

## **Negotiating Marriage Beyond Traditional And Modern Contexts: An Interpretative Phenomenology Analysis Of Upper-Caste Women In Ngada**

Theresia Avila Chastysima Daku  
Universitas Surabaya  
[dessydaku@gmail.com](mailto:dessydaku@gmail.com)

Jefri Setyawan\*  
Universitas Surabaya  
[jefrisetyawan@staff.ubaya.ac.id](mailto:jefrisetyawan@staff.ubaya.ac.id)

### **Abstract**

Cultural expectations for upper-caste women in Ngada society demand that they marry within their caste. This study opens a communicative space for women who have successfully negotiated traditional norms. It aims to understand how women negotiate marriage choices with their families and how social support and communication affect their decision-making processes. This qualitative study uses an interpretative phenomenological approach, employing semi-structured interviews with three upper-caste women who married men of lower-caste status. The findings show that cultural expectations to preserve social status through intra-caste marriage persist, placing pressure on women to relinquish autonomy in making marital decisions. However, open communication about personal choices and seeking family support allowed for the emergence of emotional, instrumental, and informational support that greatly helped women overcome social stigma and choose partners independently. The implications of this study underscore the importance of open family communication in supporting individual freedom in a partner.

*Keywords: Inter-Caste Marriage, Social Support, Communication, Social Stigma, Ngada Women.*

## Introduction

Indonesia is rich in ethnic, cultural, religious, and customary diversity, which varies across its regions. Ngada Regency on Flores Island, East Nusa Tenggara Province, is one region that boasts cultural richness, with its population consisting of various sub-ethnic groups such as Ngada, Soa, and Riung. The Ngada community is known for its matrilineal kinship system, while the Soa and Riung ethnic groups adhere to patrilineal systems (Mopa et al., 2020). Amidst this cultural richness, the tradition of preserving the “Rang” caste through marriage remains one of the most prominent customary legacies in the lives of the Ngada people. According to (Neonbasu, 2002) “Rang” is a marker of originality or seniority. The Ngada community believes that caste or “rang” holds a vital position relating to family dignity, known in the Ngada language as “waka,” which must be maintained and upheld by every generation. Based on the existing caste structure, the Ngada society is divided into three tiers: “rang Ga’e” as the highest caste, “rang Kisa” as the middle caste, and “ho’o” as the lowest caste (Ga’a et al., 2022). This caste division implies that marriages within the same caste are seen as a way to preserve honour, uphold customary values and social harmony, and continue their ancestral legacy.

The marriage system in Ngada society dictates that women from upper castes are only permitted to marry men from the same caste. Violations of this rule can lead to severe social sanctions, such as ostracization or customary fines involving buffalo sacrifice (Bay, 2021), where the number of buffalo is determined based on the woman’s lineage. This caste-based marriage tradition affects not only social harmony but also has profound psychological impacts on upper-caste women. They are often forced to sacrifice personal feelings to meet family expectations and preserve family honour. Critical discussions of gender injustice in cultural contexts frequently overlook the woman’s individual experience. Individual experiences within a phenomenon need to be given space for meaning-making, perception, and emotional expression. It is often neglected.

Inter-caste marriage in Indonesia most commonly occurs in Bali, particularly in the phenomenon known as “nyerod.” Historically, marriage within the same caste has been strictly enforced, with the caste system in regions like Bali imposing rigid cultural expectations. However, as seen in the Bali Regional House of Representatives (DPRD) decision in 1951 to revoke the restrictions

on inter-caste marriage, public perspectives on caste hierarchy have evolved (Sujana et al., 2023). This shift is significant for women, who increasingly challenge traditional norms through their marital choices, reflecting changing views on gender roles and autonomy (Astari et al., 2023).

Despite this progress, resistance remains strong, especially in rural areas where socioeconomic constraints and traditional beliefs continue to shape perceptions of inter-caste marriage. Such unions are still viewed as violations of cultural norms, with upper-caste women often facing stigma and social exclusion (Poudel, 2023; SUJANA et al., 2023). Women with higher levels of education tend to have more liberal views on marriage, indicating a growing sense of agency and personal choice in the face of societal expectations (Laksono et al., 2021). For some, inter-caste marriage offers an opportunity for upward mobility, while for others, it can lead to social and economic disadvantages, especially when marrying into a lower caste (Rumble et al., 2018). In navigating these marriages, women also face unique challenges in balancing cultural and linguistic expectations from their natal and marital families—a dynamic underscores their ability to manage complex social and familial structures (Astari et al., 2023).

