



East African Journal of Traditions, Culture and Religion

eajtr.eanso.org

Volume 6, Issue 1, 2023

Print ISSN: 2707-5362 | Online ISSN: 2707-5370

Title DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37284/2707-5370>



EAST AFRICAN
NATURE &
SCIENCE
ORGANIZATION

Original Article

Marriage Culture Among the Abagusii in the Pre-Colonial Period

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Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37284/eajtr.6.1.1526>

Date Published: **ABSTRACT**

20 October 2023

Keywords:

Marriage
Culture,
Patriarchy,
Bridewealth.

This paper discusses marriage institution among the Abagusii in the pre-colonial period under the following themes: History of migration and settlement of Abagusii, the institution of marriage among the Abagusii in the pre-colonial period, Traditional socio-religious aspects of Gusii marriage, marriage customs among married Gusii men and women in the pre-colonial period, nature of Abagusii households up to 1895, the role of initiation in marriage customs, bridewealth and its place in marriage, the role of patriarchy in marriage, polygamy in marriage. This sequence will help us trace the changes in marriage customs and their implications in the marriage of the Abagusii in the colonial period. This section was guided by social constructivism theory.

APA CITATION

Orera, N., Kakai, P. & Gimode, E. (2023). Marriage Culture Among the Abagusii in the Pre-Colonial Period *East African Journal of Traditions, Culture and Religion*, 6(1), 132-146. <https://doi.org/10.37284/eajtr.6.1.1526>

CHICAGO CITATION

Orera, Nahashon, Pius Kakai and Edwin Gimode. "Marriage Culture Among the Abagusii in the Pre-Colonial Period". *East African Journal of Traditions, Culture and Religion* 6 (1), 132-146. <https://doi.org/10.37284/eajtr.6.1.1526>.

HARVARD CITATION

Orera, N., Kakai, P. & Gimode, E. (2023) "Marriage Culture Among the Abagusii in the Pre-Colonial Period", *East African Journal of Traditions, Culture and Religion*, 6(1), pp. 132-146. doi: 10.37284/eajtr.6.1.1526.

IEEE CITATION

N. Orera, P. Kakai, & E. Gimode, "Marriage Culture Among the Abagusii in the Pre-Colonial Period", *EAJTR*, vol. 6, no. 1, pp. 132-146, Oct. 2023.

MLA CITATION

Orera, Nahashon, Pius Kakai & Edwin Gimode. "Marriage Culture Among the Abagusii in the Pre-Colonial Period". *East African Journal of Traditions, Culture and Religion*, Vol. 6, no. 1, Oct. 2023, pp. 132-146, doi:10.37284/eajtr.6.1.1526.

INTRODUCTION

Marriage in many communities is attributed to the numerous fundamental social and individual roles that it plays, such as sexual fulfilment and regulation, sex-based divisions of labour, economic

production, as well as personal longing for affection, prestige, and companionship. Marriage is a universal cultural institution; however, its forms differ from society to society and from religion to religion. Every cultural society has a specified

marriage method that requires its members to observe specific customs and taboos as a necessity of a lawful marriage. According to Mibang and Behera (2006), marriage is not a stand-alone institution but rather a reflection of a people's culture. Marriage ceremonies are not independent but are typically tied to a nation's greater cultural past. Marriage is still regarded as a culturally common institution, which indicates that it remains an institution of society in practically all civilizations, despite the fact that marriage rites, traditions, and duties change from country to country. Marriage practices and rituals have always played a major role in shaping the culture and identity of a people. Marriage globally has been undergoing many fundamental changes and transformations in its structure and function. In every community and generation, there are noticeable changes as well as continuities that characterize the institution of marriage.

Abagusii of western Kenya had a marriage culture that was so dynamic. It was interwoven around aspects such as marriage transactions like bridewealth and relationships between the families in marriage (Ochieng, 1974). Indigenous Gusii customs regarded marriage as an alliance between two kinship groups and not only two persons. The bond in marriage, its nature and stability could be related to the perception that marriage binds two families together, forming an integral part of the kinship system as a whole (Hakansson, 2019). The relationship between a man and a woman in marriage was interwoven with marriage transactions, which gave rise to reciprocal rights and obligations that bound this alliance. Marriage was seen as sacred to everyone in the community. It was a divine institution that was interwoven with consequences upon breaking the union. Traditional Abagusii thought marriage was a link that connected the community from a known past to an unknown future (Akama, 2017). Like other African families, the family structure was so dynamic that some customs permitted a wider conversation before choices were made. Marriage was a social,

economic, and cultural tie that was tied to the couple's cultural and historical background. Such a tie could be broken with the approval of families and relatives, making its dissolution more unlikely. The fundamental family structure was a branch of the extended family that served as an umbrella over the young families, forging a strong tie of solidarity in the process.

