late allows her to have more mosquito bites. The ‘mosquito bite’ metaphorically refers to the ridicules of society or fixing the eyes of other men upon her. The narrative thus discourages the divorce of the couples in the society.

The customarily law regulate divorce cases. Divorce owing to adultery of either party or without reasonable grounds is dealt with fines in cash or in kind. Several Ao Naga folktales speak about stepfathers and step mothers who had strained relations with their stepchildren. But the stories related to the stepmothers are highlighted in the folk tradition as irksome members of the family. They are frequently represented as cruel, mischievous and unjust; always strategize to exercise power and control over the members of the family including husband and stepchildren. References for the stepfathers who offended their stepchildren are rare. Such projection of women is a typical patriarchal stratagem for their subjugation.
However women are shown punished if the mischief was noticed. The flowing story clearly shows the differential treatment given by a stepmother towards her stepchildren by giving priority to her son whom she begot during her first marital relationship. However, her mistake was blown to the society and the husband abandons her.

**Narrative 5.13: Stepmother**

Once upon a time, in a family, a wife died leaving her husband and son. The husband got re-married. The new wife then gave birth to a son. She nourished her own son with warm and good food and gave him good cloths and beautiful shawl woven by best yarn. She fed her stepson with cold and spoiled food and gave thick and roughly woven cotton shawl to wear. The villagers could sense the differential treatment given by the stepmother to her stepson. One day, the wife asked some villagers, “Have you seen two boys one wearing shawl made with soft yarn and the other with a rough yarn.” They replied, “We don’t see any distinction in their shawls.” The mother did not understand why the villagers could not differentiate their shawls. One day, when the father and his son were working in the field, they heard the sound of the Osū bird. The boy sings to the bird, “Even if you shout loud, your meat is sour to taste and your intestine is bitter.” The father was shocked to hear that and told him, “My son, why are you singing like that.” He replied, “But father, what can I say it tastes like that only.” Then the father understood that something wrong was going on at home when he was not there. So he told his son, “Son, tonight also I will take home one Osū bird with me. I will taste some meat from your plate”. The son said, “It’s my pleasure father.” Then they went back to their home after work. During the dinner, whatever food was served by the wife to her stepson it was tasted by the husband. He found out that she served him some leaves that taste sour and the seeds that are bitter. She did not serve the meat. The father grew angry with his wife for ill-treating her stepson and expelled his wife and her son out of the home on that night only. Thence, the father and the son lived alone. 41

Though remarriage of women after the death or desertion caused by their former husbands was accepted in society, it is obvious that there was domestic unrest in the relationships among the stepparents and children. In such situations, women as usual were visibly displayed and banished. Folk narratives are silent to men’s mistreatment of stepchildren. Since child rearing continued to be the domain of the women/mother, the issues related to it were an area of concern of the women. As she trespasses her role as a wife and mother by becoming partisan in her attitude, she was punished. The Ao-Naga society strictly regulated roles and relations among men and women in their patriarchal system through their established customs and practices to endure their kinship and inheritance.

c. **Types of marriages**

Apart from the normal marriages, given below are some types of marriages which are mainly taken up by the customary law if the marriage is not according to the law.
(i) Voidable marriage

Elopement (*Jutep kiyim* means: *jupet*, stealthy mating; *kiyim*, marriage). This occurs when both parents on both sides or of either side do not favour the marriage on any grounds. When a girl or a boy after a formal engagement is done run away with another girl/boy *nechen* has to be paid to the girl’s parents. The person who marries the girl is liable to pay fines (*kelamet*) or the boy who leaves his lover is liable to pay the same fine.

When a man commits adultery with another’s wife and they subsequently become man and wife, they are declared adulterers and liable to pay a heavy *kelamet*. In other words, if a man, with or without wife lives with another man’s wife and commits adultery, and if the husband decides to leave his wife and if she lives with the other man, it is called *kelamet kiyim*. On payment of *kelamet*, fines, the marriage is declared regularized. The man and the woman will be fined with six pigs by the clan. For the *Lotha* tribe, if wife commits adultery, her husband’s relatives may warn her and if she continues to partake in the adultery act, she can be divorced by paying a fine of Rs. 10. For this tribe, divorce cases are mostly decided by the village council.