However, studies on inter-caste marriage so far have only focused on Bali, and very few have explored similar dynamics in Eastern Indonesia, which has a diverse customary structure. For example, the Ngada people adhere to a matrilineal system and have a strong caste structure, but it is constructed in a unique system of values and social relations. Ngada women are not only guided to maintain lineage through intra-caste marriage, but also become a symbolic extension of family honor and identity.

From a psychological perspective, the caste marriage rule places women in a vulnerable position, both emotionally and socially. The pressure to adhere to customary norms creates inner conflict, particularly when women's personal choices conflict with family expectations. (Yuniantari, 2021) reveals that caste-based marriages often result in social stigma and negative stereotypes toward women who violate the rules, threatening their social position and isolating them from the community. For instance, women who “descend in caste” are shunned by their families and communities and are denied a place in the traditional house (*sa'o*). On the other hand, the role of the family—especially parents—in determining

women's marital choices is highly significant. In many cultures, including Ngada, parents, particularly fathers, often act as the primary decision-makers in marriage, considering enhancing family social status through marriage (Muharry et al., 2018). It presents a significant challenge for women attempting to make personal choices within a strongly traditional context.

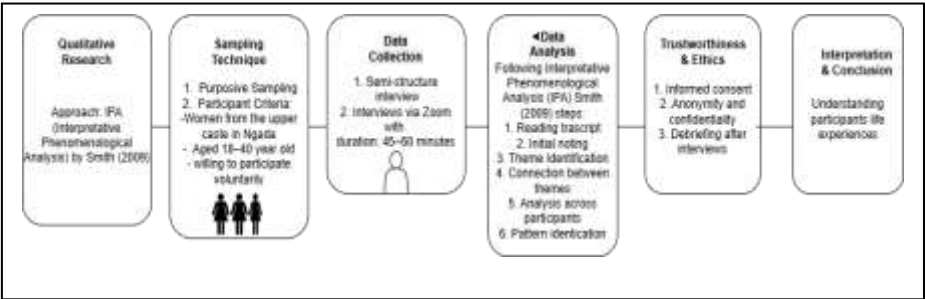
In this context, communication offers an additional perspective for understanding how marriage negotiation occurs between women and their families. For instance, from the standpoint of Symbolic Interactionism Theory, meanings related to status, responsibility, and family expectations are constructed through social interaction. Communication between Ngada women and their parents reflects differing interpretations each party holds. Women may emphasize educational attainment or economic independence as reasons for choosing a partner from a lower caste. In contrast, parents stress the importance of maintaining family honour and traditional values (Santosa & Firdaus, 2022). On the other hand, cultural conformity highlights how cultural norms shape individual decisions. Marriage is not merely seen as a personal bond but also as a social and economic contract that affects social relationships and the family's standing in society (Ghimire & Axinn, 2013). In upper-caste marriages, the social pressure to adhere to tradition is extreme, and women often feel compelled to align their choices with family expectations to preserve the family's social status. However, globalization and modernization are beginning to challenge this structure, creating tension between women's aspirations and their parents' traditional expectations (Agey et al., 2023).

Discussing women within a strongly traditional context remains essential for opening communication spaces and acknowledging individual perspectives. Therefore, it is also important to understand how women in a society with strong customary values, such as Ngada, negotiate their choices in marriage. This study aims to explore how women's psychological dynamics in maintaining the social dignity of the family and the role of communication play a role in the negotiation process. By examining the psychological, cultural, and communicative aspects, this research seeks to contribute meaningfully to intercultural communication and the dynamics of power in the ethnic law.