METHODOLOGY

The research took place among the Gusii of Kenya. It focused mainly on the marriage culture of the Abagusii in the colonial period. The research utilized a descriptive research design. The tools of data collection included oral interviews and archival data. Data was quantitatively analyzed and given a historical interpretation. This involved a systematic approach to organizing and interpreting data into meaningful conclusions that involved patterns, trends or correlations that emerge from the analysis. The target population included elderly members of society, religious leaders and Gusii cultural leaders.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The History of Migration and Settlement of Abagusii

The Gusii people, commonly known as Abagusii, are a Bantu-speaking community who occupy the southwest portion of the cool, fertile western section of the Kenyan highlands. They border the Luo to the south, the Kipsigis, and the Maasai to the east and southeast. They are a highly diverse Kenyan ethnic group of the former Nyanza region, currently occupying Kisii, Nyamira, and other parts of Kericho and Bomet counties of Kenya's former Rift Valley region. Gusii region is the highest part of the south-Nyanza highlands; it consists of rounded, steep-sided hills intersected by narrow valleys rich in red volcanic soils. There is normally sufficient rainfall, and the area is well served by the tributaries of the three main rivers which flow into Lake Victoria. The highlands cover an area of 2196 sq. km. The climatic conditions allow for a large variety

of crop farming, ranging from tea, coffee, pyrethrum, wheat, maize, and a variety of vegetables and fruits (Silberschmidt, 1999).

Just like the Kikuyu, Akamba, Abaluhya, and Abakuria Bantu speakers, the Gusii claim that they originated from ' Misri' to the North of Mount Elgon. Scholars who have studied Abagusii agree that they must have settled in their present home in the southern highlands approximately two centuries ago. Their first settlement locations were Nyagoe, Manga, and Isecha in the present Kitutu constituencies of Kisii county (Ochieng, 1974). Traces of their migrations can be traced in Kisumu, Kano plains, Nyakach, Nyando, Ruri hills, Gendia, Belgut, Kabianga, and the Transmara triangle. From these primary settlements (Nyagoe, manga, and Isecha), Gusii clans sorted themselves out and expanded into the rest of the highlands (Were & Nyamwaya, 1986). According to Ochieng, the Maasai, Kipsigis, and Luo were the greatest dangers to the Gusii's existence from the time they settled in their current homeland until the arrival of the British. They attacked the Gusii in their heartland and exercised raiding from them as a lucrative business.

The Gusii settled in the highlands in phases. The first to settle were the Osiango and Sigisa clans, followed by the Abarangi, Abakeboye, Abasamaro, Abanyameuru, and Mwanyamoronge in the present area of North Mugirango. Interestingly, some of these clans have been phased out or absorbed into other clans. According to Gusii traditions, five or seven generations ago, Nyaribari, Bassi, Majoge, and South Mugirango were empty before occupation commenced (Ochieng, 1974). The Gusii highlands influenced the social, political, and economic spheres of their lives. After their arrival, the Gusii turned more and more to cultivation. Each clan had to occupy a ridge or a succession of adjacent ridges claimed by the right of first occupation and clearance of forests or by dislodging the first clans that settled on it. It is also important to note that the Gusii religious ideas played a very

fundamental part in welding together the Gusii social structure.

Just before the coming of the Europeans, various themes of conquest, assimilation, and adoption to new environments were featured in Giusii's history (Ochieng, 1974). These themes were necessitated by the natural struggle to survive in the hills. In the true spirit of shared destiny, the various ethnic groups were highly dynamic, adaptive, innovative, and accommodating. The Gusii was a well-ordered, self-regulatory, self-sufficient society with an inbuilt mechanism for self-perpetuation, production, reproduction, and local initiatives that the colonial intrusion dampened and stifled rather than promoted (Maxon, 1989).

The Institution of Marriage Among the Abagusii in the Pre-Colonial Period

Since arriving in their homeland, the Gusii people have followed several traditions, just like the other ethnic groups in Kenya. The populace revered these traditions, and to a considerable part, they still are (Okiya, 2016). This indicates that breaking or disobeying a custom shows complete disdain for the ancestors and devastates the entire "community" (Mwamogusii). Marriage was one of the institutions with such practices. Marriage was regarded as the most important institution in Gusii culture since it was the start of life. The fruit of marriage was thought to be having offspring (Mayer, 1949).

Marriage was seen as an institution to be regarded as sacred by every Gusii. It was a divinely ordained institution regulated with norms that had consequences upon breaking the union. Traditional Abagusii thoughts towards marriage were the link of the eternal chain of existence that stretched from a known past to an unknown future (Levine & Pfeifer, 1982). It was divinely decreed that no one should intentionally destroy this bond, as it connected the living and the dead. The Abagusii society saw the inhumane treatment of women as a sign of irresponsibility. Polygamy was the gentlest approach for a man who wished to maintain control

over his homestead's deteriorating marital connections. Rather than resorting to severe and brutal measures such as divorce, Abagusii traditional culture believed it was prudent to marry a second wife. This step was viewed as a kind of rehabilitation or a lesson to the first wife to rectify herself (Maxon, 1989). The second or even third wife's marriage preserved the first wife's image and reputation, which would have been otherwise ruined by divorce.

In situations where women could not meet the sexual desires of men, it was only natural for men to remedy the problem by marrying a second woman to avoid marital conflicts that could develop from sexual dissatisfaction. Elders from the Abagusii community who heard similar complaints from a man with high sexual drive advised him to marry a second wife and refrain from enjoying marital ties with his first wife. Married women were never sent away for the mere reason of not satisfying the sexual desires of their husbands. In such cases, both husband and wife would strike a balance and bring in the second or third wife. The first wife would take care of the welfare and other duties of the family, and the second wife would take care of the sexual demands of the husband (Okeno, 2014).

