

Religious Implication of Woman-to-Woman Marriage as a Way of Offspring Continuity among the Abagusii People of Kisii County in Kenya.

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ABSTRACT

The main aim of this article is to locate the religious implication of woman-to-woman marriage as a way of offspring continuity among the Abagusii people of Kenya in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries. Attempts have been made to trace the changing trends of the said traditions. Woman to woman marriages among the Abagusii people in Kenya to modern people is viewed as un-African and a western thing. They forget that it has been there in African for many years. In most African societies, sexuality is perceived as being exclusively heterosexual anything of a woman and a woman marriage is not recognized. As a result, homosexuality in Africa is not adequately researched or spoken about. However, several studies have reported on same-sex intimate relationships and same-sex marriages within African societies. The purpose of this article is to discuss the views and the practices of same-sex marriages among the Abagusii people of Kenya. The study sampled elderly and resourceful local men and women through; stratified, purposive and snowballing techniques. The researcher requested the local chief, sub-chief or village elder to identify elderly respondents in their area of jurisdiction who were born in 1940s and 1950s. The article reviewed related literature on marriage in general and those mentioning woman to woman marriage, a brief discussion and interactive from data collected was discussed and the conclusion was given and the way forward.

Keywords: woman to woman marriage, offspring continuity.

INTRODUCTION

This article deals with the understanding of religious implication of woman to woman marriage among the Abagusii people of Kenya. Woman-to-woman marriage is a form of customary marriage between two women, predominantly found among the Abagusii people. These customary marriages have been, and to some extent still are conducted by various communities across Africa, including Kenya. Communities such as the Kamba, Kisii, Nandi, Kikuyu and Kuria practice woman to woman marriages for a variety of reasons[1].

The author has explained in detail the meaning of marriage and modern understanding of marriage. This type of marriage is an issue that has been condemned since time immemorial in various parts of the world and in religious institutions especially in Africa. Various methods were and are still used to curb or minimize the vice. Some of the methods used like hanging, stoning, beating, amputation and nose cutting among others have been condemned by international laws and human rights organizations[2]. The reason for this type of marriage seem not to be understood, but people who do not understand seem to be effective in discouraging it. There is need to learn this more about this type of marriage which was mostly practiced by the Abagusii People. It may not be possible to study how this type of marriage was practiced traditionally and religiously by each community in Africa in one study. Every community was unique and needed individual attention. This explains why this study was carried out to explore and document the religious implications of this marriage as a way of offspring continuity Among the Abagusii People of Kisii County in Kenya.

METHODOLOGY

The study sampled elderly and resourceful local men and women through; stratified, purposive and snowballing techniques[3]. The justification for the choice of these techniques was because the target population is small and scattered in unknown locations across Kisii county. Stratified sampling was used in the 9 sub-counties within Kisii county. This helped to reduce the probability of being biased in getting respondents from only one region of Kisii county. In this county, different places have varied cultural settings and transformations. Purposive sampling was used to select respondents who were born in 1940s and 1950s.

According to Cohen and Arieli most of the respondents were obtained through snowballing, this is a technique in which one interviewee gives the researcher the name of at least one or more potential interviewee[4]. On this study the researcher requested the local chief, sub-chief or village elder to identify elderly respondents in their area of jurisdiction who were born in 1940s and 1950s. This identification was done through National Identification cards or passports to determine the year of birth. It was discovered from the ID and passport that the majority were born in 1950s, and a few were born in the 1940s. After identifying a case from each sub-county, this case was requested to identify more cases, asked new cases to identify further cases and so on until there were no further cases left[5]. This sampling technique was used because few respondents in Kisii country fall in the bracket of those who were born in 1940s and 1950s and were scattered in locations unknown to the researcher. 120 questionnaires were distributed to 120 respondents out of which 96 were returned back within the stipulated time frame of 2 months.

