

Peoples' Perception of Polygyny in Contemporary Times in Nigeria

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INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the change in attitudes of people towards polygynous marriage. Polygyny is the marriage of one man to two or more women. It is known to be one of the distinctive characteristics of primitive African family. According to Pison (1986), polygyny is associated with high rates of divorce. Thus, Timeus and Reynar (1998) argued that, since, in most of Africa, divorced and widowed women remarry rapidly, this makes it possible for more men to become polygynists. The authors also opined that polygyny is found more often in combination with patrilineal than matrilineal kinship systems. It is also associated inversely with political complexity.

To Boserup (1970), Clignet (1970) Ademola (1994) polygyny has an economic advantage for men in African societies where women undertake much of the agricultural labour and where a large family provides both labour and physical security. It is uncommon in societies that lack any form of social stratification (Clignet, 1970). The process of urbanization and industrialization is also expected to weaken extended family systems and encourage the emergence of conjugal families (Goode, 1970).

Timeus and Reynar (1998) noted that, generally Christian populations tend to be less polygynous than Muslim ones while ethnic groups that hold to traditional African belief systems are most polygynous. It is also less prevalent in societies where more adult women are literate. These and many other factors have been identified by different authors as the basis to support the prevalence of polygyny in different societies.

However, different theories have also been propounded by different authors with respect to the rise and change in attitudes towards polygyny. For instance, Becker (1991) applied the micro-economic model to the study of marriage and family. He made explicit analogy between the household and the firm. To him, household mem-

bers receive "income" according to their marginal contributions to the output. Children are the primary output of the household. Since women make greater marginal contribution than men toward the production and care of children, it follows that, households with more women will have higher "productivity" than those with only one woman, thereby encouraging polygynous marriages.

However, in the course of history with industrialization and urbanization, households have greatly reduced their demand for a large family size quantity of children and correspondingly increased their demand for quality of children. Thus Kanazawa and Still (1999) noted that, since the marginal contribution of men to quality is much greater than to quantity, the incidence of polygyny has declined substantially over time.

Melotti (1981) argued in favour of human evolutionary history from promiscuity to polygyny to monogamy. He noted that, the average coefficient of relatedness among children of promiscuous unions is smaller than that among children of polygynous unions which in turn is smaller than that among children of monogamous unions. Altruism among children of monogamous family is therefore evolutionarily more beneficial than altruism among children of promiscuous unions. Thus, monogamous family has been evolutionarily selected over time. However, Kanazawa and Still (1999) argued that, human being have always been altruistic toward their kin through millions of years of their evolutionary history. Melotti's theory cannot explain why polygyny was widespread until a few years ago or why many people still practice polygyny today.

In another development, Alexander (1987) and MacDonald (1990) believe that monogamy is a compromise or concession that upper class men make to lower class men in exchange for their political support under democracy. To them, wealthy men abolished polygyny and instituted monogamy in order to placate poor men, who

would be wifeless under polygyny while Wright (1994) pointed out that most women are materially better off, and most men are productively worse off under polygyny. This is simply because, some men are able to monopolize women and make women scarce. Thus, the supply of women is decreased relative to the demand for them. This in turn increases their value. But Grossband (1980) contended that the extent of resources inequality among men has a positive effect on the level of polygyny in society, Kanazawa and Still (1999) also believe that women benefit from polygyny only when there is extreme resources inequality among men. Thus, the extent of resources inequality among men and the level of women's power have a positive interactive effect on the level of polygyny in society. Therefore, unlike Alexander (1987) and McDonald (1990), who believed that institutions are imposed on society top-down by its political leaders, Kanazawa and Still (1999) believe that institutions emerge spontaneously bottom-up as an aggregation of individual choices among a large number of people in society.

The objectives of this paper are to

- (i) Examine the change of attitudes of men and women in Yoruba land to polygynous marriage.
- (ii) Examine the factors that have contributed to this change of attitudes.

METHOD

This study was carried out among men and women in the six southwestern states e.g. Ogun, Ondo, Ekiti, Lagos, Oyo and Osun in Nigeria.

For the purpose of this study, a total number of two thousand (2,000) respondents were involved. One hundred respondents were selected from each of the twenty selected centres across the zone. Purposive sampling techniques was used to select these centres, such that people from different geographical locations and dialectical differences are well represented in the sample.

There are more women ($n_1 = 1,100$) than men ($n_2 = 900$) in the total sample because of two main reasons. (i) Women are much more readily available to be interviewed than men. (ii) There are more women than men in Nigeria's population. As a matter of fact, the 1991 population

census confirmed this assertion.

The sample was further divided into four sub-groups consisting of the following:

- (i) Women in monogamous marriage (WM)
- (ii) Women in polygynous marriages (WP)
- (iii) Men in monogamous marriages (MM)
- (iv) Men in polygynous marriages (MP)

Purposive sampling method was used to select the respondents such that more men and women in polygynous marriages are included than their counterparts in monogamous marriages. Thus, the sample sizes of each group are as follows: WM = 497, WP = 603, MM = 386 and MP = 514.