From birth to death, Abagusii belonged, in a literal sense, to his family, clan, and ethnic group (Ochieng, 1974). All communal activities were collectively performed harmoniously in a spirit of togetherness. Collective responsibility was to ensure the community had enough security, understanding, and fellowship. Without this, there was danger and misfortunes from enemies and their surrounding communities. Many were the devices that bound the community together, and amidst them was marriage. The life and essence of the Abagusii community mainly rested in marriage, with its day-to-day experience and expectations of its members. According to Professor Ogot, "the dominating realities of traditional life lie first in the security of familial succession and second in the tight relationships of all patterns of conduct," which

has evolved as a way of life meant to secure the group's survival (Orera, 2023).

The married Gusii individuals were obligated to follow certain cultural norms. Within marriage, there was a socially acceptable code of behaviour. Gusii's marital connections developed along these lines, which were critical for the stability and survival of their traditions. In marriage, everyone shares common and institutionalized patterns of cooperation and interdependence (Hakansson, 1985). There were well-defined lines of authority along the familial line. With the aid of the clearly defined authority, all conflicts and norm breaches were amicably resolved within the family tree. The homestead head wielded enormous power over his wives, sons, and daughters. His directions on various issues had to be followed (Ochieng, 1974). The father possessed commanding power to control his wayward sons and daughters, including the ability to discipline his wife. This kept the family ties, and respect for the head of the family was always maintained.

Traditional Abagusii marriage institutions recognized legal marriages only acknowledged if the bride's wealth was paid. The key component of the legality was the payment of goods and services and cooking for the bride's family (done by the bridegroom's household) to show the capability of taking care of the bride once the marriage was done (Akama & Maxon, 2006). Even though Abagusii had a wide range of forms for paying bridewealth, the laws controlling its payment were uniform across the ethnic group. In traditional Abagusii society, marriage connections were viewed as fostering love, peace, harmony, and togetherness within the family of married connections (Nyasani, 1984).

Social justice was guaranteed through the man of the family. The husband ensured his family stayed in peace and harmony, and his children received blessings equally and without discrimination. Justice regarding the distribution of wealth, opportunities, and privileges within a homestead

was witnessed and maintained. Social order and peace prevailed within African polygamous households. In this sense, respect was key, and people feared the consequences of disrespecting older members of society. This was possible due to the many laws, customs, sets of behaviours, regulations, rules, observances, and taboos constituting the moral code of behaviour around marriage. Some of these laws were regarded sacred and promoted justice among the Abagusii (Silberschmidt, 1999). Abagusii's traditional marriage was interwoven with important aspects such as marriage transactions and relationships. Indigenous Gusii customs regarded marriage as an alliance between two kinship groups, not just two persons. Marriage relations, their nature, and stability could be related to the perception that marriage binds two families together, forming an integral part of the kinship system as a whole. Within this framework, a conception of marriage was interwoven with marriage transactions, giving rise to reciprocal rights and obligations that bound this system (Shaddle, 2006). This idea of a continuing relationship tied together various facets of marriage, including bridewealth, aspects of levirate marriages, and sororate conditions, all of which contributed to marriage's significance. Such ideas, laws, and customs were passed down from generation to generation, becoming the core tradition of the Gusii.

Traditional Socio-Religious Aspect of the Gusii Marriage

Marriage was a holy institution for the Gusii indigenous people, intimately linked to the Gusii traditional religion. It was more of a process than a single event that signified one's passage from one stage of life to the next; it entailed years of rites, agreements, and transactions. It was a communal activity through which a community's ideals were developed and perpetuated. Marriage among the Abagusii was highly socio-religious. It was the primary focus of the existence of the community. Through the permanent and harmonious marital

posterity, the Gusii remembered the dead and anticipated the unborn future generation. According to Otoigo, one of the informants:

Marriage was sacred, and every normal Gusii freely and with joy participated in it. Failure to do this was a deliberate stop of the continuous free flow of "obogima (Life" through individuals. This meant wiping the community from the earth. The ancestors would never be happy with us if we did thi" (I. Otoigo, Personal Communication, December 25, 2021).

Parents were considered foundations of traditional Abagusii beliefs, which was why newborns were named after the deceased members of the family unit. Many of the newborns could acquire similar names to their ancestors. Many men aged 55 years and above were called Nyabuto, a famous Gusii family man and colonial chief. Abagusii believed that marriage was even in the land of the living dead (Silberschmidt, 1999). The idea of life after death was conscious in the minds of the community. For that reason, a couple lived together harmoniously, and after death, they were buried side by side so that they would continue living their happy life wherever they were.

Marriage was a lawful and socially accepted transitional ceremony in which a man and a woman consented to live together as husband and wife to reproduce due to parental permission and completion of societal standards. A marriage between a man and a woman legitimized sexual access, and the children born as a consequence were automatic members of the lineage and community at large (Ochieng, 1974).