If a girl is impregnated by another man, or the same man, before marriage and has not disclosed this, such a marriage can be deemed void provided, in either case, the victim pays *kelamet* of seven pigs and is not divorced.

(ii) Void marriage

Marriages which are prohibited by custom are void. They are dealt with severe penalty for immorality. Marriage within the same clan of family is endogamy. The husband and wife of endogamous marriage are heavily punished with pig fines and they are expelled from village. This marriage can never be healed. There is no case of bigamy marriage among the Aos but when the tendency of this is suspected it is then nipped at the bud by the village authority. According to Tajen Ao (1980), the functions of village authority are highly commendable as it is due to their vigilance that immorality is timely suppressed. He further adds by saying that there are cases of endogamous marriage but so far there is no case of bigamous marriages among the Aos.42 If a man is found living with another woman while he has his wife then he is given orders by village authority to give up the other woman. If he divorces his wife
and continues to live with the other he is not liable. If however, he does not obey the order he is ousted from the village.

A man living with another woman as his wife without affecting divorce or without giving reason, such marriage is also void. Reasons for desertion, if not assigned will enable the marriage always void. Void marriages such as endogamous bigamy and marriages by desertion are seen as most seriously immoral and unethical among the Aos since ancient times and are dealt with severe penalty. The victims have only two choices, either expulsion from village with no acceptance anywhere, and become wanderer or to abide by customary law under the vigilant village authority.

d. Identity through the distinction of marriage system between the Ao and the others

With the coming of Christianity, education and modernization the marriage ceremonies are being diverted and are influenced by the western style. But one thing to keep in mind is that the traditional system of marriage is still practice and there is continuity in that. Instances like, the practice of exogamy, girls not losing their title even though they are married, no bride price, customary laws to deal with if there are divorces or problems arises between the wife and the husband and so on.

Among the Aos there is no marriage price. For the Konyak Naga, marriages were arranged by parents. The girl’s parents demanded huge properties as price for their daughter. She did not have any option to choose her life partner. She was only to consent to the choice of her parents. If she refused her parents’ choice, she was discarded from her family. With the passage of time this is no longer the same. Again one interesting fact is that a son would always marry a girl from his mother’s clan. However, in present time, this is also no longer adhered to. 43

Even among the Zeliangrong tribe, the bridegroom pays the bride’s price to the bride’s family. It is customary that the bride’s price must be paid before the actual marriage ceremony takes place. The bride’s price is usually distributed among the girl’s parents and their relatives: in case, the girl does not have any relative, near or distant, it is shared with their close friends. Those who have bride’s price are responsible to sort out the girl’s matrimonial problems if and when they arise. 44 The
Sema’s guard their girl with the greatest care, the reason being that a girl fetches a handsome price at marriage and this price would be substantially reduced if she got involved in a scandal.

The Aos did not practice polygamy. But for the Lotha tribe, Polygamy was more popular before the coming of Christianity. But it was confined only to the village chiefs, great warriors and to the wealthy section of the people. If the wife proves to be barren, the husband had every right to marry again without divorcing his first wife. Even today among those who live by traditional customs and practices, polygamy is still prevalent.45 To add further according to J.H.Hutton,46 the Lotha is ordinarily polygynous to the extent of having two wives and sometimes three are married.

Among the Aos, a marriage to the same clan is against the law. But for some other tribes like Sema, after a gap of some generation they can marry members of the same clan. The Konyak Ang (Chief) can have many wives and he marries from the same clan from other village for maintaining the purity of royal blood.

The Ao women do not lost their title after they are married unlike other tribes. For example, if she is from a Longchar even though she married to a Longkumer clan, she will always remain a Longchar till she dies. But for other tribe the day she gets married, the girl loses her title and takes up her husband’s title.

