

**THE PERCEPTION AND DEFIES OF POLYGAMY IN THE BAMALI COMMUNITY,
CAMEROON, A POST-COLONIAL SURVEY**

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ABSTRACT

In the Bamali community of Cameroon, just as in other parts of Africa, polygamy was an important aspect of indigenous culture which was widely acceptable and practiced by many. Monogamy was regarded as a form of weakness given the fact that the might and pride of a man was measured in accordance with the number wives and children he had. This paper seeks to examine the perception of polygamy and its defies in the Bamali community. It highlights the basis of polygamy among the Bamali people, and also explores the impact of polygamous marriages on the family. The paper sustains the argument that, despite the fact that polygamy was widely accepted and practiced by many, it had devastating effects on family happiness. In order to achieve this goal, the paper made appeal to some selected primary and secondary sources and the conclusions were drawn after a qualitative historical analysis. The paper concludes by stating that, polygamy was an inherent cultural practice of the Bamali people which resisted cultural extinction and has moved into a revolutionary dimension to transcend the various historical periods.

Keywords: Polygamy, Marriage, Bamali, Relationship, Family.

INTRODUCTION

Polygamy refers to a matrimonial relationship comprising several spouses and ensues in numerous forms. The most common form of polygamy happens when a man marries more than one wife for himself, well-known as polygyny. On a similar note, though to a lesser extent, it happens when a woman marries more than one husband which is referred to as polyandry. Polygamy is a common well recognised and legal practise in various parts of the world especially in Africa, even though it is not practised by everyone.¹ Several factors account for this

¹SiveBresnihan, Understanding Women's Lives In Polygamous Marriages: Exploring Community Perspectives In Drc, Newstone Global Consulting, Trócaire, 2017, p. 34.

practice amongst which include social, economic and religious factors. However, our emphasis in this paper is dwelled on the most common form of polygamous marriage, polygyny, which is the practice of one husband with more than one wife. In Cameroon, polygamous marriages are common especially in the rural areas. At the moment, accurate and current statistics on the prevalence of polygamy in Cameroon are very few or inexistent. In Bamali, polygamous marriages are very common, with greater rates reported among less educated husbands and wives. However, in recent years, there has been an observed increase in the rates of polygamy among highly educated men who can afford a second wife. The practice of polygamy in Bamali is basically influenced by the culture and tradition of the people. Most of these marriages are often associated with serious family disputes especially when the husband dies. This study thus analysis the perception of this practice among the Bamali people and examines the challenges that ensues.

THE PERCEPTION OF POLYGAMY IN THE BAMALI COMMUNITY

Polygamy was considered as an acceptable and valid form of marriage among the Bamali people, in spite of the challenges involved. The people viewed monogamy as a form of weakness given that the might and pride of a man was measured in accordance with the number wives and children he had. In most cases, people who got married to more than one wife were economically stable. Individuals who came from a poor background married one wife because they could not afford to maintain many wives. A man with one wife could not speak in the council of elders and he was regarded as a weakling who could not stand for his household tasks. The more wives a man had, the more children he was likely to have, and the more children he had, the stronger the power of immortality in the family. Such a man had the perception that the larger the size of his family, the greater he became. In this respect, a woman's procreative supremacy was very important for the husband and for the sake of strengthening his might. This was the culture among polygamist within their marriages. Some Bamali women had accepted living the life of being "children manufacturers" in order to make their husbands happy and to secure their marriage. Some women even had to lost who they were as individuals especially when it came to

maintaining themselves.² They could only be recognized by the number of children they produced, especially male children. Polygamy was however viewed by some people as the major course of oppression within the cycle of marriage to women in Bamali community. Several multifaceted factors accounted for the practice of polygamy portraying both the strength and weaknesses of such marriages.

Despite the fact that Christianity discourages polygamy, from a cultural perspective there were certain benefits derived from polygamous marriages according to the people's traditional belief. It was argued that monogamy endorsed adultery because it left many other women unmarried which at the end caused unmarried women to have relationships with married men in exploration of the sense of belonging, security, and sensual fulfilment. Meanwhile in polygamous marriages, no one is unmarried except those who choose to stay single. In polygamy, no children were fatherless, because they were all born within a marriage set up. It is interesting to note that most of those who stood against polygamous marriages eventually had children born out of wedlock. Most women preferred having a child with a father than living as single mothers as such readily accepted to be a second or third wife. In polygamy their children found equal share of everything owned by their father.³ On the other hand, in monogamous marriages some husbands engaged in polygamous marriages in secret. Still regarding culture, when a husband died, his wife/wives were given to his brother. This was meant to ensure that the family structure remained intact and that the children were well taken care of. This practice left the widows and their children in a safe environment because their sexual needs were met, and children born in such relationships were legitimate.⁴

BASIS OF POLYGAMY IN THE BAMALI COMMUNITY

Several factors motivated men to engage in polygamous marriages in the Bamali community. According to Mathias Chombong, polygamy according to the culture of the people was a symbol of economic accomplishment. The insinuation was that the more wives a man had, he was

²J. Valsiner, *Culture and human development*. London, Sage Publications, 2000, p.15.

