

# The Game of *Kene*: A Study of Traditional Wrestling among the Angami Naga of Kohima Village, Nagaland

VIZONEINUO VICTORIA VIZO AND QUEENBALA MARAK

Department of Anthropology, North-Eastern Hill University, 793022, India

## Abstract

Traditional games hold profound significance within the cultural tapestry of societies worldwide. These games often have deep historical roots, reflecting a community's values, beliefs and practices to be followed. They serve as living repositories of cultural heritage, passing down traditions from generation to generation. This study attempts to document the game of wrestling among the Angami Naga of Kohima village of Nagaland. During the *Sekrenyi* festival, usually held in February, games such as *kerie melel* (grease pole climbing), *mepfii* (war cry), *seichatuo* (stilt bamboo walk), *keero keteshii* (tug of war), *thapru* (stand-jump), *kemieshii* (traditional fire making) are still being played. Of all conventional games, the game of *kene* continues to be popular amongst adult men, exemplifying the enduring allure of the age-old custom in the form of a wrestling game played among the Angami Naga. Anthropological methods such as observation, interview and case study have been used in this study to gain a comprehensive understanding of the cultural significance and societal impact the game has on the villagers. The popularity of *kene* lies in its capacity to function as a strong agent of socialization for menfolk. The game not only showcases personal growth and development, but also impacts food habit, physical fitness and social aspirations for achieving higher social status. It is also considered a sacred game and that's why, social taboos are associated with it. On the whole, *kene* still holds socio-cultural as well as spiritual and religious importance in the community life of the Angami Naga.

*Keywords:* Intangible Cultural Heritage; *Kene*; Naga Wrestling; Angami Naga; Traditional Game

## INTRODUCTION

Traditional activities, such as games, are an integral part of the 'Intangible Cultural Heritage' of any community. These games are deeply rooted in the history and customs of different societies and offer a glimpse into the past while fostering valuable skills and intra-community interactions having contemporary significance. A game is a recreational activity characterised by organized play or competition between two or more sides, with specific criteria for determining the winner, based on agreed-upon rules (Roberts *et al.*, 1959). So defined, certain games with traditional roots may attain the level of cultural universals (Chick, 2015).

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Games specific to a particular group are common in many traditional societies. Chalid *et al.* (2021) describe games of the Aceh society, such as *maenguli* (marble game), kites, *maencanci pet* (hide and seek), and *chee-chee* (hopsotch), as a form of character building from the religious, cultural, social and educational perspectives, carrying the same appeal to both the children and adults. Ahmadi and Sharbatian (2017) discuss *pigalebazy*, a game played by men, testing an individual's breathing power, agility and dexterity (p.28). Different types and levels of cooperation and/or competition are also evident in games of the aboriginal Torres Strait islanders, such as ball games, wrestling activities and skill contests (Edwards, 2012). To them, traditional games have a role to play in attaining greater cultural integrity involving-kinship, totemism and other principles of grouping in the process. String games, identified as being almost universally part of them, carry different levels of meanings and forms, and are associated with exchanging ideas and at the same time carrying much entertainment value. Figure designs in the form of animals, people, or abstract ideas as the forces of nature (*ibid.*) were commonly represented to mark the occasion. Geertz (1973) describes the Balinese cockfight, where internal and external logic combine and coexist. The Angami Naga game, discussed herein, may symbolically be related with a cockfight, though in reality, it is a men's fight. But as is the case with the Balinese cockfight, there is a touch of violence associated with it.

