



Psychosocial experiences and identity negotiation in mixed marriages within selected churches in Rongai, Kajiado County, Kenya

Esther Omwamba * and Joyzy Pius Egunjobi

Catholic University of Eastern Africa, Nairobi, Kenya.

International Journal of Science and Research Archive, 2026, 19(02), 1253-1263

Publication history: Received on 05 April 2026; revised on 16 May 2026; accepted on 19 May 2026

Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30574/ijrsra.2026.19.2.1090>

Abstract

Mixed marriages are increasingly common in contexts marked by cultural and religious diversity, yet they present unique psychosocial and relational challenges. This study examined how couples in mixed marriages within two selected churches in Rongai, Kajiado County, Kenya negotiate cultural, religious, and social differences in their marital relationships. Guided by Identity Negotiation Theory and Family Systems Theory, the study adopted a phenomenological qualitative design, utilizing in-depth interviews with 12 participants in mixed marriages who were purposely selected for the study. The findings revealed that couples actively construct a shared “third culture” through blending and adaptation, while relying on communication, negotiation, and boundary-setting as key relational strategies. However, these processes are shaped by significant external influences, including extended family interference, religious expectations, and societal pressures. The study further revealed a complex interplay of psychosocial outcomes, with participants navigating distress manifested through stress, exclusion, and identity tensions, alongside resilience expressed in relational growth, empathy, and social cohesion. Support systems, especially those provided by churches, peer networks, and counselling services, are instrumental in mediating these outcomes. This study contributes to existing literature by providing context-specific insights into mixed marriages in Kenya and highlights the need for culturally responsive interventions to support couples navigating complex relational dynamics.

Keywords: Mixed-marriage; Psychosocial experiences; Identity negotiation; Family systems

1. Introduction

Marriage is an important social institution recognized across different cultures, and it is relied on for social reproduction, structuring of kinship, and the maintenance of moral order (Baloyi, 2022). Madondo et al. (2025) further state that with the current globalization and cultural pluralism in the modern era, marriages have become a site where cultural, social, and religious boundaries intersect and are renegotiated. This intersection and renegotiation of boundaries often takes place in mixed marriages, which are conceptualized as unions between partners from different ethnic, cultural, social, and religious backgrounds. Mixed marriages have drawn the attention of scholars because of their implications for social cohesion, identity formation, and psychological wellbeing (Seshadri & Gutierrez, 2024). Kenya like many other countries faces contemporary globalization and urbanization processes, which means that there is an intensification of intergroup contact, leading to a meaningful increase in intercultural and interfaith marriages. Such marriages are not merely romantic in nature, they could also be seen from a social phenomenon lens where all parties involved must reconcile divergent worldviews and practices, undergo psychosocial adjustment, and undergo a continuous process of identity negotiation (Arandil, 2023).

The psychosocial experiences of couples within a mixed-marriage are multifaceted, encompassing identity construction, emotional wellbeing, social acceptance, relational satisfaction, and stress negotiation. These experiences involve an interplay between internal relationship dynamics and external social pressures. Couples within such contexts deal with

* Corresponding author: Esther Omwamba

reconciling disparate communication styles, conflicting child-rearing philosophies, and different gender role expectations, all of which are rooted in their different primary cultural socializations (Singla & Holm, 2012). Also, the external community and social network surrounding the couples, including their extended families, and social or religious communities can either provide essential support or significant stress (Sala & Celik, 2021). In many African and Kenyan communities, extended families play influential roles, and therefore the introduction of marriage partners from different tribes can cause anxiety regarding cultural preservation and family heritage. Also, religious differences among married couples have emerged as one of those predictors of relational strain in mixed-marriages.

A study by Ashadi et al. (2025) indicated that couples in interfaith marriages frequently report facing challenges such as child religious socialization, ritual participation, communal belonging, and extended family expectations. Studies also indicate that although there might be challenges, these couples also experience resilience by incorporating strategies such as boundary flexibility, dialogical engagement, selective ritual integration, and the development of shared moral frameworks (Cate, 2025). Identity negotiation among these couples becomes the central strategy through which they manage their differences. This means that each individual within the marriage strives to maintain and preserve some aspects of their ethnic pride or religious convictions, while trying to create a shared hybrid marital identity with their spouse. During this navigation process, which is rarely linear, both parties fluctuate between feeling secure in the newly created shared identity and feeling insecure when they feel that their primary identity is being marginalized or overpowered by that of their spouse (Dixit & Kujur, 2024).