³R. Goodwin, *Personal relationships across cultures*, London, Routledge, 1999, p. 10.

⁴H., Ware., *Polygamy: Women's views in a transitional society*, Nigeria, 1975. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 1979, 41(1), 185-195.

perceived to be more prosperous in society. It was also evident that polygamy was practiced due to subsistence farming which required large labour force, serving as a means to ensure the family's socio-economic strength. To this effect, child bearing in contexts where polygamy was practiced, also implied to ensuring that the family had enough labour to generate enough food for the family. Revenue generation also motivated the choice of marrying more than one wife. It was believed that the bigger the family size became, the greater the family income as they were more children working in the fields which in turn resulted in the production of more food for the family. As a result, surplus food was sold at the market to generate revenue for the family. Children born in polygamous family become prospective part of the labour force. It was for this reason that women who did not bear children were often subjected to humiliation as such sometimes leading to a man seeking to marry a second wife.

The cultural practice of the people was very influential in a man's choice of taking a second wife, there was a common saying that says "a goat does not depend on one type of grass for feeding", which implied that men were not supposed to marry one wife. This perception reduced women to the level of items. The perception further buttresses the argument that marrying more than one wife was a cultural practice among the Bamali people. Another cultural practice that led to men marrying more than one wife was that when two elderly men were close friends, in order to seal their friendship, one may decide to give out her daughter's hand in marriage to his wealthy friend. Most often than not, when one family owed another and was unable to pay, if that family had a daughter they will exchange their daughter as a debt settlement. Some men went in for multiple wives as a means to avoid adultery and to live freely with the women they so much desired.⁵ Meanwhile some men got into polygamy just to satisfy lust and to derive the pleasure of multiple sex partners. Barrenness however also motivated most men to seek for a second wife, children were commonly believed to bring joy to any household. The desire to have them was certainly one of the major reasons that men took in more wives. Some pundits posit that barrenness of the wife deprived the husband and the whole family of the joy that came with having a new person in the family.

⁵Charles Amonel & Monica Arao, The Values of Polygamy among the Langi People of Northern Uganda G.J.I.S.S., Vol.3(4):48-52, July-August, 2014, ISSN: 2319-8834

THE DEFIES OF POLYGAMOUS MARRIAGES IN THE BAMALI COMMUNITY

Irrespective of the numerous motives advanced to justify the practice of polygamy in the Bamali community, such marriages were often subjected to many challenges and harsh realities especially when it came to peaceful cohabitation in the same household. These challenges posed a serious problem as far as the family structure in general was concerned. The nature of the relationships within the family set up was greatly affected often characterised by accusations, attacks and counter accusations.⁶ Most often, the partiality of husbands according to some women was the paramount problem among the wives in a polygamous marriage. In most cases, when the man exhibited more concern for a particular wife, this led to jealousy and detestation towards the most preferred wife. As a result of this, once the suspicion between the wives turned out to be very ugly, some women at times resorted to witchcraft which was a common practice, in order to eliminate the rival co-wife in a bid to remain the sole favourite of the husband. This phenomenon had an adverse impact on the children who most often were also targeted and killed in mystical ways. In some situations, the attacked wife was forced to abandon her marriage in order to protect her children.⁷

The bond amongst the spouses was characterised by distrust and suspicions, meanwhile in some marriages, the wives pretentiously behaved as though they truly loved one another just to please their husbands, meanwhile in their hearts they hated each other with passion. However, some women openly expressed their hatred for one another even beyond the family cycles. A husband in such a marriage was bound to live with the realities which most often was considered a burden and a source of depression leading to poor mental health problems. It should be noted that the children in such cases paid dearly for the state of family crisis especially when the child's mother was not the favourite of the father. According to Mary Miyah, her husband's 3rd wife controlled almost everything that belonged to her husband. She noted that her husband became afraid to even say anything that will go against what she desired and requested for. Despite the fact that

⁶ Eugene M., Muntoh, Upshots of Domestic Violence On the Status of Women in The City of Bamenda, Cameroon, 1975 TO 2014, International Journal of Advance Research and Innovative Ideas in Education-ISSN(O)-2395-4396, Vol-6 Issue-3 2020.

