



The Centrality of *Esigani* (Matchmaker) in Traditional Abagusii Marriage

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Abstract

This study sought to explore the centrality of a matchmaker in traditional marriage among the Abagusii. A case study research design was utilized. The social exchange theory of mate selection guided the study. Stratified, purposive and snowballing sampling techniques were used to obtain 30 respondents who provided data. An interview guide was utilized to gather qualitative data which was analyzed using thematic content inquiry. The study found that a matchmaker (*esigani*) played a significant role in most marriages among the Abagusii in the traditional setting. He or she was involved in mate selection, negotiations, dowry payment, and regular advice during and after marriage and when a conflict occurred during a marriage. Due to the use of a matchmaker, careful selection of mates was in most cases ensured and therefore few marital conflicts and divorce. The role of a go-between began declining with the advent of settlers and missionaries in Gusiiland. The study will benefit the present and future generations of the Abagusii. They will know that despite modernity, marriage requires collaborative views including those of a matchmaker.

Subject Areas

Sociology

Keywords

Marriage, Matchmaker (*Esigani*), Traditional, Practices

1. Introduction

People in diverse cultures, past and present, have sought assistance from matchmakers because they may have a deeper understanding of human character, a

wider connection to friends and greater knowledge and experience to help someone choose a marriage partner [1] (Tahir, 2021). Historically, in many cultures, parents would request the assistance of a matchmaker in finding a suitable spouse for their child. The job of the matchmaker was extremely important because dating and free choice of a marriage partner were not allowed [2] (Lyu & Zhang, 2021). The only way for young people to marry is through arranged marriage [3] (Xinhua.net., 2019). Such arrangement increased the chances of making the right choices and therefore minimized conflicts within the institution of marriage. Divorce cases were minimal and complementarity in marriage was in most cases warranted [4] (Rune, 2022). The first episode of arranged marriage is recorded in the Bible [5] (NIV, Genesis, 24: 14). Eliezer, a servant of Abraham was tasked with the responsibility of getting a wife for his master's son. In ancient times, the Greeks loved long-lasting marriages and therefore a suitable matchmaker who was mostly a woman was used to negotiate for two families who wanted to marry. She made the approach, took messages, and most importantly, reported their personal opinions about prospective spouses to hopeful brides and grooms [6] (Dawood, Mimouni & Yarosh, 2017). The same situation was evident in ancient Japan during the Nara period (710-794). During this period, the use of matchmakers in facilitating competitive mass marriages referred to as *utagaki* was common [7] (Smith, Dahal, Puri & Weiser, 2020). The ancient Aztec community in Mexico had a law in which old women (*cihuatlanque*) facilitated marriages. The couple was successfully matched, using a ritual in which they tied the groom's shirt to the bride's dress [8] (Pennock, 2017). The Victorian era in Britain set courtship regulations that were to be used by matchmakers. Matchmakers carefully watched the behavior of young women of marriageable age [9] (Cadbury, 2017). Traditionally, and to a large extent today, marriages in China are arranged by a matchmaker [10] (Cao & Feng, 2022). In Africa, most marriages are arranged by parents, grandparents, or other relatives and closest trusted friends [11] (United Nations, 2018). The use of a matchmaker was common in most communities in East Africa [12] (Ashley (2019). In Kenya, most people conduct marriage through a matchmaker [13] (Orera, 2023). Abagusii, during the pre-colonial period, laid a lot of emphasis on the use of a matchmaker (*esigani*) during marriage arrangements [14] (Nyamache & Asatsa, 2022). However, with the advent of modernity particularly in the post-independence period, young people are turning to various social situations to find prospective partners by themselves. Most of these marriages have failed to promote marital stability. The use of a matchmaker to get a mate in traditional marriage promoted marital stability. With fast developments in arranging for mates, the present and future generations will not have knowledge of the significance of *esigani* in marriage arrangements. The stability of most modern marriages is characterized by challenges that were minimal when matchmakers were involved. On this basis, this study was carried out to survey the centrality of *esigani* in traditional Abagusii marriage.

