

## The Socio-Cultural Significance of Polygamy in Africa

### **Grace Lawrence-Hart, Ph.D.**

Department of Religious and Cultural  
Studies, Faculty of Humanities, Ignatious  
Ajuru University of Education, Rumuolemini,  
Port Harcourt, Rivers State | E-mail:  
[drgrace.lawrence-hart@iaeu.edu.ng](mailto:drgrace.lawrence-hart@iaeu.edu.ng)

***Abstract:** In contemporary African societies several African institutions which were of great significance have been subjected to Western categories and as such relegated to the background. One of such indigenous institutions that have been considered “sin” or anti-social is the polygamous family system. Using an ethnographic survey, this study, “The Socio-Cultural Significance of Polygamy in Africa” attempts to explore the significance of the polygamous family system in the social and cultural milieu of Africa. The study discovered that polygamy serves as an agent of moral control in that society. It therefore, recommends that Christian denominations should divorce themselves of Eurocentric categories and accept polygamist in their midst since the Bible did not out rightly condemn polygamy.*

***Keywords:** Polygamy; Family; Africa; Marriage; Monogamy*

---

### **Introduction**

In Africa, tradition and religion are synonymous; and the cultural values of the people are tied to their belief system (Lawrence-Hart, 2013:193). In this vein therefore, polygamy as an African institution, becomes an acceptable institution. The practice of polygamy in Nigeria is associated with economic and social values. In most indigenous African societies, a man believes that having male children enhances his position and prominence in the community, and his name in addition remains immortalized. Thus, if the first wife bears only female children, the tendency will be to contract another marriage for the expressed purpose of raising male children (Ibeabuchi 1990:81). Polygamy is customary all over Africa but in less degree in some societies. This has some bearing on the social structures of the traditional society. In Nigeria, for instance, religion and human administration underscore the values associated with polygamy. These values are what Christian missionaries of various denominations failed to appreciate in their various encounter with the different African societies. These denominations considered it sinful to be polygamous.

However, there exists another school of thought who sees nothing wrong in being polygamous. The general argument of the progenitors is narrowed down to the belief that neither monogamy nor polygamy is essential to Christian salvation since it is not easy to prove from the Holy Scripture that polygamy is a sin. So, this study intends to highlight the socio-cultural significance of polygamy in Africa.

### **Conceptual Analysis**

Several volumes have been written on polygamy (Jones, 1960; Haselbarth, 1976; Imasogie 1986). Most of these are written by Christian theologians. These set of scholars are Christian apologists who wrote in defense of monogamy as an ideal form of marriage. Such scholars did not bother to examine the rationale for polygamy within an African context. They examined the concept of polygamy from Eurocentric bias and prejudice. Some literature on polygamy is written by Africanists who probably wrote to justify the rationale for a polygamous form of marriage in Africa (King, 1970; Mbefo, 1980; Yego, 1984; Bake, 1988). Scholars such as Shorter (1970), Kisembo and Shorter.(1977), Iwe (1979), Nkwoka (1990), Walls (1995) and Nwoko (1996) took an agnostic stance; thus, views on this African institution varies depending on the religious cultural leaning of the scholar. But the current study is concerned with the practice of polygamy in Africa.

### **Why People Opt for Polygamy in Africa**

Polygamy is widely practiced in West Africa as well as other parts of Africa. However, the rules guiding it are strict and as such it was not regarded as a form of licentiousness or evil. A number of things make people become polygamous. Many people have their reasons for it; some may be circumstantial, others are willful and premeditated. It was not only in the pre-modern days that the issue of male child pushed one to polygamy, Hitherto, it is a factor That compels people to take a second wife either publicly or secretly. Mrs. Calista Ofoma (interview 20/12/2017), who got married at 15 and gave birth to nine female children by 'the time he was 29, married a second wife for her husband, She did this because her husband wanted a male child, When she was asked why she did that she said:

At forty-one today, I can still add more children but I am not interested, I love my husband because of the love that I have for my husband that made me to marry a second wife for him, You see, all the nine children that I got for my husband were females, his people wanted a male child, The pressure from his family to marry a second wife was too much on him but he refused to their whims.