5. Gender and power relationship in Ao-Naga family system

Gender is emerging as an important paradigm to interpret the dynamic roles and relations of men and women in their respective family systems. Family which is the citadel of social organization functions as a centrifugal and centripetal force in determining and construing gender. Gender is the knowledge about the differential positioning of men and women in the society. The society fixes meanings to the role ideology and role behaviour of men and women keeping in view their biological and cultural differences that are genetically and epigenetically transferred along generations. In other words masculinity and femininity are conferred upon the men and women resting on their gender performances prescribed by their respective societies. Gender is created in response to power relations. Power relations are constituted within the role a person plays. A gender role is a set of expectations about
what behaviours are appropriate for people of one gender. As the role changes, the power relations also change and *vice versa*. Hence, these relationships are highly dynamic. The frequent shifts in these relationships find expression in their speech genre like tales, proverbs, and slurs. They manifest the process of gender construction and the patterning of roles and relationships of men and women in their respective societies. It is because, the relationships especially between the two sexes are generally believed to have been manipulated and preserved by social customs and traditions. The structuring of different events and interaction among various social dyads in folktales reflects a network of gender relations and the process of gender construction that the people undergo in a given society.\(^{47}\)

Folktales of Ao-Nagas told by men and women of different ages bear sound testimony to the biases that exist between the two sexes regarding their gender performances and roles. The gender norms and relations between men and women observed in different roles – husband vs. wife, siblings, parents vs. children etc, - can well be explained through the folk narratives.

**a. Husband Vs. wife**

Generally the husband has power to regulate and manipulate his family relations as he is supposed to be the bread-earner. Being the head he should be able to protect his family prestige and should be sober with his wife and children.\(^{48}\) His contribution towards the society should not be neglected. When the husband comes back from work or public meetings (*yimden mapa*) or public participations, the wife is expected to speak politely/ humbly and make arrangements for warm bath, clean clothes and delicious food. The wife is supposed to negotiate both the domestic and public realms within the family and in the society. The family schedule is determined by the woman. Normally, wife/mother is expected to learn in quietness and full submission. Being a woman she should be dissent, not expected to teach or have authority over her husband, must be silent and not be malicious but temperate and trustworthy in everything. She must be worthy of respect and must manage her children and the household well.\(^{49}\) Wife should work hard; take care of her family members including their parents and in-laws. She should maintain healthy relationships with the neighbours and exchange honours with them by gifting or
offering delicacies etc. Thus, the role expectations of wife are multifaceted. Any deviation of women from their respective societal expectation was treated with contempt.

The narrative (1: Wife who returned home), delineates how a husband abides the norms of the family and endures his relations with his wife and children even though she violated them. Any disagreement that arises between the husband and wife is supposed to be settled by them only. The return of the wife to her husband in the narrative further suggests that for a woman her man is the only ultimate resort to live in peace and glory.

The extent of intimacy between the husband and wife finds expression during the pregnancy and delivery time of the Ao-Naga woman. The husband’s participation on the eve of childbirth is amazing event that shares the experience of pleasure and pain between the couple. This is well explained in the life cycle ceremonies.

In a family, good relationship between husband and wife is maintained when they are faithful to one another despite their differences and weaknesses. When dissatisfaction between them takes place they should able to solve it by themselves.

The following narrative (no. 13) explains how the husband loses his temper when he found out his wife’s one weak point. Without showing any sympathy to her, he made his father take her away and never let her step inside his house again, knowing that they have a son. But before he realizes his mistake it was too late because his wife had gone away and never to return home. It is a typical patriarchal story which depicts the right of husband to desert the wife if he can trance any asymmetry occurs in hers thought or practices in their conjugal relationships. The narrative further tells that asymmetrical marriages cannot sustain for longer times.

