



The Intersection of Tradition and Choice: A Study of Spouse Selection in Pakistan's Nomadic Tribe

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ABSTRACT

In an intricate examination of spouse selection within the Bagri tribe, a nomadic community in Pakistan, this study dissects the multi-tiered, socio-cultural dynamics that govern matrimonial decisions. Drawing upon qualitative research, comprising in-depth interviews with 15 respondents from the Bagri tribe in Balochistan and Sindh provinces, the study illuminates the tripartite influence of spouses, parents, and the tribal council known as "Panchayat." The findings unearth a hierarchy of authority, with spouses wielding minimal influence, parents exerting substantial control, and the Panchayat often having the final say. Contrasting the male and female roles, the study observes a gender-based disparity where men possess a slightly greater agency in spouse selection. Moreover, the process is steeped in culturally rich rituals and symbolic gestures, such as "Shagun" and engagement ceremonies, reflecting the tribe's social ethos. The paper situates these practices within theoretical frameworks such as Social Conflict Theory, Family System Theory, and Social Exchange Theory, offering a nuanced understanding of how decisions regarding marital unions are negotiated, ritualized, and enacted. Comparing these patterns with other cultural contexts, the study contributes an enriched perspective to the existing body of knowledge on spouse selection, emphasizing the complex interplay between individual choice, familial dictates, community norms, and traditional customs.

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1. Introduction

Spouse selection is one of the major decisions confronting an individual at least once in a lifetime. However, the decision to select a spouse is rarely an individual decision. Various external factors influence the decision to marry or select a spouse. Studies have constantly found passionate love and attractiveness as the preferred characteristics for the potential spouse election. (Buss et al. 2001; Milardo et al. 1983). However, preference is relative and contextual. What is preferred in one sociocultural setting might not be in another culture. In Asian cultures, family-related characteristics are important when deciding on potential spouse selection. (Higgins et al. 2002). For example, family influence is binding in China regarding spouse selection. (Pimentel, 2000).

The spouse selection process is influenced by various factors that are external to the spouses themselves. Uomo (2014) discussed the role of socioeconomic status in spouse selection. Individuals with higher gains in wealth and education performed greater agency in spouse selection than those with lower income levels. Trilla and Domingo (2008) argued that social status and educational qualifications were prioritized while selecting a partner for

cohabitation. Age, religion, and race were considered while deciding on a spouse for marriage. It directly exemplifies that Spouse selection is also found in a barter system where spouses are exchanged for spouses. Bhutta et al. (2015) studied *Watta Satta* as a normal method of spouse selection in the rural areas of Pakistan. The said method involves the exchange of brides between two families.

In late 20th century Libya, family and kinship were the main sources of spouse selection. Al-Nouri (1980) investigated the spouse selection methods of married couples at the Tripolian College of Libya and found that couples from traditional backgrounds were formed mainly through kinship influence, even though an average of 72.5 per cent of these couples preferred love marriage and exogamy. In Megawal Tribe, however, *Manga*¹ is important in spouse selection. When finding a better match for the bride or the groom, the parents contact *Manga* for the job. (Shahid & Jamil 2014)

Analyzing the mate selection process in different cultures gives us a contextual understanding of mate selection in Asian cultures. Marriage as economic consumerism existed in the South Asian context. In early Virginia Indian Society, a man searched for a woman who would perform his duties properly, for which an amount was paid to the bride as a bride price to the woman's parents for the loss of her labour. (Rountree 2014). Contrarily, Rehan and Kanwal (2017) investigated the exchange marriages in Pakistan and found *Swara* (A traditional spouse selection criterion in which the girl of a community is forcibly married to a member of the enemy community to settle a dispute) and *Vani* (Forcible marriage as a compensation to the tribal disputes to the victim clan) as the spouse selection criteria. Such a criterion does not take the bride's agency into account since the meaning attached to this marriage is purely traditional and beyond the debate of agency.