As a result, marriage played an important role in Gusii's culture and religious heritage. It was a community activity that shaped and sustained community values. Marriage acted as an insurance against evils such as witchcraft in that whenever such vices were common, many children acted as a surety to propagate the lineage (Okiyah, 2016). The Gusii lineage, leadership, adulthood, elderhood,

bridewealth, polygamy, herbalism, and community continuity were all related to marriage in one way or another. Marriage encompassed the most important concepts and values that brought human life together and into harmony. Before the era of colonial rule in the highlands, men and women had their familial identities well spelled out. The roles of both genders were clearly defined and acknowledged. It was the responsibility of every woman to give birth and raise children. They also took care of farm operations to yield food for the family.

The Role of Abagusii Traditional Rites on Marital Stability in the Pre-Colonial Period up to 1895

Marriage among the Gusii was a community affair with several rites and customs. The proper adherence to such rites made marriage meaningful and considered a significant stage of Giusii's life (Okiya, 2016). Adhering to such rites made marriage be referenced by many for a long period. The marriage institution was only enriched and strengthened through participation in the various marriage rites. Abagusii, just like other Bantu communities of western Kenya, actively engaged in various marriage ceremonies. It involved all community members, both the living and the ancestors. Upholding cultural rites associated with marriage kept the community together and supported the community in growing its rich cultural base. The various rites that included initiation, mentorship to adulthood, courtship, aided partner search (*chisigani*), wrestling matches, weddings, and post-wedding marriage rituals sustained marriage. It was through such celebrations and communal support that marriage sustainability was realized.

Since marriage was considered the most important thing in Giusii's life, many rites were attached to ensure survival. Among the Abagusii, only some people could get into marriage by passing through almost all the rites and rituals attached to it. The upholding of such rituals was believed to help

sustain marriage even later in life. A period of courtship was essential in every Gusii marriage. The period lasted for a short time because it entirely depended on the information gathered from the go-between (*design*). During this period, the two main steps entailed partner search and bride introductions (*ekerorano*). These steps involved certain rituals that included visitations, introductions, feasting, further spying, and investigations of the two families (Nyamache & Asatsa, 2022).

The parents of the groom would identify a go-between (*design*). He or she was a trusted neighbour or relative and could be sent to assist in searching for a suitable girl for marriage. Ladies with good reputations attracted many suitors and were well-spoken everywhere. A lady was supposed to be good-looking, hardworking with a good sexual reputation (not sexually promiscuous), not highly tempered, and whose family history had no taint. According to Omeke, go-betweens could try to inquire about bridal virginity (*ogwekunga*) and the groom's sexual ability. They checked if the families were witches or thieves or had a history of laziness or scars on their bodies. The existence of such scars, particularly those resulting from burns, was sometimes seen as parenting carelessness, which could not be taken lightly. Abagusii believed in the inheritance of weaknesses in habits, and this could affect one's attraction to marriage (N. Omeke, Personal Communication, December 26, 2021). In-laws, visitations, and introductions were other important marriage rites. This ceremony was commonly known as *ekerorano*. The accompanying feasts known as eating and drinking of in-laws (*ekeri-boko*) were done after a deal had been stricken for marriage engagements. Much feasting was done, especially in the evenings, followed by dancing, drinking, and festivity. At this point, goat meat was served, and no chicken meat could be placed on the table. According to Otiso, an elderly among the Gusii, the in-laws to be were treated with honour with goat meat and other drinks. Eating chicken meat was taboo for in-laws, for it was considered disrespectful. However, they were

served chicken to test if the in-laws strictly adhered to Gusii customs. If they ate the chicken, the relationship may, in the future, have problems (Otiso, 2021).

After various engagements, bride price negotiations, and payments, a wrestling match (*enyameni*) was organized between the groom's men and the bride's side. Music done by the harp (*obokano*) ushered in the wrestling. The wrestling was only meant to increase the bond between the two parties. The winning team was given a bull for slaughter. A pre-wedding ceremony was then arranged, commonly known as *ekeragerio*. This big celebration was organized at both the bride's and groom's homes. These days were always set apart and attended by nearly all community members to show how important marriage was to the community. Women and men older in age advised the parties planning to get married on how to conduct themselves in marriage. It was through such advice that the stability of marriage was reassured.

After the pre-wedding, the bride was escorted to the groom's place, handed over ceremoniously to his wedded man, and was cautioned not to break the bond. This was commemorated by knot-tying by both the groom and the bride. The knot was an eternal chain that bound the two parties together. The wedding symbols (*ebitwanga*, editing, website) marked the seal of an eternal tie. This tie could be removed in case of death or, sometimes, in rare cases, divorce. After the wedding, many rituals accompanied to cement the relationship. The meal-sharing feasts by both families, commonly known as *Obokima*, were held a few days after the wedding. The main agenda of this feast was to find out the welfare of the bride in her new home. Newborn celebrations, commonly known as *ekerero*, accompanied other post-wedding rituals. It is through such shared activities that helped to build strong marital bonds among the Gusii. Marriage breakups, rivalry within marriage, and contestations of gender roles were rare when many traditional

marriage rites were followed and referenced (Nyamache & Asatsa, 2022).

