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African Polygamy: Church Action, Community Reaction, and Personal Interaction

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Introduction

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.¹ The Western entry into Africa brought various changes, especially the introduction of Christianity. The Church and the community interacted, but in the practice of polygamy the Church and the community became strange bed-fellows. As Alan Tippett describes it: "The current situation is urgent."² I shall briefly explore the nature, extent and function of polygamy, the problem or concern being debated, the Church action on polygamy, the community reaction in Africa, and my personal interaction with this sensitive socio-ecclesiastical issue.

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 "polygyny," and the single wife with several husbands, the type of union called "polyandry." Polyandry is very rare in the African community.³ Polygamy, however, is the word in popular employment to describe the state of a 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 a significant phenomenon in African countries. Eugene Hillman 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.⁴ The rates appear to be lower in East, Central and Southern Africa than in West Africa. For example, in East Africa Kenya has 1.21, 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 being taken from the 1960s.⁵

It is difficult to say whether polygamy is increasing or decreasing. Within any community there are favourable and unfavourable

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factors.⁶ 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, like Cote D'Ivoire, which have done so.⁷ 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 the remaining three-quarters of monogamous marriages are potentially polygamous.⁸

The function of polygamy within any African community is multifaceted. Ironically the Second Vatican Council mis-equated polygamy within "the plague of divorce," "so-called free love," and a "disfigurement of marriage."⁹ 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 relationships and was a status symbol of the wealthy. Procreating many children was also a sign of blessing and pride; consequently the 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.¹⁰

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.¹¹ Also polygamy lowered the incidence of "illegitimate" children, who were not welcome in the community, and eliminated the need for adoption, which Africans disliked.¹²

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 affinal networks of extended families.¹³ 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 Being Debated

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 a 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?

The Church's Action

In order to change the polygamous institution and transform the system, the Church has acted in various ways. According to Adrian Hastings there are four basic positions that are discernible with regard to the Church's action on polygamous marriage.¹⁴ 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 is 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 can put up with it as the first century Church did with slavery and dictatorial government. This position is advocated by Hastings who feels polygamy can be tolerated but undermined by promoting the ideal of monogamy.¹⁵ Fourth, polygamy is one form of marriage, monogamy another. Each has its advantages and disadvantages in different types of society. It is not the duty of the Church to make any judgement between them. This is more a cultural relativity viewpoint and often championed by independent persons in the African community.¹⁶

On Christian baptism, the problem is accentuated by the Church's multitude of attitudes. There are at least eight different solutions as indicated by Alan Tippett.¹⁷ First, all the women and 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 baptized, 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 baptized with the understanding that any subsequent plural marriages are forbidden. Seventh, all may be baptized, if they have monogamous god-parents. Eighth, 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 setting.

This phenomenon has effected a community reaction from three schools of thought: the rightist, the leftist, and the eclectic, which Nwafor Orizu points out.¹⁸

The rightist school sees the Church action as functional and positive. The Church's insistence on monogamy and denial of baptism to polygamists have brought a development of social, cultural, and moral stability. Only in the Church can there be genuine attainment of a couple's highest potential. The fears and taboos in polygamy are overcome, and one is converted from superstition to reality, from darkness to light and from primitivity to modernity. The bounties of the Church action have 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.

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 inconsistent with many injustices to legally married wives, and legitimately procreated children. An unbending 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."¹⁹ It is a germ of religious intolerance and bigotry to call the African simultaneous polygamy improper, while the West practices "consecutive, progressive" polygamy through the sequence of divorce and remarriage.²⁰ The intermittent divorcees and remarried partners are baptized and allowed to partake in the Lord's Supper, whereas simultaneous polygamists in a 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.

The eclectic school compromises and sees the Church action as having both functions and dysfunctions for the community. The Church action has been helpful in establishing higher standard of marital equality and education, but it has also distorted the indigenous marriage pattern. The Church has brought a noble notion of marriage form, but it has likewise introduced Western legislative demand of monogamy. The eclectic school does not accept the complete westernization of the African marriage system in the name of the Church, but it also does not agree that the

Church is simply undesirable for the community. A grafting of the Church ideas to traditional values is the best synthesis.²¹

Thus in the pluralistic African society, the variegated impact of the Church action on polygamy is viewed by these three schools of thought: the conservative rightist, who affirms the action, sees it as an asset; the radical leftist, who opposes the change, sees it as a liability; and the moderate eclectic, who accommodates the new institution, sees it as *comme ci, comme ca*.

My Personal Interaction

Being a member of the Church on one hand, and a member of the African community on the other hand, my personal thrust is two fold: polygamy is an inadequate form of marriage, but polygamous converts should be allowed to receive baptism and the Lord's Supper. This is the direction of my interaction.

