

THE CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS DYNAMICS OF POLYGAMY IN IGBOLAND

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Abstract:

This article presents a comprehensive exploration of the culture-religious dynamics surrounding polygamy among Igbo. It delves into the historical foundations of polygamy, its cultural significance, and the profound impact of missionary influence on traditional marriage practices. The study adopts a qualitative methodology that integrates cosmological, historical, cultural, and sociological perspectives, facilitating an in-depth interpretation of gathered data. The article examines challenges encountered in reconciling age-old customs with Christian doctrines and proposes strategies for inculturating biblical teachings on marriage among Igbo Christians. By fostering genuine dialogue, mutual understanding, and contextual integration of biblical principles with cultural values, the article advocates for a balanced approach to promote harmony within Igbo society regarding marital practices.

Keywords: Polygamy, Igbo society, Cultural dynamics, Missionary influence, Inculturation, Marriage teachings.

Introduction

The phenomenon of polygamy has garnered significant attention and scrutiny since the mid-19th century, reflecting its enduring presence as a widespread institution with deep historical roots across various civilizations (Ekpendu, 2015). Particularly notable is its entrenched practice in Africa, including the eastern region of Nigeria, where among the Igbo people, polygamy is not merely a marital arrangement but a culturally embedded ideology. This concept is intricately integrated into the societal worldview, perceived as an exclusive prerogative of men with multifaceted benefits ranging from political and economic advantages to the elevation of a man's social status (Nwazonobi, 2013). However, the arrival of early missionaries in Igboland marked a pivotal moment, ushering in debates, conflicts, and challenges for both the Christian church and Igbo society at large. The stringent measures, doctrinal approaches, and teachings on marriage introduced by the church have been met with criticism for their perceived harshness and discordance with Igbo cultural norms. This clash of perspectives has led to setbacks and backlash within the missionary endeavors in Igbo communities (Nmah, 2012). It is imperative to address this matter thoughtfully, considering the potential repercussions on both the Christian church and Igbo society, especially in light of the burgeoning cultural movements in Igboland.

Therefore, this study embarks on an exploration of the cultural and religious dynamics surrounding polygamy within Igbo society in Nigeria. It seeks to delve into the historical foundations of polygamy, its cultural significance, and the profound impact of missionary influence on traditional marriage practices. Central to this investigation is the examination of the challenges encountered in reconciling age-old customs with Christian doctrines, alongside proposed strategies for inculturating biblical teachings on marriage among Igbo Christians.

To accomplish this comprehensive analysis, a meticulous data collection strategy encompassing both primary and secondary sources is employed. Primary sources involve firsthand observations and direct verbal interactions, while secondary sources comprise a diverse array of published and unpublished materials, including academic literature, online resources, and archival documents. Adopting a qualitative methodology that integrates cosmological, historical, cultural, and sociological perspectives allows for a nuanced interpretation of the gathered data. This multifaceted approach is pivotal in facilitating a profound exploration of the intricate cultural and religious dynamics surrounding polygamy within Igbo society in Nigeria.

Polygamy: Cultural, Legal, and Social Perspectives

Polygamy transcends cultural boundaries and is not exclusive to African societies. Originating from the Greek term, polygamy encompasses various forms of simultaneous multiple marriage unions for an individual, including female polyandry and male polygyny. At its core, polygamy entails the practice of a man marrying more than one woman, with the defining feature being his ability to take multiple wives as desired (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2024).

However, the three primary forms of polygamy are delineated as follows:

1. Polygyny: This form involves a family unit where one man is married to multiple wives.
2. Polyandry: In this arrangement, one woman is married to multiple husbands within the family unit.
3. Group marriage: This type encompasses multiple husbands and wives within a single family unit.

Historically, all three forms have existed, with polygyny being the most prevalent arrangement. However, the term "polygamy" within this discourse specifically denotes a man having multiple wives, encompassing the religious, legal, and customary dimensions of such unions (Yamani, 2008).

Polygamy, in essence, describes a marital relationship where an individual is married to multiple partners, contrasting with monogamy, which involves a committed relationship with one partner. Gaskiyane (2000) defines polygamy as a culturally sanctioned, socially accepted, and legally recognized form of permanent marriage where a man has multiple wives concurrently, with acceptability determined by social customs. Kahiga (2007) notes contextual variations in interpretation but emphasizes that polygamy fundamentally entails marriage involving more than one wife (Baloyi, 2013).