# Research Method

## Research design

This study employed a qualitative method with an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore the psychological dynamics experienced by upper-caste women in the “Rang” caste-based marriage system within Ngada society in the modern era. This approach provides deep insights into women’s subjective experiences (Smith et al., 2009)As they face social and cultural pressures associated with caste-based marriage. The study aims to understand the experiences of upper-caste women during the marriage negotiation process and how they confront such experiences within a strongly cultural value system.



**Figure 1.** Research Design Diagram

## Participants

This study employed purposive sampling to select participants who could provide rich, in-depth insights into the research focus (Sugiyono, 2013). The selection process began with reaching out to women in Bajawa, Ngada, to determine if they met the study’s criteria: (1) women from Ngada, (2) holding the highest caste status in the “Rang” system, (3) aged between 18-40, and (4) willing to participate voluntarily. Initial interviews were conducted to confirm participants’ eligibility based on their family background and caste status. After verifying their eligibility, three participants were selected for the study. The sample size of three participants was chosen to align with the phenomenological research approach, specifically Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which typically requires a small sample to enable an in-depth exploration of individual experiences. Smith et al. (2009) argue that three to six

participants are an ideal range for IPA, as it allows for a detailed analysis of each individual's experience while facilitating comparison across cases. Despite the small sample size, this is sufficient for the study's goals of examining the meaning-making processes and negotiation strategies of Ngada women regarding marriage choices that challenge caste-based norms.

#### *Data Collection Procedure*

Data was collected in the first week of November 2024 through semi-structured interviews, with questions tailored to explore women's experiences during their marriage negotiation processes. No cultural events or specific factors were considered when choosing this time period; the data collection was purely based on practical factors and the availability of participants. Due to the geographic distance between the researcher and participants, interviews were conducted via Zoom. Each interview lasted 45 to 60 minutes and was conducted personally by the researcher to ensure consistency in data collection. Before the interviews began, informed consent was obtained from each participant, and their rights were respected according to research ethics guidelines.

#### *Data Analysis*

The data analysis followed the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) framework. (Smith et al., 2009), focusing on understanding how participants made sense of their lived experiences within the socio-cultural context of Ngada. IPA's theoretical underpinnings guided the identification of key themes, which allowed for an exploration of how women navigated the complexities of caste norms and marital expectations. Specifically, the analysis focused on how participants' personal experiences and interactions with their families influenced their decisions and how they negotiated the pressures of societal expectations within the framework of caste-based marriage practices. IPA has also been applied in research involving women in marginalized groups (Setyawan, 2025). The analytical process consisted of several steps:

1. Reading interview transcripts repeatedly – The researcher began by reading the transcripts multiple times to develop a thorough understanding of the participants' shared experiences and perspectives.

2. Initial noting – The researcher noted key points that emerged during the reading process, including recurring words or phrases and expressed emotions.
3. Developing emergent themes – Based on the initial notes, the researcher identified major themes emerging from the interviews and grouped the participants' experiences into relevant categories.
4. Identifying connections between themes – Once the emergent themes were developed, the researcher looked for relationships and patterns to create a holistic understanding of upper-caste women's experiences in the caste-based marriage context.
5. Proceeding to the next participant's case – The analysis continued with transcripts from the remaining participants, applying the same process to ensure clarity and depth of understanding.
6. Identifying patterns across cases – After analyzing each participant, the researcher compared and looked for consistent patterns to generate broader findings regarding women's experiences with caste-based marriage in Ngada.

### *Ethical Considerations*

The ethical procedures were rigorously followed to ensure the protection and well-being of participants. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring they understood the study's purpose and knew their right to withdraw. Confidentiality was maintained, and participants were assured that their identities would not be disclosed in any publications or presentations resulting from the research. After each interview, debriefing sessions were conducted to ensure participants were emotionally comfortable and fully informed about the study's aims.

## **Results and Discussion**

**Table 1.** Profile of participants

Participant <sup>a</sup>	Age	Social Profile
Bunga Dhone	27	Married to a man from outside the region who does not adhere to a caste system. Currently works as a housewife.

Participant <sup>a</sup>	Age	Social Profile
Flora Milo	31	An employee in the private sector who initially attempted to uphold her “upper caste” status, but after experiencing rejection from an upper-caste man and being arranged to marry an uneducated man, ultimately decided to marry a lower-caste man.
Marry Kesa	27	A woman from a family with strong traditional beliefs, unmarried and working in the city, whose views on caste-based marriage differ significantly. She focuses on life after marriage and criticizes the dark side of customary rules that confine upper-caste women.