In the Northeast Indian context, Lyngdoh (2011) elaborated on the game of archery as seen among the Khasi, and discussed the bow and arrow as symbols of a life-long companion to men, from birth and/or naming ceremony to death. The bow and arrow also played a significant role during hunting and warfare and was found to be suitable for testing physical prowess and intelligence. *Thang-ta* and *sarit sarat* are forms of Manipuri martial arts meant to hone one's battle craft during peace time in the olden days when a Manipuri warrior was required to serve his country at war times (Singh, 2008). *Osu kaka*, a game of the Mao tribe held during the post-harvest *Chiithumi* festival, is known for its uniqueness. It is played between the bachelors and married men where the members of the winning team invite the other team in a feast. This game offers a break to everyone from a day's hard work in the agricultural field. On the other hand, *lerii kaphi cho*, a spear throwing war game, held during the *Saleni* festival, revives memories of the olden days when spears were used in wars (*ibid.*). Marak (2015) illustrated different games played by young boys and girls of the Garo tribe, and showed how games acted as a socializing agent working along a solid gendered line. She also gave examples of how societal perception and behaviour were revealed through these games.

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One of the earliest references to Angami Naga games is Hutton's monograph of 1921, wherein he mentioned games such as *terbuchu* ('fighting-eating'), *sitse* (high jump) and its variants *mabeh*, *chatse*, and *keva*, *pili* (high kicking) with the variants *mbamesii*, and *kenneb* (wrestling). The former is a board game wherein logical reasoning is required, while the latter refers to all 'active games' (p. 102). Hutton also mentioned how one untrained and out of practice Khonoma young man cleared a height of 4 feet 8 inches (p. 103) in high jump. Instances such as these are, however, very rarely found in available literature. Liezietsu (2020), in his book *Nhicu Rüzüü 77-ko*, listed a total of 77 games and brought to light the importance of traditional games in the well-being and health of individuals, in addition to recognising the need to preserve these games. This recognition points to a gap in the documentation of traditional games in Northeast India in general and the Angami Naga in particular. Among the conventional games specific to the Naga as a whole, is Naga wrestling, played by the Angami, Chakhesang and Zeliangrong tribes in Nagaland. This study is an attempt to document Naga wrestling as played by the Angami, which is commonly known as '*kene*', simultaneously shedding light on its cultural significance and relevance to them.

### METHODOLOGY

The Northeast region of India is a culturally diverse part of the country, comprising eight states: Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, (commonly known as the 'Seven Sisters') and Sikkim (the 'brother' state). Nagaland is bounded by Assam on the west, Myanmar on the east, Arunachal Pradesh and part of Assam on the north and Manipur on the south. With Kohima as the capital city, the State consists of 16 administrative districts, namely, Kohima, Dimapur, Phek, Peren, Mokokchung, Zunheboto, Wokha, Tuensang, Mon, Longleng, Kiphire and the newly added districts namely Noklak, Chümoukedima, Niuland, Tsemnyü and Shamator. The State is inhabited by 17 major tribes along with other sub-tribes.

The Angami Naga are one of the major Naga tribes residing in Nagaland. The area they predominantly occupy comprises Kohima and Dimapur Districts; the area is again divided into four distinct territories, home to the Northern Angami, Southern Angami, Western Angami and *Chakbro* Angami, each with its own unique dialect and characteristic features. This study was conducted in Kohima Village within the Kohima District. Kohima, the capital of Nagaland lying at an altitude of 1444 metres above the sea level, shares its borders with Dimapur and Peren Districts on the west, Zunheboto and Phek districts on the east, Manipur State on the South and Tsemnyü District on the North. According to the records of the Kohima Village Council

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(2023), individuals from different places and directions converged here, leading to the establishment of a village, and they named it 'Kewhira' ('to meet and assemble together'). Kewhira became 'Kohima' due to mispronunciation of the term by the British administrators, which gained official currency. Kohima village is believed to be over 700 years old and is said to be the second-largest village in Asia. It is commonly called as 'Bara Basti' (big village) and forms the northeastern part of the Kohima Urban area. Angami of this village fall under the Northern Angami group and are commonly referred to as '*Kewhimia*' (*mia* means people). The village is divided into four clan-based localities (thinuo or *kebel*), namely, *Lbisemia*, *Tsiituonuomia*, *Dapfbütsümia*, and *Pfuchatsümia*, abbreviated for the sake of convenience as L, T, D, and P *kebel*s respectively. Kohima village comprises of over 21,600 persons distributed in 5,500 households.