Polygamy is a complex social phenomenon with historical, cultural, legal, and religious dimensions. Its prevalence and acceptance vary widely across different societies and are influenced by factors such as traditions, customs, and religious beliefs. Despite its diversity in forms and interpretations, polygamy often raises important questions about marital dynamics, gender roles, family structures, and societal norms. (Hayase & Liaw, 2007)

Within the context of polygamy, scholarly discussions delve into distinct aspects such as the rights and responsibilities of multiple spouses, inheritance and succession laws, children's upbringing, and the emotional well-being of individuals in such unions (Shaiful et al, 2021). These discussions are not limited to academic circles but also extend to legal frameworks, ethical considerations, and public debates about the rights and freedoms of individuals within polygamous relationships.

Furthermore, the impact of polygamy on gender equality, women's rights, and social cohesion has been a subject of critical examination. Scholars and activists argue that while polygamy may have cultural and historical roots, it can perpetuate inequalities and power imbalances within families and communities (Davis, 2010). As such, there are ongoing dialogues and advocacy efforts aimed at promoting more equitable and respectful relationships within polygamous contexts.

Hence, polygamy remains a critical topic that requires careful analysis, considering its various dimensions and implications for individuals, families, and societies as well as challenges and opportunities associated with polygamous unions in contemporary contexts.

Cultural Significance of Polygamy

As noted by Nmah (2004), polygamy continues to be prevalent across Africa, ingrained deeply within the societal fabric as a fundamental value. This underscores the widespread nature of polygamous unions on the continent, emphasizing its integral role within African cultures. Historically, the practice has been deeply rooted, with many Africans actively participating in polygamous marriages. In the view of the above, Mbiti (1969) avers;

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 "Polyandry". I shall use "polygamy" in the popular sense even though I realize that linguistically that is only partly correct (Mbiti, 69).

Within African Igbo societies, polygamy serves multifaceted roles that are deeply intertwined with the social, economic, and cultural fabric of these communities. Primarily, polygamy is viewed as an essential component of the

economy, playing a crucial role in sustaining agricultural practices and other labor-intensive activities vital for livelihoods. With the economy relying heavily on land cultivation and labor, having multiple wives translates to a larger family workforce, contributing significantly to productivity. According to Ekpendu (2015);

The economy of the Igbo's depends on the cultivation of Land. The producing of these crops is time consuming and depends solely on human labor. Since it depends on the family which the man is the head, this means that the greater the number of wives, the greater the number of family members to do the work. It was also sometimes a mutual arrangement between the man and his first wife. As the woman is overburdened with work, or is barren, she encourages her husband to marry a second wife.

Furthermore, polygamy is a matter of prestige for men within Igbo societies. The ability to support multiple wives and their families is often associated with social status and influence. It reflects a man's wealth, power, and capability to manage a large household, which enhances his reputation and standing within the community. Nmah, (2004) reiterates this view when he averred that;

In Igbo ancient Society, polygamy is practiced

Mostly among traditional rulers such as Ndi Igwe, Ndi Ichie and ndi Eze, and among some title holders including some renowned farmers. It is a matter of prestige to these people. That is to say that polygamy could be determined by economic, political, religious and social factors. (p.45)

Polygamy also provides a sense of security for women in Igbo societies (Shaiful-Bahari et al, 2021). Within a polygamous setting, women can support each other emotionally and share responsibilities, creating a supportive network. Additionally, having co-wives can offer a form of protection and social inclusion for women, especially in traditional settings where communal living and mutual aid are valued (Weerasinghe, 2020).

Moreover, polygamy serves as a foundational element for the family, clan, and tribe structures among the Igbo people (Anedo & Anedo, 2019). It contributes to the continuity and expansion of family lineages, ensuring the proliferation of descendants who maintain ancestral ties and traditions (Aneke & Bassey, 2022). Polygamous unions often create interconnected networks of kinship and alliances that strengthen social cohesion and solidarity within the broader community (Onwuzurigbo, 1990).