**Narrative 5.14: Sungrochetla who became cuckoo bird**

In the past, humans, animals and gods lived together. During this time, Sungrochetla, daughter of god married to a human being. She was very fair and beautiful because her parents fed her with human flesh. One day, Sungrochetla told her husband, “These days I’m feeling extremely weak and seem to be losing my weight so, can you please go to my parents and bring the usual food I use to have at home.” He agreed and went to the jungle to meet her parents. He was asked to stay the night with them. Next morning, Sungrochetla’s parents cut one human hand and wrapped the hand several times with a leaf called Am, and tied it with bamboo string and gave it to their son-in-law. On his way home, he wanted to see what was inside the leaf so he slowly opens one of the layers. Every time he tries to opens the leaf, a bird (which was send by her parents to guide the food) always shouts at him, “Ni nü nangla sayika” (I will tell them).
When he reached home, he saw that he had opened all the layer of the food, except one. He gave the food to his wife who was making rice-beer. She got so excited to receive the food. But he did not trust his wife so he peeped through the bamboo-matting wall. He was shocked when he saw her taking out a human hand. She then roasted the hand on the fire and slowly enjoying the hand with rice-beer. Then slowly, her face began to glow and became beautiful as before.

He told the entire story to his father and asked him for an answer. His father told him, “You take her into the deep jungle and leave her there.” But the son replied, “I have a son to take care so please let me not do that business.” So his father took Sungrochetla to the jungle told her, “Let’s go and collect yarang (young banana) from the jungle.” She happily agreed and went together to the jungle. On their way, the father-in-law collected some clouds and put it on a container. He asked her, “Do you know this jungle?” She replied, “Yes, this is place where we frequently come”. The father-in-law thought to himself, “If I leave her here I’m sure she will able to come home so let me take her to another place”. They went deeper and deeper into the forest. At last, they reached a place near a river from where she could not return. Then the father-in-law opened the container containing clouds and poured them over her. Then the entire surroundings were thickly covered by clouds. Both cannot see each other. Then the father told her to wait there for sometime till he comes back with some leaves. Thus he deserts her into the forests.

Sungrochetla’s son cried whole night searching for his mother’s milk, so in the morning her husband told his father, “please go and bring her back because the baby cried the whole night searching for her.” The fathering-law agreed and went to the forest in search of her. He took food along with him. He called out, “Sungrochetla, Sungrochetla where are you? I came to take you home.” But she told him that she got transformed into half human and half bird and hence she could not come out. She shouted at him, “Akontongdong, akunur ashi kulaker.” (Father-in-law is cunning). So he left half of his food to her and returned home. He told his son, “She will never come back, she has gone to her parent’s side, and so you take care of you son.”

From the above narratives it is observed how a man uses his patriarchal authority to over-rule his family as well his wife.

During the fieldwork the researcher could not collect folktales on wife beating. But there are many contemporary narratives that show how husband beats his wife due to drinking and loss of temper which finally end up in divorces or family problems. It is interesting why there are no folktales regarding wife beating despite the fact that the Ao tradition and culture shows the plentiful usage of rice beer. Though Christianity condemned drinking, the people cannot alienate themselves from it. Older generation tell that the wife beating and mutual negotiation are common in the society and they are not the problems to be publicized out. That exists in the family realm and the issues are internal to their private life. That’s how the issue of wife beating is internalized by the traditional people and this may be reason for the absence of the motif of wife beating in their oral narratives.
b. Parents Vs. children

