

POLYGAMY AND CHRISTIANITY IN AFRICA

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ABSTRACT: *Whereas it is believed erroneously among many people that Polygamy implies the art of a man being married to more than one wife, the true definition of polygamy implies the idea of a man being married to more than one wife (Polygamy) or a woman being married to more than one man at the same time (Polyandry), or more than one man being married to more than one woman all at the same time which is communal marriage. It is the intention of this paper to examine Polygamy especially, which is the idea of a man being married to more than one wife concurrently at the same time. I shall, however, use the word 'Polygamy' because of its popular usage in spite of the fact that I am aware that the right word is Polygamy.*

KEYWORDS: Polygamy, Christianity, Africa

INTRODUCTION

Polygamy is most common in Africa. It is indeed part of the culture of the Africans. Most Africans especially in the past were deeply involved in the practice. In this way I quite agree with Professor Mbiti who says that:

*Technically the term 'Polygamy' should mean what the Greek components imply and that is marrying 'many' (wives or husbands). But in popular usage it is applied to mean the state of marriage in which there is one husband and to two or more wives. This should be referred to as 'Polygamy' and where one wife has two or more husbands this is 'Poly**andry'. I shall use 'polygamy' in the popular sense even though I realize that linguistically that is only partly correct (Mbiti 1969).*

The Encyclopaedia Britannica defines Polygamy as “a form of marriage in which several wives are united to one man each having the status of legal comfort, while her offsprings are regarded as legal descendants of the husband” (Encyclopaedia Britannica 1968).

It adds that “is an institutions, Polygamy exists in all parts of the world” (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1968). The new Caxton Encyclopaedia has this to say on Marriage generally:

The commonest types of marriage are monogamy, in which only one legal spouse is recognized and polygamy in which a man may have more than one

wife. Polyandry the marriage of one woman to several men also exists (New Cotton Encyclopaedia 1969).

The encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics has a lot to say on Polygamy.

It's different forms are polygamy in which one man marries more than one woman, Polyandry, in which one woman marries more than one man and Communal marriage in which more than one man marries more than one woman.

It goes further thus:

The Continent in which Polygamy has reached its highest degree of development its highest degree of development in Africa in many parts of which the practice is so fragment and has so impressed itself upon the Social organization that it has influenced the nomenclature of relationship, and special terms are used to distinguish from one another the children by the different wives of the polygamous marriage.

The European's Culture embraces, welcomes and is much more sympathetic to monogamy, which is the art of one man having only one wife, than Polygamy that is Polygamy and Polyandry,. The Europeans are, however, at one time or the other involved in polygamy howbeit sequential. The Europeans are much more involved in sequential polygamy which is the art of one man marrying more than one wife or one woman marrying more than one man though not at the same time or concurrently. In most cases they divorce the first in order to get married to the second, or even the third. Here it could be difficult, a matter of hot debate or controversy, deciding which is better, much more reasonable and less harmful between the African concurrent polygamy and the European sequential polygamy. I am of the opinion that the Africans concurrent polygamy could be better than the European sequential and systematic polygamy. Although I will not delve too much into this argument in order not to divert our attention from the main issue.

The early European missionaries brought Christianity to Africa and the religion was embraced by Africans. The Europeans, however, unfortunately did not take into consideration the culture of the Africans like Polygamy, mode of dressing, mode of worship and other peculiar traits of the Africans. The European missionaries had no sympathy for the culture of the Africans but rather impose the European Culture on the Africans alongside with Christianity which ought not to be so at all.

“The European missionaries were obviously spreading Christianity to the Africans on one hand while spreading or imposing their culture and customs on the Africans on the other hand. There was not sympathy at all for the culture of the Africans. It was not just accepted nor was it tolerated by the European missionaries” (Falaye) “It did not matter at all to the European missionaries whether their objections and resentments had biblical support or not. These among

other facts led to the Africans to think of establishing their own churches where they could worship freely as Africans” (Falaye).