However, Strong cultural arguments in support of polygamy within African/Igbo society, as outlined by Nmah (2012), include:

1. **Symbol of Power, Wealth, and Influence:** Having several wives has long been viewed as a symbol of power, wealth, and influence in traditional African societies. It reflects the man's ability to provide for and manage multiple households, enhancing his status in the community.
2. **Continuation of Family Name:** Polygamy ensures that a man will have many male children who can carry on his name and legacy. This aspect is crucial for the continuity of the family lineage and maintaining ancestral connections.
3. **Legacy and Honor:** The belief that having many children and grandchildren ensures remembrance and honor long after death is deeply rooted in traditional African society. It emphasizes the importance of leaving a lasting legacy and being remembered by future generations.
4. **Labor Force in Agricultural Settings:** In agricultural societies like many parts of Africa, having several wives translates to a larger family workforce. This system ensures there are enough laborers for farming, cattle herding, and household chores, contributing to economic stability and sustainability.
5. **Avoiding Sexual Immorality:** Polygamy is sometimes seen as a way for husbands to avoid sexual immorality. Since it is common for wives to abstain from sexual relations after childbirth, having multiple wives can fulfill the husband's physical needs without violating cultural norms or engaging in extramarital affairs.
6. **Increased Happiness and Meaning:** Within the framework of African community values, having several wives is often associated with increased happiness and a sense of fulfillment. It is viewed as a harmonious and meaningful way of life that aligns with cultural norms and practices.
7. **Preferential Treatment for Married Women:** There is a cultural belief in many tribes that being a single woman without children is unfavorable. As a result, many African women prefer to be part of a polygamous marriage rather than remain single, as it offers social acceptance, support, and a sense of belonging within the community.

These cultural arguments highlight the deep-rooted significance of polygamy within African/Igbo societies, showcasing how it intertwines with social structures, beliefs about family, gender roles, and community values.

Historical and Biblical Roots of Polygamy

Polygamy, tracing its roots back to ancient times, finds its earliest mention in the Bible through Lamech, a figure from the generation after Adam (Gen 4:19). Across various ancient societies globally, with few exceptions like the Greco-Roman society, polygamy was not only tolerated but also embraced. The Igbo society is no stranger to this practice, as evidenced in its earliest historical accounts (Ekpendu, 2015).

In the context of the Old Testament, specific regulations regarding polygamy are outlined in the Jewish book of Law, known as the Torah. These regulations include provisions such as ensuring fair treatment for additional wives in terms of food, clothing, and marital rights (Exodus 21:10), the inheritance rights of first-born sons (Deut 21:15–17), and restrictions on the number of wives for kings (Deut 17:17).

Despite these regulations, polygamy was not uncommon among notable figures in the Old Testament. Examples include Esau, Jacob, Elkanah, David, and Solomon, among others. The Old Testament also acknowledges multiple marriages as a practical solution in certain circumstances such as famine, widowhood, or female infertility (Breckenridge, 2004).

One significant practice related to polygamy was the levirate marriage, where a man was obligated to marry his deceased brother's widow to provide support, as mandated by Deuteronomy 25:5–10. Polygamy remains a prevalent custom well into biblical times and even persisted among Jews until the second century (Zeitzen, 2008).

This historical and scriptural perspective sheds light on the acceptance, regulation, and prevalence of polygamy in ancient societies, providing valuable insights into the cultural and religious dynamics surrounding this marital practice.

Christian Perspectives on Polygamy

In the New Testament era, polygamy has been subject to significant scrutiny and criticism within the Christian community. Christian scholars have widely debated its acceptability, with many viewing it as an outdated and unacceptable form of marriage. Central to this critique are passages from the Pauline epistles, which emphasize the moral standards for church officials, stipulating that they should be respectable, above reproach, and the husband of a single wife (1 Timothy 3:2, 1 Timothy 3:12, and Titus 1:6).

These verses have been interpreted in various ways by Christian scholars. Some argue that they constitute a blanket prohibition of polygamy among Christians as a whole, while others contend that they specifically apply to church leadership and do not necessarily extend to ordinary Christian members. Still, others propose that these passages primarily aim to prevent church leaders from divorcing their first wives and to uphold marital fidelity among Christians (Nyami, 2018).

This interpretation of the New Testament teachings on marriage reflects ongoing debates within the Christian tradition regarding the moral and ethical implications of polygamy. While some advocate for its total prohibition based on biblical injunctions, others adopt a more nuanced approach, considering contextual factors and differing interpretations of scripture.

However, in the view of Mamdani (2008), Paul's verdict was a total prohibition of Polygamy among Christians. He writes;

Hermeneutically, the Greek phrase *mias gunaikos andra* is an unusual Greek construction, capable of being translated in multiple ways, including (but not limited to): 1) "one wife man," (prohibiting plural marriage) or 2) "a wife man" (requiring elders to be married) or 3) "first wife man" (prohibiting divorcés from ordination) (p.64).

