



The Plight of Polygamists in Contemporary African Society

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Abstract

Attempts have been made by scholars of diverse disciplines to give a vivid picture of what polygamy looks like. Such disciplines include; history, church history, Archaeology, Anthropology, cultural studies, theology, Islamic studies and so on. They have put up brilliant arguments for and against polygamy. This essay is an attempt to discuss polygamy and to highlight its plights among contemporary Christian African communities from a purely African perspective.

Keywords: Polygamy, Plight, Contemporary, African, Missions, Christianity

Introduction

Polygamy is the practice of having more than one wife at one time. (1) It occurs where women are seen to occupy a low status in human society. Islam as a religion permits a man to have more than one wife when necessary but with certain conditions. But it is outside the scope of this write-up. While the Bible did not directly condemn polygamous marriage that occurred in the old testament, as many persons were polygamist, it frankly describes the evil effects of polygamy (polygyny) as in the families of Jacob (Gen 35:22; 37:18-28); of David (1Sam 13: 1-29; 15:1-9); and especially of Solomon (1 Kings 11:2). Scriptures therefore, showed us the evil that was associated with polygamy during the Old Testament era as we do not have direct reference to any polygamist in the new testament era. Polygamy has been found even in Christian Europe. No obstacle was put in the way of its practice by kings in countries where it occurred.

Polygamy has been at the heart of the whole polemics within the church and the African community. This social problem has been from the mid-nineteenth century until today, especially, following the entry of Christianity and of the Europeans into Africa. The Church and the human communities interacted well. But in the practice of polygamy the church and its earthly human communities became strange bed-fellows. As Alan Tippet describes it: "the current situation is urgent (2). We shall briefly explore the nature,

extent and function of polygamy while also highlighting the problems associated with it, the action of the church on polygamy together with its socio-ecclesiastical issues, possible solutions and the way forward.

The Nature, Extent and Function of Polygamy

In its basic nature, the word "polygamy" is a generic term, referring to either kind of plural union: the single husband with several wives, the type of union called "polygamy," and the single wife with several husbands, the type of union called "polyandry." Polyandry is very rare in the Africa community. Polygamy, however, is the word in popular employment to describe the state of man who has more than one wife simultaneously. In this study, the popular concept will be used.

The extent of polygamy is vast. It is still as significant phenomenon in African countries. Eugene Hilman calculates the polygamy rate and concludes that there is an average of 150 wives to 100 husbands, or a ratio of 1.5 wives to each married man. The rates appear to be lower in East, Central and Southern Africa than in West Africa. For example, in East Africa Kenya has 1.321, Tanzania 1.25 and Uganda 1.18, but in West Africa, Gabon has 1.41, Ghana 1.35, and Cote D' Ivoire 1.40, all figures have been taken round about the 1960s (3).

It is difficult to say whether polygamy is increasing or decreasing. Within any community there are favourable and unfavourable factors. The rates are less in urban areas than rural environments and the chances of becoming a polygamist improve with age and wealth. Very few countries have legislated against it and the law has little effect in those countries, such as Cote Ivoire, which have done so. Nigeria, Uganda and Tanzania have placed polygamous and monogamous marriages on equal footing though within separate ordinances. Within any population the actual number of polygamous men is small, at the most a quarter, although the majority of remaining three-quarters of monogamous marriages is potentially polygamous.

The function of polygamy within any Africa community is multifaceted. The institution of polygamy in traditional Africa was not merely a means of satisfying male lust. It helped to stabilize the marriage and integrate the family with society; it regulated social relationship and was a status and symbol of the wealthy. Procreating many children was also a sign of blessing and pride; consequently barrenness of a wife motivated a man to marry more wives in order to keep up the family heritage and genealogy. Both men and women were protagonists of the polygamous system, which also helped

in horticultural farming. Further, polygamy was functional since life expectancy was short, the infant mortality rate was lamentably high, and mothers were the cheapest source of food for infants during the nursing periods of two or three years. During that period sexual relations were taboo. Also polygamy lowered the incidence of “illegitimate” children, who were not welcome in the community, and eliminated the need for adoption, which Africa dislike.