<sup>a</sup>Participants’ names are presented as pseudonyms, with family surnames added to provide a cultural nuance reflective of the Ngada family’s heritage.

The table below (Table 2) summarizes the study’s key findings, breaking down the main and associated superordinate themes. These themes capture the participants’ experiences with cross-caste marriages in Ngada, such as the influence of cultural expectations, the challenges of navigating social stigma, and the critical role of social support in decision-making. The first column identifies the main themes, while the second column provides a more detailed look into the superordinate themes, which reflect the broader concepts that emerged from the data.

**Table 2.** Main and Superordinate Themes

Main themes	Superordinate Themes	Transcript Example
Cultural Expectations and Communicating Individual Choices	Cultural influence, adherence to social norms, village vs. urban perspectives, preservation of family status, inherited cultural expectations, and defying traditional caste lines.	“...orang-orang yang tinggal di daerah perkotaan, baik dari kasta atas maupun kasta bawah, meskipun mereka tahu tentang larangan atau sanksi yang mungkin ada, mereka merasa bahwa... eh... hal-hal tersebut sudah sangat ketinggalan zaman. Jadi



Main themes	Superordinate Themes	Transcript Example
		<p><i>mereka pikir itu tidak penting sama sekali...</i>" (Flora Milo, 31tahun)</p> <p>Urban society, with the development of technology and an advanced education system, has different perspectives related to this marriage system. They consider it to be something old-fashioned. The "<i>rang</i>" marriage system also makes a woman who is still living in the village must obey the rules, so that sometimes they are late to get married.</p>
Readiness for the Consequences of Inter-Caste Marriage	Social stigma, consequences of marriage with a lower caste, acceptance of cultural penalties, personal vulnerability, transformation of values, emotional consequences	<p><i>"...apa akibatnya yang akan terjadi pada saya, saya sudah tahu karena sejak saya kecil sudah dijelaskan kepada saya..."</i> (Bunga Dhone, 27 tahun)</p> <p>When a woman from the upper "<i>rang</i>" decides to marry a man from the middle or lower "<i>rang</i>", there will be consequences or risks that must be accepted by the woman.</p>
Communicating Social Support and	Community responses, psychological pressure, internal	<i>"...karena memilih pasangan hidup itu bukan hanya untuk satu atau dua tahun, tapi untuk seumur hidup, maka</i>

Main themes	Superordinate Themes	Transcript Example
Rationalizing Marriage	conflict, emotional support, instrumental support, informational support, social adaptation, rational decision-making, relationship quality	<i>dari itu kita sebagai anak perempuan harus memilih seseorang yang benar-benar mengerti kita dan juga berpikiran modern...” (Marry Kesa, 27 tahun)</i>  A woman will look for a man who she thinks can be responsible for her life and her future household life.

To explore these findings further, the following sections dive deeper into the specifics of each theme, offering a comprehensive analysis of how cultural, social, and personal factors intersect and influence the decisions of women navigating the complexities of marriage beyond caste boundaries.

### ***Cultural Expectations and Communicating Individual Choices***

The cultural environment significantly influences individuals' thinking and behaviour about adherence to social norms. Social norms, which are closely tied to cultural contexts, shape individual compliance with prevailing societal expectations. This study found a divergence in perspectives between Ngada communities in urban areas and those in rural villages. Rural communities still uphold ancestral traditions by maintaining social status through intra-caste marriage. They believe violating customary norms—such as marrying someone from a different caste—can bring adverse personal and social consequences. It reflects how village communities continue to place a high value on preserving family social status, thereby fulfilling inherited cultural expectations. These findings align with research by (Naizabayeva et al., 2022) , which demonstrated that traditional values play a vital role in shaping individual behaviour, where promoting such values contributes to identity formation and social cohesion within a community. In this study, participants shared:

“...people who live in urban areas, whether they are from the upper or lower caste, even though they are aware of

the prohibitions or potential sanctions, they feel that... um... those things are very outdated. So they think it's really unimportant..." (Flora Milo, 31 years old)

