

**A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF ESTHER IN THE BIBLE AND MATE
SELECTION IN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL SOCIETIES:
IMPLICATIONS FOR THE CHURCH IN AFRICA**

Luka Vandí Uti

ABSTRACT

Marriage customs vary globally, but parental approval is often a key factor. Parallels exist between Esther's marriage and some African patriarchal systems involving male-led mate selection and bride price. This raises questions about the contemporary relevance, advantages, and disadvantages of such systems and the potential for integrating women's opinions. This study compares Esther's experience with African traditional mate selection, highlighting the role of male authority and its impact on female autonomy. Employing a historical method by examining the narrative of Esther in the Old Testament, this study comparatively analyses mate selection systems in selected African regions, including South Africa, Kenya, and the Igbo culture of Nigeria. It advises the African church to blend discouraging systems and anti-human values of patriarchy to value women's input and discourage discrimination. The paper critiques egalitarianism and complementarianism, advocating that ultimately, the church should prioritise salvation, human dignity, and service, while rejecting harmful patriarchal practices and championing a framework honouring everyone's autonomy and potential. The church should champion a framework that honours the agency of all individuals, ensuring that mate selection processes, whether incorporating traditional elements or modern perspectives, ultimately uphold the salvation, dignity, and opportunity for service of both men and women within the community of faith.

KEYWORDS: King Ahasuerus, Esther, Mordechai, Patriarchal and African societies.

INTRODUCTION

Selecting a life partner is a significant aspect of life across all societal strata. However, in many cultures, women historically have limited or no freedom in choosing their mates, with decisions often made by the prospective male spouse, his family, or designated marital intermediaries. This reality is evident in the biblical account of Esther among the Jewish diaspora, a context where patriarchal structures were prevalent. As Western religion and culture increasingly influence societies globally, including Israel, Judah, and Africa, the marriage rite remains a profoundly important and widely celebrated rite of passage in African culture. This intersection of historical patriarchal practices and evolving cultural norms raises crucial questions about choice, autonomy, and human dignity within the

context of mate selection, themes central to the modern discourse on egalitarianism and complementarianism within Christian theology.

This paper aims to draw a comparison between the mate selection process for Esther and those in African societies, focusing on specialized selection groups, societal patterns, and valued cultural norms. Employing a historical method by examining the narrative of Esther in the Old Testament, this study comparatively analyses mate selection systems in selected African regions, including South Africa, Kenya, and the Igbo culture of Nigeria. The research observes that the patriarchal system of mate selection was central not only in Esther's time but also persists in various African societies, indicating its continued influence on cultural traditions. This mode of mate selection, while historically common, often raises concerns regarding women's autonomy and their inherent human dignity, concepts strongly emphasized in egalitarian perspectives which advocate equal roles and decision-making power for both genders. Conversely, complementarian views, while often affirming women's equal worth, may still support distinct roles that could impact the level of choice women exercise in mate selection.

While the patriarchal method offers certain advantages within specific cultural contexts, its disadvantages, particularly the limitation of women's agencies, become increasingly problematic in an era emphasizing individual rights and modernization. This work will provide an overview of the Book of Esther, Esther's selection as Queen, marriage and bride selection in Traditional African Societies, a comparative analysis between Esther's selection and mate selection in African Traditional Religion, and its implications for the African Church as it deals with the issues of tradition, modernity, and theological perspectives on gender roles, choice, and human dignity. The church's approach to mate selection has significant implications for upholding the inherent worth and autonomy of all individuals, reflecting the core values debated within egalitarian and complementarian frameworks.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK OF ESTHER

The story unfolds with the deposition of Queen Vashti and the subsequent rise of Esther, a Jewish maiden, to the throne. Esther, guided by her cousin Mordecai, finds herself in a precarious position when Haman, a powerful courtier, plots the annihilation of the Jewish people. The content in the book of Esther is addressed to the Jews in the Bible. The book is not a sacred name, but it contains important information that connects one to the divine. This book is connected with the Torah and shows God preserving his people. This book comes after the pronouncement of Cyrus to free the Children of Israel; crucial terms as related to the Jews, such as the commandment, covenant, temple, Jerusalem, etc., cannot be found in this book.

The book of Esther reveals how Esther was chosen to be queen in the place of Vashti. Vashti refused to show her beauty before the King and his highly esteemed visitors. This might be because of her thought that it was not necessary; nonetheless, the act was seen as a

great insult to the king before his men. The scripture indicated that she was beautiful to look upon, but was silent on whether there was something ornamental about her beauty or if there was a spiritual attachment to her beauty. Vashti's attitude was seen as an unpardonable offence, which was punishable and had consequences from Ahasuerus (Esther 1:11, 12).