The first reason for the inadequacy of polygamy is subjugation of women. From the beginning of the marriage contract the women are put under the control of the man. Following the customary pattern of enquiring for the suitable lady, the marriage arrangement is made by the suitor and the lady's father with little or no consent from the lady. Under this design the man marries as many wives as he can economically afford. Since these women had no voice as to whether they wished to marry the man, nor participated effectively in the marriage arrangements, they often come to the man's house as "servants." The man becomes their "master," who delegates responsibilities to them.

Second, polygamy is an inadequate form of marriage because it encourages a double standard of treatment. The man is socially allowed to scout and court for more women as potential wives. The women are branded as unfaithful in the community, if they ever looked for more male partners.

Third, polygamy breeds jealousy. In a polygamous home there is generally intense envy among the wives. On some occasions they may be outwardly hostile to one another. An example: if the man gets employed in the urban city, he may take one of the women (usually the youngest married) to the city as his companion, while he leaves the rest at the far (traditionally under the control of the first wife). The other wives are then left with far less protection, and they become responsible for the welfare of their children. The resultant effect is survival of the fittest. Furthermore, rivalry creeps into the whole interaction of the home amongst the wives, children, step-mothers, and step-children.

The fourth reason for the inadequacy of polygamy is the divided love of the man. Experience shows that the presence of several wives

in the home tends to produce discord and internal feud. There is a great burden on the husband, who must discipline himself to an equitable distribution of his love. This is a difficult, awesome task, which has seldom been successful. For instance, a personally known woman married to a polygamous husband was no longer loved by the husband because she refused to join a secret cult with him. She asserted that the husband loved one of the other who agreed to join the cult with him. In a situation like this, the less loved wives are not only neglected, but also their children are exposed to the mercy of the man's whims and caprices.

Fifth, polygamy brings heavy economic burden. Certainly the standard of living is higher today; consumer items and other basic necessities of life such as education, medical care, shelter, and clothing, are much more expensive than they used to be. A negative effect results from this economic stress, as the wives are not taken care of, the children are not given good education, and the man feels his inability to meet the economic responsibilities. As a result, the burden is invariably transferred to the extended families—uncles, aunts, nieces, nephews, in-laws and other relations. These ones are sometimes unable to help financially because they too have their own economic problems. Thus, marrying more than one wife does not only cause economic hardship to the man, but also to other members of the extended family network in the community.

The sixth reason for the inadequacy of polygamy is that it is unacceptable as a Christian ideal. The biblical concept of marriage involves the interpretation of "one flesh," or "one body." Genesis 2:24 states it clearly: "A man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh." There is a leaving, cleaving, and joining relationship. New Testament teachings on marriage stress the mutual, reciprocal, and covenant rapport between a husband and his wife. A husband must give his wife her full due, and she must give her husband his due. The wife cannot claim her body as her own; it is her husband's. Equally, he cannot claim his body as his own; it is his wife's (I Corinthians 7:3-4). The dynamics in the Christian marriage is equality of persons and loving mutual service: "be subject to one another" (Ephesians 5:21).

While polygamy is an inadequate form of marriage, yet the widespread treatment of polygamists by the Church is completely unsatisfactory. The denial of baptism and Lord's Supper to polygamous converts has been a thorn in the flesh for many well-meaning Christian persons in the African community. Polygamy is not explicitly condemned in the Bible.²² It is neither adultery nor is it an article of faith without which a community member is unfit for

the Church.²³ Above all, it is not the unforgivable sin against the Holy spirit (Matthew 12:32).

The underlying motif is "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 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?" (Acts 8:36). On the basis of his faith alone, he was baptized. Here the passage as well does not by any figment of hermeneutic principles connote "apart from the polygamists!" To insist on a man becoming a monogamist before baptism is to deny the gospel and stands 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 salvific grace of the gospel.²⁴

On the celebration of the Lord's Supper, Jesus commanded through Paul that we should do this as often as we remember him (I Corinthians 11:26). Still, believing polygamists from the African community are barred from participating. Hence the two basic Church observances of baptism and Lord's Supper are denied to the polygamous converts. This unfortunate denial is based not on proper biblical exegesis, but rather on an unconscious, intricate intertwining of the Church with Western cultural standpoints, cemented by the early missionary movements.²⁵

Conclusion

The Church and community interact. The Church is not established in space nor without the human locality. It is important then for the Church to understand the worldview of its audience and community. As the Word 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 nature of the Church in terms of its theological identity neither changes. But the Church's social form and structure change from age to age, from locality to locality, according to the community's sociological setting. Thus the incarnate gospel of the Church must be contextualized.

Consequently, the Church action on polygamy in the African community needs to be reconsidered and predicated on the solid understanding of the unchanging gospel impacting changing communities. The distilled essence of the Church must be distinguished from the cultural veneer in which the essence is couched. Therefore, as an African Church member with a pragmatic

knowledge of polygamy in the local community, I conclude with my twofold premises: that polygamy is an inadequate form of Christian marriage, but that polygamous converts from the community be allowed to receive baptism and the Lord's Supper without any preconditions.

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