"...They are actually deserving of a partner, but because of the Rang system, they still don't have one. And that happens a lot in the rural communities..." (Mary Kesa, 27 years old)

These findings illustrate that even when there is a desire to marry, strict social norms dominate rural life, indicating the more substantial presence of traditional and cultural structures. (Hilbert & Suessmair, 2015) Further explain how social norms, often unconsciously activated, can influence individuals more than they realize, leading to compliance with societal expectations. It suggests that cultural influence can subconsciously dictate individual behaviour even when social norms are not explicitly enforced.

In similar customary practices, Damayanti (2020) Research on caste-based marriage in Bali shows that the caste system is gradually declining due to widespread modernization. Ahuja & Ostermann, (2016) Findings are also relevant, indicating that interest in inter-caste marriage decreases as the desire for upward social mobility increases. Uniquely, however, participants in this study still perceive themselves as part of their family and tradition, inseparable from their cultural roots. The researcher reflects that meaning-making around tradition can reinforce collectivist values within a community. Nonetheless, this raises questions about how cultural expectations persist or shift among more moderate individuals, particularly those living in heterogeneous environments exposed to modernization. Individuals in such settings tend to develop a more individualistic mindset, prompting them to become more critical of customary rules perceived as no longer relevant.

The three participants communicate their disagreement with intra-upper-caste marriage through their views of marriage as a personal choice and their interactions with family and society. Marry Kesa is more independent and rational when choosing a partner, and Flora Milo is more bound by tradition. At the same time, Bunga Dhone is more prepared to face the consequences and sees marriage as a personal right that matters more than merely following caste rules. Such changes provide a framework for women to feel empowered in their choices, rather than being constrained by the caste system expectations. This elevation of personal rights is echoed

in feminist discourse, reinforcing the idea that marriage should be a partnership chosen by the individuals involved, rather than merely a union negotiated by families (Aditi, 2019). Marry Kesa demonstrates a more flexible and open mindset toward inter-caste marriage. Although aware that her community values marriage within the same caste, Mary focuses on her partner's personal qualities rather than social status. She stated:

“I will look for someone who is not from Bajawa... what matters is that he has a good job, good attitude, and behavior, and is religiously observant” (Mary Kesa, 27 years old).

Marry Kesa faced minimal resistance from her family, and they eventually accepted her decision after she provided a rational explanation emphasizing her partner's qualities. As a result, Mary Kesa feels more independent in choosing a partner, though she remains aware that customary rules—such as those governing caste-based marriage—still need to be respected. On the other hand, Flora Milo is more tied to her family's and society's expectations, especially since she comes from a family with upper-caste status. Flora Milo indicated that she accepted her family's decision regarding a marriage that aligns with caste expectations. However, she began to experience internal conflict when personal considerations clashed with family expectations. Flora Milo's emotional pressure stemmed from the disparity between her desires and cultural expectations, though she was prepared to accept any customary consequences.

Bunga Dhone also shows a mature understanding of customary rules, but is more open and ready to face the consequences if she chooses a partner from a different caste. Bunga Dhone views the decision to marry as a personal choice that outweighs the need to maintain social status, and she accepts the possibility of customary sanctions with a calm and willing heart. The consequences she faces include potentially burdensome ritual obligations, but she is prepared to face them after receiving her parents' blessing. This sentiment is increasingly reflected in the attitudes of younger generations, who are more open to inter-caste relationships than their elders, indicating a cultural shift towards accepting marriage as a personal agency (Dhar, 2013; Larson, 2022)

***Readiness for the Consequences of Inter-Caste Marriage***

The main consequence of marrying into a lower-status family is the potential for social stigma. It relates to the woman's reputation and casts doubt on her social standing. In strong cultural contexts, such consequences can create feelings of uncertainty and vulnerability (Yanasti et al., 2021). Upper-caste ("rang atas") women who decide to marry men from a different caste are aware of and prepared to face such consequences, including customary fines and restricted mobility (Tobar et al., 2020). It is consistent with what one participant expressed:

"...what the consequences would be, what will happen to me, I already knew because since I was a child it had been explained to me..." (Bunga Dhone, 27 years old)

The evidence that the women's self-awareness regarding the consequences of inter-caste marriage reflects a long journey in accepting the prevailing social and cultural realities. Although they were aware that violating customary norms regarding caste-based marriage could lead to social status decline, exclusion, and painful ritual penalties, the participants demonstrated readiness and acceptance of those consequences.