Delayed marriage influences the spouse selection criteria and the decision to form a family. Marriage, if delayed, results in a wider range of flexibility regarding spouse selection criteria. Foreman-Peck (2011) observed the delayed marriages in the Hanjal tribe in the post second world war Europe. The delay in marriage resulted in a shift toward modernization and the attainment of education rather than considering marriage as an option. Similarly, Jeejeebhoy and Haali (2005) studied the dynamics of spouse selection in India in which the demand for a certain level of education and dowry influenced the decision to marry. Additionally, Sathar and Farooqui (1986) contended that women's education, employment, and urbanization influenced the decision to get married.

Traditional societies prefer spouse selection from among the endogamous group, while modern families lay more emphasis on exogamous marriages. Wong (1989) studied Chinese marriages and found a tilt towards exogamous marriages from purely endogamous marriages of the early 20th century. Similarly, Dugene and Bauduer (2012) found that most Western French Pyrenees preferred endogamy regarding spouse selection for marriage. The locality also influences choosing a spouse from one's endogamous or exogamous group. Reniers (2001) compared the spouse selection criteria of the Turkish and Moroccan communities in Belgium. They found that endogamy was preferred as a more suitable option among both communities in Belgium than in their home countries. Education is also considered a potential factor influencing choosing a spouse. For example, Afzal et al. (1994) observed a rise in endogamy due to insufficient formal education in the Punjab province of Pakistan. Glenn (1982) found a relationship between diversity and secularism in the marriage institution where diverse societies opted for both endogamy and exogamy as suitable and vice-versa.

The aforementioned debate on the different patterns and criteria of decision-making about spouse selection provides an enriched horizon to view the dynamics of spouse selection. This paper aims to understand the process of spouse selection among the member of the Bagri tribe, a nomadic tribe in Pakistan. It examines the influence of social networks on decision-making about spouse selection. It also sheds some light on the role of spouses, parents, and

¹ Middle man

*Panchayat*² in the decision-making process of spouse selection. Understanding these dynamics adds to the existing body of knowledge.

2. Theoretical Underpinning

As a social institution, marriage involves a systematic process of negotiations, decisions, and rituals between different stakeholders to form a family of procreation. Structural functionalists view the family as the basic unit for social mobility while nurturing and socializing children and adults. Forming a family of procreation is a systematic yet different process in many cultures. Structural Functionalists view the decision-making process of spouse selection as an organizational behaviour in which different stakeholders of the institution of the family perform different functions. The fundamental question that fits this theory is how the prevalent flow of decision-making in spouse selection influences the functions of the family of procreation.

On the contrary, Social Conflict Theory is more concerned with studying the differences in share of decision-making. It deduces its inspiration from the question of how decision-making dynamics are different among the different stakeholders of the family of procreation. It also looks at the structural variables as influencing the decision-making in the individual sphere for a specific class and its role and acceptance in society. The question of this theoretical approach is how the decision-making authority in spouse selection benefits different stakeholders unequally. The premise set in this theory is that men assert superior over women, which ultimately creates conflict in which men attempt to maintain power and women attempt to seize more of it. We will use different theoretical approaches and constructs to explain the decision-making process of spouse selection.

The decision-making process for the formation of the family is shared by different family members, with each one performing a different role. Family system theory views the family as the primary context of a relationship in which personality traits of individuals and ensuing behaviours are internalized and reinforced. It emphasizes "*paying attention to the sequence of interaction between the family members: who is doing what to whom, where, when, and in what way is it a problem*". (Johnson and Ray, 2016:783: Priest, 2021). Based on this proposition, it is important to explain the role of different family members in the process of spouse selection to form a family of procreation. Different family members and other traditional-legal institutions influence the spouse selection process.

A decision for permanent togetherness involves both opportunities and risks. Social exchange theory begins with the fundamental proposition that social behaviours are produced in an exchange process where individuals are ready to give up something individual (time, freedom, money) to gain something social in exchange (services, goods, love). It is a potential mechanism for maximizing social gains and minimising individual costs. The relationship will be abandoned or terminated when the risks exceed the rewards. (Cook & Rice, 2006). The spouse selection process is also understood as an event of social exchange in which the spouses give up their freedom to select the spouse in return for love, respect, and services. The intervention of other stakeholders of the family and tribe in the spouse selection process is viewed as a case of social exchange.