The Angami follow a patrilineal kinship system, where descent and inheritance are traced through the male lineage. It is customary for the youngest son to inherit the parental home and be responsible for caring for his ageing parents. They predominantly speak in *Tenyidie*, which belongs to the Tibeto-Burman language family. Their traditional attire often features unique tribal motifs and intricate designs. *Sekrenyi* is the most important festival and is generally observed in *Kezei* (equivalent to February). The term '*Sekrenyi*' is derived from two words: '*sekre*' (to cleanse) and '*nyi*' (festival). It is a two-day observance of rites exclusively performed by men. Alternatively, it is known as '*Phousanyi*', which signifies the 'Festival of Purification/Sanctification'. As the festival's timing is based on the actual lunar appearance, so the dates are not fixed according to the modern Gregorian calendar.

This study offers a descriptive analysis of the traditional game of *kene*, based predominantly on primary sources. Fieldwork was conducted for three months, i.e., January 2023, February 2023 and July 2023, during which the informants were selected on the basis of specific criteria, such as previous experience of playing *kene*, having a thorough knowledge about the game, currently serving as mentors or coaches, had the distinction of active participation in various *kene* tournaments, and are current champions. The informants included both young and elderly individuals, ages ranging from 23 to 80 years. In-depth interviews and case studies were then carried out among 15 informants, including newly inducted players, veteran players, and elders. Audio recording tools were used during the interviews, and the recordings were subsequently transcribed, translated, and analysed.

## NAGA WRESTLING

Wrestling as a game has been in prevalence among different Naga communities such as Chakhesang, Zeliangrong and Mao, and it has earned popularity among the Angami. 'Naga wrestling' is a common term that is used across all communities. Each tribe uses its own term to refer to the game; for instance, the Chakhesang refer to the game as '*meno*' and/or '*küni*', whereas the Angami call it '*kené*'. The term '*kené*' has its origin from the phrase '*huoniebuo nepie zbükecü*' (Liezietsu *et al.*, 2001), referring to the act of dragging each other onto the ground. *Kene* is played by two individuals, each taking recourse to dragging, pulling, pushing and tripping the opponent. The individuals wear different coloured cloths around their waists and try to topple their opponents onto the ground by pulling with both hands at their waist binders. Interestingly, an opponent is addressed as '*kbrietho-u*', meaning 'beloved friend'. As one gets engaged in more matches, he gains more *kbrietho-u* or 'beloved friends'. *Kene* is a popular game amongst the Angami carrying a long tradition, and meant exclusively for the males.

**Figure 1.** Wrestlers, alongside the referee, poised for the match to begin.



(Source: M. Yiese)

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**Figure 2.** Game in progress with one player striving to overturn the other.



(Source: M. Yiese)

The Naga, irrespective of their tribal affiliations, have a long history of conflict and inter-group rivalry. In the past, they (including the Angami) followed the practice of head-hunting, which had profound cultural significance for them. However, as the Naga tribes have gradually transformed themselves with time, they realised the need for exploring peaceful means of conflict resolution. This exemplifies the process of self-realization, more than anything else. Consequently, *kene*, the traditional wrestling game, which is also considered a sacred act, has been projected as one of the alternative methods of settling conflicts and disputes between neighbouring clans and villages. No doubt, this shift in focus has signalled a change in attitude and orientation of mind, allowing for a peaceful and more culturally accepted way to address differences, promoting greater unity and harmony within the larger community.

### *The Game of Kene*

Among the Angami, *kene* in some cases takes the form of *keshükene*. Initially, *keshükene* was played informally, resembling *kene*, but without following the strict rules attached to it. In *keshükene*, individuals can challenge each other to engage in matches. If the challenger fails to defeat his

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opponent, he commits to train his son and prepare him for a future game against the opponent's son. It is an informal way of wrestling that revolves around personal challenges and commitments as they are transmitted to future generations.