Several studies have noted that violations of customary norms frequently lead to emotional consequences such as stress and estrangement from family due to non-traditional choices (Poudel, 2018). In line with this, Alandari & Muti'ah (2019) state that after marriage, individuals often face negative stigma from society and customary law—consequences that they must confront. Although Mary Kesa knew violating caste norms could lower her social status and lead to exclusion, she was prepared to accept those consequences. Marry stated:

"Our family has also started to think more modernly—what matters now is not caste anymore, but family background, occupation, education, and other such factors" (Mary Kesa, 27 years old).

It reflects a value shift when choosing a life partner, prioritizing individual quality over maintaining caste status. Despite the risk of customary sanctions, Mary prioritizes the criteria of having a good partner. The same sentiment was expressed by Flora Milo, although initially conflicted, mainly due to family expectations, she eventually realized that the

decision to marry is a personal choice that matters more than merely preserving caste status. This awareness reflects a shift in her values, where she prioritizes responsibility and the quality of her partner over social status alone. This readiness reflects a transformation of values among some upper-caste women who accept the consequences of defying traditional caste lines, often advocating for autonomy against societal norms in marital choices (Pan, 2024).

The central insight from these findings is the significant shift in values among Ngada women—particularly those from upper castes—who are increasingly aware that marriage is a personal right, not merely a means of preserving social status or fulfilling customary expectations. They are beginning to prioritize the quality of the relationship, partner responsibility, and character compatibility, even while recognizing that inter-caste marriage still carries substantial social consequences. This research highlights that although customary traditions persist, women's growing autonomy in choosing life partners reflects a transformation toward more inclusive values rooted in individual freedom, especially in the context of increasing modernization.

### **Communicating Social Support and Rationalizing Marriage**

Community responses to women who engage in inter-caste marriages often vary, ranging from acceptance to strong rejection, creating significant challenges for women in finding their place in society after marriage (Kurnia et al., 2022; Wagiswari & Valentina, 2025). Women not only face psychological pressure due to negative societal views but also experience internal conflicts regarding their identity and self-worth (Alandari & Muti'ah, 2019).

This study found that the courage to communicate support is seen as a way to adapt to a new reality that challenges their societal position. All participants stated that social support played an important role in helping them, as women, cope with social pressure. Its support can be seen in three dimensions: emotional, instrumental, and informational—all of which positively impact reducing stress and fostering a sense of acceptance within the community. As explained by participant Bunga Dhone (27 years old), emotional support from family and those around her provided a sense of belonging and reduced the stigma arising from breaking customary norms:

“...because my family and those around me didn’t pressure or ostracize me—they accepted me—so naturally, my husband, my child, and I also feel well accepted...” (Bunga Dhone, 27 years old)

On the other hand, instrumental support provided by the family, as expressed by participant Flora Milo (31 years old), granted her the freedom to choose a partner without excessive traditional pressure. This support helped her to overcome practical challenges related to her decision.

“...Fortunately, my immediate and extended family are not too demanding or feudalistic about tradition, so they gave us the freedom to choose our own partners...” (Flora Milo, 31 years old)

This freedom meant they did not feel compelled to follow strict caste rules that often limited their personal choices in marriage. It led to a reduction in feelings of alienation or social exclusion that are commonly experienced by individuals who defy customary norms. Informational support also played a crucial role in facilitating well-informed decision-making. Through advice and guidance from family or close individuals, women facing dilemmas over inter-caste marriage could make decisions with greater confidence, knowing they had clear information on the consequences and how to deal with them. It aligns with (Alandari & Muti’ah, 2019) Findings that individuals in inter-caste marriages can better cope with negative social impacts thanks to the social support they receive.