Keeping the spouses in the dominant position of deciding to select a mate of their choice, filter theory asserts that the spouse selection process is understood in three sequential stages of filtering in an open field of potential spouses. (Kerckhoff and Davis 1962) The similarity in social attributes (social class, religion, education) is the first filtering factor that narrows down the potential pool of mates. Dissimilarity in these attributes results in the filtering out of potential mates. At this point, value consensus or commonality in attitudes and values is employed as the filtering factor of spouse selection to screen possible spouses. Finally, complementarity traits include compatibility, behavioural pattern, and interpersonal approach. This theory is the best fit to explain the sequence of decisions made during the spouse selection process.

Like all parts of the world, individuals and families have different and specific criteria for spouse selection. They also filter in and out certain potential spouses in different decision-making stages. Family, traditions, caste, and religion significantly influence spouse selection. Hamid et

²² Traditional dispute settlement institution.

al. (2011) maintain that the traditional cultures of Pakistan do not encourage spouses to select their spouses independently. Compared to the Western countries, filters, choices, and exchanges during the process of spouse selection are different in Pakistan. Bagri is a nomadic tribe that takes on different localities in Pakistan and are scheduled castes in Pakistan. The decision-making process of spouse selection among the member of the Bagri tribe will be understood in terms of the aforementioned theoretical constructs and approaches to understand their applicability in the tribal and nomadic tribes of Sindh and Balochistan.

3. Research Methodology

This is qualitative research which is exploratory in nature. The primary data were collected through in-depth interviews with 15 respondents from married members of the Bagri tribe in Balochistan and Sindh provinces of Pakistan. The secondary data were extracted from different journals and books. The universe of this study was initially decided to be confined to the Nawabshah region of the Sindh province of Pakistan. Nevertheless, with the knowledge about seasonal migration of some of the households of the Bagri Tribe, the research universe was expanded with the addition of the Quetta region of the Balochistan province of Pakistan. Half of the in-depth interviews were conducted in Quetta, Balochistan, while half were conducted in the Nawabshah region of Sindh province of Pakistan.

Since the population was dispersed in different regions of Pakistan, a stratified sampling technique was used, and the units of analysis were divided into two diverse strata in accordance with the contextual, geographical affiliation. Based on the assumption that the members of the Bagri Tribe can better explain the phenomenon of marriage patterns, individuals belonging to the Bagri Tribe were recruited as the potential units of analysis through the purposive sampling technique.

An interview schedule was used for the purpose of data collection. Data were collected through face-to-face interaction with the respondents at their convenience. The mobile phone was used to record the respondents' voices, for which permission from respondents was sought. A thematic analysis approach was adopted to analyze the data at hand.

The respondents were taken on board after being assured that their disseminated information would not be used for purposes other than the research before starting interviews. None of the respondents was physically, psychologically or economically abused, and all were recruited voluntarily. The consent of each of the respondents was taken before conducting in-depth interviews.

4. Results

4.1. Spouse Selection Process

The spouse selection process, among Bagris, refers to negotiations between spouses and their parents, between the parents of both spouses and between the parents and *panchayat*. In these negotiations, spouse selection is discussed, and a strategy is planned for the entire marriage process if approved. The process of spouse selection often begins with the parents of both male and female spouses. Nevertheless, spouses also initiate the process by expressing their desire for mate selection. The interesting fact about the process of spouse selection among the members of the Bagri Tribe is the role of *panchayat* that, in some cases, dominates the decisions of both spouses and their parents.

4.1.1. Role of Spouses

When it decides spouse selection, the spouses have a lighter role. The parents have a greater role in the process of spouse selection, but the *panchayat* has the supreme say in the decision-making process about spouse selection. While interviewing a respondent about the role of spouses in the decision-making process of spouse selection, a respondent aged 23 spoke about the role of the male spouse in the decision-making process of spouse selection and said, *"The male spouse discusses his likeness of a girl to his parents and, if approved, his parents decide a day to take the proposal to the parents of the female spouse."*

The agency of the male spouse in the Bagri tribe rests not in the decision-making process of spouse selection but only in the proposal of spouse selection. It represents a greater authority

on the part of parents in the process of spouse selection. Both male and female children are discouraged and socialized not to choose their spouses independently. The role of spouses in decision-making varies in line with gender. In most cases, female spouses are not even asked verbally before marrying them off. Concerning the role of the female spouse in the decision-making process of spouse selection, a man with two married daughters said: *"There is no need to ask the girl about the spouse selection; her parents are more intelligent than herself."* It is a prime example of a proposition of social conflict theory that women are considered less intellectual than men in many decisions taken by spouses.