REVIEW OF EXISTING LITERATURE

The review of existing literature revolved around articles, books and journals authored on the topic of marriage in general. Many authors have researched on the topic of man and woman marriage, family life, and the role of gender in marriage, but a few have attempted to research on woman-to-woman marriage on a different context, but no author has done research on religious implication of woman-to-woman marriage among the Abagusii people of Kenya. The review will be thematic based on research questions presented in the 120 questionnaires and the survey guide.

The Abagusii people, Migration and Governance

The Abagusii, also known as Kisii or Gusii, are an East African ethnic group who are indigenous of Kenya. The Abagusii people belong to Bantu speaking group they are indigenous of Kisii and Nyamira counties. Some of them also live in some parts of Kericho, Bomet, Kitale, Nairobi and other counties in Kenya as well as a good number are living in America, UK and Arabian countries[6]. They practice small scale farming, they grow crops like maize, millet, sorghum, groundnuts, potatoes, bananas, vegetables for food stuff and they grow tea and coffee as cash crops they are known for their soapstone carvings. In terms of education the Abagusii people are well educated most of them hold diplomas, bachelor's degrees, Masters, and PhDs. Economically few are rich, and the majority live under 2 dollars a day.

The oral tradition of the Abagusii holds that their ancestors migrated from a place called Misiri, north of Mt. Elgon, possibly in present-day Egypt. These ancestors were the founders of the six major Gusii clans: the Abagetutu, Abanyaribari, Abagirango, Abanchari, Abamachoge, and Ababasi.[7] The Abagusii people had a decentralized political system based on clans, with each clan having its own leader and government. The clan leader or omorwoti/omogambi, was the highest rank and was like a king or chief [8]. This leader was always a man who had more than one wife, because it was believed that to qualify to be a leader you must have more than one wife and be able to pay dowry for all of them, and be able to solve conflicts that may arise among them.

The political evolution of the Abagusii people can be traced back to their settlement in the Kano plains between 1640 and 1755. Before this, they lived in scattered family units led by family heads. As they

expanded, these family units became clans, which migrated to their current homeland[9]. Their political system was based on agnatic kinship. The lineage (RIIGA) level was defined by marriage and patrilineal descent, which determined access to land and corporate action. There was a concern of barren women who were married according to Kisii traditions and were unable to give birth to children. The question was who would carry their offspring, and who would inherit their properties, especially the land? The reason was they did not trust the boy child of their co wife or wives. Even though woman-to-woman marriage has existed or exists in many societies, this institution has often been overlooked by researchers.

Marriage and Family Life

Marriage is a legal, social, and contractual union between two people that establishes rights and obligations for both partners. It can also refer to the ceremony that creates the marriage relationship.[10] The Abagusii people also believe that marriage is between two families. That is to say that marriage is a link that connects the two families from the past to the future. They believe that marriage is subject to strict regulations, expectations, and norms that set them apart from other cultures.[11] Traditionally, the expectation was to have children, and Polygamy was allowed for men to have more than one wife. The number of wives is not determined if the husband is able to meet their expectations. Circumcision is done at the age of 10 as a rite of passage from childhood to adulthood it was done to all genders but nowadays is only done to men. Women are no longer circumcised. Traditionally an uncircumcised person was regarded as a child regardless of age but nowadays the meaning of circumcision has changed, it is done to men mainly for health purposes not as a rite of passage, and gateway to marriage. Before marriage, there is a series of things to be done until the two people live together as husband and wife. First there is a search for a wife. This include sending relatives to look for a hard-working girl, the family background is thoroughly checked to get information if the family is good, and they are not witches and jealousy.

To Abagusii people therefore, according to Mayer marriage can be established only through the payment of bride-wealth in the form of livestock and money by the husband to the wife's family. This act establishes a socially sanctioned marriage, through which a woman and a man become socially defined mothers and fathers. Residence is at the husband's home. Divorce was and still is rare; it entails the return of the bride's wealth. At the death of a husband, the widow chooses a leviratic husband among the deceased's brothers.[12]

The background and reasons for woman-to woman- marriage among the Abagusii

According to O'Brien, the institution of woman-to-woman marriage, which has existed at least as early as the Eighteenth Century, still exists in some societies today.[13] Inheritance is a reason that drive a woman without child of her own to think of who will inherit her properties in future. Consequently, woman-to-woman marriage may be a "pro-female" institution because it can provide women with rights that would otherwise be reserved for males.[14] Regardless of whether the female husband takes on a conceptual role of a male, it is evident that she uses the institution as a way of achieving social prestige and increased economic security. The female husband usually has the same rights over the wife and her children as a man has over his wife and children. Having reviewed the reason for this marriage, the literature review has not pointed the religious implications for this marriage.