There are two things that led to this polygamous marriage: first the woman was tired of bearing children; second, the pressure from her husband's family was too much. These are some of the factors that usually led Africans to resort to polygamy. Even today, pressures from outside the family usually lead people to contract a second wife. Trobisch (1978:26) was right when he remarked:

The disciplinary approach deals with polygamy as an object and tries to find a general approach. Therefore it has failed. The counseling approach deals with the polygamist. It is personal. It tries to match the answer to the motive.

It stands out to reason that a general and disciplinary attitude to polygamy among the people cannot help in solving the problem since reasons differ for taking up additional wife.

Trobisch (1978) report on one Omodo's motive for taking a second wife as being different from his reason for taking the third one; for the first one, his wife led him to that. Omodo's wife was so overburdened, with both domestics and farm work that she wanted a helper. Omodo's wife was not the only wife that had had such problem. This is common in Africa. The African woman is overburdened with much responsibility, usually, the man clears the bush and pays for hoeing, but the wife has to do the rest of the work: planting, weeding, and conveying the yam tubers to the ban. After these things, it is also her duty to plan for 'the daily meals; get wood and water, care for the children and prepare food, while the man most of the time, would sit outside his hut enjoying the air or meet with his age group in the village hall, for social life. Therefore, some African men take to polygamy in order to alleviate the first wife's problem of overworking. In some cases, the idea is suggested by the first wife. From a look at Omodo's reason for taking the third wife, we discover another reason for being polygamous. It is interesting to note that barrenness of his first wife was not his motif for marrying his second wife as it was for the Biblical Abraham and Elkanah. Omodo's first wife had children — sons and daughters but the first wife made him a polygamist. Omodo married the third wife because her husband, Omodo's brother, had died. This is an entirely different situation. This shows how important it is to find out one's motive for being polygamous. It is obvious in Africa how a widow is exposed to untold problems and difficulties. A widow is the most pitiful woman in Africa. A widower will find it easier to marry another wife but not so with the widow. The situation seems worse in the church. Many churches do not have provisions for' the widows ...even those who are widows indeed as the Bible directs (1 Tim.5:3) are overlooked by the church. The church would only be on the lookout to see when she (the widow) will misbehave — either by sexual immorality or by marrying a non-believer of the Christian faith, they will then suspend or excommunicate her.

Consequently, widows in some African societies like Igboland, Ikwerre, Ogoni, Etche, etc. are encouraged to attach themselves to a man and beget *azunna*, a posthumous child (a term in Igboland which describe children born after their father's death). Others will prefer to remarry within the family of the dead husband, In such a case, an unmarried young man may find it difficult to marry what is usually called "secondhand" wife. He would rather prefer to marry a young girl. In a situation like this, an already married man can volunteer to help the woman by marrying her, thereby becoming polygamous. In Israel, this custom is known as "levirate". In Omodo's case, if the third wife were to marry a man from another family; she would lose her children and other benefits from her diseased husband's family. For her to remain unmarried is almost impossible in traditional African society unless she wants to be termed a prostitute.

Another contemporary reason in support of polygamy is to regard it as an institution which expresses the "African" way of life. Some who speak in favour of this do so because they advocate the return to African tradition and heritage as against western ideas which lead to estrangement. However, this proposition does not enjoy popular support. It is said that polygamy takes care of surplus of women who parade the streets. It, therefore, limits the rate of prostitution giving protection to unmarried women and a new home for

widows (through the custom of the levirate marriage). It has not yet been proved that there are more women than men, but in some societies such exist especially where there is war. However, where women learn to live on their own and receive equal rights in the society, the need to resort to polygamy will gradually disappear (Hasabart 1979:73).