Building a shared moral framework that helps sustain mixed-marriages depends on communication competence and negotiating meaning. This, by extension, implies that couples in mixed-marriages require sustained dialogical processes in order to constructively manage their differences. The outcome of this is that while couples in this context might experience internal or external pressure, they are also more likely to develop expanded cultural empathy and relational maturity (Seshadri & Gutierrez, 2024). These mixed-marriage phenomena is highly expected in a setting like Rongai, which is regarded as a cosmopolitan hub for people of different ethnic backgrounds in Kenya who work within the wider Nairobi metropolitan area. The close proximity of Rongai to Nairobi city makes it a fast-developing urban area, and this urbanization has promoted ethnic plurality, including Maasai, Kikuyu, Luo, Luhya, Kalenjin, and others. Also, the population is affiliated with various Christian denominations such as Catholics, Anglicans, Pentecostals, Seventh-day Adventists, and independent churches. This cultural and religious diversity makes Rongai a fertile ground for interethnic and interfaith marriages.

While global literature (e.g. Ashadi et al., 2025; Sala & Celik, 2021) demonstrates the central role of identity negotiation and psychosocial adaptation in mixed-marriages, there are insufficient localized studies, especially in Rongai, which examine how these dynamics unfold among couples in mixed-marriages. Without such empirical findings, counselling programs and pastoral interventions targeted at couples within this setting remain generalized and lack contextual specificity. Hence, this study seeks to fill this gap by examining how couples in mixed-marriages in Rongai, Kajiado County negotiate cultural, religious, and social differences in their marriages, and how such negotiations shape their psychosocial experiences and identity construction.

1.1. Theoretical framework

This study's theoretical foundation draws upon Identity Negotiation Theory (INT) and Family Systems Theory (FST). INT, formulated by Ting-Toomey, elucidates the ways individuals in intercultural settings navigate multiple facets of identity, such as ethnic, cultural, religious, and relational, through communicative processes (Ting-Toomey, 2017). According to this perspective, identity is regarded as malleable and subject to continuous negotiation as individuals seek inclusion, validation, and a sense of security. Within mixed marriages, couples face the challenge of preserving their distinct identities while concurrently developing a collective marital identity. This endeavor is a non-linear undertaking characterized by fluctuating feelings of security or insecurity, contingent upon whether their identities are acknowledged or marginalized (Ting-Toomey & Dorjee, 2018). Empirical evidence indicates that identity negotiation transpires across both micro-level interactions (e.g., everyday communication and shared rituals) and macro-level structures (e.g., religious doctrines and societal expectations) (No et al., 2011). Consequently, INT offers a valuable framework for examining the psychosocial experiences of individuals in Kenyan church-based mixed marriages.

FST enhances INT by placing marital identity within the context of wider family and social structures. Drawing from Bowen's theory, the family is conceptualized as an interdependent emotional unit wherein each member's actions reverberate throughout the entire system (Bowen, 1987). Consequently, marriages are situated within broader kinship and community frameworks that profoundly influence role definitions, boundary establishment, and decision-making processes. In African settings, such as Kenya, ethnicity, religious affiliations, and kinship ties exert significant influence on marital satisfaction and relational dynamics (Chomba et al., 2023), with indigenous marital customs acting as

guardians of social cohesion (Baloyi, 2022). As a result, couples frequently depend on extended familial support, communal norms, and pastoral guidance to navigate relational conflicts. Thus, while INT elucidates the negotiation of interpersonal identity, FST underscores systemic and relational pressures, jointly providing a robust analytical framework for examining mixed marriages in Rongai, Kajiado County.

1.2. Objective of the study

The objective of this study is to explore how couples in mixed marriages negotiate cultural, religious, and social differences within their marital relationships in selected churches in Rongai, Kajiado County.

2. Methodology of the study

This study adopted a phenomenological qualitative design to examine the lived experiences and identity negotiation of couples in mixed marriages, an approach well suited to exploring how individuals construct meaning from personal experiences (Bugental, 2013). By emphasizing in-depth inquiry, the methodology foregrounded participants’ perspectives on managing cultural, religious, and social differences.

The research was conducted in two purposively selected churches in Rongai, Kajiado County, Kenya, an area characterized by religious diversity and rapid urbanization (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics [KNBS], 2019; Kajiado County Integrated Development Plan, 2023). Selection criteria included congregational diversity, active marital and family programs, and willingness to participate. A sample of 12 participants (6 couples) was used, consistent with qualitative research guidelines for achieving thematic saturation (Guest et al., 2020).

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, audio-recorded with informed consent, and transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke’s (2006) framework to identify key patterns. Ethical standards were strictly observed, including voluntary participation, confidentiality, and sensitivity to participants’ emotional well-being.