⁷ S., Elbedour, Bart, et al, The relationship between monogamous/polygamous family structure and the mental health of Bedouin-Arab adolescents. Journal of Adolescence, 2007, 30, 213-230.

she often abused every member of the family, her husband still found it admissible. Mary believed that her husband was probably under the influence of witchcraft. Conflict among wives most often intensified especially in a situation wherein one wife was barren. It was common for a barren woman to be insulted by her co-wife because of her childlessness. This often contributed to frustration and subsequent retaliation from the barren spouse.⁸

There was steady competition and opposition in many polygamous marriages, especially in contest for love by the husband. Each wife used her own kind of powers to win her husband's love. During such contest, the wives often resorted to hatred and opposed one another as a way of pulling off from the marriage relationship. The children were intoxicated and influenced with bad advice against their step mothers. The greediness and resentment for possession was intensified with each wife desiring to be better than others. The first wife often strived for control over everything and made sure that things be done in her own way as the first wife. Most women in polygamous marriage did not trust each other, given that when they realised one of them was receiving more attention from the husband, it was concluded that she was receiving more money and benefiting more from her husband's wealth. The level of education of the different wives was also instrumental in determining the extent of conflicts amongst women in polygamous marriages given that in a situation where one wife was more educated than the others, this created hatred and envy which eventually resulted to witchcraft and poisoning the one who was more enlightened. The problem of deceitful allegations was very common and was almost observed as a normal standard of daily living. Most often, when any one fell sick, it was often associated to witchcraft with accusing fingers pointing at some persons in the family. Some wives even created lies about their co-wives in order to tarnish their image and make them suffer in the hands of their husband.

IMPACT OF POLYGAMY ON THE BAMALI COMMUNITY

One of the most devastating impact of polygamous marriages on families was the high number of births recorded which economically stressed the family resources. The high rate of birth exerted pressure on the finances of the family unit. It was very difficult for a husband to provide

⁸Seani Mavhina, *Traumatic Conflict Among Polygamous Children*, Pretoria, University of Pretoria, 2010, p.23.

quality education for all his children due to the high expenses involved in acquiring education. Most often the children had to depend on learning a trade meanwhile others depended solely on farming for survival. Most polygamous marriages were often associated with trauma, tension, conflict, and disequilibrium in the family structure. This often affected both children and the parents with serious mental health problems associated with it. A majority of children of first wives always demonstrated negative emotions towards their fathers marrying again.⁹ Most of them got disappointed when they found out about their fathers' polygamy intention, thus leading to anger and sadness in the family. No child felt happy, proud or loved upon hearing his/her father was about to take in another woman.

Women in polygamous marriages were often exposed to significant higher psychological distress and other psychological problems. These were in addition to significantly more problems in the family set up, marital relationships and low life satisfaction. Family structure had a substantial impact on the mental health of children as well, thus indicating the growing concern in family characteristics that may reduce the risk of child development and disturbances.¹⁰ In some instances, men left their first wives and their children in order to live with their second wives and their children. In these cases, the father did not participate in the upbringing of all of his children, and those left behind experienced feelings of grief and abandonment, as well as lower levels of parental supervision. Often, the effects on male children was strongest as boys often experienced difficulties with self-control over anger and retaliation against their father.¹¹

Women and children who escaped polygamous families were affected in all aspects of their lives. Because of the secrecy that concealed polygamous relationships, most of their experiences were scarcely known by their families. Generally speaking, mostly strong and resourceful women successfully left a polygamist relationship. One of the most challenging obstacles in living such marriages were the mental and emotional conditioning which made the negatives of

⁹A. Al-Krenawi, *Psychosocial impact of polygamy in the Middle East*, New York, Springer, 2014, P.12.

¹⁰L. D., Shepard, *The impact of polygamy on women's mental health: A systematic review*. *Epidemiology and psychiatric sciences*, 2013, pp. 22,47.

¹¹Mohammad Al-Sharfi, Karen Pfeffer and Kirsty A. Miller, *The effects of polygamy on children and adolescents: a systematic review*, University of Lincoln, Lincoln, 2009, p.23.

the experience normalized tradition. What further compounds problems that women encountered in polygamous marriages were the emotional torture with which she and her children were subjected to. Men who practiced polygamy believed they had the authority to govern and control their wives and children in the family relationship. Most often, this form of control took extreme forms as it was maintained through secrecy.

CONCLUSION

The practice of polygamy remains a common practice in the Bamali community with future prospects of continuing in the future. The practice remains commonly accepted for men of all categories regardless of their economic status. As a result, polygamous men in the Bamali community face enormous difficulties in sustaining their large families in terms of provision of food, medical care as well as meeting the school requirements of the many children. In the absence of legal provisions either restricting or legally limiting the practice, polygamy is likely to continue being practiced for more generations. This is indeed a reality given the fact that the population of women greatly outstrips that of men.

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