In addition, polygamy minimized the temptation of the man committing adultery, and increased the chances of most women getting married, because to be unmarried was looked down upon. Polygamy again cared for the widows through a leviratic custom. It created multiple alliances with different families, thereby sustaining complex affine networks of extended families. This kindred network was a support system for marital stability, communal identity, social ministry and social security. Divorce was at a low rate, and the plurality of wives and children insured the man’s personhood and economic livelihood.

The Problem

The church in its conceptualization of mandatory monogamy encountered the African contextualization of functional polygamy. In this tension between the church’s theory and the community’s practice, two problematic concerns stand out; (1) is polygamy an adequate form of marriage for community member who becomes a Christian; and (2) is a polygamous convert from the community to be baptized, and subsequently allowed to take the Lord’s supper(4)

The history of missions and church planting in Africa strongly suggest a lack of appreciation of the social justifications of African polygamy. Due to the missionaries own cultural practice of monogamy, they generally saw polygamy as a state of adultery that was in conflict both natural and divine law. The world missionary conference at Edinburgh in 1910 labeled polygamy one of the gross evils of heathen society which like habitual murder or slavery, must at all cost be ended”. That it was declared to be unlawful with the Church of Christ even though commenced ignorance; (1) because it has been pronounced adultery by Christ; (2) because it has been declared by God to be contrary to the divine institution of marriage; (3) because it is written “let every man love his own wife, and let every woman have her own husband”(5).

Consequently the first missionaries to Africa required polygamist to forsake all their wives except one. When Kasagma, the Omukama (king) of the Toro kingdom in Uganda converted to Christianity, he had to send away eleven of his wives and retain only one. The rigid and unsympathetic view of polygamy has persisted. As recently as 1964, Kenneth Taylor reported on an incident that occurred when he met with a group of keen evangelical missionaries in Africa one of them shared how a local chief had received the Lord Jesus as his Savior and how he had carefully pointed out to the chief that the very first thing to do after disposing of his idols or fetishes must be to dispense of all but one wife. All the missionaries praised the Lord when they were told that the chief had done this (6). The issue of polygamy has begun to receive serious attention by Western and African scholars. Some scholars even contend that polygamy is legitimate (7)

Biblical Perspective on Polygamy

Our analysis of polygamy must be biblical ideal of marriage as presented in the opening chapters of Genesis. Thereafter, however, most of the Biblical material is descriptive rather than making statement about the morality of their action. The Bible has no clear cut statements condemning or prohibiting polygamy as it was practiced in the Old Testament.

As Christians, we should also pay attention to the example set by the apostle. Paul instructed that monogamy is, without any doubt, God's deal for marriage. God created only one wife for Adam (Gen 1:28; 2:24), and had he wanted polygamy to be the norm, he would have made more than one woman. John soon summarized the concept of marriage set up in Gen 2: 24 as "an exclusive heterosexual covenant between one man and one woman, ordained and sealed by God, heralded by a public leaving of parent in exchange for a permanent mutually supportive partnership, normally crowned by the gift of children". This is the type of relationship that Jesus endorsed in Matt 19:4-6. The church must stand by his position.

Because the monogamous and indissoluble union of one man and one woman is God ideal, it follows that polygamy, like divorce, is a deviation from this norm. A polygamous marriage is thus a "form of marriage which is less satisfactory than monogamy and one which cannot do justice to the full spirit of Christian marriage, but in certain circumstances individual Christians can still put up with it, as they put up with slavery, dictatorial government, and much also".

The question arises; if polygamy is sinful because it is less than God's ideal for marriage, how can someone be forgiven that sin while continuing to be polygamist? Does not forgiveness required renunciation of sin? The answer to this question can be found in 1Cor 7:1-40. Here, Paul is addressing certain questions in marriage that arose in the Corinthian Church. One of them is the problem of a believer married to an unbeliever. Paul tells those in this situation that "each one should retain the place in life that the Lord assigned to them and to which God has called him. This is laid down in all the Churches" (1 Cor 7:17). He repeats the same principle in 7:20 and in 7: 24 while applying it to believers' social-economic and physical circumstances as well as their marital circumstances. The entire verse implies that in whatever state we are when we come to the Lord, we should function faithfully in that state without immediately seeking to change it".