The European missionaries condemned polygamy and some other African culture entirely. The sad effect of this was that it in turn reduced the level of co-operation of the Africans and thereby slowing down the work of the European missionary in Africa if not grinding it to a halt Mary Slessor’s work for example, was almost reduced to nothing in Calabar and environs because she condemned polygamy and other notable culture of the people. Here it is noteworthy that the Africans had earlier on given some measures of co-operation to the European missionaries on arrival – lavish hospitality being a notable culture of the Africans. The condemnation of polygamy and other culture of the Africans by the European missionaries thereafter only reduced the work of the missionaries from the level of seriousness to the level of amusement and folly in the words of Hanselbarth:

The present differences in policy of how to deal with polygamists and their wives when they want to become members is disastrous and makes us fools before the world. (Hanselbarth, 1976).

Statement of the Problem

It is wrongly believed or accepted by Christians that polygamy is unchristianly, wrong, sinful, bad or even evil or devilish. Some hardliners have even equated Polygamy with Adultery. It is my intention to correct this erroneous opinion or at least expose my readers to the other side of argument if I fail to achieve my first motive.

Quite fortunately, my position in this debate tallies with that of Adrian Hastings in his fourth point categorization of Polygamy among Christian thoughts. It is Hastings opinion that: “There are, it would seem, four basic positions a Christian could take in regard to polygamous marriage” (Adrian Hastings, 1973).

- a. Polygamy is simply a sin, comparable with Adultery.
- b. Polygamy is an inferior form of marriage, not sinful where it is the custom but always unacceptable for Christians.
- c. Polygamy is a form of marriage less satisfactory than monogamy and one which cannot do justice to the full spirit of Christian marriage but in certain circumstance individual Christian can still put up with it, as they put up with slavery, dictatorial government, and much else.
- d. Polygamy is one form of marriage, monogamy another. Each has its advantages and disadvantages, they are appropriate to different types of society. It is not the task of the Church to make any absolute judgement between them.

Polygamy is one form of marriage, monogamy is another. Each has its advantages and disadvantages: they are appropriate to different types of society. It is not the task of the Church to make any absolute judgement between them” (Adrian Hastings, 1973).

I am of the strong opinion that the dilemma of the African Christian on Polygamy could be resolved in this last two quotations. It could be really difficult to out-rightly, or even condemn polygamy at all. Such was the situation that when Africans started founding African independent and indigenous churches, they could not condemn polygamy at all. Professor Tasie for example, gave the examples of William Wade Harris and Garick Soka Braide. Of Williams Wade Harris Tasie writes thus:

He stayed at the same social level as his audience, took lodgings with villagers, ate with them; and exhorted them to discard their objects of traditional religion, their shrines and amulets to observe Sundays piously, and to eschew alcohol, stealing and adultery, the last two being most rampant crimes in societies. On polygamy he remained silent. (Tasie, 1980).

The attitude of these two indigenous African missionaries obviously differ from their earlier Europeans counterparts who insisted that a convert must “observe certain standards of behaviour, and even if, for instance, he was polygamous before accepting the Christian faith, he was required to sever relations with all his wives except one. This in spite of polygamy being a status symbol for the people, and in spite of the practical problems which might be involved through forcefully breaking life long marriage. It may be noted that no scriptural basis was given for the action against polygamy (Tasie, 1980).

The attitude of the African Christian no doubt differs from his European counterpart on the issue of polygamy. Thomas Price for example after investigating widely reveals that:

Insistence on a right to contract polygamous marriage is responsible for most disciplinary expulsions from the Churches and for the setting up of independent local sects. These claim, as a rule, specifically in the titles they adopt to be Christian bodies, but do not sway orthodox opinion (Thomas Price 1954).

The issue of polygamy is definitely a dilemma to the African Christian as well as the European Christian. It can neither be accepted outrightly and wholeheartedly by the European missionaries nor can it be rejected outrightly or wholeheartedly by the African Christian.

The Debate

The debate, controversy, polemic or argument on polygamy is not doubt a hot one raging for quite some years in the history of the church. There are strong arguments against polygamy just as there are strong arguments in favour of polygamy. It is Adrain Hastings opinion that:

Polygamy has been at the heart of the whole marriage debate within the Church in Africa from the mid-nineteenth century until the 1979s though it is likely that in practice other issues are now still more important (Adrain Hastings, 1973).

