

POLYGAMOUS MARRIAGE IN THE CONTEMPORARY SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH: THE RESPONSES OF SOME MEMBERS

Olabode John Omotosho

Department of Religious Studies,
Adeleke University, Ede, Osun State, Nigeria
biblist2014@gmail.com, +2348039732075

Abstract

Christians' responses to religio-cultural life such as polygamy in Africa have generated diverse reactions from some African Christians. In this wise, some argued that the design established by God at creation was that, the marital relationship would be between a man and a woman like Adam and Eve (Gen 2: 22-24). Therefore, monogamy is the biblical foundation for marriage relationship, while some others submitted that considering some African cultural heritages and values of polygamy, the Church in Africa should be tolerant and magnanimous enough to accommodate polygamous members and potential Christian polygamists. And so, the idea of requiring polygamists to drive away all but a wife before baptism is considered inappropriate. The paper adopted the religio-cultural principle, and hermeneutical method to examine African polygamy, the teaching and practice of the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church, and responses of some members on marriage so as to get the desired information. The study found that while the teaching and practice of Christian Church is generally in favour of monogamy, there is no explicit condemnation of polygamy. Therefore, the paper contends that the Church in Africa ought to be tolerant towards African Christian polygamists, teaching them tenets of Christian disposition on marriage without enforcement and condemnation.

Keywords: African, Marriage, Polygamy, Christians, Responses, Appropriation

Introduction

Appropriating Christians' responses on marriage regarding African polygamy, it could be observed from the Bible that God does not really restrict the free will of his people. The only direct command against polygamy is given to the Kings that were to rule Israel, as they were told not to multiply wives to themselves (Deut 17:17), which is not a law against polygamy, or normative for monogamy. Scholars, such as Igenzoza

who argue that the pattern should be the standard set in the Garden of Eden¹, miss the point that the “Garden of Eden” is part and parcel of the Genesis creation myths, and that it is a euphemism for this world as a whole.

Although there is no explicit condemnation of polygamous marriage in the Bible, except as advised for bishops and deacons by Paul, some Church theologians have also argued that the act of Yahweh’s tolerance towards polygamy does not mean that He supports it, without any basis offered for such argument other than the teaching of Christianity. The contention is that “polygamous relationships are never mentioned positively.”² As Alalade rightly notes, the Old Testament (OT) recognises the authenticity of both monogamy and polygamy. He states further that “this recognition seems to have formed the groundwork for the perspective and projection of marriage in the New Testament (NT)”.³

Moreover, Barth, Mckenzie, and Schillebeekx clarify how polygamy has been treated in the NT era. They are apt that there is no single text in the NT that forbids polygamy or explicitly decrees monogamy as an ideal form of marriage. They note rightly that the teaching of Jesus on marriage is limited to affirming indissolubility of marriage.⁴ This paper investigated the African perspective on polygamy as relates to the Church in Africa, using Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church as a case study. It adopts the religio-cultural principle, and hermeneutical method to examine African polygamy, the teaching and practice of the SDA Church, and responses of some members on monogamy and polygamy in African context.

African Polygamy

Polygamy is a marital union of a man to two or more women, and is widely practised in traditional Africa, as in many parts of the ancient world.⁵ In agreement with Muthengi, Taryor argues that in Africa, before the introduction of Christianity, polygamy was a common cultural pattern. It was part of the framework of the African society.⁶ Mbiti holds that when a man has many wives, there is a tendency for him to have many children as well. He further stresses that the more children one has, the longer he would likely be remembered, long after his death. Many descendants would succeed such a man with the power of immortality and remembrance.⁷

Yet, polygamy is not a monopoly of traditional African practice, but a worldwide practice opposed by Christianity, and still practiced in one form or another globally, such as having “mistresses” with

interpersonal commitments in Europe and America. Today, in Africa, modern changes and financial hardships are making it harder and harder to practise polygamy within the traditional setting of African life. Nevertheless, the practices of polygamy, and high value for children have not been abandoned.⁸ Likewise, in African setting although the ceremony in the Church or at the court has been a strong factor militating against polygamy, yet the practice has not been done away with.⁹

Polygamy in the Contemporary SDA Church

The issue of polygamy in the SDA Church is among the most complex challenges that confront the missionary enterprise. For instance, in bringing possible solution to these challenges, the General Conference of the Church took the action that seemed to be drastically proactive. In 1926 a decisive policy was formed which was later revisited. All of that is encapsulated in the following: 1. In no case should a man living in polygamy be admitted into the fellowship of the Church. 2. Newly converted polygamists are probationary members that are recommended for baptism by the responsible field committees. 3. A man who is a polygamist and wishes to join the Church as a full member is required to become monogamous by putting away all but one of his wives. 4. Wives of a polygamist who accept Christianity may upon due consideration and approval by the committees become baptised members of the Church.¹⁰