Elder U, who is 80 years old, narrates that in former times wrestlers and community leaders, such as the *gaonburas* (village heads), used to gather at a communal space, where *kene* would be played. In these gatherings, there were no formal rules or regulations dictating how opponents would be chosen. The process was more direct. An individual from any *kebel* would simply stand up and declare that he would wrestle. Following this declaration, any wrestler present in the gathering would step forward and accept the challenge to compete against the challenger. There were no dedicated arenas for wrestling. Instead, people would typically dig up the bare ground and use it as a wrestling spot. While there may not be specific formal occasions dedicated solely to playing *kene*, it is a versatile game enjoyed by all in different settings. Men of all ages play the game for personal enjoyment, social gatherings, or during informal celebrations. Women, children and other men are often the spectators, enthusiastically cheering for the players and creating a lively, supportive atmosphere. Although winning the game did not come with special rewards in the past, the experience fostered a sense of unity and shared enjoyment within the community.

*Kene* has existed since time immemorial but gained popularity only after the gradual decline of the practice of head hunting with the coming of Christianity in the 1830s. During British rule, it was said that the authorities asked the people to dig the area in *Serüzou/Serü* (a place in Kohima) telling them that it would be converted to a wrestling arena, where *kene* would be formally played. After the ground was dug and levelled, games associated with *kene* took place for one year. Subsequently, however, the place was developed into a hospital, what came to be known as Naga Hospital, which is functioning till today.

In 1966, the Government of Nagaland initiated holding the first formal tournament of Naga wrestling, and this marked the beginning of Naga wrestling being played formally, necessitating subsequent alterations to the rules and regulations governing the game.

### *The Kohima Village Youth Organization (KVYO) and Its Role in Formalising Wrestling*

In 1989, concerns developed among the village youth regarding political interference by some of the prominent leaders, who were perceived to be working behind the design of dividing the village along political lines. They realised that reuniting would be a challenge if the villagers were

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to remain divided. Consequently, they decided to establish the 'Kewhimia Youth Organization', also known as 'Kohima Village Youth Organization'(KVYO) as a force of unification. After some time, the organisation assumed responsibility of overseeing the 'Kohima Village Sports Association' (KVSA) Meet, initially held annually but changed to biennial performance with the primary objective of promoting unity and friendship among the four *kebel*s of the village.

The sports meet has provided a platform for the villagers to come together, participate in various sporting activities, and strengthen their bond through friendly competition and camaraderie. The diverse activities include running races, high jump, football, volleyball, badminton, table tennis, shot put, and the traditional game of *kene*. These games add excitement and variety to the sports meet, encouraging widespread participation and fostering a sense of community engagement among the four *kebel*s. The initial competitions were confined within the clans (or *kebel*) in games such as wrestling, running races, and high jump, often referred to as *Lbisemia* Heat, *Tsütuonuomia* Heat, etc. These intra-*kebel* competitions serve as the process of selection by which the most competent individuals are chosen to represent their respective *kebel* at the KVSA Meet.

The KVYO frames the rules and regulations for formal wrestling to govern the conduct and proceedings of the game. These rules are essential to ensure fair play, maintain the traditional integrity of *kene*, and create a safe and enjoyable environment for all participants. KVYO, as the governing body, is responsible for setting and enforcing these rules, organising tournaments, ensuring players' adherence to the guidelines, and preserving the cultural heritage of the game within the community.

Following are the specific rules laid down by the KVYO:

(i) *Chiephrie* (Waist binder)

*Chiephrie* is to be arranged by the KVYO, which is tied below the navel in a traditional double knot pattern. During the match, each player has the liberty to adjust the opponent's binder. If the waist binder is not tied to the opponent's satisfaction, it can be retied. However, if the discomfort persists, the referee will take charge of tightening the binder, and no further adjustments will be allowed. If the waist binder becomes untied during the match, the referee has the authority to halt the match temporarily to adjust or tighten the waist binder. Before each bout, the waist binder can be rearranged, and players can check and ensure their comfort level by examining each other's waist cloths at the beginning of the match.