To Africans, marriage and procreation are regarded as an aid towards the partial recapture or attainment to the lost immortality. In this sense, it follows logically that, the more wives a man has, the more children he is likely to have and the more children he has the stronger his power over mortality, Therefore, marriage in Africa involves more than two individuals. Onunwa (1990:10) is right when he calls it a drama in which many actors participate actively, He says that:

It involves both the living and the dead, young and old, male and female, in the families, kindred, villages and towns. Through marriage, children are born and through the children, the unwritten laws, traditions, customs and history of the people are transmitted to the succeeding generations,

In like manner, an African feels that he has been “born again” among his descendants. Consequently, he is remembered after he had died physically and therefore enters his personal immortality, for the Africans, “children are the glory of marriage”, and so the more they are, the more the glory.

A marriage in Africa is regarded “incomplete, valueless and unconsummated if it there is no child, especially a male child (Onunwa 1990:21). It is through this institution of marriage that the society seeks to face the challenge of death and preserve its fading image. The children born in the family are an assurance of the continuity of the generation. This, then, is one of the reasons for polygamy in Africa. The desire to marry many wives among the Igbo’s for instance, is to ensure that many children are born in the family. This desire is further noticed from the challenging names like:

Ahamefula — may my name not perish

Nwadimkpà — A child is important

Nwabugwu . — A child is the source of my prestige

Nwagboo — A child prevents

Nwabuisi — A child is the source

These and other names show the importance attached to children in African community. Furthermore, the desire for male children in Africa is very high and a wife is regarded as a means of fulfilling this desire. If one is disappointed in his first wife, he will “give in” for a second one in order to achieve his purpose. Even when he wants to handle such with maturity, his mates will persuade him to agree with them. They will outline the reasons and benefits of having male children. If a woman disapproves her husband’s plans to marry another wife, she will either be forced to accept it or be divorced; she will be called all manner of derogatory names just to tag her as a bad and selfish person. This demand and crave for a son (of one’s own blood) makes it almost impossible for an Africa man to think of adoption as an alternative, In a royal family, the absence of a male child

means the transfer of kingship to another family. But in ordinary families, the absence of a son simply means that “the name of that family has been blotted out of history” (Ibeabuchi 1990:81). For an African to fold his hands in silence over the issue of ‘no son’ in the family is looked upon as irresponsibility. Therefore, the best thing he will do is to take a second wife instead of dying in silence. Polygamy increases a man’s social status in Africa. It is believed among African that the larger a family is, the more respect one has in the eyes of the community.

For kings and rulers, as in the case of Solomon and Ahab of the Judeo-Christian Bible and most of the African Chiefs, the opportunity of marrying several wives has an important political function. It helps them to form alliances with powerful kinship groups which might try to seize power from those who hold it. Marrying women from different lineages helps the chief to manipulate allies and “practice a large scale policies which the princely families of Europe could not carry out only within the narrow limits of monogamy (Maquet 1975:74). In those days (and even today) kings and chiefs solidify agreements, contracts, and treaties by marrying, sometimes the princess of the other community or the tribe concerned. This alliance stands indissoluble. Politically, a polygamist stands a better chance to influence people in the community because it will be easier to get his in-laws form allegiance with him. Most of the chiefs, village heads and community heads in Africa today are polygamists.

It is suggested too that polygamy helps to check immorality, namely, adultery. However, there is no empirical evidence for this suggestion. The Biblical David committed adultery with Uriah’s wife, yet he had many wives. The weakness of immorality is endemic. But some men are caught with another man’s wives. Some of the guilty ones in this are the anti-polygamists who vow to stick to only “one wife”. These people are not satisfied again with only one wife, hence their involvement in immorality. (Eke interview 03/12/2018). This evil is more practiced when the wife is in her third trimester or nursing a baby. A husband may resort to extra marital relationship during his wife’s period of gestation. This is a make shift device to reduce tension during the period. This may be counted as an immoral act but in some societies, no one would frown at it. But if he is polygamous, he can easily shift to the next wife to satisfy himself. During one of the interviews held with a group of people, it was discovered that polygamy helps to curb the “indispensability act of one wife”. Under polygamy, no woman or wife can say that she is indispensable in the matrimonial home. In other words, no wife will boast before the husband that without her the husband cannot enjoy conjugal relationship. Put in the way one of the interviewee said it: “This is because what a woman fails or refuses to do, there are others who can do it” (Tamuno interview 03/12/2017). It gives the man joy and assurance, making him the central figure in the home. What a man suffers in some monogamous homes in not known. Sometimes, he endures until he is found dead. According to Chukwuka:

In a situation where it is only one wife she may undo the husband and begins to brag that without her, things will not augur well; and she always like to put the husband to ransom to dance to her tune, Nobody will know what the man is suffering in the hands of his only wife, This is not the case in polygamy where there is room for variety (Chukwuka interview 01/01/2018).



In many parts of Africa a man is not permitted to have sexual intercourse with the wife within the advanced stage of pregnancy and lactating period. The husband abstains from sexual relationship at least from latter pregnancy until the baby begins to walk and is weaned. Under this situation, the man is left either to remain single within this period or revert to concubineage or prostitution. Therefore, polygamy tends to solve the problem of sexual starvation in view of the fact that he can go into his other wives if one is not disposed. Many experts in marriage say that men are more easily aroused than women. A Woman can stay for the period of one to two years without much worry about sex, but only few men can do that; the sex urge is greater in men than in women.

It is regarded as a thing of mockery for a woman whose child is still sitting down and breastfeeding to be pregnant (Jack, personal interview 03/11/2017). When this happens the wife suffers a lot physically, psychologically and economically. The mother suffers physically if she continues to breastfeed the child since she does not feed adequately and regularly. Psychologically, she feels ashamed before other women and every other person in the community. If the woman will be pregnant while the baby is still small, she can hardly do anything in the farm in preparation for the next season. Economically, she will become poor since the husband will hardly go to the cassava plantation to weed it. Thus, the only way to be free from all these blames and problems is for the man to take another wife. A typical traditional African woman will be in support of this.

In case of sickness in the family, a polygamous family stands a better chance, to render help to the one who is sick and other mutual service among themselves. Conversely, co-wives' rivalry and feud do not allow such assistance. For example, if any member of the household is sick, that is, one of the wives, other members of the family will assist her in cooking and fetching water, especially if her children are still small. Another benefit of this comes when one wife gives birth there are other wives to help and even care for other children of hers until she regains her vitality. If one wife dies, others are available to take care of her children, and in case of barrenness as already mentioned, "Others bear children for the family, so that the torch of life is not extinguished" (Mbiti 1969:14). It is a common observation that women, most of the time, grow older than their husband, although they are younger in age. Some factors may have contributed to this: child-bearing, inadequate care by the husband and hard work. Some men prefer marrying another wife (younger one perhaps) instead of pestering on young girls.

Emotional support is another reason why some people resort to polygamy. Most women need emotional adjustment at any given time and at such age when they get desperate for this, they are considered too old by society. What seems to be of immediate solution at that particular time is dating and remarrying. It is also pointed out that societal pressure gradually starts building up on a girl to marry once she is becomes an adolescent; speaking on the dilemma that faces the unmarried girl, Letty Dial (1992:3) writes:

If she goes past the age of 25 without an engagement, then she is looked upon as doomed, especially if her friend and age mates are already hooked. The pressure becomes so much that she is forced to take the next available option, polygamy, since it is more respectable to be in any kind of marriage than to remain an old maid.

In Africa, this is very complex for the girl (lady) because she has to wait for somebody to do the asking. In such situation therefore, her choice is limited: therefore, she has to wait for whoever comes. In an indigenous Africa setting, majority of the girls marry very early, by the time a girl is 25, it is somehow difficult for her to get a husband. In frustration, therefore, a girl who has waited for too long ends up in the house of a man who is already married. This is done to avoid the agony of remaining single. It is better for a girl to get married to one who has already married than to remain single and see her younger sisters marrying to other young men. If they wait for a single man, they go through tremendous struggles to get there (Dial 1992:16).