Krige, states that, woman-to-woman marriage, also known as woman marriage or marriage involving a "female husband," refers to the institution whereby a woman marries another woman and assumes control over her and her offspring.[15] Among the Abagusii, people there are various reasons to this marriage. According to the research conducted there are three reasons which came to light as to why a woman marries another woman among the Abagusii people. Women take wives under three circumstances, all of which increase the status of the female husband: 1) barren women and widows take wives to obtain rights over children produced; 2) rich women accumulate wives to gain prestige and wealth in the same way men do through polygyny; and 3) women have the right to have a daughter-in-law, women without sons can exercise their right to a daughter-in-law by marrying a woman and giving her to a non-existent son to continue carrying her name and make her offspring through no-existence son.

Most researchers have argued that woman-to-woman marriage may involve lesbianism.[\[16\]](#) The author strongly oppose this idea because no sexual activities involved between a woman and a woman, but the woman wife is or was allowed to look for a man love suitor to bear, children in the name of the woman husband. In this case the paternal psychology is followed and maintained.

The reason given above for this marriage is or was barrenness. Given that in many African religious societies a woman's traditional obligation and duty is to procreate, a barren woman is often considered a failure, and she need to have a lineage[\[17\]](#). For her to untie herself from the shackles of shame and intimidations, she needed to marry, and marriage is or was through woman-to-woman marriage, a barren woman can gain social prestige and her husband's favor. A barren wife can resolve her unfortunate social position by engaging in a woman-to-woman marriage[\[18\]](#). In such cases, the wife bears children for the female husband, which brings honor and glory to the barren woman and subsequently to the husband of the barren woman.

Wedding Ceremony of Woman to Woman

After paying the bride price, the ceremony is arranged with these two families, the ceremony is meant to bid goodbye, and the wife is escorted to her new home. The Abagusii traditional ceremonies is performed to make these two families connected. The ceremonies are the same as male and female marriage. The traditional brew is prepared made of millet and sorghum, a goat is slaughtered, the intestines from the are cooked either boiled or roasted and eaten with the accompaniment of traditional millet cooked flour put in a traditional basket weaved from reeds (Ekee), blood is sprinkled, sour milk is brough with a traditional calabash for them to drink, other food items are thrown down to the ground for ancestors the ancestors believed to eat as a way of being attached with them. According to the informants some words of blessing are uttered to these couples. The blessings are to go and sire more children and fill the land. Those words are tied with a sip of traditional brew. This is followed with a traditional wedding whereby a traditional respected elder performs a wedding next to the pot of traditional brew. After that the wife is allowed to go to her new home accompanied by the men who went to pick her.

DISCUSSION

After the respondents gave their views, they reached saturation point, and the researcher was satisfied that the information received is the views of the majority. The study noted that there were more aged women than men. At the same time, the study noted again that the number of women respondents was higher than that of men, because women are the one who are affected with this marriage. The study found a justification for utilizing such a size of a sample based on the rule of thumb by Guest, Bunce, and Johnson that a sample of between 10-30 respondents is sufficient to provide adequate qualitative data[\[19\]](#). The validity and reliability of data collecting instruments were safeguarded through piloting.

From the data collected, it was revealed that the continuity of the offspring of the barren woman is counted once she has children who will carry her name. As Kimutu highlighted that the jurisdiction of the female husband includes choosing the man with whom her wife will procreate. It may be the female husband's own husband or any of her husband's close male kin[\[20\]](#). Mostly, this was done to keep the blood stream of the family in continuity. Blood from outside was not allowed, that means choosing a suitor from outside the family line was not allowed.