Figure 3. *Chiephrie* (waist binder)



(ii) *Kene chü* (Arena): It is important to properly set up the arena to ensure the safety of the participants and prevent injuries. The arena can be set up at either a high or low location. If the arena is placed at a higher elevation, it should have a dimension of 40ft x 40ft in terms of length and breadth. The height of the arena can vary. Within the arena, the area for the players (*kene rhichou*) should have a diameter of 30 ft, while a safety zone (*riebousie*) of 4 ft is necessary to provide adequate space for manoeuvring and to prevent accidental injuries. The type of surface used in the arena can vary. If it is located at a high elevation, mattresses can be used. Sand is an option if the arena is at a lower elevation, and it should have a thickness of 6 inches to ensure safe landing for the wrestlers. When the arena is arranged at a high location, a properly constructed fence is essential to prevent any accidental fall or injury, ensuring the safety of the participants during the bouts.

(iii) *Rüzhümia tsiüphrü* (Number of players): In *kene* tournament, each *kebel* (team) is required to have 10 members with an additional three members as reserve, making a total of 13 players representing each *kebel*. In rounds two and three, reserved members can substitute the originally selected players, provided they inform the judge before the new round commences. No player can be replaced during a round. Once a player is substituted, he will not be eligible to

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participate in any subsequent rounds of the tournament. If a player takes an opponent's name but refuses to play with him, both of them will be disqualified from the next round, and their *kebel* will not be allowed to provide a replacement. Players who feel physically weak are to inform their coaches before picking their opponents' names to avoid last-minute complications. No extra time is given for replacement once the name is chosen. Any violation of these rules invites intervention from KVYO, which takes appropriate action. The rules aim to ensure fair play and uphold the integrity of the tournament.

(iv) *Kru kedakecii* (Choosing comfort): Individuals after selecting their opponents will be granted the privilege to play in a manner most suited to their comfort level. If they are incapable of finding comfort while the round is on, it should be ensured that the subsequent rounds will be in accordance with the opponent's preferences. In cases where the players possess different levels of comfort, they will be permitted to play following each other's preferred style. However, in case of a draw, a lottery is done to decide which comfort style is to be used.

(v) *Puotei* (Timer): Players are allotted 2-minutes each, a total of 4 minutes in each bout, for achieving results. In case the players are tied after the end of the allotted 4 minutes, an extra 2 minutes are provided to determine the winner. During the individual championship round, each player is given a 2-minute time limit for their match. If the players are unable to come to a result within 2 minutes in the first, second, and third bouts, a unique technique called '*pbikrii ketou ciin*' (big toes-aligned) is employed. They are made to stand upright, with their great toes and stomachs facing each other and their faces directed towards each other. A 5-second countdown is initiated to encourage them to make the first move. If they fail to act within those 5 seconds, the referee will restart the game to ensure fairness and a decisive outcome.

The KVSA wrestling champions would then proceed to compete in the Northern Angami Sports Association (NASA) Wrestling Championship, which usually takes place in February. After their participation in the Northern Angami Championship, successful wrestlers advance to the higher grade Angami Wrestling Championship, involving competitors from various Angami Naga village communities of the region, and ultimately, they may even compete in the Nagaland Wrestling Championship. The possibility of progressive rise through participation in different levels of competition allows skilled wrestlers to showcase their abilities in a spirit of community development, encouraging healthy competition among different sections of the Angami Naga, and, for that matter, among all Naga communities across Nagaland. These events are spread over the whole span of a year.