3. Findings

3.1. Demographic Characteristics

The table outlines the demographic features of the study's participants, with particular emphasis on gender and age distribution. This information aids in evaluating the diversity, representativeness, and relevance of the participants in relation to the research.

Table 1 Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Respondent	Gender	Age
Respondent 1	Female	34
Respondent 2	Male	30
Respondent 3	Male	33
Respondent 4	Female	28
Respondent 5	Female	30
Respondent 6	Male	27
Respondent 7	Female	32
Respondent 8	Female	29
Respondent 9	Male	33
Respondent 10	Female	27
Respondent 11	Male	34
Respondent 12	Male	35

The sample comprises 12 participants, featuring a gender distribution that is relatively even, with 6 men and 6 women. This equitable representation strengthens the credibility of the results by ensuring both genders contribute equally to the findings. It is also important to note that all participants were independent respondents and not married to one another, allowing for a broader range of individual experiences and perspectives. Regarding age, the participants span from 27 to 35 years, indicating a cohort primarily composed of young adults. The majority of the sample falls within the early 30s age bracket, which could suggest shared life circumstances, particularly concerning marriage and family structures. Collectively, the demographic characteristics point to a balanced but somewhat homogeneous group, which is appropriate for examining detailed psychosocial experiences while preserving uniformity among the participants.

3.2. Emerging Themes

The analysis of the participants narratives revealed several interconnected themes which captured the lived experiences of couples in mixed marriages. Eight major themes were extracted, and they include the construction of a third culture, communication and negotiation as central relational tools, pervasive influence of extended family systems, religious negotiation and spiritual compromise, social pressure, stigma, and cultural expectations, the role of social support and mediation, psychosocial distress and resilience, and gender role negotiation. These themes illustrate how couples continuously negotiate identity, belonging, and relational stability in the midst of complex religious, cultural, and social contexts. This section explores these eight themes in line with the voices of the participants.

3.3. Construction of a “Third Culture” through Blending and Adaptation

A dominant theme emerging from participants’ narratives is the intentional construction of a shared hybrid identity, often described as a “third culture,” in which elements from both partners’ cultural and religious backgrounds are selectively blended to form a new family system. This process reflects a deliberate and ongoing negotiation of difference, where couples actively move beyond rigid cultural boundaries to establish a unified sense of belonging.

Several participants articulated this blending as a conscious strategy for fostering cohesion within the marriage. For instance, one respondent noted, *“We have created a unique family culture by blending traditions from both backgrounds”* (Respondent 2), while another similarly observed, *“We create a unique family culture by blending traditions from both backgrounds”* (Respondent 4). These accounts suggest that cultural integration is not incidental but is actively constructed through everyday practices and shared decision-making. In this sense, the “third culture” becomes a negotiated space where differences are not erased but reinterpreted in ways that sustain relational harmony.

For some participants, this process was experienced as inevitable rather than optional. As one respondent explained, *“We have no choice but have a unique family culture made by blending traditions”* (Respondent 7). This highlights the structural reality of mixed marriages, where partners must reconcile differing backgrounds in order to coexist. The creation of a hybrid culture, therefore, emerges as both a pragmatic response to difference and a relational necessity.

Beyond cultural practices, this blending also extends to social roles and everyday life patterns. One participant described *“coming up with a unique style in life... no gender role restriction”* (Respondent 10), indicating that the construction of a third culture may also involve renegotiating traditional norms such as gender roles. This reflects a broader reconfiguration of identity, where couples redefine not only cultural belonging but also relational expectations within the marriage.

Importantly, participants often framed this hybrid identity in positive terms, emphasizing its enriching and resilience-building qualities. As one respondent stated, *“We have a ‘unique blended culture’... richer and more resilient”* (Respondent 12). This perspective suggests that, despite the challenges associated with cultural and religious differences, the process of blending can produce a stronger and more adaptive marital unit.

Taken together, these findings illustrate that the construction of a “third culture” is central to how couples in mixed marriages navigate difference. It represents a dynamic form of identity negotiation in which partners co-create a shared “we-ness” that transcends individual cultural affiliations. Rather than choosing one culture over another, couples integrate aspects of both, resulting in a fluid and context-specific identity that supports both relational stability and psychosocial wellbeing.

3.4. Communication, Negotiation, and Relational Strategies

Communication emerged as a central mechanism through which couples in mixed marriages navigate cultural, religious, and social differences. Participants consistently emphasized the role of open dialogue, mutual respect, and intentional negotiation in sustaining their relationships. For instance, one respondent noted that *“open dialogue... helps prevent*

conflicts" (Respondent 5), underscoring the preventive function of communication in managing potential tensions. Similarly, others highlighted the importance of *"open negotiation and mutual respect"* (Respondent 4; Respondent 7), suggesting that successful relationships are built on continuous, reciprocal engagement rather than unilateral decision-making.