Summary of the Biblical Data

The indissoluble monogamous union of a man and woman is God's ideal for marriage. The practiced of polygamy issues from a sinful heart because it violates God's command at creation. However neither the old nor the New Testament depict polygamy as living in adultery. Polygamy was less common in Testament time, but it seems safe to infer, that there were polygamist in the church who were not considered adulteress but were baptized on the basis of their repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. They may well have been full- fledged members of their local congregation. We can also infer that Christians should not seek to change their marital situation. Our study of the biblical teaching on polygamy has made it clear that we do not have clear answers regarding polygamy in the revealed world of God. Where the scripture is silent, we have to be very careful in drawing conclusion that may suit our cultural inclination and contradict the spirit of the scripture.

Treatment of Polygamists in Churches

The intolerance of polygamy by the missionaries and some contemporary church leader has created many ethical and social problems and has left a legacy of embittered wives and children, who were sent away without anyone to provide for them. Some have even had to resort to prostitution in order to survive. This situation has raised the question; "is it morally right to require that a man who has contracted marriage to more than one wife, renounce them on conversion"? And which of them is a greater evil, polygamy or divorce? Adrain Hastings' observations are appropriate;

A non-Christian has accepted a lifelong obligation by plural marriage from which he is not entitled to withdraw. To do so is frequently to cause very real injustice and misery to wives and children. To impose this upon other defenseless people is a strange way of preparing for baptism. It is the woman and children, not the man who suffer to enforce separations of this kind. To end a polygamous marriage in the name of Christ, who said nothing explicitly to condemn it, at the expense of effecting divorce, which Christ explicitly forbids, is to pay too high a price to achieve a theoretical conformity with one part of the Christian pattern. (8)

And what happens to the children? In Africa being without a parent causes serious social problems and has long lasting psychological implications. The children of a rejected wife have no one to provide for them and are considered illegitimate. The grandson of a polygamist who had seventeen wives and many children expresses his anger and frustration when he writes;

It is my opinion that legislation against polygamy has done more than good. The church's position is neither warranted by scripture or sanctioned by apostolic example nor justified by common reason. Whenever the church breaks up legitimate family ties, it creates bastards out of legitimate children and indirectly promotes adultery or whoredom, it is failing in its mission to bring the gospel of Jesus Christ to a sick world. (9)

Again the question might be asked: would Jesus or St. Paul have demanded that polygamists should send away their wives and children in order to become Christians? Another consequence of the requirement to divorce all but one wife, has been the splintering of the church as polygamists have founded their own church that still accommodates their way of life.

Today many African initiated churches allow, and even encourage, polygamy. Such groups include the cherubim and seraphim movement church in Nigeria, the United Native of African (now the first African church mission Inc; some branches of the Methodist church and the African Greek Orthodox church. The splintering would likely not have come about if the church had helped people to remain in the truth without demanding that polygamists separate from additional wives.

The church's opposition to polygamy has also led some people to completely refuse to accept Christ and instead remain pagans or embrace Islam. The Yoruba chief of Nigeria neither could nor reconcile themselves to a God who would leave their families apart. The issues of how to respond to polygamy is especially crucial in Northern Nigeria where many people are polygamous, but coming to know the Lord Jesus. Should the church require these polygamists to forsake their wives before being accepted? In one of the largest towns (with a population 45, 000) more than two thirds of the population were lost to Islam when one man of considerable influence was denied church membership because his home was polygamous. The young man in charge of the parish where the man lived applied a strict interpretation of the ideal of "one wife" when the man accepted the Christian faith and desired baptism. Unwillingly to reject his wives, he ran into the warm embrace of Islam, the religion in which his family remains to this day.