To avoid this act of rebellion of Vashti from spreading to other women in the empire, the King heeded the advice of his advisors and accepted Memucan's view of putting a stop to the misleading attitude exhibited by Vashti which may have adverse effect on the family because wives would eventually refuse to be submissive to their husbands. The dismissal of Vashti as queen led to an opening for Esther. The King ordered that beautiful ladies be catered for, and at due time, they should be brought before him so that he might choose from among them the queen. Esther was counselled by her uncle Mordecai, and she gained favour before God that on her appearance before the King, he loved her and chose her to be the queen. (1:17, 2:9, 15,17).

Well, Summer affirms that the appropriate way of comprehending the book of Esther is in the situation of the period of emigration and not in the sense of captivity (5). This implies that the children of Israel in a foreign land in the dispensation of Esther chose to remain in diaspora and were not forced labour or slaves. They peacefully dwelt in a land that did not belong to their fathers. This made them gradually and systematically get used to the Persian culture and government at the time. Karen Jobes opines that truth in the scriptures can easily be conveyed by narratively discussing historical events. The author passes their message across through several means by using creative writing styles and other figures of speech such as humor, satire, and irony. This book is a unique book of the Old Testament because of its interesting stories, such as the revealed conspiracy, the obvious part played, and the unexpected favour withdrawn and given to someone else (32).

The story in Esther, composed uniquely, portrays issues of governance, supernatural intervention, and amazing boldness. The main idea of the book is the elevation of Esther from a low state to a level of authority after paying the price on behalf of her people. The festival of Purim, the simultaneous humiliation of Haman and promotion of Mordecai, is also discussed in the book of Esther. The fact that some readers see the book as unauthentic does not mean that it is so, because there are known sources from which the book originated, such as the compilation of the kings of the Media and Persia (Jobes 32, 39). The fact that the book of Esther is part of the canonized books in the Old Testament negates other presuppositions and perspectives of scholars who see the whole book and its interpretations as unauthentic and fables. The book also gives an understanding of the way of life of the Jewish people during the reign of the Persians (Streane no page). Aaron Ventura's perspective of the union of Esther with the King is a typology of the holistic union of humanity with Christ, reflecting God's love from the first creation of man to the coming together of Eve as one flesh (www.facebook.com/aaronventura).

The researcher comments that this narrative approach likely emphasizes the power of storytelling to engage the reader, convey moral and theological lessons, and illustrate the workings of God in human affairs. The narrative format allows for a more accessible and

impactful presentation of historical and theological themes, fostering a deeper understanding and application of biblical principles.

MARRIAGE AND BRIDE SELECTION IN TRADITIONAL AFRICAN SOCIETIES

The services of matchmakers were needed and employed in the Abagusii (an ethnic group in Kenya) traditional marriage system. Before the period of colonial rule, fathers were in control of the African society and cultures: they ruled over women and children. Marriage could be arranged and was based on the good characteristics possessed by the man. Members of this matchmaker's group who are also known to be *esigani* constitute females who are related to the family. The group has the responsibility of selecting a wife who is hard working, with good home training and character, and an adorable family history. The *esigani* served as intermediaries and mediators of peace and good relationships between the two families. The process of marrying, which was rigorous and deep inquisition, led to a long-life marriage and had little or no divorce experienced among the people (Mokua et al 1-11).

The era of increased knowledge and technology in society has led to the decline of the usefulness of the *esigani*. There are many alternatives for matchmaking in this dispensation, which renders the role of the traditional matchmakers ineffective. These alternatives arise because of easy movement, the effect of social media, and the existence of romantic love forums/groups among learned and religious groups, among others. The cultural practice that has helped to build up lasting homes, strong communal relationships, and maintain moral attributes among the people in society, which has become null and void, is of great concern. However, *esigani* has shown the importance of comprehending and preserving traditional practices amid a growing and changing society (Mokua et al 1-11). It is interesting to note that the tribe of Vhavenda in South Africa also employs arranged marriage as the main recognized form of marriage. In this culture, the responsibility of choosing a partner lies on the shoulders of the head of the family and the female siblings of the father. This is because marriage is seen in terms of loyalty and trust between the families and parents of the intended couple. The strength of this approach is that it strengthens the relationship between the families, cultural preservation, and other benefits (Raphalalan and Musehane 18-22).

The purposes of marriage, as given by these scholars above, are preservation of culture, acquisition of wealth, and retention of social status. Some families go into a marriage agreement before the delivery of their children. Marriage can also occur among students based on the agreement of their parents. In the Abagusii, the *esigani* oversaw mate selection on behalf of the family. The Vhavenda centres on family control and cultural continuity (Raphalalan and Musehane 18-22).