The Role of Initiation in the Marriage of the Abagusii in the Pre-colonial Period

Initiation was an essential traditional ritual that marked the transition from childhood to maturity. Abagusii believed in a strong link between marriage and initiation. This practice had several implications for the community and the initiates involved. Among the Gusii, circumcision rituals were held yearly compared to other ethnic groups, with an interval of three to five years. The age of circumcision of both boys and girls ranged between 16-20 years. The ceremonies were held after the main harvest from October to December. After the operations, the initiates could stay in a special house during the period of seclusion commonly known as "*bware*." During this period, the initiates were taught and prepared for marriage. After circumcision, the initiates (boys and girls) were given a bunch of *ekerundu* grass (a common symbol of fertility) to hold in their right hand, a sign of preparedness to sire children. Songs of *timbre* were sung to praise their bravery. Later, washing hands and applying caustic ash as a part of the cleansing was done (Orera, 2023).

During induction into the seclusion hut, the Gusii performed a formal ceremony. The initiates and their tutors were covered by a blanket when they entered the homestead and proceeded toward the seclusion hut. The father of the initiates had invites who awaited around the cattle pen (many of whom were elders) to bless the young man. They held a calabash with milk, indicating the desire of many cattle and women for the initiative. Afterwards, rejoicing and dance are made after the initiate drinks the milk. The circumcision song's *timbre* was sung as the initiates went for seclusion. Inside the hut, a fire had been lit with traditional firesticks. The instructor had to ensure the fire went out only when the seclusion was over. The extinguishing of fire slowed the healing process and called for the cleansing ritual. After entering through the main

door, the initiates were not supposed to use it until the end of seclusion. After seclusion ceremonies, the initiates were given a mandate to conquer the world. A famous Gusii proverb was used, *orwane mocha na irianyi*, signifying that the initiates were now ready to impregnate any girl from any part of the world. They were blessed to marry and begin families. Women's initiation was done due to the belief that it reduced sexual urges in women and would sustain the marriage. In practising female initiation, Abagusii sought to ensure that their women were not promiscuous. Initiation was highly spiritualized, and more rituals accompanied it, including oath-taking. The oath taken was that the initiates were to be true to the traditions and customs of the Gusii. According to Nyamao, upholding cultural traditions was the main reason initiation was practised (O. I Nyamao, 2021). On the other hand, female initiation was considered an integral part of the Gusiipeople's way of life and culture.

“Boys and girls were circumcised at puberty, which symbolized endurance and a rite of passage from childhood to adulthood. Preserving sexual morality was a fundamental reason for circumcision. Initiates underwent marriage counselling from aunts and uncles, on a commitment to marriage by being faithful, in order to escape curses and harsh punishment, including death that resulted from breaking the marital taboos amasangi (O. I. Gesare, 2021).

The songs and dances performed in these ceremonies were important. The dancers, who comprised young men who had undergone the rituals and girls slightly older than the son undergoing the ritual, coloured the ceremony. The songs were accompanied by drums, commonly known as *the Mekong*, which, in most cases, is a set of three drummers beating the drums in a certain style. The songs and dances are meant to encourage the son undergoing the ritual to be strong, for strength is a sign of manhood. Also, facing the cut is a sign of great strength and manhood. Blood dripping on the day of circumcision linked the

initiates with their god and the forefathers. The physical suffering the initiates underwent readied them for the difficulties they would face in the future. It was believed that the bravery to face circumcision was enough evidence that the initiates could defend their family. A few years after circumcision, the initiates were prepared to get married and establish a family (Shaddle, 2003). Preparedness took the shape of the division of work at the family level. The dads spent most of their recreational time with their boys, exposing them to manly pursuits. Together, they cared for grazing cattle, hunted in the homes and fields, built structures, fenced the complex, and made defensive tools (Gwako, 1995). This assisted the initiates in cognitively identifying their tasks, culminating in marriage. Moreover, young males were conditioned to believe that females were fragile and required protection, which became their marriage domain.

On the other hand, girls were trained in isolation for domestic chores such as taking care of husbands, midwifery, living together with the in-laws, respecting the father and mothers-in-law, raising children, and behaving in readiness for marriage. This mirrored how they would act in marriage. Marriage was considered the aim and climax of existence in the community, with all life pointing to it, and the preparations here took on psychological and social aspects.

Both boys and girls went through marital counselling to learn what was anticipated as they matured and how to manage their relationships once married. The agony they felt during circumcision without anaesthesia was intended to train and equip them to withstand hardships as they grew into adults (Mayer, 1953).

“They were taught various traditions and how to step into adulthood. They were taught about sexuality, adult roles, hard work, protection, and fending for the family, among other roles. They underwent marriage counselling from aunts and uncles, on a commitment to marriage by being faithful, in order to escape curses and

harsh punishment, including death that resulted from breaking the marital taboo “amazing (O. I. Gesare, 2021).”

All initiates were ready to marry after circumcision. They had everything they needed to raise and care for their family. During the pre-colonial period, this practice was one of the pillars of a powerful marriage system among the Gusii.