### *Kenyü*(Taboo) connected to Wrestling

A pivotal element in the Angami culture is the concept of *kenyü*, which carries a dual meaning of prohibition or taboo, as well as serving as an ethical lesson for leading a virtuous life. *Kenyü* embodies the restrictions placed on individuals to prevent them from engaging in harmful

actions within the community. In this connection, J. H. Hutton (1921) also writes, 'so loose is the use of the word *kenyü* that it may refer not only to the breach of the strict rule of a magico-religious observance or to the breach of a social law, theft for example, but to the most trivial matter of pure utility' (p.190). *Kene* is loaded with a myriad of taboos deeply ingrained in the local tradition. One significant taboo is that women are not allowed near the ring, as it is believed that only men have the capacity to be engaged in wars or battles. Prior to the match, players are allowed to sleep in a camp to prevent any potential bid to victimise them and mar the show. Married men playing in the game are prohibited from sleeping with their wives during that time. On the day of the match, women from the player's family are not allowed to wash their hair, sweep the floor, or close doors as a precaution against bad luck. Women typically wear their hair in a bun during a *kene* match, and it is customary for the mother of the player to untie her hair. The parents of the player should not sit with their legs crossed during his match, but remain standing as a mark of respect and reverence to the occasion assuming a sacred flavour. Parents hold a significant and respected position in the community, akin to being next to God, and standing during the match signifies their support and importance in the player's life. The eldest person in the *kebel* also makes an announcement which runs as follows:

*'U thinuo Lbisemiako, keboupuorei kepfenyü sii luo*

*Thenu thenuo keboupuorei mesa mo kebamia u ramia rüzhü mbodzü*

*U chü kemesa wa morosuo ho*

*U chü kemesa wadi rüzhümia ko bu rüzhülie morosuho*

*U chükemesa lie mo kebamia kbaru sie pa phreta morosuo ho*

*U chü kemesa lie mo badi thesie nu shi ke lie sie u gei keboupuorei chüwa rei geidza dzü ho.'*

[Everyone from *Lbisemia kebel*, should pay heed to this announcement.

Women who are not clean must cleanse themselves before the start of the game;

They must be cleansed for the players to play.

Those who have not cleansed themselves must go outside the traditional gate (*kebari*).

If it is found later that they have not been cleansed, they should not raise any objection to the consequences that may follow.]

Cleansing is considered to bring positive energy, remove any negative influence, and enhance the value of the overall outcome of the game for the participants. A pregnant, unmarried woman is

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considered soiled due to the societal norms and beliefs concerning marriage and pregnancy. In the specific cultural context as mentioned, going outside the traditional gate (*keharu*) is considered a purification act for women who have not been cleansed. This act of stepping outside the gate is believed to symbolise a purification process, where the women distance themselves from the game and the arena to remove any perceived impurity.

On the morning of the match, players visit the eldest person in their *kebel* to seek blessings. During this visit, the elders extend their support and encouragement by offering the players a cup of *zutho*, a traditional rice beer. Among the acts of misfortune, throwing a stone over a player's house is one which is considered inauspicious for the player. Furthermore, the player's supporters are prohibited from clapping or expressing excitement as he wins, as it could be misinterpreted as a challenge. This prohibition is observed to maintain a harmonious and healthy atmosphere during the game and to avoid any potential conflict or misunderstanding to develop. These taboos exemplify the sacredness and cultural significance attributed to *kene*, influencing the way it is observed and held in high esteem within the community.

### DISCUSSION

The popularity of *Kene* as a leisure activity (for players and spectators) notwithstanding, it also serves as a strong agent of socialization for men. At one level, fathers, uncles and brothers would teach their younger family members, not only as a game to be pursued, but also to avenge their defeats, or to maintain their winning record. But, as mentioned previously, the game also promotes friendship, the opponents being referred to as 'beloved friends' implying that the more bouts a wrestler plays, the more friends he gains, irrespective of wins or losses. Mr. V, a 23-year-old wrestler, was raised in a family where his father and uncle (father's brother) were known wrestlers. Watching them in action as he grew up impacted his life, developing a passion for wrestling. He was mentored at a young age by the elders in his family, and he continues to be a well-known wrestler even today. From the fieldwork conducted, a common finding that emerges is every male has wrestled at least once in his lifetime, be it formal or informal. In informal settings, peer groups would get together during their leisure time, and they would challenge each other to wrestle, maintaining a friendly spirit. As adolescents and young men, they also were seen impersonating eminent wrestlers just for merriment.