The above story is not intended to imply that Christians must sacrifice the truth in order to retain converts in the church. The point is that there is great need for tact and understanding concerning the issue of polygamy, especially when there is no clear biblical statement that equates it with adultery.

THE CHURCH'S ACTION

In order to change the polygamy institution and transform the system, the church has acted in various ways. According to Adrain Hasting there are four basic positions that are discernible with regard to the church's action on polygamous marriage. First polygamy is simply a sin, comparable with adultery. This was the earlier position taken by many missionaries and western thinkers until recently. Second, polygamy is an inferior form of marriage, not sinful where it the custom but always unacceptable for Christians. This is probably the position of most Christians today. Third, polygamy is a form of marriage less satisfactory than monogamy but the church cannot put up with it as the first century church did with slavery and dictatorial government. This position advocated by Hastings who feels polygamy can be tolerated but undermined by promoting the ideal of

monogamy. Forth, polygamy is one form of marriage, monogamy another. Each has its advantages and disadvantage in different societies. It is not the duty of church to make any judgment between them, this is more cultural relatively viewpoint and often championed by independent persons among the African communities.

On Christian baptism, the problem is accentuated by the church's multitude of attitude. There are at least eight different solutions as indicated by Alan Tippett. First, all the women and the children may be baptized, but not the husband. Second, all the children may be baptized, but not the women and husband. Third, only those who are not in any way connected with polygamy may be baptized. Fourth, the husband may be baptize, if he retains his first wife, while divorcing the others. Fifth, the husband may be baptized, if he divorces all but the most preferred wife, sixth, all may be with the understanding that any subsequent plural marriage are forbidden. Seventh, all may be baptized, if they have monogamous god-parents. Eight, on the testimony of their faith alone, any of them may be baptized with no other previous conditions.

The Community Reaction

The action of the church, in any direction on polygamy and baptism, has necessitated changes in the indigenous African sitting. This phenomenon has affected a community reaction from three schools of thought: the rightist, the leftist, and the eclectic, which Nwafor Orizu points out:

The rightist school sees the church action as functional and positive. The church's insistence on monogamy and denial of baptism to polygamist have brought a development of social, cultural, and moral stability, only in the church can there be genuine attainment of a couple higher potential. The fears and taboos in polygamy are overcome, and one is converted from supervision to reality, from darkness to light and from primitively to modernity. The bounties of the church action are opened up higher standards of living and greater marital parity between husband and wife. The church has moreover inculcated the

invaluable benefits of education, social mobility, and intellectual enlightenment of the family, especially of the wife. (10)

The leftist school however sees the church action from a conflict perspective, of course, the church has stolen the vitality of the African stamina, physically, socially, culturally and mentally, it has caused social disruption and family disintegration. It has brought in its wake nothing but disequilibrium and cultural decay. Things have fallen apart and the centre cannot hold any longer in the family. Divorce rates have increased and the church action is consistent with any injustice to legally marriage wives and legitimately procreated children. An unending demand of monogamy is both ethnocentric and anti-African. It is unethical colonialism to make “Western” monogamy to be “right” and “African” polygamy to be “wrong” it is a germ religious intolerance and bigotry to call the African simultaneous polygamy improper, while the West practices “consecutive progressive” polygamy through their sequences of divorce and re-marriage.

The intermitted divorcees and remarried partners are baptized and allowed to partake in the Lord’s super, whereas, simultaneous polygamists in culturally approved communities are denied the same rites. The church action is parochial and inimical to the indigenous system as well as not being authenticated by the scriptures. Thus, in a pluralistic African society, the variegated impact of the church action on polygamy is viewed by these three schools of thought: the conservative rightists, who affirmed the action, sees it as an assert; the radical leftist who oppose the change and sees it as a liability, and the moderate eclectic, who accommodates the new institution and sees it as a *Comme ci, Comme ca*.