For the sake of clarity and perhaps convenience, I shall classify the Debate on Polygamy in this paper into three sections namely:

- (a) Arguments against Polygamy
- (b) Arguments in support of Polygamy
- (c) Conclusion

Arguments against Polygamy

Chief among the arguments that antagonists of Polygamy utilize is the claim that it is unscriptural, unbiblical and therefore unchristianly. This argument is however weak and full of loopholes. In the first instance no uncrate or cogent verse in the Old Testament and the New Testament outrightly condemns Polygamy rather the Old Testament seem to support it from the example of Patriarchs.

The verses quoted profusely to condemn Polygamy in the New Testament do not directly or outrightly condemn it but do so mildly, indirectly or by inference if at all they do so. The verses are mainly thus:

This is why a man leaves his father and more and joins himself to his wife and they become one body. (Gen. 2:24).

As bishops they must be blameless, the husband of one wife, vigilant, sober, of good behaviour, given to hospitality apt to teach. (1 Tim. 3:2).

Titus 1:6 is also a similar verse to this in the Bible. Yet another verse that could be relevant to condemnation is Mark 10:11, where Jesus was actually condemning divorce. He equates the marriage of another wife after divorce to adultery.

It is noteworthy, however, that in these verse no direct or outright condemnation of polygamy could be found. The verse at best could be preferring monogamy to polygamy. It could therefore be an issue of preference and by no means a total rejection of the other.

On the first verse (Gen. 2:24), Adrian Hastings comments accordingly:

The test in this, its Hebrew form, has certainly no anti-polygamy references.

On the second verse (1 Timothy 3:2), it talks only on the appointment of a Bishop – a Senior, executive and a supervisory member of the Church. Those who may not fall into that category may possibly not be monogamists. It is noteworthy that Monogamy is certainly not the only qualification for that exalted post or office. By the virtue of the other requirements in the verse, most monogamists could be disqualified and outlawed. The verse says:

A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, vigilant, sober, of good behaviour, given, to hospitality, apt to teach, the requirements of the word “blameless” in doubt disqualify very many monogamists and polygamist as well.

The last verse (Mark 10:11) is actually dealing with the issue of divorce mainly and no direct link with Polygamy. On this verse, Hastings comments thus:

It is equally possible that his (Jesus) condemnation of divorce should be held to include the breaking of a second polygamous Union (Adrain Hastings, 1973).

Finally, on Polygamy, Hastings concludes thus:

No decisive guidance, positive or negative, can be drawn from the Gospel (Adrain Hastings, 1973).

These verses definitely do not justify the denial of polygamist from baptism or Holy Communion by European missionaries nor does it warrant their total expulsion from the Church.

Hastings writes of the Lambeth conference of 1888 and 1908 passing a resolution on Polygamists thus:

It is the opinion of this conference that persons living in polygamy be not admitted to baptism, but that they be accepted as candidates and kept under Christians instruction until such time as they shall be in a position to accept the law of Christ (Adrain Hastings, 1973).

(5) (A), passed by 83 votes to (21).

The Lambeth conference has a double opinion on the issue of favouring wives of polygmists but not their husbands. It states thus:

The wives of polygamists may, in the opinion of this Conference be admitted in some cases to baptism, but it must be left to the local authorities of the Church to decide under what circumstances they may be baptized (Adrain Hastings, 1973).

(5) (B), passed by (54 to 34).

Hans Hanselbarth condemns this attitude of the missionaries saying that:

Such a legalistic stand in today a hindrance of remission and drives many away into the fold of Islam (Hans Hanselbarth, 1976).

Haselbarth Lambasts missionaries who condemn polygamy thus he writes:

Much harm is done by hypocrites who act as while being themselves in the greatest need of forgiveness (Hans hanselbarth)

Hans further judges:

Of all reasons given by antagonists of polygamy in the Church the scriptural verses as feeble as they are constitute the most weighty. Other reasons are by far of lesser importance being, sociological, economical and perhaps advisory.

It is being widely claimed that polygamy may attract numerous financial problems to perpetrators because of the huge amount usually involved in feeding, and clothing the wives and children of the men as well as the huge expenses of educating the children if they care to do so or if it is ever their priority.

Other reasons given are quarrels, hatred, enmity and division among wives and children. Many more feeble reasons are given to discourage polygamy namely that it attracts too many children, leaves several male stranded without wives while polygamous husbands often neglect some wives because they favour others especially the latest additions.