Beyond general communication, participants described specific relational strategies that facilitate understanding and conflict resolution. Practices such as *"active listening and empathy... validating perspectives"* (Respondent 5) were identified as essential in acknowledging and respecting each partner's background. Additionally, some couples established clear communication boundaries, as reflected in the statement, *"defining acceptable behavior... no shouting or involving family"* (Respondent 6). Such structured approaches indicate a conscious effort to regulate conflict and protect the integrity of the marital relationship from external interference. The use of reflective techniques such as *"I statement communication"* (Respondent 1; Respondent 3) further demonstrates an awareness of constructive communication methods that reduce blame and foster mutual understanding.

However, the findings also reveal that not all couples possess or effectively utilize these communication strategies. One participant candidly admitted, *"we are having no communication strategies so far"* (Respondent 3), pointing to gaps in relational skills that may exacerbate conflict and misunderstanding. This absence of structured communication reflects a more strained negotiation process, where differences remain unresolved or are managed ineffectively. Such experiences highlight the uneven distribution of relational competencies among couples and suggest that communication skills are often learned rather than inherent.

Overall, these findings indicate that communication functions as both a resource and a potential vulnerability in mixed marriages. While effective communication strategies enable couples to manage differences constructively, their absence can lead to relational strain. The variation observed across participants highlights the importance of communication as a dynamic and learned process, central to the successful negotiation of identity and difference within mixed marital relationships.

3.5. Influence and Interference of Extended Family Systems

The findings reveal that extended family systems constitute one of the most powerful structural influences shaping the experiences of couples in mixed marriages. Participants consistently described how their relationships are embedded within broader kinship networks that exert expectations, control, and, in some cases, resistance. For many, this influence manifests a direct interference in marital dynamics. One respondent expressed a sense of subjugation, stating, *"I take orders from his siblings and parents as if I am a servant"* (Respondent 1), while another reported feelings of exclusion, noting, *"they see me as an intruder"* (Respondent 4). These accounts highlight how acceptance within the extended family is not guaranteed, particularly when cultural or ethnic differences are perceived as threatening.

In several cases, extended family members actively contested the legitimacy or stability of the marriage. One participant observed that *"her family... do not agree with our nuclear family decisions"* (Respondent 2), pointing to tensions around autonomy and decision-making. Similarly, another respondent shared, *"my siblings and parents want this relationship to end"* (Respondent 3), indicating outright rejection of the union. Such resistance was sometimes framed in terms of cultural preservation, as illustrated by the claim that *"his family... view the marriage as a threat to lineage"* (Respondent 7). These narratives suggest that mixed marriages are often evaluated not only at the individual level but also in terms of their perceived implications for family identity, continuity, and social order.

Despite these pressures, some couples demonstrated agency by actively negotiating the boundaries of extended family involvement. For example, one participant noted, *"we have set boundaries regarding in-laws' involvement"* (Respondent 2), while another emphasized, *"we have established clear boundaries with extended families"* (Respondent 12). These strategies reflect deliberate efforts to protect the autonomy of the nuclear family and to manage external influence in ways that support marital stability. Boundary-setting thus emerges as a critical coping mechanism, enabling couples to balance respect for kinship ties with the need for relational independence.

Overall, this theme highlights the systemic nature of mixed marriages, where the couple's relationship cannot be understood in isolation from the wider family context. The findings strongly align with Family Systems Theory, which posits that individual relationships are embedded within interconnected social units. In the context of Rongai, extended families function as both sources of pressure and potential support, shaping how couples negotiate identity, authority, and belonging within their marriages.

3.6. Religious Negotiation and Spiritual Compromise

Religious difference emerged as a central domain of negotiation within mixed marriages, requiring continuous adaptation, compromise, and, in some cases, personal sacrifice. Participants described a range of strategies used to manage divergent beliefs and practices, reflecting varying degrees of flexibility and accommodation. For some, this involved full alignment with a partner's faith tradition, as illustrated by the statement, *"I moved from my church to join his church"* (Respondent 1). Similarly, another participant shared, *"I learnt catechism... and joined her Catholic church"* (Respondent 11), suggesting that conversion or religious assimilation may be adopted as a means of fostering unity within the marriage. These experiences highlight the extent to which religion can shape not only spiritual life but also relational cohesion.