The perspective concerning marriage and relationships was underscored in 1 Corinthians, where Paul the Apostle emphasized that each man should have his own wife, and each woman should have her own husband. In the words of Paul:

Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: "It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman." But because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband. The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. For the wife does not have authority over her own body,

but the husband does, likewise, the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. Do not deprive one another, except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control (1 Corinth 7:1-7)

This passage underscores the biblical perspective on marriage as a dedicated partnership between a single man and a single woman, emphasizing the significance of mutual commitment and loyalty within marital bonds. As such, since the inception of Christianity, believers have esteemed marriage as a sanctified institution—a lifelong, monogamous covenant—between a man and a woman, divinely blessed and cherished. According to the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer (1979),

Christian marriage is a solemn and public covenant between a man and a woman in the presence of God, intended by God for their mutual joy; for the help and comfort given one another in prosperity and adversity; and, when it is God's will, for the procreation of children and their nurture. (p.96)

Apostle Paul, made it clear that in Christian Covenant, the man who already has one wife cannot add another wife because his body belongs to the one wife and is no longer his; if the man adds another wife, then that woman is coveting another woman's husband. In the Christian Covenant, a woman shall not covet another woman's husband just like in the Mosaic covenant a man shall not covet another man's wife (Gills, 2008). Zeitzen (2008) also agrees, that;

Polygamy, or the marriage of more persons than one, as well as adultery, must be a breach of marriage-covenants, and a violation of the partner's rights. And therefore they should not defraud one another of the use of their bodies, nor any other of the comforts of the conjugal state, appointed of God for keeping the vessel in sanctification and honour, and preventing the lusts of uncleanness, except it be with mutual consent and for a time only, while they employ themselves in some extraordinary duties of religion, or give themselves to fasting and prayer (p.2118).

On this subject, Metzger (2001) also posits thus:

It is most probable that the qualifications list see the "husband of one wife" as a condemnation of porneia unlawful sex, though doubtless the clause also prohibited adultery sex with someone else's wife, polygamy was out of sight and mind. The issue is not the number of covenant relations the man had he would only have had one at a time, since the empire was monogamous but his womanizing. This of course does not eliminate the grievous sin of marrying and divorcing in order to have sexual relations with a number of women. But that too is not the issue in polygamy (p.14).

Joyce (2007) also observes that Tertullian, who lived at the turn of the 2nd and 3rd centuries, believed that marriage is lawful, but polygamy is not. In the words of Tertullian according to Joyce;

We do not indeed forbid the union of man and woman, blest by God as the seminary of the human race, and devised for the replenishment of the earth and the furnishing of the world and therefore permitted, yet singly. For Adam was the one husband of Eve, and Eve his one wife, one woman, one rib. (p.14) .

Therefore, within Christian belief, it is generally held that the fundamental purpose of marriage is better fulfilled by a monogamous union between one husband and one wife. This viewpoint is supported by the original union of a married couple, established by the Divine Creator from the outset.

Impact of Missionary Influence on Polygamy

It is worth noting that since the arrival of missionary churches in Eastern Nigeria, the practice of polygamy has been a contentious issue due to the church's teaching that monogamy is the acceptable form of marriage. Consequently, individuals practicing polygamy have faced obstacles in gaining membership in the church and participating in sacraments like baptism (Ekpendu, 2015). Barrett (1970) explains that polygamists and their families were often not fully accepted into the church, with varying degrees of refusal for baptism and membership, depending on different missions' policies. Some missions refused baptism to polygamous husbands altogether, while others were more lenient, especially in the first generation.

Nmah (2012) highlights the challenges faced by missionaries in reconciling African marriage customs, particularly polygamy, with Christian church membership. This dilemma led to decisions against accepting polygamists into the church, leading to social repercussions such as divorce, fatherless children, and destitution among women, which were viewed as unfavorable alternatives by many Africans. The missionary approach of enforcing monogamy in Igbo societies without proper inculturation dialogue caused shock and resistance within African society.

Historically, prominent figures like Henry Venn of the Church Missionary Society (CMS) and leaders in other denominations strongly advocated against accepting polygamists into church membership. This stance was also echoed by bishops like Crowther and Johnson in West Africa, leading to a rigid stance against polygamy within these Christian institutions (Nmah, 2012).