2. Statement of the Problem

There is concern that most contemporary marriages among the Abagusii have challenges. Most people within and outside Gusiiland have attributed this partly to self-choices for a mate made by spouses. The use of matchmakers who used to increase the chances of suitable individuals marrying each other is quite minimal. Divorce which used to be rare in the traditional setting has in the recent past increased. This is partly explained by the mismatch occasioned by self-selection. As noted by most scholars [15] (Akama, 2019), the centrality of *esigani* in increasing the chances of stability of marriages cannot be overemphasized. Due to modernity occasioned by technological development, emphasis on education and careers, religion and various family-related legislations, the current generation may not have an opportunity to know how a matchmaker was significant in traditional marriages. Additionally, most of the generation that understood about using a matchmaker in marriage is facing extinction. The current and future generations may be at a loss of not have knowledge of this rich culture of Abagusii. With modernity in marriage, the current and future generations may not have knowledge on the significance of a matchmaker in marriage arrangements. Information on the significance of *esigani* is scanty in the literature. It has to be researched and documented for present and future generations. On this basis, this study sought to explore and document the centrality of *esigani* (matchmaker) in traditional Abagusii marriage.

3. Research Objective

This study sought to explore and document the centrality of *esigani* (matchmaker) in traditional Abagusii marriage.

4. Theoretical Framework

The study was guided by the Social Exchange Theory which emanated from the works of George Homans (1958). According to this theory, humans tend to seek out rewards and avoid punishments. On this basis, while *esigani* was scouting for a suitable bride or groom, there were attributes that he looked at while he or she avoided bad attributes. Positive attributes (rewards) formed a basis upon which one was considered for marriage. On the other hand, negative attributes (punishments) eliminated one from being considered suitable for marriage. The matchmaker selected a mate who had good qualities while avoiding those mates who had negative characteristics.

5. Review of Related Literature

Literature on the centrality of a matchmaker in traditional marriage among the Abagusii is scanty [16] (Ayako, 2020). Studies on marriage through a matchmaker have been carried out in various parts of the world. A study on marital satisfaction resulting from arranged marriage was carried out by Raina & Maity (2018). The result indicated a positive relationship between marriage through a

matchmaker and marital satisfaction. Based on this result, the current study sought to explore the centrality of a matchmaker in traditional marriage among Abagusii. In another study, [17] Raina & Maity (2018) carried out a study on arranged marriages in Africa, Southeast Asia, the Middle East and Latin America. The study established that despite the existence of such marriages in these parts, women interviewed were against these marriages for reasons of religion, love and women's rights. On their part, [18] Sethi, Karika and Reiter (2020) explored into women's choice and premarital experiences of arranged marriages within a South Asian community in Britain. The study found that the culture of using a matchmaker is slowly declining within a South Asian community in Britain because of influence from the Britons. [19] Sarkar & Rizzi (2024) sought in their study to establish the attitude of college students in India towards marriage through a go-between. Most of the respondents were against the issue of getting married through a matchmaker. A significant number of students appear ready to exercise some decision-making power in the process of mate selection, thereby challenging the traditional norms. [20] (Khamasi 2010) carried out a study on the role of information in matchmaking during marriage. The study established that self-matched couples have the fewest domestic conflicts and the highest income [22] (Kelli, Kondili, Stiller, Korenchuk & Jennings, 2023). [23] Yang (2021) researched on online dating and mate matching. The result from the data collected showed that online dating, which has rapidly become a pervasive means of seeking potential partners, has altered both the romantic acquaintance process and the compatibility matching process. In another study, [23] Sharabi, (2023) researched past matchmaking norms and the analysis established that children were not for the aspect of a matchmaker in marriages. [24] Steiner & Becker (2019) carried out their study on the persistence of arranged marriage in urban India particularly the New Delhi National Capital Region. Most respondents reported an expectation that young people today will have more say in their partner selection than the previous generation. Most prefer some sort of "joint-arranged" marriage, where young people participate in selecting their partner alongside their parents [25] (Population Association of America, 2019). Parent-arranged marriages have historically been the most common form of partner selection in India. [26] Flicker, Sharon, Barbosa, Flavia; Afroz, Farhana; Saif, Sumaiya, Mohsin & Faeqa (2019). Arranged marriage was also dominant in many other Asian countries as well but sharp declines in the prevalence of arranged marriages have been documented in China, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Kyrgyzstan, Nepal, Taiwan, and Togo [27] (Allendorf and Pandian 2016).