From the data presented it, came out that social stigma among the barren women is a strong factor that drives them to get married to another woman. Among the Abagusii people it was revealed from the study that a woman without a child is undermined, bullied, laughed at and even not counted as a family member. The data revealed that infertile couples among the Abagusii are/were socially stigmatized and excluded from leadership roles even in religious institutions like churches, mosques and temples, but they continued going there for prayers now and then. Couples without children are/were denied membership in the ancestral world thereby losing the opportunity to live again. For her to get out of this shame, marrying a fertile woman who will carry on her name was an option, the data revealed that the expectation from this wife was for her to get

boys although all genders were/are recognized but preferences was given to boy child. According with this response it clearly reveal that the Abagusii people are a patriarchal community.

The data revealed that in some cases where a woman was/is married with children, these children must be young. The reason given by all respondents was that when these children are young and given good care, they will not be able to know who their biological father was/is. The only father they know is the woman-father who performs the role of a father. In the case whereby grown-up children are married with their mother, the data revealed that the probability of them going back to their biological father was/is high. That will make the woman-father to lose the marriage and will suffer psychologically. In the same note the researcher revealed that nowadays many childless women prefer to adopt kids from children society than marrying a woman with children.

Age was a factor that made woman to marry another woman for her husband. According to the data, it was revealed that at the age of 50 and above, many women reaches menopause whereby they are not active sexually, and they don't want sexual disturbance. The study revealed that this woman opted to marry another wife for her husband, and that wife is counted as her wife, because the dowry used to marry this woman is hers and the children born out of this marriage are hers. From the data presented it was established that, if the woman married had children before marriage, she will make sure that she give birth with a man from the family or among the relatives of that family. This way will earn her respect and be counted as a full member of the community.

The study revealed that there is/was evidence that, the Abagusii culture allowed a woman husband to marry a woman as "daughter-in-law." This is closely related to the motivations caused by barrenness, women without sons would pay bride wealth for a girl and refer to the process as marrying a "daughter-in-law" for the "house." This form of woman-to-woman marriage as Krige indicate gives a sonless female husband the opportunity to become the head of a "complete" house [21]. This enabled her as a member of the patrilineal Abagusii to expel the stigma attached to her because she failed to bear a male heir.

From the data presented, it can be concluded that woman-to-woman marriages were also practiced fostering freedom and independence particularly in patrilineal-dominant societies like the Abagusii community. This author discovered from the data, that freedom and independence among females were enhanced in that the wife was able to freely choose her sexual partner without interference from the spouse. Furthermore, privacy was maintained by the wife by letting her have her own home separate from that of the female partner, thus further guaranteeing freedom. The author discovered from the data presented that this type of marriage was most significant for females who were in abusive marriages and were unable to leave because of not being able to pay back the bride price.

CONCLUSION

Woman-to-woman marriage happened with a reason and the reason was to get a boy child who will inherit the land and other properties of that woman husband or make her name remembered through this boy child.

In several different cultures whereby Abagusii are not exceptional, barren women have employed the system to provide themselves with the children they need to be considered full members of society. The solution for these problems is/was marrying other woman, widows are not left behind have also gained status by securing children for their deceased husband's lineage. Sonless women have married daughters-in-law to provide grandchildren and domestic help. Women have been known to become female husbands to secure rights over land and this can be realized by marrying another woman who has or will sire boy child.

In the Abagusii community, the presence of the institution of woman-to-woman marriage is declining as discussed in this study this is due to adaption option. In addition to the changes brought about by colonialism, the incidence of woman-to-woman marriage may have been altered in response to medical advances which reduce barrenness and infant mortality. This is not far from what happened with the

Abagusii people. The advanced medical care, politics, social economic power, and education has contributed to the decline of woman-to-woman marriage.

Woman-to-woman marriage gives the deeper understanding of life through marriage. woman-to-woman marriage has been a way in which women could substantially advance their social status and/or increase their economic standing in their communities as discussed in this study.

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FOOTNOTES

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