The strength and wealth of a family depends upon the nature of relationships that exist between the parents and children. The parents should set examples to their offsprings. In AO-Naga society, though the gender roles and duties of father and mother or are hierarchized, in the absence of one, the other takes the responsibility of the one who was lost and patches up the situation. Especially the Ao-women have the caliber to take the role of the father in up bringing of the children. Because of the internecine and inter-tribal warfares, there was no security to men’s lives. Hence the women are equipped with the qualities that are essential to arouse the community and family consciousness among their children for revenging upon their enemies. Thus the role of portents in character building of children is very crucial in Ao-Naga society. The parents expect their children to learn about their genealogy and history of their respective families. The children are expected to know not only about their properties but also their debts, friends and foes. The debts of not only money but also relationships like realizing the promises of their parents or revenging upon their clan enemies are expected to be cleared by the offsprings. In chapter 4, Narrative No.1. The Story of Revenging sons (mangyangba jabaso) of the thesis explains how a mother brings up her male children in such a way that they take revenge upon the enemy who killed their father. In the past, the fathers sent their son to the boy’s dormitory (Arju) which was the primary step to socialize him to the rules and regulations of the family at the base and the community at the apex. Children who just listen to advices but never do things in their practical life are referred to such proverb, “Like water not staying in Yum leaf” (Manüto nung tsü mamong ama). The meaning of this proverb is that water never stays on the yum leaf. It always falls down the moment water touches the leaf because it is very slippery and even if one tries to let the water stays on the leaf it just rolls down and falls on the ground. The following narrative explains how a father disciplined his son.

Narrative 5.15: The spoiled son

Long time ago, there was a family. They had only one son. He grew up according to his own wishes and his parents provided him with all the good food like fish and meat. To test and see the son’s reactions, one evening, his parents give him only a simple dish without any meat or fish. The son told his father, “Opa nibo ayimmur.” (Father I want to shout). Actually he means to say
he wanted to have some meat or fish. His father quickly replied back, “Tongshi nungji wor ayimang.” (Go and shout near the wooden post). The father just replies what his son said. Only then the son realized what his father means to say and never demanded anything extra. He stopped crossing the limit and tried to be a good son.

The father and son relationship develops through the participation in activities of the Village Council (Putu Menden). Traditionally the role of the mother was to manage the home, to look after the children, weave clothes for the family, and train her daughters to weave, cook food, feed the children and animals, and fetch water and firewood, brew rice-beer, pound paddy works in the field throughout the seasons. The mother was considered as an example of hard work for her children. Even today, the daughter is expected to be like the mother. Mother is expected to mould the behaviour of the daughter. Mother vs daughter conflicts are not shown in the narratives. Cordial relationship is manifested even in other folk expressions of the AO-nagas.

Sibling relationships

The sibling relationships in the case of sisters were noticed in the folknarratives. The conflicts among the male siblings were shown in the origin myths of Nagas (see chapter II, Narrative 2: origin myth of Nagas (ii) Myth of flat stone and Three brothers in this thesis). Expected behavior for siblings may depend on where the child is in the sibling hierarchy (oldest, middle, or youngest child) and whether the child is male or female. Children with siblings learn how to share and resolve conflicts quite easily. And with the right kind of guidance from parents, siblings also get a lot of practice in learning how to be cooperative, supportive, and nurturing to others. Siblings serve many functions for one another. There are many folknarratives based on siblings’ relationship. When the older sibling tries to exert too much control over the younger one then there arise conflicts among them. They are expected to be responsible, help one another and not to exploit their sibling control. This is explained in the following narrative.

Narrative 5.16: Aier chanu agi ozu akumba (A girl who turns into a bird)

Once upon a time, in a family there were two girls. One day as their parents were away to the field, they spent their day going to collect firewood. Since they went to collect firewood for several times they felt very tired and hungry. The youngest sister asked her elder sister, “Sister, shall we have food?” Her sister replied, “if you want to have food then you go first to collect water.” After coming back from the pond, when the younger sister again asked to have food, her sister told her, “There are some few grains so you pound the grains.” At last she fainted and could not do any work because of the hunger. She told her sister, “I will not do any work because
I am feeling very hungry” and then she rested. But again her sister demanded, “You cook rice first” so she started to cook. She took out some rice with a spoon and tasted to know whether it was cooked or not as she was feeling very hungry. But unfortunately this act was seen by her elder sister. Her sister snatched away the spoon and beat her terribly. Because of the beating, the younger sister got very angry and she cried hysterically as if she was going to faint. As she was very angry, she tore her cloth and put the cloth on her arms and backbone to look like bird wings and feathers. Fixing it so, she went to sünglang (balcony) singing this song, “Ati mangla süngpeni wangte, Tzüteri mangla, ongpang mentitila nung onglak onglak” (Sister you told me to collect firewood and to fetch water, what kind of sister are you).