The Kenyan Abagusii marriage is the traditional marriage system which has various communal processes (such as custom and rite) for marriage aimed at ensuring that it lasts long. An undisputable mandatory initiation for all those who are maturing is circumcision. They are educated on issues that pertain to cultural abomination, sexuality, and the rules and

duties of family members. Marriage is a communal responsibility where the in-laws are greatly involved to reach an agreement about the bride's portion of riches and a well-pronounced marriage, all these are to ensure close family ties and sustaining traditional customs. The system of the traditional Abagusii marriage remains valid in this dispensation and is useful for marital counselling purposes. The main idea of this system is that it promotes communal support and cultural preservation. The traditional responsibility of the extended families in solving problems has been ineffective because of modernization (Kerebi and Asatsa 173- 184).

In the Ibo Igbo traditional setting, marriage is more of the coming together of two families than individuals. The family of the intended couple, with time, understands each other through constant visits, enquiries, and investigation. The ceremony that binds the family together is *Igba-Nkwu*. The family union form of marriage is stronger in the Igbo tradition than in the Western individual system. The western system of marriage, such as weddings in the church and the person who determines the payment of the bride price, seems to question and disagree with the traditional pattern of personal decisions, family decisions, and customary duties. Western development now brings questioning and disagreement between personal decisions, family decisions, customary duties, versus the wedding in the church, and determining the bride's price. The increase in knowledge has rendered parental consent ineffective. However, the cultural importance of the Igbo culture remains firm. For Igbo tradition to be more effective, it should be applicable in the situation of contemporary times. This would make the Igbo system of marriage stronger and encourage continuity (Nwabude 224-39).

A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS BETWEEN THE SELECTION OF ESTHER AND MATE SELECTION IN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION

The way Esther got married is through the procedure of the approval of her "foster" father. It is a system where fathers make major decisions about giving out their daughters for marriage. The action taken by Vashti led the advisors to make a decision that is directly connected to women, that they might be submissive to their husbands. Vashti's opinion did not count, just like the woman caught in adultery found in John 8:1-11. This story shows a system where fathers are the sole authority in making general decisions, including the aspect of giving away their female children for marriage. Some Greek authors recognized the great potential of women in influencing the king. Similarly, some Persian authors noted that women effectively handled social and economic duties (Hancock, no page). However, women faced significant limitations in decision-making in both the Ancient Near East and African cultures. While the narrative in Esther illustrates how God brought freedom to Israel through a woman, the question remains: if God could use a woman to accomplish such a great task, why is there so much discrimination against them? This demonstrates that women possess considerable potential that can benefit themselves, their families, and society (Muzvidziwa 138-55).

Similarly, the Abagusii traditional marriage system was firmly rooted in a patriarchal structure, where fathers held dominion over societal norms and family affairs, including the arrangement of marriages. The selection process, even with the involvement of female relatives known as *esigani*, ultimately hinged on the "good characteristics possessed by the man," highlighting male agency as the primary determinant.

Similarly, among the Vhavenda people, while female siblings of the father participated in choosing a partner, the final authority resided with the "head of the family," a role typically occupied by a male figure. The emphasis on familial loyalty and trust, primarily between the parents, is further accentuated by parental, and often patriarchal, control over the marital union. In the Igbo tradition, marriage was conceived as a union of two families rather than individuals, implying that the families, often led by male elders, held significant sway in the decision-making process. The Patriarchal system in Kenya gives men the upper hand over every sector of the country. The precolonial Kenya societies operated with this system, and the 2010 constitution in Kenya promoted equality but permitted polygamy, which increased the rate of inequality and reduced the chances of women having profitable opportunities. The same system is strong among the Igbos, where attention is mainly focused on the male, and it's almost a taboo not to have a male child. The discrimination between males and females is so much that male is seen to have the full right of inheritance, and not females. But contemporary learned groups of women are merging to fight against this dilemma confronting women (Urama, n.p.).

The focus on the groom's attributes as the basis for arranged marriages in the Abagusii culture further solidifies the male-centric nature of the system, positioning the man as the central figure whose suitability was paramount. Across all three cultures, one can see limited insight into the agency and decision-making power of the women entering these unions. The narrative predominantly centres on familial arrangements, the qualities of the prospective groom, and the strengthening of communal bonds, often with the male lineage taking precedence. Even the role of the *esigani* in Abagusii, tasked with selecting a bride based on domestic skills and family history, suggests a selection process geared towards fulfilling the expectations within an established patriarchal framework.