Other participants adopted more integrative approaches that allowed for the coexistence of differing religious identities. For example, one respondent explained, *"we maintain individual prayer routines"* (Respondent 2), while others described a system of *"parallel practice... maintaining own religious habits"* (Respondent 3; Respondent 10). Such arrangements reflect a negotiated balance between unity and individuality, where partners respect each other's beliefs without necessarily relinquishing their own. This form of accommodation underscores the fluidity of religious identity within mixed marriages and the role of mutual tolerance in sustaining relational stability.

Despite these adaptive strategies, the findings also reveal that religious differences can generate significant tension and conflict, particularly when external pressures are involved. One participant recounted, *"they assign me duties... so that I don't go to church"* (Respondent 8), indicating how family interference can restrict religious expression and intensify marital strain. Another expressed internal psychological conflict, stating, *"I feel internal conflict and guilt for violating religious norms"* (Respondent 4). These accounts point to the deeply personal nature of religious identity and the emotional burden that may arise when individuals feel compelled to compromise their beliefs.

The negotiation of children's religious identity emerged as a particularly sensitive and contested issue. Participants noted that children often become the focal point of unresolved religious differences, with one respondent observing that *"children feel caught between two faiths"* (Respondent 4; Respondent 6). This highlights the intergenerational dimension of religious negotiation, where decisions about upbringing carry both symbolic and practical implications for family unity. Overall, the findings indicate that religious negotiation in mixed marriages is an ongoing, multifaceted process, shaped by personal convictions, relational dynamics, and external influences.

3.7. Social Pressure, Stigma, and Cultural Expectations

The findings indicate that couples in mixed marriages operate within a broader social environment characterized by significant pressure, stigma, and culturally prescribed expectations. Participants frequently described experiences of stereotyping and social exclusion rooted in ethnic and cultural differences. For instance, one respondent reported, *"they say people from my ethnic group are witches"* (Respondent 1), revealing how deeply entrenched beliefs and prejudices can shape interpersonal and familial interactions. Such stigmatizing narratives not only affect how individuals are perceived but also influence their sense of belonging within both the marital and community context.

In response to anticipated or experienced stigma, some couples adopt avoidance strategies to shield their relationships from negative social scrutiny. One participant noted, *"we started going to a church far from home for fear of stigma"* (Respondent 12), highlighting how social pressure can extend into religious spaces that would otherwise serve as sources of support. Similarly, another respondent referenced a pervasive *"fear of shame or disrepute from the community"* (Respondent 4), suggesting that societal perceptions can exert a powerful influence on how couples present and manage their relationships. These experiences point to the broader social risks associated with mixed marriages, where deviation from cultural norms may attract judgment or marginalization.

Beyond stigma, participants also identified specific societal expectations that exert pressure on their marital lives, particularly in relation to reproduction and family continuity. The expectation to bear children emerged as a recurrent concern, with participants noting *"pressure to have children"* (Respondent 8; Respondent 5). This reflects the cultural centrality of parenthood within many African contexts, where marriage is often closely tied to procreation and lineage continuation. Failure to meet these expectations may invite scrutiny or reinforce negative perceptions of the union.

Cultural norms and prescriptions further shape everyday practices within these marriages, often requiring individuals to conform to unfamiliar or restrictive traditions. For example, one participant explained, *"it is a taboo to eat some parts of a chicken"* (Respondent 7), illustrating how cultural rules govern even routine aspects of daily life. In more extreme cases, acceptance within the partner's community may be conditional upon adherence to specific rites, as reflected in the statement, *"I will be accepted after circumcision"* (Respondent 8). These findings underscore the extent to which

mixed marriages are negotiated not only at the interpersonal level but also within a broader framework of cultural expectations that regulate behavior, identity, and social acceptance.

3.8. Role of Social Support and Mediation

The findings highlight the critical role of social support systems in buffering the challenges associated with mixed marriages. Participants consistently pointed to the importance of supportive individuals and networks in mitigating conflict, fostering understanding, and sustaining relational stability. In some cases, support emerged from within the extended family, albeit selectively. For instance, one respondent noted, *"only one of his uncles is trying to change their narrative"* (Respondent 1), suggesting that even isolated allies within kinship structures can play a meaningful role in countering negative perceptions and promoting acceptance.

Beyond family, friendships and peer networks were identified as key sources of emotional and practical support. One participant explained that *"mutual friends... offer advice and mediation"* (Respondent 6), indicating that friends often function as neutral intermediaries who help couples navigate tensions. These relationships provide safe spaces for expression, reflection, and problem-solving, particularly in contexts where family members may be sources of conflict rather than support. Such peer-based support underscores the importance of alternative social networks in reinforcing resilience within mixed marriages.