The Place of Bridewealth in Gusii Marriage in the pre-colonial period

The Abagusii concept of bridewealth, just like many other Bantu communities in western Kenya, was motivated by noble and genuine necessity rather than because of malicious profiteering. Bridewealth did not mean an element of purchase or selling of the bride. The purchase element may have been introduced later after the coming of the British. The term “chiomb” was used by the Gusii to mean bridewealth. Marriage became legitimate only if there was an exchange of bridewealth (O.I Mwembi, 2021). The payment of bridewealth in the pre-colonial period was exclusively made through the remittance of cows, goats, and sheep. Cattle, bridewealth, and marriage were inseparable forms of determining the success of the whole community.

Bridewealth had an important social, economic, and religious significance. Through the bride's wealth, a new relationship was formed between the two families. Abagusii believed that a marriage without payment of bridewealth was like cohabiting with a woman as a concubine. A man had no claim over a woman unless he had paid the bridewealth. Upon the payments, all children born of the marriage belonged to the husband's family. Among the Gusii, bridewealth was usually paid as livestock (O.I Mwembi, 2021). The average full bridewealth for Gusii marriage was between 10-15 heads of cattle, three goats, and other gifts (KNA/SK/3/3/2). Only cattle were counted as bridewealth. The goats were slaughtered in pre and after-wedding ceremonies. Bridewealth was, therefore, a cornerstone of the Gusii marriage, hence the common saying “no

bridewealth, no marriage. The Gusii culture demanded dowry negotiations and payments prior to the wedding day. However, based on the understanding of the two families, part of the wealth could be paid, and the remaining amount completed later.

Marriage was inseparable from the bridewealth (O.I, Motieri, 2021). The legality of any marriage was evidence of cattle transactions with the bride's parents. This transfer significantly linked two families. It also meant security of land rights to the woman married in her new home and, most importantly, gave the man a right to sire children with the woman. Traditionally, parents and relatives of the respective bridegroom and bride had an important role in marriage negotiations concerning bridewealth. It was an important source of prestige for the elders in that they controlled and determined the amount of bridewealth remitted. According to Omariba, bridewealth always stayed within some limits.

“Exchanges of “chiombe” (bridewealth) never exceeded some limits. Usually, a certain number of cows agreed by elders of both sides were given to secure a girl for marriage. Where the bridegroom's side felt burdened with the amount, they easily pulled out from the transactions. This could paint a bad image of the bride's family. This was avoided as much for it meant that the family could not easily get sons-in-law (Abako) (O.I Omariba, 2021).”

Mayer records that in some instances, women fetched a higher bridewealth than expected because of their desired traits and if they had attracted multiple suitors for marriage. Women who had given birth while in the father's home fetched fewer cattle for bridewealth. Some fathers willingly accepted fewer cattle, especially when their daughters had long stayed without getting married or if the father preferred the suitor to marry his daughter. Nevertheless, even if this was so, recordings from the Kisii district, especially those referring to the pre-colonial period, show a range of

10-15 herds of cattle given for bridewealth (Mayer, 1950).

Bridewealth in Kisii term meant “exchange.” According to Moraa, bridewealth was meant to replace the workforce that had left the village.

Cattle got from marrying our daughters and replaced them by bringing in ladies to help us with farm labour. If the Mzee was not old, we proposed to her a woman to marry to increase labour in our farms. If the Mzee was old, then his sons were given “chiombe chio omoisek” (bridewealth from a daughter) to marry (O.I Moraa, 2021)

Young men of marriageable ages looked to their sisters’ bridewealth to enable them to get married. This meant that fathers accepted a specific amount of cattle (between 10-15) to enable their sons to get married with ease. Every family brought up their demands, but there was always a go-between (Omogayani) who always helped these families settle down on a reasonable amount of bridewealth. After reaching a consensus, the elders ate happily and drank beer. This was a sign of making peace between the families. If there was no consensus arrived at, the bridegroom’s elders could not accept any meal or beer. This was a demonstration of their frustration. They could request time to think about the laid demands. If the woman to be married had desirable qualities, they could come again for negotiations.

Role of Patriarchy in Marriage among the Abagusii in the Pre-Colonial Period

Abagusii had been traditionally structured around the idea of patriarchy, which is the belief that men are the heads of the household and have authority over their families. Patriarchal marriage was based on the idea that the husband was the authority figure in the home and was responsible for making decisions about the family’s finances, the upbringing of the children, and the choice of a potential bride or groom for his children

(Hakansson, 1994). This type of marriage structure was an important part of Gusii culture and was believed to promote stability and order within the family. It also provided a framework for the husband and wife to work together to provide for their family and ensure their children were well looked after. Furthermore, it was believed that this type of marriage structure protected the woman and her rights and promoted a sense of respect and honour for maleness in marriage. Abagusii had traditionally built their identity along patriarchal lines. The role of patriarchy in Abagusii marriage was strong and inherent. Marriage was seen as a way for a man to increase his wealth and status (Hakansson, 1985). Gusii men were expected to provide for and protect their wives and were typically seen as the heads of the households.

On the other hand, women were expected to obey their husbands, remain faithful and bear children. Gusii’s concept of marriage was seen as a way of consolidating wealth and power within the community. Men were expected to marry many wives, and the more wives they had, the more power and influence they had in the community. On the other hand, women were expected to be loyal to their husbands and were not allowed to marry outside their own Gusii clan. Marriage was allowed between certain totems (sub-clans) of the Gusii community (Levine, 1966).