On the first claim that polygamy attracts numerous financial problems I wish to state that it is an exclusive right of those who can afford it, those who cannot are not compelled. The Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics back up this opinion say in that: *It is the special privilege of the powerful and wealthy (Encyclopaedia of Religion).*

Where the different wives have their separate establishment, there is no cause for incessant quarrels or clashes at all. Thomnas Price also destroys this argument by stating thus:

Thus Polygamous household need not be a single cluster of dwellings. Cattle rearing people in particular would set up each wife in a place of her own, at which she would be visited by her husband. In these circumstances the common and well founded objection to polygamy, that it leads to jealous bitering between wives and their groups of children. Losses some of its weight (Thomas Prince 1954)

The excuse that polygamy attracts too many children does not stand where some especially Africans actually like to have as many children as possible. The Bible consciously or unconsciously even supports the idea of having as many children as possible in (Psalm 127:5).

Happy is the man that hath his quiver full of them. (Children)

On the issue that polygamy leaves several eligible male stranded without wives, monogamy can as well be condemned for leaving several female stranded without men. Adrian Hastings raised this issue twice in his discourses on Polygamy thus:

Moreover we are inclined to hear most of the more successful peoples, who may well have carried off a fair number of women from their less fortunate neighbours (Hastings Adrian (1973).

Hasting states further that:

In fact every sample survey of a society which has shown a rather high proportion of married men with more than one wife inevitably also reveals a large number of unmarried adult males. (Hastings Adrian 1973).

Lastly Hastings states that a disadvantage of polygamy thus:

The old and the rich secure extra wives, while the young and the poor have to wait, making do perhaps with a secret arrangements with someone else's junior wife. (Hastings Adrian 1973).

Whereas it could be admitted that these are the disadvantages of polygamy, it is noteworthy that monogamy has the same disadvantages howbeit on the female namely that it leaves many female stranded just as polygamy does for the male.

The argument that some polygamous husbands neglect some wives because they favours others especially the latest addition, is mild and minor. Where polygamy is well handled and well managed by experts such issues rarely come up. Besides, monogamists are not left out of the issue of neglecting their only wives especially when the marriage is fairly old.

Merits Arguments for Polygamy

Whereas the above stated punctured arguments have been stated against polygamy of Africans in the church, the merits, of polygamy are of no parallel in the lives of Africans. Firstly, it is noteworthy that whereas the New Testament is silent, lukewarm and uncertain about the issue of polygamy in the church, the Old Testament wholly supports it. The Old Testament is all through positive about polygamy. There are even numerous examples of polygamy among patriarchs. Adrian Hastings fully backs up this position when he writes thus:

Thus, Old Testament presents us with a number of examples of polygamous marriage, notably the cases of Jacob, David, and Solomon. Israelite society of the time undoubtedly accepted polygamy and there is no condemnation of the practice as such anywhere in the Old Testament. (Hastings Adrian 1973).

Here, Hastings even commended Abraham and Isaac who were also polygamists at one time or the other. In II Samuel Chapter 12 verse 8, God even confirmed that he gave David wives to his bosom. The African culture or system welcomes polygamy thoroughly. It suits the system and the system suits it. Thomas Price quite recognizes this when he writes thus:

African Customary Law recognizes that a man may legally have more wives than one and prescribes no limit beyond which he must go. (Thomas Price 1954).

Mbiti's opinion is no less different for he says that:

Getting married to two or more wives is a custom found all over Africa, though in some societies it is less common than in others. The custom fits well into the social structure of traditional life, and into the thinking of the people, serving many useful purposes. (Mbiti J.S, 1969).

Such is the situation that Edmund Ilogun writing about polygamy and Christianity in Iboland quotes thus:

From the earliest contact of Christianity with Ibo life and society, polygamy seemed one of the most difficult institutions of Ibo life to be easily thrown away by converts. (Edmund Iulogun, 1974).

The Igbo converts could in the first instance give up polygamy only to go back to it later on and thereby frustrating the efforts of the European missionaries attempting to stamp out polygamy of Africans in the Church. Edmund Ilogu even gave a typical example of John Samuel Okosi in Onitaha who retrenched all his wives except the first, as a condition for baptism but called back all the retrenched wives as soon as he was baptized.