Likewise, according to the General Conference of SDA Church working policy on African marriage, it is clearly God's plan that a man should live in a state of monogamy, that a man should have only one living wife. Any contravention of this plan results in confusion and lowering of moral standards that should govern human society, and especially the Church of Christ. The practice of polygamy on the part of many non-Christian peoples for whom we are labouring is in itself a challenge of Christian principles, and constitutes a ground of compromise if permitted in the Church. The denomination (SDA Church) has therefore adopted that, a man found living in a state of polygamy when the gospel reaches him shall upon conversion be required to change his status by putting away all his wives save one before he shall be considered eligible for baptism and church membership.¹¹

Responses of Some SDA Church Officials and Pastors on Polygamy

To Owolabi, Adebomi, Alabi, and others (Owolabi is the President of Western Nigeria of the SDA Church, Adebomi is the President of the SDA Church in Osun State, and Alabi is a Director in the Western

Nigeria of the SDA Church), a polygamist should put one of his spouses to be admitted into the full membership of the church.¹² In a similar pattern, Amanze, Olarewaju and Alao (Amanze was a President of the SDA Church in Abia State, Olarewaju is Director in the SDA Church, Osun State, and Alao, a Church Official and Vice Chancellor, Adeleke University, Ede), following the teaching of the SDA Church on polygamy, they are of the opinion that in no case should a polygamist be admitted into the fellowship of the church through baptism.¹³

There seems to be strong arguments against the practice of polygamy in the SDA Church. In order to maintain what is considered to be the biblical standard on marriage (Gen 2:18-25), the Church vehemently discourages polygamy. Polygamists are to put away all but the first wife.¹⁴ It has been observed that the treatment of polygamists in SDA Church suggests to them to be second class Christians, deprivation of religious rights and duties, and denial of Church membership. These conditions are perceived to limit Church growth and membership, and reduce participation in Church leadership with limited evangelism. To some others, polygamous members may be encouraged by the Church to actively engage in visitation, witnessing, and other evangelistic efforts, but still not as full Church members.¹⁵ The latter proponents would wish that the SDA Church treats polygamists in the way God treated Abraham, David, and other biblical polygamists.

Responses of Some Adult Members on Polygamy in the SDA Church

The positions of the SDA Church on polygamy sum up to the attitude that in no case should a polygamist be admitted in the full fellowship of the Church through baptism. And a polygamist should not play leadership role in the Church administration or worship. Jegede avers that any woman that marries an already married man stands against the biblical principle on marriage (Gen 2:18-25), and should be treated as such.¹⁶ Buttressing his view, Jegede adds that any woman who marries a married man intrudes into someone's marital relationship and she should be treated by the Church as such (an intruder). The popular argument that a woman marries only one husband, and therefore she should be considered innocent is objected on the ground that she should know the man's marital status before agreeing to marry him.¹⁷

Therefore, a polygamous man and their wives with the exception of the first wife (because the first wife does not make her husband a polygamist) should take the responsibility, accountability and consequences on polygamy. Otherwise, in African setting polygamy could

be seen as having anthropological and economic values. For instance, in farming, the opinion here suggests that the more wives, the more possible children, and more farm produce.¹⁸In Africa, polygamy is not a circumstantial activity as it could be argued. It is a reality of life in Africa. It is interesting to note that there are instances where the younger wife takes care of the husband and the elder wife at their old age. Polygamy is perceived as a cultural heritage that the Church should tactfully deal with in Africa. This peculiarity still remains with African societies, and it ought to be treated with respect; not ignominy.¹⁹

Now from the various arguments and responses on how the church treats her polygamous members, it is expedient to note that many interviewees in this category submitted that polygamists are being deprived of their religious rights and duties in the SDA Church. The opinion here could be that polygamists are seen as second class Christians or sinners who live on the platform of divine marital misrepresentation. Some of the interviewees were of the opinion that polygamous members should be encouraged by the Church to actively engage in visitation, witnessing, and other evangelistic efforts but not as Church leaders.