The Roman Catholic Church also took a firm stance against polygamy, issuing papal constitutions by different popes to enforce monogamy within African churches. These constitutions mandated that converts with multiple wives could choose one wife upon conversion, leading to the dismissal of other wives, a policy that could contribute to social upheaval in Igbo society (Woods, 1935).

Approaches to Inculturating Biblical Marriage Teachings in Igbo Society

Indeed, when missionaries sought to introduce the core Biblical principles of marriage to Igbo communities, they would have employed meticulous and thoughtful measures. A fundamental aspect of their approach would have been engaging in genuine dialogue with the Igbo people to gain a deep understanding of their cultural context, beliefs, and practices related to marriage. This dialogue served as a crucial pathway for missionaries to comprehend the intricacies of Igbo marital traditions, the societal values attached to marriage, and the underlying reasons behind these customs. (Nwadiolor & Okpe, 2023)

The essence of this dialogue was not merely to preach or impose foreign concepts but to engage in a mutual exchange of ideas and values. The church should aim to create a platform where they can listen attentively to the perspectives of the Igbo community regarding marriage. By actively listening and empathizing with the local viewpoints, the church could establish a rapport based on respect, trust, and understanding.

Through this process, the church should gradually integrate the biblical teachings on marriage into the conversations, discussions, and teachings within the Igbo communities. Instead of presenting these teachings as rigid or dogmatic rules, it should be contextualized to resonate with the cultural sensibilities and realities of Igbo society, highlighting the universal values of love, commitment, mutual respect, and family unity that are central to both biblical teachings and Igbo cultural values related to marriage.

The dialogue-based approach will also allow the church to address potential misunderstandings, misconceptions, or conflicts that may arise when introducing new ideas or concepts. By fostering open communication and mutual learning, the church should create an environment conducive to positive change and transformation within the understanding and practice of marriage among the Igbo people.

Conclusion

The discourse surrounding polygamy within Igbo society in Nigeria is multifaceted, intertwining historical, cultural, religious, and social dimensions. This exploration has shed light on the intricate dynamics of polygamous unions, the influence of missionary activities, and the inculturation of biblical marriage teachings within Igboland.

Polygamy, deeply rooted in African cultures including Igbo society, holds significant cultural and economic significance. It has historically served as a means of economic sustenance, social prestige, family continuity, and communal solidarity. However, the arrival of Christian missionaries brought forth challenges and debates regarding the compatibility of polygamy with Christian teachings on marriage.

The Christian perspective, particularly as interpreted from New Testament teachings, emphasizes monogamy as the ideal form of marriage, reflecting the sanctity, commitment, and mutual respect inherent in biblical marital principles. This has led to tensions between traditional African customs and Christian doctrines, especially regarding membership in Christian churches and participation in sacraments.

The impact of missionary influence on Igbo society's marriage practices has been significant, with various missionary organizations advocating for monogamy and rejecting polygamists from full church membership. For instance, the Church Missionary Society (CMS) mission asked polygamists to drive away their other wives before they can be admitted as full members of the church. This move did not go down with some of the members of CMS mission. The Roman Catholics admitted those of them that left CMS mission (Ilogu; 1985). This approach, while rooted in doctrinal interpretations, often faced resistance and social challenges within Igbo communities due to deeply entrenched cultural beliefs and practices related to polygamy.

Moving forward, the inculturation of biblical marriage teachings within Igbo society necessitates a balanced approach that embraces genuine dialogue, mutual understanding, and contextual integration of biblical principles with cultural values. The church should foster an environment of open communication, respect for diverse viewpoints, and sensitivity to local customs when addressing marriage norms among Igbo Christians.

By engaging in meaningful dialogue, respecting cultural nuances, and promoting mutual learning, the church can bridge the gap between traditional practices and Christian teachings, promoting harmony, inclusivity, and positive transformation within Igbo society. The goal is not to eradicate cultural practices but to align them with biblical values that promote love, fidelity, and family unity within the Christian context.

In essence, the ongoing dialogue and efforts toward inculturating biblical marriage teachings within Igbo society reflect a journey of mutual understanding, adaptation, and transformation. This journey, marked by challenges and opportunities, underscores the dynamic interplay between faith, culture, and social dynamics in shaping marital norms and practices among diverse communities.

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