However, one of the respondents stated otherwise. A Bagri shopkeeper in the Bagri community of Nawabshah appointed that both spouses' consent is verbally required after the parents have agreed upon it. He said,

"Both the spouses have a lighter say in the decision-making process of spouse selection."

Most respondents in this course believed that the male spouse has a lighter say in the decision-making process of spouse selection. A respondent, while replying to a question about what decisions the spouses make in the decision-making process of spouse selection, humorously stated.

"The spouses only decide what to wear in their wedding ceremonies."

It represents institutional superiority over the agency of spouses in the decision-making process of spouse selection. It can be said that marriage as an institution in the Bagri tribe awards certain roles and authorities to different family members in forming a family of procreation, in this case, parents.

4.1.2. Role of Parents

On the other hand, parents have a significant role in the decision-making process of spouse selection for their siblings. Parents' decisions are more binding on the siblings in almost every aspect of their life, including the spouse selection. With the expression of a proposal from the male spouse, the process of spouse selection begins with the beginning of a series of negotiations between the families of the groom and bride. This series usually involves delegations from the family of a male spouse to the female's family at their home or some other place of convenience. While discussing parents' role in the decision-making process of spouse selection, a married respondent confessed.

"I had no say in the decision-making process of spouse selection, and my spouse was selected by the parents whom I accepted as the will of God."

Emphasizing the other way around, a respondent said that the parents more often select the spouse suggested by the male spouse than the spouse suggested by some other person. He also explained that since marriage is not a relation between two individuals but families, the parents' decision is final at the household level and the panchayat's decision at the community level. In the same course, another respondent reiterated that the parents' decision is binding on the spouses since the relationship is an alliance between two families. Almost all the responses were found to more or less the same authority of the parents of the bride and the groom in the decision of the spouse selection at the household level. Parent involvement in the decision-making process of spouse selection is common in many other South Asian cultures. For example, Rehan and Kanwal (2017) also said that the spouses' parents decide the terms and conditions of the social exchange of marriage. Similarly, Jeejeebhoy and Haali (2005) discussed the terms of spouse selection negotiated during the process of spouse selection between the parents of both spouses in India.

4.1.3. Role of Panchayat

When both the families of the bride and the groom accept the relationship, they refer it to the panchayat, where the final decision about the spouse selection is made in front of the *panchayat* and other guests. In most cases, the *panchayat* is consulted before the final approval by the parents of spouses in their own domain, but in some cases, they approve it themselves and then bring it to the *panchayat*. A respondent who has been married for two decades stated

that the *panchayat* is the tribal justice system that decides inter-family disputes and serves as the final say in spouse selection. While narrating the role of *panchayat* in the decision-making process of spouse selection, a respondent said,

When it comes to the final decision about spouse selection, the bride and groom's family calls on panchayat. Along with the member's panchayat, other guests come to this occasion. The members of the panchayat ask the bride and groom's parents for their consent and then announce the bond to the guests and other audience.

Other cultures in Pakistan involve the institution of religion in the wedding process. Still, the involvement of the tribal justice system in the process of spouse selection was a unique finding. During the discussion about the possibility of a rejection of the relationship by *the panchayat* even though both the spouses and their parents approve it, the researcher asked what would happen then. The respondent abruptly said in complete confidence,

"The relationship is over."

The response and the way of stating it declared that the *panchayat* is the supreme body of the *panchayat*. Certain other respondents were of the similar view that the role of *panchayat* is supreme in most of the decisions in the community, beginning from marriage proposals to murder cases etc. Thus, it was concluded that the community's representative body is the sole decision-maker in most community issues.

4.2. Rituals in Spouse Selection

Certain rituals and symbolic gestures performed during spouse selection have deep-rooted cultural meanings. A series of social exchanges and nomination rituals are carried out to mark the finalization of the negotiation and approval of the relationship. While sharing his views about the process of making a marriage proposal to the bride's family, a respondent explained,

"The parents of the male spouse visit the parents of the female spouse and discuss the proposal in a cultural setting called hawal."