Abagusii culture demarcated men’s and women’s roles in marriage; males were the heads, and women adopted subservient positions. Aside from farm labour, women’s tasks included sexually satisfying their men, cooking for them, and bearing children (Silberschmidt, 1999). Male and female responsibilities were clearly defined. According to Silberschmidt (2001), while patriarchal thought was lived and reflected in the lives of men and women in Gusii, this did not imply that all men were effective patriarchs or that all women were obedient.

On the surface, Kisii households were predominantly male-dominated. Patriarchal rules,

codes of conduct, and beliefs were ordered or left in charge of men. Women had their place in the marriage, too; they were identified in their relationship with men (daughter, sister, wife, and mother), and men were linked to women in the same manner (son, brother, husband, father). Men, unlike women, were also characterized by their duties or statuses, such as head of the family, cattle keeper, elder, and many more (Mayer, 1950). Men who were exclusively the heads of families were also rulers and owners of their own families. They owned all the property within the homesteads (including women and children) and exercised authority over all internal familial issues, including the relationships and connections with neighbouring families. Every family was accountable to the head of the family in the manner of conduct and social responsibilities. The man assigned duties that ranged from livestock herding to crop cultivation and many more responsibilities. Every family member was expected to take on these responsibilities cheerfully and without complaint. Each family endeavoured to increase its membership in order to increase farm labour. This drive for numerical expansion of the homestead was a fundamental tendency in the Gusii domestic life (Levine R and B, 1966).

Male and female realms were physically separated in physical space. Men could not access the rafter storage room where the women kept their pots and threshed grain. Women, on the other hand, were barred from entering the men's houses without permission. There was a clear division of labour between men and women, reflected in two hierarchies. Specific tasks were allocated to just one sex (Levine R and B, 1966). A Man was the only one who could herd the animals. Men erected the timber framework for the huts, while women did the plastering. Males were the only ones who could make ropes or work with iron. Women were the only ones who could cook, care for the house fire, and make beer. Male domination was restricted since society's worldview was based on separating the male and female spheres. Furthermore, because

males relied on women for nourishment, women had a counterweight and the power to inflict sanctions on men.

Authority was centred on manhood. Solving marriage disputes was exclusively for elders, *abanyamaiga*. *Etureti* elders and *Egesaku* elders presided over this marriage dispute. Abagambi solved and laid justice in many marriage disputes. Elders were men of regular standing, honest, and kept to themselves secrets of many marriage disputes that were brought to them. Due to the patriarchal nature of the community, most Gusii women feared being divorced or staying without a man (Okeno, 2014). They would rather endure struggles to enjoy the pretentious securities and benefits.

Male headship and women submission were both culturally and religiously inscribed in the lives of the Gusii. This kind of social control penetrated all societal and social institutions, including marriage. Fathers made rules, made decisions, controlled household activities, and provided for the family (Silberschmidt, 2004). Traditional Gusii cultural values had specific perceptions regarding headship and submission in marriage. According to Levine (1966), traditional Gusiisociety's men and women had well-defined roles and obligations that defined their patriarchal nature. There were clear-cut boundaries of 'and and' anddon'tss' with regard to male and female roles. This perceived 'proper way' was taught to children from an early age by word of mouth. Males were welcomed with great excitement even at birth, and the father took immense pleasure and pride in reinforcing the family line's continuation and preserving his possessions. On the other hand, a girl's birth had fewer rites and a lower emphasis placed on the mother. The reception was simple and uninteresting.

Men had sole ownership of the land. A woman could get permanent land ownership through marriage but not own land by herself. Nevertheless, she supervised her house's properties and could make independent decisions in day-to-day

activities. The homestead head assigned plots to each woman, but grain generated by a wife or any of her children remained in her house and was kept in her granaries. Furthermore, she might sometimes effectively oppose her husband's policies, such as his attempts to compel livestock loans between families. Her success depended on adult sons, who were usually more attached to their mothers than their fathers. Determining the nature of sons' allegiance to their moms is difficult. According to Mayer (1950), as a mother's age advanced, she obtained greater autonomy in her home affairs and earned her sons' allegiance.

Gusii institutions were not easily differentiated in political, economic, or religious spheres. They were run on patriarchal lines with a reason of respect for men. There was axiomatic respect not only from wives and daughters but also from sons. Men were ever members of the same society, whereas women came from other clans (Levine, 1966). Patriarchy was often seen as a necessary part of the social structure that brought order and stability to the society. It had a role in the effort to create a harmonious society that had clearly defined roles of members of the family. However, it is important to note that among the Abagusii, patriarchy was not oppressive. Women had access to many spheres of life, including farming. It was a structure necessary to bring order and stability to marriage.