When their parents returned from the field, they could not find the youngest daughter. When the sun was about to set, they found her in the corner of the sünglang, transformed into a bird. She was there jumping joyously singing the same song which she sang to her elder sister. When they saw her and heard the song, they called her many times thinking that her elder sister might have scolded and made her very angry. They requested her, “Child, please come to us. We will scold your sister”. But she never returned to her. The parents scolded the eldest sister and so she too became very angry and at the same time, she also did not come back to them. She went down to the balcony. Even she turned into a bird and went away making sound, “Tenü-a tenü-a” (sister-o sister). During metsü mapang (sowing season), the sound of this bird is heard.

The narrative illustrates the problems the parents face with children when they leave their home for earning livelihood. In any relationship the ‘strong’ exploits the ‘weak’ and the ‘elder’ snubs the’ younger’ and sometimes the vice versa. In the end the ‘defeated’ or ‘exploited’ will escape into a blissful world. Here the younger daughter who was frequently exploited by her sister got transformed into a bird and flies into skies.

Maintaining good sibling relationships can be found when problems, sufferings and danger occur between them. The Ao-Naga depends for food not only in cultivation but hunting as well. So the male siblings help one another for the sustenance of the family. During hunting in the jungle, they face dangers in many forms, so their relationship is recognized at this time. The following narrative explains the relationship of two brothers where they helped one another to save themselves from the danger, on their way from hunting birds.

Narrative 5.17: Two brothers and a tiger

Once upon a time, there were two brothers. They went to hunt birds (anung asai). They caught many birds, so the younger brother said his brother, “Odlì (brother) lets go home, and we’ve caught enough birds.” But his brother said to him, “Let’s wait and catch more birds and let’s also catch a big bird for our mother because there will be lots of birds coming when evening comes.” As they were engrossed in their hunting, it became dark. As they were going back homeward, they saw an old man holding a bamboo torch and walking through the woods making an, “mmnh mmnh” sound. Since it was dark and they had no torch with them, they shouted, “ohhoi! We don’t know who you are, but wait for me and my brother.” So, the old man waited for them. Actually it was an old tiger. The tiger said to them, “Burn all the birds one by one and put into my mouth otherwise I will kill both of you.” They told him, “We will burn and give it to you one by one, all the birds.” Meanwhile, the younger brother said to his brother, “Brother, do
not give the biggest bird to the tiger which we caught for our mother’’; he kept repeatedly saying this for several times. While doing so he made a long stick out of tin, put it on the fire and told the tiger, “Grandfather close your eyes and open your mouth big, I will give you the biggest bird.” When he did so, the younger brother put the hot, burning stick into his mouth. His tongue burned and he ran away in search of water. So they shouted, “I and my brother enemy went in search of water. Please let there be no water in the river.” As the tiger reached the river all the water dried-up, and he had a difficult time with his burned tongue. This tale means to say that, people come across danger when they live in a poor condition.  

**c. Relationship with in-laws**

In-laws can be a great source of support and closeness. They can also be a major problem in the marital relationship. As mentioned earlier, roles change according to the position. When a man is married to a girl, he becomes a member of the girl’s family. The son-in-law is expected to be present in the in-laws family occasions rendering his help. The son-in-law’s help, presence and concern should be made known to the father-in-law through respect. Since son-in-law has married his daughter so it is his obligation to attend whenever need arises. For example, if his brother-in-law is to get married, he should be the first one near them by even, sacrificing his sleep. In the past, the husband used to go to the wife father’s field to help and for all practical purposes to accept as a member of her family. This is clearly explained in the marriage ritual. The father-in-law’s role is to make sure that his daughter lived securely and happily with his son-in-law. He is also expected by the society not to be too involved in the son-in-law family affairs because being a nuclear family, he has his own family and once the daughter is married to him, the son-in-law assumes the responsibility and right towards his daughter. If he tries to involve and control his son-in-law’s family then it will only bring disturbances between the two families and it will also affect the relationship of the kinship. Till today it is a practice and custom that during an occasion if a pig is killed then the son-in-law give a thigh of the pig to the father-in-law’s family. In this way the relationship is maintained.