For a wrestler, the game showcased personal growth and development from a stage when he was a mere novice to a skilled and respected professional. As wrestlers, they not only gain in physical strength but also acquire mental resilience and discipline. *Kene* in many cases

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served as a metaphor for overcoming life's challenges with determination. In the case of Mr. W, a 48-year-old wrestler, his clan faced a decline in number, leaving them belittled in the community. This situation instilled in the wrestler W a deep-rooted determination to protect and uplift the reputation of his clan. He considered himself not an individual, but a potential embodiment of his clan's prestige. His involvement in wrestling became a mission for him to restore his clan's image, to bring recognition and respect back to his clan, proving that their legacy was far from being diminished. This could be seen as a testament to the power of tradition, craving for identity, and personal resolve.

In the pre-colonial headhunting era, among the Angami, the title of the 'bravest warrior' was bestowed upon the individual who could capture the highest number of decapitated heads as a mark of his bravery. As a symbol of recognition, the 'bravest warriors' were granted the privilege of wearing distinctive attires and ornaments. This special distinction symbolised exceptional courage and achievements in battles, enhancing their status and heroism within the community. Today, in the context of *kene*, victory holds an altogether different importance, as the one who could successfully defeat his opponent is regarded as a prominent person in the village, acclaimed for his physical strength and skill as well as mental capacity to accept others. This achievement brings them great honour and respect within the community. The elevated status that wrestlers gain is one of the reasons why young men learn and take part in this game. A 37-year-old popular wrestler, X, spent his childhood observing the elders engaged in *kene*. He had experienced bullying from his peers while growing up and this fuelled his determination to prove his personal capabilities to others. Consequently, he began participating in one at the young age of 19 years and won championship titles in two tournaments. Additionally, he secured the first, second, and third positions in various other tournaments throughout his impressive 18-year tenure. Today, as an important member of the village community he is recognized for his proficiency and skill.

The game of *kene*, which originally was an informal one, has undergone much change after the initiatives taken by the Kohima Village Youth Organization's (KVYO), especially in setting down rules and regulations. In the past, men usually gathered at a common area where they got engaged in informal wrestling matches. These matches used to take place on bare ground, where participants could grapple and wrestle without strictly following any prescribed rules. It was played as a form of entertainment and community bonding, allowing individuals to demonstrate their wrestling skills. As was in the past, at present also there are no specific age

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groups or weight categories defined for participating in the game. Historically, participants were required to wrap a traditional shawl called '*lobe*' around their waist. This shawl was characterized by red and green stripes on a black fabric. However, over time, they have deviated from this traditional practice and started wearing waist binders of various colours such as yellow, red, white, and blue. This alteration was intended to enhance visibility and differentiate the players from a distance.

Another change that has been witnessed is the extreme care that is now given towards the maintenance of health by the players. Earlier, wrestlers did not have access to dieticians or nutrition experts to guide their dietary choices but followed certain norms in terms of food intake. They relied on traditional knowledge and included protein-rich foods such as pig head, trotters, chicken, and soups. Additionally, dog meat was also considered a source of energy for them. These protein sources were believed to provide the wrestlers with the necessary strength and stamina. Today, some of them seek guidance from a dietician, and take protein supplements, even though their regular food intake continues to include traditional dietary practices. Earlier, the routine of exercises mainly covered running laps around the village before gathering at a common area where the players practised. During the practice sessions, the players would take quick turns, trying to turn their opponents over on the ground they had dug up themselves, subsequently covering it with sand. This physical training was essential for gaining necessary strength and endurance required to play the game. With unlimited access to gyms now, the wrestlers have shifted their practice sessions to these modern facilities. Instead of relying solely on traditional methods, they now utilise the gym's equipment and resources to enhance their level of training. The availability of gyms provides them with a more professional and specialised approach to physical training, enabling them to improve their overall performance.