Polygamy and its Influence on Marriage

Polygamy was a norm among the Abagusii. It served the interests of both men and women in various circumstances. It served as a guiding concept for family security, stability, progress, and reputation (Hillman & Perry, 1975). Men joined these partnerships to elevate their social, political, and economic position and to project power and prestige. Getting another woman as a wife was a sign of achievement. A man could farm more land, have more daughters who would marry and leave him with more cattle as bridewealth, and have more sons (Levine & Pfeifer, 1982). Polygamy was

common in the majority of the homesteads. According to Ogetonto:

“Men were always the heads; they had an average of four wives. Poor men could only keep one or two wives, while the rich had many wives (some even had ten wives). Each wife had her hut and was allocated a piece of land to cultivate. The wives were supposed to live together harmoniously (O. I. OTISO, 2021).

In traditional Abagusii society, marriage was a fundamental concern to more people than potential spouses. Polygamous marriages were preferred among the Gusii and other western Bantu communities. Taking an additional wife was regarded as one of the fundamental indicators of a successfully established Gusii man. Married wives approved of their husbands' taking of additional wives to increase the labour force and productivity. However, no man was allowed to marry before he could prove to take care of and provide for his already-founded family. Abagusii men did not just marry carelessly and irresponsibly (O.I Nyangaresi, 2021). They were aware of the duties and responsibilities that accompanied polygamy, and those who could not manage were shunned away from polygamy.

The polygamous husband was expected to devote equal sexual and economic attention to all his wives, even though this was not always the case, as preferential treatment was sometimes accorded. This was usually a breeding ground for jealousy and jealousy among married women (co-wives). The first wife enjoyed the highest status, and her house was the largest in the homestead. Many of the husband's personal belongings, such as weapons, stools, beer straws, and medicine, were kept under her watch or in her house. Most of the time, the husband ate in the first wife's hut because a more stable and trustworthy bond linked him than his other wives (Gwako, 1995).

The first wife had some form of authority over the rest of the co-wives. This was evident, especially in

the first years of younger wives' marriage. Before they had permanently established their homes, they cooked, ate, and slept in the first wife's home. Once they were allocated land and settled in their homesteads, the dominance slowly diminished. The wives jointly cultivated the gardens, beginning with the senior wife's garden. This pleasant stay describes how polygamy contributed to a stable and secure marriage set-up among the Abagusii in the pre-colonial period (Silberschmidt, 1999).

Wife inheritance also contributed to polygamy among the Abagusii (O.I Omeke, 2021). This was done either by individual choice or loyalty to traditions and lineage. Among the Gusii, the sons of the senior wife were also allowed to inherit their deceased father's junior wives. This demonstrated the superiority of the first wife and her sons over the rest of the household. The desire for many children encouraged some Gusii men to venture into a polygamous marriage. Members of the Council of Elders also encouraged some of their colleagues to take up additional wives. In this sense, polygamy served as a strategy of risk aversion and social insurance.

Large families enhanced the prestige of Abagusii men. Men with large families were respected and could obtain justice, as they would be feared by people who would not forcefully dare to take their livestock or other things away from them. More children were also seen as economic assets for enhancing the household's productivity. All these aspects influenced Gusii men into polygamous marriages. Some men ended up in polygamous marriages because they impregnated young unmarried girls and were forced to marry them.

Almost every Gusii man aspired to seniority. The men who aggressively wished to obtain a maximum degree of protection within their Gusii community and to attain some influence and prestige aimed at securing themselves more networks of kinship relations. Marrying more wives was one of the men's most common avenues to enhance their statuses and network of kinship relations. All these

endeavours were also driven by older men feeling more comfortable with wider groups of people related to them by blood and marriage. It is, therefore, apparent that some polygamous Gusii men critically viewed the social significance of seniority in terms of the accumulation of years and the effective kinship relations one had. This motivated many men to have many wives and live harmoniously with them.

CONCLUSIONS

As seen from the above discussions, Abagusii marriage was considered a significant institution due to the several roles and purposes it served. Marriage in traditional Abagusii culture was governed by rigorous regulations, conventions, and expectations rooted in the Abagusii community's traditions. Abagusii had a variety of marital beliefs that appeared to characterize them amid the communities that surrounded them. Marriage was viewed as a relationship that promoted peace, love, harmony, and togetherness in the family. These ties were intertwined with marriage contracts, which resulted in reciprocal rights and duties that tied the system together. Marriage, according to Abagusii, was an eternal and ever-present bond between the past and the future. Polygamy became popular as a means of perpetuating the community's generations as a result of this.

Abagusii traditional culture had various laws, traditions, and sets of behaviours, regulations, rules, observances, and taboos, all contributing to the moral code of behaviour surrounding marriage. Every member of society was expected to marry, and whenever disagreements, disputes, or misunderstandings happened, the heads of households dealt with them. Abagusii relied heavily on principles drawn from their cultural beliefs for cohesiveness and sustainability within marriage. With strict adherence to the Gusii customs, beliefs, and rituals, every marriage was to be peaceful and without many disputes and contestations. Abagusii pre-colonial marriage culture was interwoven around important aspects such as marriage

transactions like bridewealth and relationships between the families in marriage. The strict observance of Abagusii culture concerning marriage brought order and stability to the pre-colonial Gusii community.

According to the Social constructivism theory, marriage in the pre-colonial Abagusii society was seen as the foundation of their society. It was a relationship that defined and united people of different sexes. Marriage defined social interactions and served other important functions that harmonized the community. The next chapter examined the encounter and influence of Christianity and Western culture on Gusii marriage.

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