Unlike the joint family of the Indian society, generally in the Ao-Naga family everyday close interaction is not found between the daughter-in-law and mother-in-law because of its nuclear set-up. This doesn’t mean that the relationship between them is distant but they maintained their relationship by sharing information, instructions and advices even during pregnancy and delivery. They share their love.
and care through gifts and also respect their roles and power. Conflict arises like divorce, bad relationship when they interfere in the family affairs.

According to Anungla Aier, “Our social structure has a clear division of gender roles, while the menfolk were historically engaged in protecting our villages and clans, women were confined to the family and kitchen. I think it will take some more time for the society to change its mindset”. Gender plays an important role in determining the role of male and female in any society. The Ao-Naga society being a patriarchal society gave men more rights in decision-making. Men not only worked to look after their own families, but as members of the village council they also took importance decisions for their respective village or clan. The women too in the Ao-Naga society had an important role to play. Though they confined themselves to the four walls of the house, it was their duty to take care of the family and look after all the household chores. They were responsible in molding the daughters to become good wives and mothers. The fathers played a huge role in shaping the lives of the sons. Despite the norms set by the society in certain cases where the women had no say, she did not have the right to property and she could not become a member of the village council. Thus the patriarchal society decided the norms for both male and female and power too is determined by the relation between male and female.

It can be concluded from the above discussion that the organization of Ao-naga society rests on functioning of its various institutions like family, kinship, marriage and gender relationships. The narrative tradition of the Aos reveals how these institutions standardize their personal as well as the community lives and ensure the continuity of their identities in changing times. Family (kibong) is the basic social institution established through the custom of legitimate marriage (Kiymba) and function on the norms of patriarchy. Marriage rests on the stringent rules of exogamy and endogamy. The norms of kinship are strictly followed in terms of marriage and related behaviour. The trespassers are punished by the customary law. Polygamy and adultery in conjugal life are prohibited for Aos where as Lotha-Nagas observe it. Aos have no bride price where as the Konyak and Zeliangrong Nagas hold this practice. Remarriage of men and women are permitted. The stepmother problem is highlighted in some narratives. The wicked stepmothers are expelled from the families in the narrative tradition. The stepfather episodes are not
found. Though divorces are in vogue, the Ao custom emphasizes on the need for a healthy and unbroken family for men and women. The narrative tradition suggests the women (wives) not to compete with men (husbands) in family life as both are complementary in their role behaviour. The society warns the women that they receive more bites from men than privilege. The women has vital role to play in bringing up the children as per the norms of the Ao society if the father dies in tribal warfare, hunting or in protecting their community or away from home. The society expects that the men should always be ready with his dao to die for the cause of his community. Every woman wishes that her husband or son should emerge as a headhunter and prove his virility and prowess as a member of Ao-Naga society. Though the nature of the family is nuclear, parental care is mandatory as per their custom. The children are eligible for inheriting property as well as debts of their parents. The family functions on division of labour. The gender roles and functions are determined by custom. The obligatory and customary relationships between parents, parents vs. children, in-laws, between siblings (brothers vs. brothers, brothers vs. sisters and sisters vs. sisters) bounded by tradition. The children are socialized by dormitory system. Thus the social organization of Aos speaks about their identity as a distinct group among the other Nagas.

In order to regulate and reiterate the values and norms of the society the Aos observe several customary and obligatory rituals both in personal (familial) as well as at community (social) realms and thereby protect their core identities in changing times. The next chapter explains the process of constructing the personal and group identities of the Aos by observing the rituals, viz: the personal rites, i.e., the rituals of life cycle -childbirth, puberty, marriage and death and community’s socio-religious and political rites.