Religious institutions also emerged as significant sources of support, reflecting the central role of the church in participants' lives. Several respondents highlighted the value of faith-based guidance, with one noting, *"we get support from church, friends and counselling"* (Respondent 9), and another referencing *"pastoral counselling... small Christian community"* (Respondent 12). These spaces not only offer spiritual guidance but also provide structured environments for addressing marital challenges, reinforcing shared values, and fostering a sense of belonging within a broader community.

In addition to informal support systems, there is evidence of increasing reliance on professional interventions. One participant reported, *"we are engaging with a counsellor specializing in intercultural therapy"* (Respondent 2), reflecting a growing recognition of the complexity of mixed marriages and the need for specialized support. Professional counselling offers couples structured tools for communication, conflict resolution, and identity negotiation, complementing the support received from family and community networks. Overall, these findings suggest that social support and mediation are indispensable in enabling couples to navigate the multifaceted challenges of mixed marriages, enhancing both relational resilience and psychosocial wellbeing.

3.9. Psychosocial Outcomes (Distress vs Resilience)

The findings reveal that psychosocial experiences in mixed marriages are characterized by a dynamic interplay between distress and resilience, with many participants reporting the simultaneous presence of both. On one hand, participants described significant emotional and psychological strain arising from cultural conflict, social exclusion, and strained family relationships. For instance, one respondent expressed profound vulnerability, stating, *"I feel hopeless... no sense of belonging and always unsafe"* (Respondent 1). This reflects a deep disruption of emotional security and belonging, suggesting that unresolved differences and lack of acceptance can significantly undermine individual wellbeing within the marital context.

Similarly, other participants highlighted the cumulative burden of navigating competing expectations and social scrutiny. One respondent described being *"emotionally drained... socially exposed as a man"* (Respondent 3), pointing to the gendered dimensions of psychosocial stress, where societal expectations of masculinity may intensify feelings of pressure and inadequacy. Another participant noted, *"I feel stressed because my husband's people despise me"* (Respondent 8), illustrating how rejection by extended family can translate into persistent emotional distress. These accounts underscore the extent to which external relational tensions are internalized, affecting self-esteem, mental health, and overall life satisfaction.

At the same time, the presence of such distress does not necessarily indicate the absence of resilience. Rather, the data suggest that many couples continue to endure and adapt despite these challenges, drawing on various coping mechanisms identified in earlier themes, such as communication, boundary-setting, and social support. The coexistence of distress and resilience highlights the complexity of mixed marriages, where hardship and growth are often intertwined. Emotional strain becomes part of the lived experience, yet it also creates opportunities for strengthening relational bonds and developing adaptive capacities. Overall, this theme illustrates that psychosocial outcomes in mixed marriages are not linear but exist along a continuum shaped by both internal dynamics and external pressures.

3.10. Gender Roles and Power Negotiation

The findings indicate that gender roles within mixed marriages are not fixed but are actively contested, negotiated, and, in some cases, redefined. Participants described a spectrum of arrangements ranging from adherence to traditional norms to the adoption of more flexible, egalitarian systems. For some couples, role allocation is guided by practicality rather than cultural prescription. One respondent noted, *“we adopted a merit-based system”* (Respondent 2), while another explained, *“we share roles whenever need arises”* (Respondent 6). These accounts suggest a deliberate shift toward functional arrangements that prioritize efficiency and mutual support over rigid gender expectations.

However, not all experiences reflected this flexibility. In some cases, participants reported imbalances in role distribution, which could become a source of tension within the relationship. For example, one respondent stated, *“I do most of the house chores”* (Respondent 3), indicating a perceived inequity that may be influenced by differing cultural expectations or lack of negotiated agreement. At the same time, several participants affirmed the continued influence of traditional gender ideologies within their marriages. Statements such as *“I am submissive... he is the head”* (Respondent 1; Respondent 4) reflect adherence to patriarchal norms that position men as leaders and women as subordinate within the household. For these participants, such arrangements were not necessarily contested but were accepted as part of their cultural or religious framework. This suggests that, for some couples, stability is achieved through continuity with established norms rather than through renegotiation.