To Oşundina, Jegeđe, Adedotun and some other interviewee adults in the SDA Church, the treatment of polygamists has clearly been revealed in their deprivation of religious rights and duties. They held that although the Church should tolerate and accept polygamists as Yahweh did with Abraham, David, Gideon and others in biblical times, in no case should the practice of polygamy be encouraged and approved or condoned by the Church, because of what they considered its present and future adverse effects.²⁰ Admittedly, the biblical disposition to polygamy should form the teaching and practice of the SDA Church on polygamy. The Church needs to be magnanimous in treatment towards her polygamous members.

Responses of Some SDA Church Youths on Polygamy

In the opinions of Adebayo, Fatola and Kolawole (Adebayo is a Youth Corps member, Fatola is a student of Adeleke University, Ede, and Kolawole, is a Youth Corps member) the SDA Church's treatment of polygamists is largely intolerant. They argued that since there is no explicit condemnation against Abraham and other polygamists in the biblical accounts, the Church ought to be magnanimous in her treatment of polygamists, and that the denial of full membership to polygamists by the Church demands a serious rethink. Otherwise, as the argument goes, the treatment of polygamists in the SDA Church can be rightly taken for anti-biblical disposition on polygamy, and at the same time it is a way of

denying the religious rights and duties of polygamous members. Since polygamists are not biblically condemned, seeing them as second class Christians and worst sinners appears to be an aberration of the highest order.²¹ Thus, the SDA Church would need to be guided by the biblical disposition on marriage, which is pro-monogamy and polygamy.

However, Adeoti and Adedotun (Adeoti and Adedotun are students of Adeleke University, Ede) assert that polygamy is a distorted and perverted practice. They argue that although in the OT, there are cases of polygamy, particularly among Yahweh's servants such as Abraham, Gideon, and David, and there may be no explicit condemnation of the practice of polygamy or no hint supports its condemnation, nevertheless, as the explanation goes, the consequential activities of polygamy such as rivalry and envy have actually revealed the practice as the distortion and perversion of Yahweh's original design of marital union.²² The conclusion is that polygamists in the SDA Church need to adhere to the teaching of the church on polygamy. The interviewees did not give a thought to the fact that some monogamous homes are more turbulent than some polygamous homes.

Responses of Some First Wives of Polygamists in the SDA Church

Even with childlessness or infertility most Christian wives would not want their husbands to marry another wife or wives. Yet, there are cases when some Christian husbands marry more women because of childlessness or infertility, or even for sheer love of large family. When husbands choose to marry more women their first wives might accept, happily, due to personal temperament and life's experience, or in preference to divorce. It is important to note that apart from childlessness, troublesome partner, sickness of wife, and levirate, as in the olden days when people married more than one wife majorly because of love of large family and farming activities. Besides, the olden days were largely patriarchal, and arrogated authority to men, to a very large extent. During that era there seemed to be mutual love and relative peace in the polygamous homes.²³

The world has changed now that white collar job seems to have replaced farming. And some women now speak for women rights. In the present era, people are encouraged to desist from polygamy, not because the Bible prohibits it, but the current Western life styles are largely opposed to polygamy, even as salary gives little room for large families, in addition to loss of cultural values, such as the extended family system.²⁴

To Fakayode, Odedunmoye, and Odeyemi, denying polygamists Church leadership position is largely in tandem with the NT principle. Speaking from their own experiences, the interviewees hold that polygamous men lack biblical quality to rule their own house, and giving them opportunity to lead in the Church might serve as a bad example to the weak ones in faith. They nevertheless believe that applicant polygamists should be allowed to be baptised, and be admitted into full Church membership, but never should polygamous men and other wives except the first wife be allowed to play any Church leadership role. For the interviewees, polygamy remains a perversion of divine form of an ideal marriage relationship.²⁵ Life, as it is said is about perception, attitude, and preference.

Responses of Some “Other Wives” of Polygamists in the SDA Church

There were those who held the opinion that polygamy should not be practised by any born again Christian, on the assumption that the initial plan of God for marriage is a relationship between a man and a woman, taking the story of Adam and Eve as a true story that set marital standard from creation. Some explained that most of the women who married a married man did so out of ignorance, and low level of faith.²⁶ Being raised in a religious setting that does not stand against polygamy was said to have greater influence on some women involved in polygamy.²⁷ That refers to African Traditional Religion (ATR), Islam, and some Churches, such as the Cherubim and Seraphim, the Celestial Church, and some other white garment Churches in Nigeria that have no bias against polygamy.