6. Methodology

The research was carried out in Gusiiland which constitutes of Kisii and Nyamira Counties.

A case study design was utilized as it provided the researcher an opportunity

for an in-depth analysis of the centrality of *esigani* (go-between/matchmaker) in the framework of traditional Abagusii marriage. The design helped to describe the meaning or lived experience of various respondents. The design gave the researcher an opportunity to interpret the meaning of their lived experiences [28] (Creswell, 2014). Data was gathered from 30 respondents who were obtained through stratified, purposive and snowballing sampling techniques. An interview schedule and secondary sources were used to obtain data. The stability of the interview guide was safeguarded through piloting. Data that was chronicled in audio tapes was recorded and scrutinized to evade misunderstanding of meaning that may have originated from rephrasing. Field data was scrutinized and incorporated with secondary data, then thematically systematized according to the objective of the research. Data was analyzed using thematic content inquiry.

7. Result and Discussion

This study established that by 1911, marriage through elopement and subsequent cohabitation was quite rare. According to data collected, it was extremely uncommon for a young man and woman to approach and propose a marriage to each other. Identification of a partner was mostly executed by a matchmaker (*esigani*) who played a major role from the time of scouting for a mate to a wedding and life thereafter.

7.1. Why Marriage Arranged through *Esigani*?

One of the respondents observed that the mobility of the youth was quite restricted. There was no meeting through technology such as the internet. Youths in adjacent villages and even homesteads did not know each other. It was therefore challenging for one to get a suitable mate without interaction. A matchmaker was therefore a significant and inevitable bridge in marriage arrangements among the Abagusii. The significance that was bestowed on a go-between led to a proverb among Abagusii as recorded by [29] Okemwa (2012); *Esigani mboraro nka-* or *esigani nigo ere oboraro gocha enka* (a go-between is a bridge between two families- a go-between is like a bridge).

From oral interviews with the respondents and information extracted from ([29] Okemwa (2012)), the significance of a go-between can be stated in the following saying;

A man who wants to marry should first find out from a trustworthy source about the behavior of members of the family he wants to marry (*Bwanchi bwamang' eire, ntengora bokorigia (Okomang'a obwanchani igo nokobochaka. Okwo n' okoria oboko. Ekeru omonto anyorire ase aranyuome korwa igo omang' ire enka eyio. Erio koba n' obomaene oboiri obwo n' obuya goika aenekie korwa ase abanto. Abanto nabwo bagotengoria gose bakorusia chitang' utang' u korwa ase enkoro igoro y'enka eyio)*). Simply means whoever wants to marry should make enquiries from people about the suitability of

the bride in order to dispel any doubts held.

This saying clearly indicates that before marriage took place, investigation and adequate knowledge about the couples-to-be was sought by *esigani*. This is because a go-between could build or break two families whose children were joined in a marriage. A careful scrutiny by *esigani* made marriages long-lasting because it made couples make informed decisions. The researcher concluded that this may explain why divorce and conflicts in marriage were rare.

7.2. Who Was *Esigani*?

According to Akama [15] (2019) and primary information from respondents, *esigani* was in most cases a close relative to the groom's lineage. She was an aunt or a reliable female relative who was entrusted with the responsibility of searching for an appropriate bride. It was the responsibility of the groom's parents to search for this suitable go-between once they felt that their son was mature enough to get married. This individual had to be dependable because any half-truth from her/him would lead to an undesirable choice.

According to Beatrice Mokeira, 73 years, (O.I., 5/08/2021) of Mong'oni village, Masaba north sub-county, Nyamira County, women were preferred to be go-betweens because they were very keen on very small details and could out of interaction with other women know a lot about a given girl in a given family. The respondent further revealed that men were on rare occasions used as go-betweens because they could easily be swayed by the prospective bride's physical attraction and the fact that most men were in *ebisarate* (huts built away from homes) did not give them the opportunity to observe and gather most details about young girls in the neighborhood.