Hawal is a cultural setting in the Bagri in which both the parents, despite knowing about the agenda of the visit, provide a space for the groom's family to share the purpose of their visit. Starting with some cultural salutations and gratitude, the parents explicitly state they are seeking the hand of the specific girl for the specific boy by calling their name and parentage in front of each other. Usually, the groom's family is received with a feast and cultural salutations. It is customary that the proposal is never agreed upon in the first meeting, revealed by a respondent, and is responded to with the request of some time for consulting relatives. It takes at least three to four consistent meetings to decide. These meetings involve negotiations about different criteria and concessions, informally informing a respondent. Nevertheless, when the marriage proposal is accepted, a systematic process of rituals takes place that not only manifests the cultural practices of the Bagri tribe but also contains several symbolic representations of rituals.

4.2.1. Shagun and bracelet

The first ritual after the acceptance of the marriage proposal is giving some monetary gifts to the bride, known as *Shagun ka Sikka* which symbolizes the approval of mate selection in the social sphere. Its acceptance by the girl is marked as the beginning of a series of rituals at different times to form a family of procreation. The ritual of Shagun follows in the wake of acceptance of the marriage proposal on the part of both the bride and groom's families. While replying to the question of the researcher about Shagun, a respondent said

It is the amount given to the bride to celebrate the acceptance of the proposal. The amount given in Shagun varies from family to family based on economic background. Along with the amount given to the bride as Shagun, many presents are also presented to the bride.

Other than Shagun, the bride is also offered a bracelet that symbolizes the approval of the proposal and confirmation of engagement. The bracelet has a symbolic meaning as the mark

of being engaged. The girl who wears the bracelet has approved the marriage proposal in her hand. A newly engaged respondent told the researcher about the significance of the bracelet worn by the bride, stating.

"The bride is offered a bracelet to wear as a mark of being engaged that she has to wear until the day of her marriage. It is taken off only when the marriage takes place."

Wearing a bracelet represents the status of being engaged on the part of the girls, whereas no such mark is specified for the finance. Based on the views of the respondents, it is understandable that the course of marriage patterns consists of numerous rituals that are performed by the community in the course of getting the spouses married to one another; the different roles and responsibilities denote the cultural integration of the Bagri tribe due to the institution of marriage.

4.2.2. Engagement

A systematic set of rituals follows this course called *mangni* (engagement). It is basically considered a social announcement of the acceptance of the marriage proposal. Guests, relatives, friends, and *panchayat* participate in this engagement ceremony. The guests are offered a feast, which depends on the economic conditions of the families of male and female spouses. Once the guests are traditionally served the feast, a panchayat member announces the final approval of the bride and groom relationship. This decision is marked by the distribution of sweets among the guests. And after a certain amount of time, marriage takes place. Contrarily, engagement is considered null and void if the Panchayat rejects the proposal on any ground. The spouses' parents have to respect the decision of the tribal council.

The time period between the engagement and marriage is optional and depends on the preparation of dowry and other miscellaneous chore among Bagri nomads.

In some cases, it was noted that the male spouse serves at the house to the bride for a limited time to present his moral ethos to the bride's family for a certain amount of time. The male spouse stays with the bride's family, takes part in cultural and religious rituals, and offers a helping hand to the bride's family in the domestic chores and economic earnings. It can be understood as a systematic examination of the male spouse by the parents before the wedding. His services are culturally required and depend on his likelihood of getting married. Crossing this phase leads to taking the place of marriage.

4.2.3. Wedding Rituals

The course of the wedding takes place in a sequential series of rituals marking different stages of the wedding. Each ritual has a deep, culturally relative meaning that marks the positive role of marriage institutions in the social integration of the members of Bagri. Generally discussing the meaning of marriage rituals, an aged man of the Bagri community in Quetta said it reminds them of their social identity history and social integration. He further added that marriage is celebrated as a festival in the face of harsh socioeconomic and geographic issues that we are facing.