Some of the women interviewed said going into polygamy did not necessarily mean acceptance of the practice, but circumstances, and fate. There was an argument that polygamy should not be encouraged because the practice does more harm than good.²⁸ Nevertheless none of the women held that polygamists should be treated as second class Church members.²⁹

Responses of Some Male Polygamists in the SDA Church

In traditional Africa, generally speaking, a king is usually influenced to marry more than one wife. The belief is that a good number of wives gives more honour to the King. In a situation where a woman cannot bear children, especially male children for her husband, she herself may ginger the husband to marry additional wife or wives to have male and female offspring. There is high premium on children in African

societies. Children are perceived as signs of a successful life, honour and security.³⁰

Some interviewees held that personal interest plays major role in the practice of polygamy, and that some men naturally opt for polygamy, while some women find nothing wrong with it. Among the factors mentioned as responsible for polygamy are: childlessness, troublesome partner, satisfaction of sexual desire, sign of success and power, sickness of a spouse, and religious influence, such as in Islam where polygamy is rated above monogamy. It was explained that towards a successful polygamous life, a husband should carry along the wife or wives at home, and with the promise of sustaining the existing love, peace and tranquillity in the family.³¹

A few interviewees argued that true acceptance belongs to God when it comes to the issue of salvation, and so, a person's fate lies with God, and baptism or no baptism should be a decision between an individual and the Creator. They concluded that failure to recognize that fact on the part of the Church causes more harm than good.³² Indeed, the teaching of the SDA Church that a polygamist should not be admitted into the fellowship of the Church through baptism does more harm than good, in that it is inhibiting the growth of the church membership.

An example was given about the case of a set of polygamists who were denied of baptism after their willingness to follow Jesus Christ in Oke-Ila Orangun town, Osun State. The consequential event of the stand that was taken by the Church nearly caused division. The interviewees therefore advised that the Church should consider that some polygamists express regret about the marital situations in which they are entrapped in.

In the final lap, attention shifted to the practical aspects of polygamy, beyond biblical references. Odedunmoye, a farmer and SDA Church member, for instance, cautioned against polygamy on the ground of today's economic realities and the hardships facing parenting, generally speaking.³³

Effects of Polygamy on Family Members

There is a counter argument that polygamy is not necessarily worse than monogamy, and that the matter depends on the dramatis personae. Abolarin, for instance, spoke of its (monogamy's) relative negative effects on children involved. He held that there seems to be no tendency for competition and self-sustaining in a monogamous home, and that getting full attention of parents could encourage indolence, incompetence, and dependence, which could be very rare in a polygamous

home. To him, most children of monogamous marriages are easily defeated by the future life challenges because there are lesser competitions for efficiency and productivity in the monogamous homes than its polygamous counterpart. While in a monogamous home, children tend to enjoy full attention of the parents, possibly because of some factors such as few number of children that seems to support lack of competition.³⁴

Abolarin reiterated that there are strengths and values in polygamy, and often these affect the family members positively. He found it interesting, saying that experiences have shown that children raised in polygamous homes are often smarter and self-reliant, because, according to him, the competition that is always part of polygamous home positively sustains self-reliance, and independent life. He avers that if well utilised, competition builds, empowers, and makes the children to become fearless and ready to confront future challenges. From the ancient African perspectives on polygamy, it could be established that polygamy more often than not leads to economic value, and family security, as Abolarin further notes.³⁵

Nevertheless, there can be very serious adverse effects of polygamy on some family members.³⁶ These are described in different views, such as saying that polygamy can lead to unhealthy rivalry, emotional deprivation, financial challenge, and diabolic activities to win the favour of the husband by a particular wife and harm may be done to children of the other wife or wives. Some interviewees described the adverse effects of polygamy on the family members in terms of diabolism, fetish, hatred, pride, betrayal, gossiping, envy, jealousy, etc.³⁷ Ultimately, it can be said that no condition is perfect. Every marriage is not the same, whether monogamy or polygamy, everything depends on the *dramatis personae*. Some people are incapable of managing monogamy, while some people manage polygamy effectively.

Conclusion

This study has investigated the teaching of the SDA Church on polygamy and the responses of some members. The SDA Church views polygamy as a deviation from the biblical form of marriage. Although polygamists enjoy fellowship in the Church, but in no case are they accepted into full membership through baptism, nor allowed any leadership role, unless they put away all but one of their wives.

While some respondents sided with the Church, some of the other members' responses as regard the treatment of polygamists advised the Church to embrace compassion, teach, and guide polygamists to abide by

the tenets of the scriptures concerning marriage, but allow free will obedience, rather than compelling polygamists against their personal conviction.

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