7.3. What Was His or Her Role

Esigani played various significant roles described in the sections that follow.

7.3.1. Scouting a Suitable Mate

A matchmaker played a crucial role in scouting a suitable mate, relaying information between the two families in the course of arranging for a marriage. Based on the emphasis placed on marrying a girl who had good qualities, Abagusii had the following to say as recorded by Okemwa (2021);

Nyansarora okuma Bonyando, ng'ai ngochia nyakiore amotimie getinge gose boiko bware gocha ang'e (Nyansarora nigo akumete Boyando, naki intakonyora Nyakiore/omokundekane amokokorere enyangi egere ense ebe buya) Nyansarora who lived at Boyando village was a desirable girl. Parents wished they could get a priest who could wed her to their son and therefore make life better in that home.

To reinforce this observation on the need to marry a good girl, Okemwa [29] (2017) recorded the following Abagusii saying; *omoiseke omobe momura oare*

aganyete- and omomura omobe moiseke oare aganyete (A bad girl waits for a man from a distance to marry her and a bad boy waits for a girl from a distance to marry him). This is because within the community, she was known. This also applied to a bad man, he awaited to marry a girl from a distance where his character was unknown. With this observation, it is clear that Abagusii cherished marriage and every effort was made to get the best spouse for each other. When a son came to fetch food, a mother could always encourage him to marry a good girl. He could be told; *Nyuoma omoiseke ore n'echimbwa chingiya* (marry a girl who has good character). The researcher noted that marriage was very important to Abagusii and every effort was made to get the right bride (*omwencheri*) or groom. This is because divorce was rare and unacceptable.

According to [15] (Akama, 2017) and responses from oral interviews, some of the features, a potential wife to be had to have as some of the specifications a go-between was given to assess included but were not limited to;

Not being witches (*abarogi or inkoigora bare egesieri kabere*), had no history of chronic illness (leprosy, epileptic (*endurume*), madness (*obobari-mo*), morally upright, good family history of mother, had history of giving birth to many children and of opposite sex (*ogwaterania oroiboro*), if there are incidences of theft in that family, issue of laziness of family members (*obworo*), issue of deformities (*oborema*) in her family, history of barrenness (*obogomba*), suicide (*ogweita or okwengenta*), history of divorce, cases of those who were not married in the family, family arrogance, honesty, the integrity of the family members, element of the girl being hardworking in the farm, whether that girl previously got married, the bride's clan or family lineage, an existing curse on the family and good physical attraction, was welcoming, not jealousy (*abanyagesongal abanyaibero*), always starving with no food, respect themselves, infertile and if body parts were crippled (*mbi-mamaine*) among others.

The researcher observed from these characteristics that Abagusii were very careful not to make mistakes when choosing a bride. More care was placed on choosing a suitable bride and less scrutiny was put on the suitability of the groom. This means that a good bride could bring up a good family.

7.3.2. Reporting Findings

The marriage process was perfectly choreographed and seriously executed because after getting a suitable bride, *esigani* reported back to the parents of the groom. A meeting was held between the go-between and the parents of the groom. The go-between described the prospective bride in detail as per the specifications that had been given and any other issues that were worth mentioning. If the groom's parents were not satisfied with some of the features, the process was put to a halt. If they were satisfied, then the next process of introducing the topic to the parents of the prospective bride was executed.

According to [30] Okinyi & Nyankanga (2014), information on the intent to

marry a girl who had been identified was relayed by the go-between to the parents of the bride. The go-between was asked to go to the potential bride's home and break this news of intended relationship of marriage between the two families. This assignment required a careful approach so that the request was not shot down. A discussion followed between *esigani* and parents of the bride. The bride's parents or relatives also inquired on various issues they wanted to know about the groom and his family. If the bride's family was receptive of the news, then an invitation was given through *esigani* for the father of the groom to come over for a talk. Consequently, regardless of the nature of reception from the bride's family, *esigani* went back to the suitor's family and provided a detailed report regarding the visit and outcomes thereof. The *esigani* coordinated a meeting between the parents of either side.