The use of in-depth interview technique was relied upon to gather the data for this study while the data were analyzed by the use of simple percentage method and Z – Y index analysis table.

Key to the tables

++ = Where the opinion was expressed by most of the respondents.

+ = Where the opinion was expressed by some of the respondents.

– = Where the opinion was not expressed at all.

DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

Table 1 through 3 shows the presentation of our results across the four groups. Table 1 shows the different causes of the practice of polygyny. Of all the different reasons identified however, religious belief is more emphasized than the others as most people in all the groups expressed the opinion. This opinion was followed by the excessive sexual urge. While infertility of the previous wife or wives is next to this. Other reasons expressed by three out of the four groups include: incompatibility/behavioural differences, professional needs e.g. for farming and theatre, needs for extensive procreation and the desire for male children. Only the monogamous men and women said that customs and tradition could cause polygyny while on the other hand the polygamous men and women said that wealth can also account for this. Only the polygamous men expressed that men's fear of loneliness at old age if wife died before them can result to polygyny while only the polygamous women said that parental wish/influence can cause it and that some men and women were lured into it.

Extract 1: Indepth Interview with Polygamous Women

Other different opinions expressed by different polygamous women are. "A married man was the only available option then", "A married man was the best alternative then", "No other suitors were forthcoming", "The man was stinking rich and generous" and that "It was just a coincidence or luck".

When respondents were asked about what they think are the advantages of polygyny to men, the most emphasized of all the opinions was that women serve as a source of labour and help for men. Most of the polygamous men expressed

that the practice serves the purpose of sexual satisfaction and gratification for men while both monogamous and polygynous women also expressed the opinion. All the groups expressed that it serves the needs for extensive procreation, which was highly cherished in traditional Yoruba society. Three of the four groups also expressed that men enjoy good cooking varieties with more emphasis by the polygamous men and women and that it helps to curb the men's promiscuity to a certain extent.

Also both monogamous and polygamous men believed that it was a symbol of honour, wealth and prestige in the traditional Yoruba society.

Table 1: Causes of the practice of poly of polygyny

<i>Responses</i>	<i>MM</i>	<i>PM</i>	<i>MW</i>	<i>PW</i>
Infertility of previous wife(s)	+	++	+	-
Incompatibility/behavioural difference	+	+	-	+
Religious belief	++	++	++	++
Professional needs e.g. farming and theatre	+	+	+	-
Extensive procreation	+	+	+	-
Excessive sexual urge	+	+	++	++
Wealth	-	+	-	+
Men's fear of old age	-	+	-	-
Desire for male children	+	+	+	-
Illiteracy/Ignorance	+	+	-	-
Customs and tradition	+	-	+	-
Some are lured into it	-	-	-	+
Parental wish/influence	-	-	-	+

Table 2: Advantages of polygyny to men

<i>Responses</i>	<i>MM</i>	<i>PM</i>	<i>MW</i>	<i>PW</i>
Extensive procreation	+	+	+	+
Symbol of honour, wealth and prestige	+	+	-	-
Sexual satisfaction and gratification	-	++	+	+
Source of extra labour and help	++	++	++	++
Enjoyment of good cooking varieties	-	++	+	+
Helps to curb men's promiscuity to certain extend	-	+	+	+
Takes care of problem of loneliness at old age	-	+	-	-
Wives compete for men's attention	-	-	+	-
Helps men to check bad behaviour of their wives	-	-	-	+

Table 3: Disadvantages of polygyny

<i>Responses</i>	<i>MM</i>	<i>PM</i>	<i>MW</i>	<i>PW</i>
It causes premature death	+	++	-	++
Inadequate resources to cater for the family	+	++	+	++
Inability of the man to satisfy the sexual needs of the wives	++	+	-	++
Inability of men to control the family	+	++	-	-
Spiritual and physical attack	+	+	+	++
Incessant quarreling tension and bickering	++	++	++	++
Personal stress, emotion and psychological disturbances	-	+	-	++
Loss of sense of security	-	-	-	+

Only polygynous men said that it takes care of their problem of loneliness at old age, while only monogamous women said that wives compete for the husband's attention and love which makes each of them to pamper him and only the polygynous women said that the practice helps men to check the bad behaviour of their wives.

Extract II: *Indepth Interview with Monogamous Women*

“Men drive pleasure from seeing their wives competing for attention and affection”.

On the other hand when the respondents were asked about the advantages of polygyny to women. Some of the respondents said that co-wives serve as helpers in the family, most especially in the household duties. Thus the monogamous women emphasized “Karin Kapo, Yiye ni yeni” i.e. there is honour in doing things together, a basic philosophy and ideology which emphasizes collective orientation and group solidarity. However, most of the respondents in this study (about 81.09%) believed that polygyny has no particular advantage to women.