Overall, the findings reveal a tension between tradition and transformation in the construction of gender roles within mixed marriages. While some couples actively redefine roles to reflect contemporary values of equality and partnership, others maintain conventional structures rooted in cultural and religious beliefs. This coexistence of differing approaches underscores the complexity of gender dynamics in mixed marriages, where power, identity, and cultural expectations are continuously negotiated within the relational space.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study reinforce the conceptualization of mixed marriages as dynamic settings of identity negotiation and psychosocial adaptation within increasingly pluralistic societies. Consistent with existing literature (e.g., Arandil, 2023; Seshadri & Gutierrez, 2024), the results demonstrate that couples in Rongai actively engage in continuous processes of negotiating cultural, religious, and social differences. The emergence of a “third culture” among participants strongly aligns with Identity Negotiation Theory (INT), which posits that individuals in intercultural relationships construct shared identities to achieve relational stability and mutual validation (Ting-Toomey & Dorjee, 2018). In this study, couples did not merely choose between competing identities but instead blended elements from both backgrounds, suggesting that identity negotiation is both adaptive and creative. This supports Dixit and Kujur’s (2024) argument that identity construction in mixed marriages is fluid and oscillates between stability and tension depending on contextual factors.

Communication emerged as a central mechanism through which identity negotiation is enacted, further affirming scholarly claims that dialogical competence is critical in sustaining mixed marriages (Seshadri & Gutierrez, 2024). Participants who reported the use of open dialogue, empathy, and structured conflict resolution strategies demonstrated higher levels of relational stability, which is consistent with Cate (2025), who identifies communication as a key resilience-building tool. However, the presence of participants with limited or ineffective communication strategies highlights the uneven capacity among couples to negotiate differences constructively. This finding extends existing literature by illustrating that while communication is widely recognized as essential, it is not uniformly practiced, thereby contributing to variations in psychosocial outcomes among couples.

The study also highlights the significant role of extended family systems in shaping marital experiences, strongly supporting the assumptions of Family Systems Theory (FST). As noted in prior research (e.g., Sala & Celik, 2021; Chomba et al., 2023), marriages in African contexts are deeply embedded within kinship networks that influence decision-making, identity, and relational dynamics. The findings reveal that extended families can function both as sources of conflict and potential support, with some participants experiencing rejection, interference, and pressure related to cultural preservation and lineage continuity. This aligns with Baloyi’s (2022) assertion that marriage in African societies is not merely a private union, but a communal institution tied to broader social and moral orders. At the same time, the active boundary-setting strategies employed by some couples illustrate adaptive responses to systemic pressures, highlighting the interplay between individual agency and structural constraints.

Religious negotiation emerged as another critical dimension of mixed marriages, confirming findings by Ashadi et al. (2025) that interfaith unions often involve complex decisions regarding worship practices, ritual participation, and child

socialization. Participants in this study adopted diverse strategies, including conversion, parallel practice, and selective participation, reflecting varying degrees of compromise and flexibility. However, the data also reveal that religious differences can generate profound internal conflict and external tension, particularly when influenced by family expectations or doctrinal rigidity. The issue of children's religious identity further complicates this negotiation, as it introduces an intergenerational dimension that requires couples to reconcile deeply held beliefs while maintaining family cohesion.

The findings further highlight the pervasive influence of social pressure, stigma, and cultural expectations, which shape both the internal and external experiences of mixed marriages. Consistent with Sala and Celik (2021), participants reported that societal attitudes, stereotypes, and normative expectations (particularly regarding reproduction and gender roles) exert significant pressure on their relationships. These external forces often necessitate adaptive strategies such as avoidance, boundary-setting, and reliance on alternative support systems. At the same time, the presence of strong social support networks, including friends, church communities, and professional counsellors, highlights their protective role in enhancing resilience. This supports existing literature that emphasizes the importance of social and institutional support in mitigating stress and promoting marital stability (Cate, 2025).

Finally, the coexistence of psychosocial distress and resilience among participants highlights the complexity of mixed marriages as both challenging and potentially enriching relational contexts. While some participants reported experiences of isolation, stress, and lack of belonging, others described increased intimacy, adaptability, and personal growth. This duality aligns with broader scholarly perspectives that view mixed marriages not solely as sites of conflict but also as opportunities for developing cultural empathy and relational maturity (Seshadri & Gutierrez, 2024). When interpreted through the combined lenses of INT and FST, these findings suggest that psychosocial outcomes are shaped by both interpersonal negotiation processes and broader systemic influences. Ultimately, the study contributes to the literature by providing context-specific insights into how couples in Rongai navigate the complexities of mixed marriages, emphasizing the need for culturally grounded and systemically informed interventions.

5. Conclusion

This study set out to examine how couples in mixed marriages within selected churches in Rongai, Kajiado County negotiate cultural, religious, and social differences, and how these negotiations shape their psychosocial experiences. The findings demonstrate that mixed marriages are characterized by continuous processes of identity negotiation, where couples actively construct a shared "third culture" while maintaining aspects of their individual identities. These processes are mediated by communication practices, influenced by extended family systems, and complicated by religious differences and societal expectations. The study further reveals that psychosocial experiences within these marriages are not uniform but reflect a coexistence of distress and resilience, shaped by both internal relational dynamics and external structural pressures.