One other thing that compels a girl to opt for polygamous marriage is age. At the early period of the introduction of Western education, it was exclusively left for boys. Many families could not afford to send their daughters to school. Whenever educational issues were discussed, girls were given little or no attention. The few who had the opportunity to attend schools could only attain to a certain level. They were oriented towards marriage and home keeping. "That its- good-for-men-only attitude changed over the years as more women opted for Western education; they proved themselves to be as capable as the men. Some of these girls spend more years in school than men, in their bid to obtain degrees. Because of that most of them have postponed marriage. But when they finally graduate from school, they would have been advanced in age that those who would be approaching them for marriage will consider them too old while their mates among the men are already married. Commenting more on this, LettyDiai says:

Polygamy, thus, becomes the last resort because by the time the woman is ready; the men are all hooked or are in the process of getting hooked. And the panic of approaching menopause makes them settle for anything. The fact that man is already saddled with three or four wives becomes immaterial (Dial 1992:3)

We have so far examined why Africans opt for polygamy. We shall now proceed to discuss the challenges of a polygamous marriage.

### **Problem of Polygamous Marriage**

It is pertinent to discuss very briefly some challenges associated, but not peculiar to polygamous marriages. There is competition in every polygamous family. Each woman struggles to please the husband, or to win his favour. This type of love is selfish because each of the wives wants to be loved more than the other. This also affects the children. The children tend to love their brothers and sisters more than their half-brothers and half-sisters. Our informant, Mrs. Ngozi, who was brought up in a polygamous family made a very important observation. In her experience, she discovered that:

Each woman will be struggling to please the husband; bowing down always to the husband, if possible spending extra money to cook acceptable food for the husband. It is more advantageous to the husband than to the wives; these activities tend to affect the larger society of today (Ngozi, Interview.13/3/2018).

The care for many children in a polygamous marriage becomes a burden to the man. Even when the man does not want to have more, some wives will insist on more children because no woman would like to have fewer children than others. Reason being that, they need these children to help them in their farms and other aspects of the economy; in situations where a woman does not have any child; she will be struggling to have it by all means. She could go as far as marrying a wife in her name for the husband in order to have children through surrogacy. These attempts may lead to having excess children in a family. Mbiti(1969:144) underscores this when he writes:

Where a man has more than six children, unless he is comparatively wealthy, it becomes a great burden for him and his family to educate all these children in modern schools, or even to clothe them - properly, or feed them adequately should the crops fail in a given season.

Mbiti's (1996) observation is similar to the situation in most polygamous families where school fees are rarely paid. Often the polygamist (husband) would say that it was not his duty to train everyone, adding that one's brother or mother could do that since he could not train everyone in the family. Most children from polygamous homes had to struggle to sponsor their education.

Added to the above-mentioned problems are those of indiscipline in a polygamous family. Sometimes the father does not know the needs of his children intimately; He may not even be able to see some of them for more than three or four days. Some of the children become stubborn and arrogant because of lack of effective parental control. The mother alone exerts dominant influence on the children since she stays and caters for them most of the time. However, it needs to be pointed out that these problems found in a polygamous family and others earlier mentioned are not necessarily created by polygamy; some of these problems are also found in monogamous families.

The existence of all these problems - proves that we are still human; we need discipline and self control in our families. To say that polygamy serves as an antidote against adultery is to see only a part of the issue. Although it has been suggested that women are not easily aroused or that they could stay for a Long time without being sexually moved, this does not apply to every woman. Women who are married to polygamous men often live secretly in adultery because their husbands, staying usually with one wife for a week at a time or with the favourite wife most of the time, are not able to satisfy them sexually (Okon personal interview 2009).