Participant Mary Kesa (27 years old) emphasized the importance of choosing a partner who understands and aligns with modern thinking for long-term life planning. This statement reflects a rational decision-making approach that prioritizes the relationship’s quality and stability over inherited social status.

“...because choosing a life partner is not just for one or two years—it’s for life, which is why we, as daughters, must choose someone who truly understands us and has a modern mindset too...” (Mary Kesa, 27 years old)

The findings of this study reveal a significant shift in how upper-caste women in Ngada navigate marriage decisions, particularly in balancing traditional caste norms with personal autonomy. While strong social norms still dominate rural communities, as reflected in the perspectives of participants like Mary Kesa and Flora Milo, these women increasingly prioritize personal qualities—such as a partner’s

job, attitude, and responsibilities—over caste status. As Mary Kesa stated, *“I prioritize a partner’s job and attitude over caste status,”* which indicates a transformation in how women view marriage. This shift aligns with Symbolic Interactionism Theory, which emphasizes that social meanings are negotiated through interactions. For Mary, open communication with her family allowed her greater freedom to choose a partner who met her criteria, reflecting how family interactions play a crucial role in renegotiating caste-based expectations.

Furthermore, this transformation reflects a layered adaptation, where upper-caste women assert their independence while navigating customary pressures. The choice to marry responsible partners with stable employment demonstrates a shift toward valuing relationship quality rather than maintaining caste status. This shift highlights the impact of modernization, with women increasingly embracing a more individualistic mindset. However, despite the move toward individual choice, these women remain connected to social values, showcasing the nuanced balance they strike between embracing modern ideals and preserving cultural traditions. This dual commitment reveals the complex intersection of tradition and modernity in the marriage practices of Ngada women, emphasizing personal autonomy while respecting social and cultural expectations.

The Theory of Cultural Conformity highlights how cultural norms shape individual decision-making, which, in the context of Ngada society, includes marriage as more than just a personal union but also as a social and economic contract that affects social relations and a family’s status within the community (Ghimire & Axinn, 2013). In upper-caste marriages, the social pressure to adhere to tradition is extreme, and women often feel compelled to align their choices with family expectations to preserve the family’s social honour. Personal preferences do not solely influence the decision to marry but also the obligation to maintain the family’s position within the broader social structure.

However, with the advancement of globalization and modernization, this structure is beginning to be challenged, creating tensions between women’s aspirations to choose their partners freely and the traditional expectations of their parents (Agey et al., 2023). Women increasingly desire the freedom to select their partners. However, they are constrained by social norms that demand loyalty



to tradition to preserve family status, highlighting the conflict between individual freedom and prevailing social expectations.

## **Conclusion**

This study aims to understand the psychological dynamics of women in Ngada society related to inter-caste marriage and the role of communication and social support in negotiating strict customary norms. The findings reveal that although upper-caste women face social stigma, emotional pressure, and internal conflict when marrying partners from different castes, social support (emotional, instrumental, and informational) plays a crucial role in helping them overcome these challenges. Communication is key in their adaptation process, particularly emotional support from family and informational support that aids decision-making. Open communication with family and the freedom to choose a partner help reduce customary pressure and increase women's autonomy in life choices. Women's openness to modernization within local traditions also influences the shift in values from preserving social status to prioritizing relationship quality.

The strength of this study lies in its exploration of the psychological, cultural, and communicative dimensions of inter-caste marriage and its contribution to understanding the role of social support in navigating social norms. However, a key limitation of the study is the lack of data on the role of men in this negotiation process. Future research should adopt gender-inclusive research designs, incorporating both women's and men's perspectives to provide a more holistic view of the dynamics of inter-caste marriage. Additionally, longitudinal studies tracking generational shifts in caste norms and their long-term impact on families and communities in Ngada could offer valuable insights into the evolving nature of caste-based practices. Moreover, while this study addresses the influence of modernization, it is important to clarify that the shift in values towards prioritizing relationship quality over caste status is more reflective of local processes in Ngada than national trends. This nuanced understanding of local modernization processes contributes to broader debates on gender studies in traditional societies. As such, the study can inform policy and community interventions, such as organizing family communication workshops to foster more open dialogue about marital decisions, particularly in traditional societies where caste norms are still influential.

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