Recommendations

There is a need for context-specific marital counselling programs, particularly within churches, that address the unique challenges of mixed marriages, including cultural sensitivity, interfaith negotiation, and family boundary management. In this regard, churches and other religious institutions should develop structured premarital and marital counselling frameworks that integrate intercultural competence and effective conflict resolution strategies. Additionally, family and community sensitization initiatives are essential to reduce stigma and foster acceptance of mixed marriages, especially within extended family systems that significantly influence marital dynamics. Finally, future research should incorporate larger and more diverse samples, including longitudinal designs, to provide deeper insights into how identity negotiation processes and psychosocial outcomes evolve over time among couples in mixed marriages within Kenya.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

References

- [1] Arandil, C. (2023). Interfaith Marriages: Experiences, Well-Being, and Marital Satisfaction of Couples with Different Religions. Academia.edu.
- [2] Ashadi, A., Kohar, W., Sefriyono, Folandra, D., Aqil, M., & Zahra, A. (2025). Between locals and migrants: articulation of Islam in the lives of the Acehnese Muslim minorities on the Nias Islands. *Contemporary Islam*, 19(2), 249-274.
- [3] Baloyi, G. T. (2022). Marriage and culture within the context of African indigenous societies: A need for African cultural hermeneutics. *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae*, 48(1), 1-12.
- [4] Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative research in psychology*, 3(2), 77-101.
- [5] Bugental, J. F. (2013). Existential-phenomenological perspectives in psychology: Exploring the breadth of human experience. Springer Science & Business Media.
- [6] Cate, M. (2025). Cultural Negotiation and Identity Formation in Interfaith Marriages.
- [7] Chomba, Z. N., Kiarie, J., & Njani, E. (2023). Influence of language on marital satisfaction among couples in intercultural marriages, Kiambu County, Kenya. *International Journal of Education, Psychology and Counselling (IJEPC)*, 8(50), 87-108.
- [8] Dixit, S., & Kujur, F. F. (2024). Identity and Belonging: a Social Work Perspective on Mixed Marriages Between Adivasis and Bodos in Post-conflict Assam.
- [9] Guest, G., Namey, E., & Chen, M. (2020). A simple method to assess and report thematic saturation in qualitative research. *PloS one*, 15(5), e0232076.
- [10] Madondo, E., Dhobha, H., & Mutema, P. (2025). Challenges and transformations of traditional African marriage in the modern era. *International Journal of Research in Business and Social Science*, 14(4), 510-518.
- [11] No, S., Wan, C., Chao, M. M., Rosner, J. L., & Hong, Y. Y. (2011). Bicultural identity negotiation.
- [12] Sala, B., & Çelik, H. E. (2021). An Analysis of Interactions in Intercultural Marriages: A Field Study of Alanya. *İnsan ve Toplum*, 11(4), 137-155.
- [13] Seshadri, G., & Gutierrez, D. (2024). Interracial, intercultural, and interfaith couples and families across the life cycle. Springer.
- [14] Singla, R., & Holm, D. (2012). Intermarried couples, mental health and psychosocial well-being: Negotiating mixedness in the Danish context of 'homogeneity.' *Counselling Psychology Quarterly*, 25(2), 151-165. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09515070.2012.674687>
- [15] Ting-Toomey, S. (2017). Identity negotiation theory and mindfulness practice. In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Communication*.
- [16] Ting-Toomey, S., & Dorjee, T. (2018). *Communicating across cultures*. Guilford Publications.

Appendix

Interview Guide

Central Research Question

How do couples in mixed marriages within selected churches in Rongai, Kajiado County negotiate cultural, religious, and social differences in their marital relationships?

Sub-Questions

- How do couples in mixed marriages negotiate cultural differences (e.g., customs, gender roles, language, kinship expectations) within their daily marital interactions?
- How do couples manage religious differences (e.g., denominational practices, worship styles, doctrines, child religious socialization) within their marriage and church participation?

- What social pressures or supports (from extended family, church leaders, or community members) influence how couples negotiate differences?
- What communication strategies do couples use to resolve conflicts arising from cultural, religious, or social differences?
- How do couples construct and maintain a shared marital identity while preserving individual cultural or religious identities?
- What psychosocial outcomes (e.g., marital satisfaction, stress, belonging, resilience) emerge from the ways couples negotiate these differences?