The wedding starts with the ritual of *wanna* that continues for six days before the wedding. It is a cultural ritual in which the bride and groom are culturally sanctioned and verbally told to avoid moving out of the house, eating anything from a stranger's hand, and receiving the guests who appear for the wedding. This cultural ritual is celebrated for 6 days with drums, cultural dances, and occasional feasts. The members of two families, friends, and relatives apply *haldi* turmeric paste on the bride and groom's bodies. It is believed that this ritual is practised to continue the tradition that *haldi* was historically used as a cosmetic for the bride and groom. After spending the period of *wanna*, the bride and groom are adorned with cultural clothes and socially celebrated for joining the noble institution of the family with a feast and henna rituals that end the day with a *gohr* (a ritual that takes place after *henna* celebration in which the hosts, family members, and friends of the spouses are collectively called to manifest affiliation by giving an amount in the name of spouse.) The money collected during the *gohr* is usually given to the bride's mother as a token of appreciation for her vast-hearted decision to marry her daughter off.

The last rituals of the marriage are both culturally and religiously celebrated. A Hindu Scholar, *Pandit*, is usually present on the last day of marriage to perform the religious duty of marrying the bride and groom. According to Bagri, Spouses are selected in the heavens, and the seven vows bind them in a sacred bond for the seven lives.

The authority of the couple to make decisions as the nuclear family is recognized and culturally marked. Their decision to adopt any form of locality is completely their own. Interestingly, the division of labour in the procreation family is less gendered than in other communities in the study universe. The wife and husband both have to share the expenses of the household. The wife and husband work together or in separate workplaces and share the household chores. The decision-making in the process of spouse selection was minimally with the spouses and maximally with the institution of family and culture.

Conclusion

Three tiers of stakeholders influence the process of spouse selection among the members of the Bagri tribe. The spouses themselves play a lighter role in the course of spouse selection. However, the male spouse has a greater say than the female spouse. The gender of the respondent has some conferred benefits in the course of spouse selection. Women's decision is less binding than the decision of man, as argued in the social conflict theory. Furthermore, parents of the male and female spouses also enjoy a systematic influence in the course of decision-making, which reflects the proposition of the family system theory that the family is a web of relationships in which each member influences the decision of the spouse selection (Johnson and Ray, 2016). As confessed by one of the respondents, parents sometimes decide on the spouse selection without consulting either male or female spouses. Marriage, among the members of the Bagri Tribe, is considered a union of two families; hence the consent and approval of parents is deemed necessary. Besides, the role of the *Panchayat* is also systematic and more influential than that of parents and spouses. It reflects the propositions in the social exchange conception (Cook and Rice 2006). Several respondents agreed that the approval of *Panchayat* is more important for tying the knot than that of spouses and parents together.

While making a comparative analysis of the existing literature and the empirical evidence derived from the in-depth interviews, a number of commonalities and differences were found in the marriage patterns of the Bagri Tribe and the patterns in other communities of the world cited in the literature. Endogamy is a common factor in the marriage rituals of the Zeopotec-speaking community of the Oaxaca Valley, South Mexico, as investigated by (Little and Malina 2010) and the Bagri tribe. On the other hand, both Bagri Tribe and Zeopotec-speaking community deem marriage with a first cousin incest. In the Zeopotec community, unlike the Bagri tribe, the family of procreation is located by kinship and is not the couple's decision. In contrast, the couple in Bagri Tribe is free to settle anywhere. Marriage with a first cousin, contrary to the Bagri Tribe, is a common practice in the marriage patterns in South Punjab (Rehan and Kanwal 2017). The practices of *Watta Satta* are very common in Balochistan, Sindh and South Punjab, which is a differentiating factor to that of Bagri tribe marriage patterns. The Bagri tribe practices the dowry ritual, an example of the complementary needs of social exchange.

The flow of authority in the decision-making process of the Bagri tribe is top-down. The screening of filtering potential fields of spouses begins with male spouses in some cases and parents in most cases but is often finally decided in the tribal justice system known as *Panchayat*. The flow of decision in this direction is a unique example of institutional authority in the decision-making process of spouse selection. As justified by some interviewees, their identity as the Hindu minority leaves them vulnerable to certain cases of forced marriages which are dealt with institutionally by deciding the marriage choices in an institutional sphere.

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