This means that this visit could take two dimensions as revealed by the following verbatim report by Ezekiel Manyiega, 70 years, (O.I., 6/08/2021) of Kanyimbo Village, Marani sub-county, Kisii County.

One of the dimensions it could take was that of the bride's family accepting the news. Under this scenario, the girl's home made a comprehensive questioning about the young man and his family. With some degree of satisfaction, the girl's father accordingly asked the go-between to go and notify the young man to pay a visit to his home. The purpose of this visit was to give the young man and girl an opportunity to have an impression of each other. If there was a consensus between the two families, the first meeting called *koriera boko* was organized. It was also possible to meet a scenario where the proposal was rejected. Under this situation, the process came to a halt.

7.4. How Did He or She Execute His or Her Role?

When asked how the go-between got to know a mate who had admirable qualities, Josephine Kerubo, 76 years, (O.I., 5/08/2021) Rigoma village, Masaba north sub-county, Nyamira County revealed the following;

These features were noted through; getting information from neighbors (*abaamate*), they were in close contact with the girl and her family. They gave out detailed information on the girl and her family. The go-between also took time to observe the girl without informing her. Time was taken to observe the girl while she was on the farm digging. The way the girl dug using the traditional hoe (*egesiri*) and her fastness and thoroughness in the work were sought. The way she carried a pot (*ensiongo*) while carrying water on her head from the river was also noted. Whether she loitered from place to place with boys (*gotayaya*) in the village was also observed. Beauty had no value in selecting a girl.

If a go between went and got a bride who had most of the specifications, his or her duty was to report back to the groom's parents the findings. The use of a go-between ensured that the right bride was found.

7.5. Why There Has Been a Decline in the Role of *Esigani*?

Most of the respondents observed that there has been a decline in the use of *esigani* among Abagusii. According to one of the respondents;

Our children are no longer staying with us at home because of education and seeking for employment. Unlike in the traditional setting where we were required not to move and know even our neighbourhood, nowadays, motion is inevitable for the youth. Schools and colleges are away from our environment, once they are through with schooling, the jobs they learnt for are never in our environment. It demands that they look for them in the formal and informal sectors. They, therefore, meet with other young people and marriage ensues.

Another respondent observed that;

Our youths are experiencing fast changes occasioned by increasing foreign-style individuality, access to mass media, the Internet and mobile phones, and increased human mobility. This has impacted in the youths' gender relations and marriage ambitions. A varied range of locations (public facilities, schools, night-clubs, colleges, universities and business centres among others.) offers young people many openings for interaction with members of the opposite sex. It denies matchmakers an opportunity to select their mates from those they interact with without necessarily involving matchmakers.

Further, a respondent revealed that;

In the traditional setting, the young people who were influenced to marry each other had not seen each other and therefore loved each other. The aspect of love was not an important ingredient in mate selection. The parents of a son gave attributes they wanted *esigani* to assess in a girl their son would marry. But things have changed and most young people have in most cases to love one another and thereafter marry.

8. Conclusion

Marriage was a valued institution among the Abagusii. The role of matchmakers in promoting the process of marriage was significant. Finding a suitable mate was cherished by Abagusii and therefore all efforts were made through *esigani* to fulfil this. Young people had little chance of meeting others beyond their immediate neighborhood and circle of family associates. Matchmakers served the important function of bringing together people who would not otherwise have met. With a lot of freedom and opportunities for young people to meet each other, and the emergence of the culture of romantic love the traditional matchmaker seems to be obsolete.

9. Recommendations

The rich culture of the Abagusii is disappearing to the point the elders think they have no generation left. To avoid the saying *mwacha mila ni mutumwa*, becom-

ing applicable to Abagusii, there is need for Abagusii to revive their cultural practices that promoted stability in marriage and the family at large. Scholars and other people interested in the reconstruction of the cultural history of Abagusii should make efforts to gather information from the surviving elderly resource persons before their extinction.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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