Finally, the most emphasized of all the disad-

vantages of polygyny is the incessant quarrelling tension and bickering in the home. Also, inadequate resources to cater for the family and spiritual and physical attacks were also identified by all the groups with more emphasis on the former by both polygynous men and women and the latter by only the polygynous women.

All the groups except the monogamous women also expressed that polygyny leads to premature death and that the man will be unable to satisfy the sexual needs of the wives. Only the men's group expressed the inability of men to control such homes while both the polygynous men and women said that it lead to personal stress, emotional and psychological disturbances and the polygamous women expressed the opinion that there is always the loss of sense of security in polygynous homes.

Below is the inter-group analysis and cross tabulation of our findings to show the attitudes of the respondents in the recent times to the practice of polygyny.

Table 4 through 6 show the cross tabulation of the attitudes of the respondents to the practice of polygamy nowadays.

Table 4: Responses on the defendability of polygyny

<i>Responses</i>	<i>MM</i>		<i>PM</i>		<i>Total</i>	
	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>
Defendable	50	12.95	101	19.65	151	16.78
Not defendable	303	78.50	400	77.82	703	78.11
Indifferent	33	8.55	13	2.53	46	5.11
Total	386	100.00	514	100.00	900	100.00

Table 5: Responses on eradication of polygyny

<i>Responses</i>	<i>MM</i>		<i>PM</i>		<i>Total</i>	
	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>
Wants polygyny eradicated	403	81.09	475	78.77	878	79.82
Does not want it eradicated	65	13.08	100	16.58	165	15.00
Indifferent	29	5.83	28	4.65	57	5.18
Total	497	100.00	603	100.00	1100	100.00

Table 6: Responses on legislation against polygyny

<i>Responses</i>	<i>MM</i>		<i>PM</i>		<i>Total</i>	
	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>
Will support legislation	261	67.62	200	38.91	461	51.22
Will not support legislation	70	18.13	251	48.83	321	35.67
Undecided	55	14.25	63	12.26	118	13.11
Total	386	100.00	514	100.00	900	100.00

Table 4 shows that majority of the respondents representing 78% believed that polygamy is no longer defensible in the present day society. Thirty-two percent believed that polygamy is still relevant and defensible while the remaining 11% felt indifferent. The significance of these findings is that polygamy is no longer defensible in contemporary times.

Also, table 5 shows that majority of the two women's groups representing 79% want polygamy eradicated, 15% does not want it eradicated while the remaining 5% were indifferent. Thus, whether in monogamous or polygynous settings, most women want polygyny to be eradicated.

Finally, table 6 shows that majority of the respondents representing 51% will support legislation against polygyny, 35% will not support the move while 26% were undecided. It is however clear that most of those who are opposed to legislation against polygyny are men practicing polygyny. This finding is not strange as they are trying to defend what they engage in or are doing. This notwithstanding, the verdict here is in favour of legislation against polygyny.

DISCUSSION

This study investigated the change in attitudes towards the practice of polygyny in Yoruba land.

Based on the results obtained from the analysis of data, some of the advantages of polygamy to men include, extensive procreation, sexual satisfaction and gratification and help to check men's promiscuity among others while majority of the respondents believed that polygyny has no advantage for the women.

On the other hand the disadvantages of polygyny as identified by the respondents include premature death, inadequate resources to cater for the family, spiritual and physical attacks and incessant quarrelling and bickering in the homes.

It is also clear from the findings that majority of the respondents are no longer favourably disposed towards the practice of polygyny. Thus, majority of the women both in monogamous and poly-gynous settings want a total eradication of the practice while majority of their men counterparts advocated for legislation against polygyny.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Based on the findings of this study, it can be concluded that the attitudes of the Yorubas in the southwestern part of Nigeria has changed against the practice of polygyny.

In the light of this, it becomes imperative to make the following recommendations.

One, that the government should organize enlightenment programme through the media to educate everybody on the disadvantages of polygyny and try to discourage its practice.

Wives were also to be advised to take good care of their husbands and be obedient. They should also not neglect their appearances after marriage.

Tolerance and understanding should be couples' watchword in every marital problem they have.

Finally, parents should try as much as possible to educate their children on the disadvantages of polygyny and try to discourage them from its practice.

KEY WORDS Attitude. Society. Economy. Spiritual.

ABSTRACT The study examined the peoples' perception of polygyny in Contemporary Times in Nigeria. The study sought to identify the factors that have led to peoples change of attitudes about polygyny in general as well as their perceived advantages and disadvantages of polygyny. The data were collected using qualitative methodologies consisting of in-depth interviews and Focus group discussions. In all, 2000 respondents were used for the study. The respondents were selected using multiple sampling techniques comprising f(i) Stratified random sampling (ii) Quota sampling and (iii) systematic sampling techniques. The data were analyzed by the use of frequency tables, simple percentage and Z - Y index analysis method. The study revealed that, there has been a change in people's attitudes towards the practice of polygyny. As high as 79.8% of women in our sample desire that polygyny be eradicated while 51.2% of the men will support legislation against the practice. Again a greater percentage of the women are against polygyny than the men.

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