Conclusion

Polygamy violates God’s norms of a monogamous and indissoluble marriage. From this point of view it fails to meet God’s intended plan for marriage. However the biblical material on polygamy indicates that God in his sovereign will tolerate polygamy as a form of marriage. More than that, polygamists in the Old Testament were full members of the people of God. The inference in the New Testament strongly indicates that polygamists, though disqualified by the leadership of churches today were in the Old Testament full members of the Christian church. Therefore, polygamists who contracted their marriages before conversion should not be required to divorce their wives but should be accepted as full members in the body of Christ as it was the practice in the Old Testament. To do otherwise is to

obscure the central gospel of justice, mercy and love. Divorce is harmful, even in polygamous situations and has severe consequences for wives and children. We should heed the option of Professor Danfulani Kore, a Nigerian who is a respected conservative Evangelist theologian:

When those with a polygamous background become believer, the church must not command that the husband divorce the second wife before they were saved or become church members. This is unbiblical. Divorce is a sin. In addition such an action will harm the woman and her children. No one can deny a polygamist salvation in Christ if they put their faith in him. They should be allowed baptism in obedience to Christ command Matt. 28: 19-20. It follows then that believers from polygamous backgrounds should be allowed to take part in Holy Communion. (11)

In their zeal to give the gospel its purest form along side with the higher Christian ideals, missionaries often forget the principle of the world of God; they do not often take time to work themselves out as ideals". Thus, the church in Africa should 'tolerate polygamy but undermine it by promoting it to the seemingly superior ideals of monogamy'. As the church teaches a biblical theology of marriage, it can be hoped that by the second and third generations, the problems of polygamy among the Christian churches will be minimized and hopefully eradicated.

The church is not established in space nor without human locality. It is important then for the church to understand the worldview of its audience and community. As the world became flesh in the person of Jesus of Nazareth in a particular historical and cultural milieu, so the modern church must become flesh in the language and culture of the community. Further, the purpose of the church does not change the neuter of the church in terms of its theological identity neither changes. But the church; its social form and structure changes from age to age and form locality to locality, according to the community's sociological setting. This indicates that the incarnate gospel of the church must be actualized. Consequently, the church action on polygamy in the African community needs to be reconsidered and predicated on the solid understanding of the unchanging gospel. While impacting and

changing communities, the distilled essence of the church must be distinguished from the cultural veneer in which the essences is couched. Therefore, as an African church member with pragmatic knowledge of polygamy in the local community, it seems best to conclude with these two-fold premises: that polygamy is an inadequate form of Christian marriage, but that polygamous converts from the community should be allowed to receive baptism and the Lord's super without any reconditions.

While polygamy is an inadequate form of marriage, yet the widespread treatment of polygamist by the church is completely unsatisfactory. The denial of baptism and the Lord's Supper to polygamous converts has been a thorn in the flesh for many well-meaning Christian persons in the Africa community. Polygamy is not explicitly of faith without which a community membership is unfit for the church. Above all, it is not the unforgivable sin against the Holy Spirit (Mathew 12:312).

The underlying motif is "Go therefore and make disciple of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit: (Mathew 28: 19). It does not say "except the polygamist". In addition, the Ethiopian eunuch asked Philip, "See, here is water! What is to prevent my being baptized?" (Act 8: 36). On the basis of his faith alone, he was baptized. Here the passage as well does not by any figment of hermeneutic principle connote "apart from the polygamist: to insist on a man becoming a monogamist before baptism is to deny the gospel and stand under the same refutation that Paul advanced against the Judaizers who insisted on circumcision as a condition of church acceptance (Galatians 5:6) it is re-introducing law into the saving grace of the gospel.

On the celebration of the Lord's Supper, Jesus commanded through Paul that we should do this as often as we remember him (1 Corinthians 11:26). Still believing polygamist from the African community is barred from participating in the church as the body of Christ is bereft of true justice. Hence the two basic church observances of baptism and Lord's Supper should not be denied to the polygamous converts. But instead, this seems to be the order of the day. It has remained an unconscious, intricate interlining of the church with Western cultural standpoints, cemented by the early missionary movements.

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