One of the best advantages of Polygamy is that it has a place for, accommodates and takes care of widows, the handicapped and it solves the problems of unwilling spinsterhood. On widows, Thomas Price is of the opinion that:

It offers solution to the problem of accommodating widows who have lost their husbands and with them their guaranteed social place. (Thomas Price, 1954).

Thomas Price is also of the opinion that polygamy solves the problems of unwilling spinsterhood and serves as natural contraception for Africans who practice it.

Thus he writes:

... it solves problems of unwilling spinsterhood in communities with fewer men than women, and of male deprivation imposed by lactation taboos which forbid sexual intercourse with a nursing wife. (Thomas Price).

Monogamy has no place at all for widows, the handicapped and unwilling spinsters. Polygamy to a large extent rules out or prevents adultery and prostitution. Hence Mbiti writes thus:

Polygamy helps to prevent or reduce unfaithfulness and prostitution, especially on the part of the husband. (Mbiti J.S., 1969:142).

Next is the fact that polygamy could be very useful where there is the problem of childlessness as a result of barrenness on the part of the wife. Here, it should be remembered that Abraham became polygamous for this reason. Where the man resorts to polygamy he does not have the problem of waiting in anxiety in anger for his handicapped wife. The comic part of the issue is

that in the end, in most cases, every wife ends up having children both the one thought to be barren and the one brought in as a corrective measure.

Here it should be noted that polygamy could also be a way out for a wife giving birth to only daughters.

Mbiti sums up these two points thus

If the first wife has no children, or only daughters, it follows almost without exception that her husband will add another wife, partly to remedy the immediate concern of children childlessness and partly to remove the shame and anxiety of apparent unproductively. (Mbiti J.S., 1969).

At this point we must not forget the counterpart of the barren woman that is the impotent man. In polygamy, that is polyandry, the impotent man could be assisted to help him his riddle. A brother of his, a relative, a friend could be called in to raise offspring for him. This is not possible in monogamy at all.

The two or more wives of the polygamist can actually complement one another in terms of household works. "When a family is made up of several wives, with their households, it means that in time of need there will always be someone around to help".

In desperate situation the wives still complement one another. Such situations as when one wife gives birth others assist her, if one wife is sick they do so too or even if a wife dies, others do take care of her children and their husband. "if one wife is barren others bear children for the family so that the torch of life is not extinguished (Mbiti J.S., 1969).

Professor Mbiti has studied this situation properly when he states that:

This is corporate existence. For example, when one wife gives birth, there are other wives to nurse her and care for other children during the time she is regaining her vitality. If one wife dies, there are others to take over the care of her children" (Mbiti, 1969).

By far the most complex in this issue is that of those who have been polygamists for long before desiring to join the Church. The church demands that they put away other wives except the first before baptism. It sounds quite absurd. Adrian Hastings has the right words to describe this situation. Thus he writes:

To do so is frequently to cause very real injustice and misery both to wives and children. To impose this upon other defenceless people is a strange way of preparing for baptism. It is the women and children, not the men who mostly suffer in enforced separations of this kind. (Adrian Hastings, 1973).

Edmund Ilogu describes the situation as embarrassing to the Church in Africa. Thus he writes:

Furthermore, the failure of the missionary leadership ... to understand the depth of the problem presented by polygamy, has continued to be a source of ethical embracement to the Church not only in Ibo land but all Africa. (Edmund Ilogu, 1974).

Polygamous men do have many children, if they are able to take care of the children, eventually, the children also do take care of the men when they are old. Some African men and women Christian or no Christian do prefer polygamy. In fact when properly managed polygamy could be a better system of marriage in African than monogamy.

CONCLUSION

With these entire cogent points one could see that polygamy could be equally good if not better than monogamy. Lastly, I will like to end up with my stand on the issue which tallies with Hans Hanselbarth and Adrian Hastings fourth position that a Christian could take in regard to polygamy.

Polygamy is one form of marriage, monogamy another. Each has its advantages and disadvantages; they are appropriate to different types of society. It is not the task of the Church to make any absolute judgement between them. (Mbiti, 1969).

Both monogamy and polygamy, from the standpoint of man in society are valid forms of marriage. To simply say that one is good and the other evil would put us into the place of self-righteous judges over the lives of millions. (Hanselbarth, 19973).

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