Over the years, some of these distinguished wrestlers have enhanced their skills by incorporating techniques from other disciplines such as martial arts and judo, in the process allowing them to compete at the National level. For instance, a 28-year-old wrestler, Mr. Y, represented his State at the All-India Traditional Belt Wrestling Championship and won a bronze medal in belt wrestling. Additionally, Mr. Z, a 25-year-old wrestler, took part in the same championship and earned a gold medal in Mas-wrestling. Their participation at the national level revealed that competitors were significantly more advanced in terms of their techniques, strategy, and knowledge about rules. This valuable experience not only offered key insights for improvement but also inspired and motivated young players to engage with *kene*, thereby

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can contribute in the sustenance of the game.

preserving its significance and at the same time preparing themselves for higher levels of competition. Consequently, a balance between tradition and modernity can contribute can contribute in the sustenance of the game.

### CONCLUSION

*Kene*, a game that tests agility, strength, and prowess, continues to be a highly structured masculine game among the Angami Naga. Just as in the past, it continues to hold significant cultural importance and remains an integral part of the community's heritage and identity. Despite the passage of time and societal changes, the traditional game has managed to retain its essence and popularity among the people, the older renowned wrestlers attaining a position of fame and enhanced status. The champions of the past served as role models, inspiring the younger generation to pursue the game with dedication and passion. At the social level, *kene* also serves as a rite of passage from adolescence to manhood. Young men are often encouraged by their elders to participate in wrestling because it symbolises physical strength and bravery associated with becoming a mature, responsible member of the community as is the case with the informant W. Through such cases, the legacy of *kene* can be passed down from one generation to the next, reinforcing the cultural significance and preserving the game's intangible heritage within the community. Getting blessings from the elders is also an important consideration as confirmed by most of the informants. Elders' blessing instils confidence and a sense of spiritual support and enhances their determination to achieve success in life.

Over the years, various organizations and clubs such as 'Nagaland Wrestling Association', '3E', 'Naga Wrestle Mania', 'Naga Open Wrestling', and 'International Hornbill Wrestling Championship' have been introduced to promote and preserve the legacy of Naga wrestling. These entities play a vital role in organizing tournaments, and events, fostering a sense of community engagement and companionship among the participants. The continued presence and active engagement of Naga wrestling highlights its enduring capacity, more than what a game just signifies. It serves as a symbol of unity, resilience, and cultural pride, carrying forward the ancestral values and traditions that have shaped their identity over generations. Organizations like the 'Nagaland Olympic Association' played a crucial role in facilitating integration by introducing belt wrestling in the Nagaland Olympics. Through such initiatives, the wrestlers can take significant strides towards establishing Naga wrestling as a respected and recognised sport at the National and International levels. The integration of different martial arts such as mixed martial arts, judo, jujitsu, freestyle wrestling techniques have introduced more

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discipline into Naga wrestling, which adds more depth and complexity into the game while preserving its cultural heritage.

In today's rapidly changing world, traditional games hold a special place as windows into the past and provide opportunities for shared experiences across generations. As technology continues to reshape the way one spends his leisure time, preserving and promoting traditional games become crucial for maintaining cultural integrity and fostering a sense of belonging to the community.

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### DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTERESTS

The authors report no conflicts of interest. The authors alone are responsible for the content and writing of the article.

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Address for correspondence: Vizoneinuo Victoria Vizo, Research Scholar, Department of Anthropology, North-Eastern Hill University, 793022, India. Email Id: vizovizo03@gmail.com

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