Endnotes

2 A man (anybody) is expected to be obedient and give respect to the elders and parents. Quarrelling is a serious issue and reconciliation is demanded. The elders in the village come and patch up the differences. J.P Mills, The Ao Nagas, Kohima, Directorate of Art and Culture, 1926. (reprint 2003), P.175.
3 Information gathered from Longrichila Longchar, 78 years, Longkhum village, interview on 20th Dec, 2007
Information gathered from Rongsenkaba, 77 years old, Yimjenkimong village, interviewed on 10.06.2008
6 J.P Mills, The Ao Nagas, supra., p.90
7 This village is in Asetkong range.
8 Information collected from R.Nungshimeren Ozukum (M), 64 years, Mopongchuket village, Interviewed on 26. 06. 2008
9 Information gathered from Purtongzuk Longchar (M), 70 years, Molung village, interviewed on 8.06.2008
10 Tajen Ao, Ao Naga Customary Laws, Jorhat, Aowati Imchen, 1980, p.73
11 Information gathered from Otsufuba Longkumer (M), 73 years old, Longkhum village, Interviewed on 18.12. 2007
12 Information gathered from Rev.L.Pona Jamir (M), 77 years, Mopongchuket village, Interviewed on 24.05. 2008
14 Information gathered from K. Jamir (M), 71 years, Chuchuyimpang village, Interviewed on 7.06.2008
15 Putu means generations and menden means seat.
16 Information gathered from Rev.L.Pona Jamir (M), 77 years, Mopongchuket village, Interviewed on 24.05. 2008
17 Naga tribe living in the Tuensang district of Nagaland
18 Ibid
19 It is believed by the people that this is a devilish creature that lives in the jungle near a river or lake.
20 The plate is metaphorically representing the daughter who takes care and prepares food for the father.
21 Information gathered from Tsükdinungba Longkumer (M), 75 years old, Changtongya village, interviewed on 24th June, 2008.
22 Since the customary law is too strong that people who love each from the same clan also cannot get married because they don’t want to leave the village and miss all the opportunities like inheritance of property, voices in the society and church, being part of the family etc.
23 Information gathered from Sakunungla Longkumer (F), 55 years, Longkhum village, interviewed on 18.06.2008
24 Tajen Ao, op.cit., 1980, p.32
25 Ibid, p.73
26 Information gathered from Imtilepzuk Jamir, Interviewed on 24.06.2009, 68 years, Changtongya village.
27 Tajen Ao, op.cit., 1980, p.185
28 Narrator did not tell her name.
30 Information gathered from Sakunungla Longkumer (F), 55 years, Longkhum village, interviewed on 18.06.2008
32 Information gathered from Imolemba Jamir (M), 57 years, Ungma village, interviewed on 19.12.2007
33 Panger Imchen, op.cit., 1993, p.109
34 Information gathered from Imolemba Jamir (M), 57 years, Ungma village, interviewed on 20.12.2007
35 Ibid.
36 Information collected from Longrichila Longchar (F), 78 years, Longkhum village, 20.12.2007
37 Ibid.
39 Information gathered in the field from Longrichila Longchar, 78 years, Longkhum village, interview on 20th Dec, 2007
40 Ibid.,
Information collected from Imolemba Jamir (M), 57 years, Ungma village, interviewed on 19.12.2007.

Otsufuba Longkumer (M), 73 years old, Longkhum village, interviewed on 18.12.2007.

Tajen Ao, *op.cit.*, 1980, p. 43.


Information gathered from L. Teka Longchar, 65 years, Longkhum village, interviewed on 13.06.2008.

Information gathered from Longrichila Longchar, 78 years, Longkhum village, interviewed on 20.12.2007.

*Ibid*

Information gathered from Otsufuba Longkumer (M).


See in the thesis, Chapter 4, Narrative 1.

The explanation for the proverb is gathered during informal chat with the community people in the village Longkhum.

*Ibid*

Information gathered from Tsükdinungba Longkumer (M), 75 years old, Changtongya village, interviewed on 24.04.2008.