Furthermore, the stated purposes of marriage – the preservation of culture, the acquisition of wealth, and the retention of social status – while seemingly communal, often served to perpetuate the existing social order, which historically favoured male dominance. The accumulation of wealth and the maintenance of social standing frequently benefited the male lineage, thereby reinforcing patriarchal power structures. While the Abagusii and Igbo traditions emphasize the communal and familial aspects of marriage, and the Vhavenda tradition highlights family control, the underlying decision-making processes and motivations often reflected patriarchal norms, where male elders and family heads held considerable influence. To sum up, the traditional marriage systems described within the Abagusii, Vhavenda, and Igbo cultures were demonstrably patriarchal. Male figures, including fathers, family heads, and male relatives, exercised significant control over the arrangement and terms of marriage. The emphasis on the groom's qualities, the limited

portrayal of the bride's autonomy, and the alignment of marriage objectives with historically male-dominated societal structures all point towards these being inherently patriarchal systems. While female relatives played certain roles in the process, their involvement did not fundamentally alter the underlying patriarchal framework, where ultimate authority and control predominantly rested with men.

IMPLICATIONS TO THE CHURCH IN AFRICA

The patriarchal system of mate selection, while possessing certain advantages, carries the risk of causing significant harm to the contemporary church and society if not carefully managed. It is crucial for the church to comprehend the inherent nature and potential effects of this system to achieve a balanced approach and prevent further discrimination among its male and female members. Uto and Asen affirm that one of the main challenges that the gathering of the saints' encounter is the issue of gender. Some factors, like culture and religion, have hindered qualified youths and women from climbing the ladder of leadership in the church (145). Chukwu states that "Patriarchal culture inculcates into men a sense of superiority and as a result makes them believe that women were created for their service" (68). Pokol declares that:

Patriarchy is a social construct emerging from male ego and embodies normative values and judgments, which, on the basis of biological differences between male and female, provides for division of labour, privileges, and opportunities between men and women. Patriarchy believes and reinforces worship of male supremacy, leaving inferiority to females, thereby recognizing no form of equality between men and women" (111).

The information given above shows that the patriarchal system of mate selection is one-sided because preference is only given to the male, while the female is completely neglected. Oladoye, Adeola, and Andy Philip ascertain that the position of Paul is that men and women are of the same importance before God (108). The patriarchal system is not only operational in mate selection but also in other areas in our contemporary age. Notably, within the realm of ministry, Pentecostal denominations, alongside some Wesleyan traditions, have generally exhibited a more liberal stance compared to other evangelical traditions. Specifically, Pentecostals have often challenged patriarchal norms concerning ministry roles, whereas much of Reformation theology has historically maintained that women should remain silent in church and be subject to male authority (Acher and Acher 70).

To gain a deeper understanding of this dynamic, it is essential to explore the theological arguments surrounding women's roles within the church and society. One prominent perspective, Complementarianism, posits that while men and women are of equal value and dignity before God, they are assigned distinct, complementary roles. This viewpoint typically advocates for male leadership within both the domestic sphere and the church, with women often serving in supportive or nurturing capacities. Proponents of this

view frequently cite biblical passages such as Genesis 1–2, Ephesians 5:22-33, and 1 Timothy 2:11-15. Those who identify as complementarians have expressed concerns that evangelical egalitarians are disseminating unbiblical teachings regarding male and female gender roles in the church, home, and society, thereby contributing to gender confusion in conjunction with secular humanism and feminism (Acher and Acher 71). As complementarians themselves articulate, they "affirm that men and women are completely equal in dignity, value, worth, and honor; however, men and women are different in role and function" (Acher and Acher 72).

Proponents of this view, like Denny Burk, contend that male headship within marriage is not merely a consequence of the Fall, as proponents of egalitarianism often assert, but is instead divinely established within the created order depicted in Genesis 1-2, predating the introduction of sin. To substantiate this claim, Denny Burk meticulously examines Genesis 2, positing that it portrays Adam as the leader in the primordial marriage, with Eve occupying a role that entails following his lead. This leadership, according to Denny Burk, is evident in several key aspects of the Genesis narrative. Firstly, the order of creation, with Adam being formed before Eve, is interpreted as signifying a position of authority, drawing a parallel to the societal concept of primogeniture, where the firstborn often held a special status. Secondly, the order of accountability is highlighted, noting that God addressed and held Adam responsible first for transgressing His command, implying Adam's role in conveying divine instructions to Eve.