### **Conclusion**

This paper has examined the social and cultural significance of polygamy in an African indigenous society. The study reveals that polygamy is a cherished marriage institution. It has addressed several reasons why the Africans opt for a polygamous marriage. The study reveals that indigenous African women do not see any form of "sin" or marginalization in polygamy. Polygamy enhances the statues of women. Although, there are some challenges associated with polygamous marriages, the study is apt to remark that such challenges are not peculiar to polygamous marriages. The study, therefore, recommends that Christian denominations should look at the issue of polygamy from a holistic perspective. Polygamists within them should not be discriminated against because the Bible is replete



with examples of polygamous marriages and is silent on the issue of whether polygamy is sin or not except for the office of a bishop. The decision of whether a man should opt for a polygamous marriage or not should be determined by his economic status and not by a foreign culture.

## References

- Lawrence-Hart, Grace (2010). "Sin and its Removal in West African Traditional Religion" in George Tasié and Rowland Olumati (ed.) *West African Religious Heritage: Clear Vision Pub. Accra Ghana. ISBN: 978-275-28115-1-7.*
- Okon, James. (2018). Personal interview
- Bake, Emiko. (1988). "Yes, I married a second wife for my Husband *Climax*, 1.3 (8 August) p.10.
- Diai, Letty. (1992). "The Changing Face of Polygamy" *Classique, Special '92*, (6 January 1992), p.16.
- Eke, Onyia. (2018). Personal Interview.
- Haentzchel, A.D. (1961). *How About Christianity*. St. Louis, Missouri: Concordia Publishing House.
- Haselbarth, Hans. (1976). *Christian Ethics in the African Context*. Ibadan: Daystar Press.
- Ibeachuchi, Christian C. (1990) "1988 Lambeth Conference and Polygamy: Its Implications for the Contemporary Nigerian Church" (B.A. Thesis, Calabar, University of Calabar, 1990)
- Imasogie, Osadolor. (1986). *Guidelines for Christian Theology in Africa*. Ibadan: Ibadan University Press Limited.
- Iwe, N.S.S. (1979). *Christianity and Culture' in Africa*. Onitsha: University Publishing Company.
- Jones, Russell Brodley. (1960). *The Epistles to Timothy: A Study Manual*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House.
- King, Noel Q. (1970). *Religious of Africa*. New York: Harper and Row Publishers.
- Kisembo, Benezeri, and Aylward Shorter.(1977). *African Christian Marriage*. London: Cassell and Collier Macmillan Publishers.
- Maquet, Jacques. (1975). *Africanity: The Cultural Unity of the Black Africa*. London: Oxford University.
- Mbefo, Luke Nnamdi. (1989). *Towards a Mature African Christianity*. Enugu: Christian Publications.
- Mbiti, John S. (1969). *African Religions and Philosophy*. London: Heinemann Education Books.
- Ngozi Dimgba, (2018) Personal Interview
- Nkwoka, A. O. (1990). "The Church and Polygamy in Africa: The 1988 Lambeth Conference Resolution" *African Theological Journal* 19.2 (1990), p.130-154.
- Nwoko, Benjamin O. (1996) *Childless Marriage: A Pastoral Case Study of a Christian Practical Problem in Southeastern Nigeria*. Rome: Pontificia Urilversita Lateranense.
- Ofoma, Calista. (2017). Personal Interview.
- Dike, Chukwuka (2018)
- Onunwa, Udobata. (1990). *Studies in Ibo Traditional Religion*. Obosi: Pacific Publishers.
- Jack, Samuel. (2017). Personal Interview.

- Tanuno, Emmanuel. (2017). Personal Interview.
- Shorter, Aylward.(1978). *African Culture and the Christian Church*. London: Geoffrey Chapman.
- Trobisch, Walter. (1978). *My Wife made me a Polygamist*. 6th edition, Kehl/Rhein: Editions Trbisch
- Walls, A. F. (1995).“Culture and Coherence in Christian History”.*Evangelical Review of Theology*. 9.3 (July 1995), p.187-221.
- Yego, Josphat. (1984). “Polygamy and the African Church: A Survey” *East African Journal of Evangelical Theology*, 3.1 p.69-88.