Thirdly, the designation of the woman as 'helper' suitable for Adam is understood not merely as assistance, but as a supportive and submissive function oriented towards Adam's leadership. Fourthly, Adam's naming of Eve is presented as an act of exercising authority, mirroring God's act of naming creation and Adam's naming of the animals. Finally, the order of Satan's temptation, where the serpent approaches Eve first, is interpreted as a deliberate subversion of God's established hierarchy of authority (God -> Man -> Woman), a subversion that Paul himself links to humanity's fall into sin. Consequently, the author concludes that Genesis 2 lays out a foundational model for marriage characterized by male leadership and wifely submission, an ordering inherent in God's good creation and thus intended as the enduring norm for all marriages. Crucially, this hierarchical distinction in roles, the author argues, does not negate the wife's equal value as an image-bearer of God. In support of this interpretation, the author emphasizes that both Jesus and Paul consistently reference Genesis 2, rather than the post-sin narrative of Genesis 3, when elucidating the meaning of marriage and gender roles, thereby reinforcing the notion that this order is an integral part of God's original design (Burk n.p.).

BEYOND GENDER ROLES: UPHOLDING FOUNDATIONAL PRINCIPLES

The Bible fundamentally supports the choice and autonomy of the human person. Therefore, in the ongoing discussion between egalitarianism and complementarianism, a crucial question to consider is the extent to which either viewpoint potentially undermines

individuals' free will in matters of faith and life. For instance, should a woman be compelled to submit to an abusive husband? Should a church prioritize male leadership based solely on gender, even when a more competent woman is available? Furthermore, have interpretations of either egalitarianism or complementarianism been used to justify patriarchal systems that deny women their fundamental rights to life and dignity?

Evidence suggests the significant value women bring to both the church and society. Azomo observes that women demonstrate a wider range of problem-solving approaches than men, highlighting their diverse utility (295). Kangdim's analysis of the African church reveals that despite often being undervalued in Nigerian congregations, women contribute substantially to church progress (90) through significant financial support for projects, the empowerment of other women via entrepreneurial training, contributions to community development, the fostering of mutual support and problem-solving within women's fellowships, the provision of valuable spiritual resources, and the organization of beneficial workshops and seminars. Ogunbiwaje further confirms that educated African women leverage their positions to educate others in African traditions, promoting decency and values. Given this considerable potential, neglecting women's perspectives in marital and other critical decisions is demonstrably unjust. Indeed, the patriarchal approach to mate selection appears to have yielded more negative consequences than positive ones (2015).

Ultimately, the central argument of this essay is that the church should prioritize three core principles: salvation, human dignity, and service. Any interpretation of patriarchy that hinders women's access to salvation is inherently flawed. Similarly, any understanding of egalitarianism or complementarianism that does not centre on the salvation of the individual is counterproductive to the gospel message. In the same vein, upholding human dignity is paramount. Patriarchal marital practices that deny women agency and choice have demonstrably caused harm. Therefore, the church should champion a framework that honours the autonomy and potential of all individuals, ensuring that structures and interpretations, whether egalitarian or complementarian, ultimately serve these fundamental values.

CONCLUSION

The patriarchal system of mate selection, evident in the selection of Queen Esther and traditional African practices, commonly grants men authoritative power in choosing partners, often leaving women with limited agency in the decision-making process. While Persia emphasized royal favour and splendour, African societies typically involved community and extended family, cultural continuity through intermediaries, bride price, and thorough inquiries. Increased civilization and modernization have brought changes to African traditions, promoting personal choice and women's rights. This study highlights culture's significant impact on marriage, deducing that the patriarchal system restricts women's choice in both Persian and African contexts.

Arranged marriages and bride price remain significant in some African societies, strengthening unions through family involvement and investigations. While Persian rule operated through royal decree, African societies employed community-driven procedures focused on lineage, cultural continuity, and familial alliances. Both systems historically demonstrate male dominance in marital decisions, potentially honouring men while disadvantaging women through discrimination and limited freedom of choice.

Given women's diverse gifts and historical contributions to the church, society, and nation, the African church is advised to integrate flexible mate selection systems. This approach would value women's opinions and discourage gender discrimination. Furthermore, creating space for women to voice concerns respectfully and addressing these issues with positive action would foster equality and combat discrimination. Mate selection, for the church, should be about prioritizing the core principles of salvation, human dignity, and service. Any interpretation of patriarchal or other gender role frameworks that hinder women's autonomy and potential, thus impeding their full participation and dignity, contradicts these foundational values. Therefore, the church should champion a framework that honours the agency of all individuals, ensuring that mate selection processes, whether incorporating traditional elements or modern perspectives, ultimately uphold the salvation, dignity, and opportunity for service of both men and women within the community of faith.

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