

The Practice of Polygamy and Church's Response: A Case Study Study of Africa Inland Church Losirwa in Uasin Gishu County, Kenya

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Abstract

Polygamy is a marriage practice where a husband is married to more than one wife. It is a cultural practice and a subject that has been widely researched but remains controversial. In church circles, denominations have historically differed on how to address the issue. For instance, some denominations heavily influenced by the African cultural interpretive lens view it as a norm and argue based on records of polygamous persons in the Old Testament. In contrast, the missionary-founded denominations condemn the practice as evil and against the biblical teachings and God's original plan. Three specific objectives guided the study. First, the study examined God's intentions for marriage in Genesis 1—2 and traced the problem of polygamy in the Bible as emanating from the fall of humanity into sin. Second, the study looked at the prevalence of polygamy and legal provisions of polygamy in African states. Third, the study sought to determine the views of Christians at Africa Inland Church (AIC) Losirwa in Uasin Gishu country on their views about the research topic. The study adopted a descriptive research design to address the research objectives. The target population of the study included church members and church leaders. The data was collected using structured self-administered questionnaires and interview schedules, and the data were analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). The data collected was analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequency distributions, percentages, mean scores, and standard deviations) and inferential statistics (T-test and correlations). Qualitative data was analyzed using content analysis. The study presents findings that can help churches relook at their policies regarding polygamy and polygamous unions.

Keywords: Marriage, Polygamy, Monogamy, Church, Culture, African Traditional.

Introduction

Marriage is a fundamental institution in every society. It brings males and females into union with each other to bring up a relationship of love, justice, and trust (Barrette and David, 1968, 117). Marriage has been defined as a “lifelong and exclusive state in which a man and a woman are wholly committed to living with each other in a sexual relationship under conditions normally approved and witnessed by their social group or society” (Bromiley 1999, 3:261). Thus, it is an intimate and lifelong relationship between a man and a woman for companionship and raising a family. A polygamous form of marriage (also known as polygyny) involves a husband with multiple wives in a marital union. The practice is still prevalent today (Kuhiyop 2008, 237), even though some have regarded it as evil, sinful, adulterous, pagan, and pagan. Therefore there is a need for Christian communities to relook at the practice and make some informed responses.

Globally, views on polygamy have primarily been influenced by regional, family, and community perspectives. For example, historically, in the US, having more than one wife in the same house was illegal in 1882. But polygamists were accepted only if the spouse could have wives in different homes (Redford 2012, 175). In most countries of Asia, polygamy is acceptable. However, the practice is low due to birth rate control regulations introduced in the 1980s in countries like China. With the population surge, citizens were required to sire one child until 2021, when the rules would be adjusted to three children per person. Thus, the practice of polygamy has been unpopular in China (Redford 2012, 175).

In African societies, polygamy was a culturally acceptable practice, and it was not uncommon in traditional Africa for a man to marry many wives (Rehman J. 2007, 108-127). However, this practice faced opposition at the advent of the missionary era. Many African converts into Christianity adopted an opposing view to polygamy. The mission-founded churches found it difficult to deal with polygamy because it was part of the African culture. In addition, some of the converts were already in polygamous unions, thus complicating the approach to the issue. This situation presented the church with practical and theological concerns to address. Overall, Christian missions in Africa in the early 20th century promoted the idea of monogamous unions and rendered polygamy inconsistent with biblical teachings (Muthengi 1995, 57). As a result, some denominations refused to baptize converts from polygamous marriages, while others baptized only the wives and children from such unions (Muthengi 1995, 57).

As an evangelical and missionary-founded denomination, the Africa Inland Church (formerly Africa Inland Mission) upheld similar views with other missionary-founded churches. During this time, the official position of AIC was stipulated in the 1972 constitution, which outlined the following guidelines:

1) No Christian man being a polygamous and no woman being a polygamous wife shall be baptized unless, in the case of the wife, she is the first to have been married. 2) Polygamists and polygamous wives may receive catechistical instruction but shall be made clear in the beginning that such instruction does not anticipate baptism. However, the first wife may be accepted for baptism. 3) Where men living in polygamy give evidence of a desire to live the Christian life, every effort shall be made to help and encourage them, looking forward to the time when all the wives but one may be put away without dishonor to them. 4) A polygamist shall not put away a wife against her will and without providing for her. In response to honest, earnest prayer, God will provide a way. 5) A woman adherent or member who takes a second wife or concubine shall be suspended from the Catechumenate or church as the case may be, until such time as he repents and gives up the woman in question (Africa Inland Church Constitution 1972: 49).

This strict stance temporarily moderated the situation but did not provide a lasting solution. Instead of drawing polygamists to the church, it further distanced them. Thus, there is still a need to clarify how believers from such backgrounds can be part of the body of Christ. Missionary-founded denominations like the Africa Inland Church would still need to wrestle with the question of how to integrate polygamist converts into the church community. What are some of the theological implications that emerge from such a stance? Although the scope of this paper will not allow venturing into this discussion, it suffices to mention that the position taken by the mainstream churches, on the one hand, hindered polygamous converts from being part of the church life. On the other hand, converts from polygamous backgrounds were attracted to the Africa Independent Churches because of their open-arm policy. Additionally, as mentioned earlier, the study interrogated the views of AIC Losirwa on this subject.

Literature Review

God's Plan for Marriage

The book of Genesis 2:18–24 explicitly presents monogamy as the divine ideal for marriage. Marriage, as God intended from the beginning, is between one man and one woman. It involves a union between a man and a woman, as husband and wife, which becomes the foundation for a home and family (Lockyer and Thomas Nelson Publishers 1986, 859). God instituted marriage

when he said, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him” (Gen 2:18, NIV used consistently). He, therefore, made a suitable helper for him and joined the two to become one. Establishing a new family involves both partners leaving their parents to start a new marriage and family. Genesis 2:24 reads, “That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh” (Gen. 2:24). The mandate to leave demonstrates maturity and readiness to establish a home (Kaiser, 1983, 154). The idea of cleaving has a connotation of sealing like a certificate seal which shows the sense of belonging; in this case, God seals the two to belong to one another (Kidner, 1967, 66). God’s ideal is for a man to be the husband of wife and for the marriage to be lifelong.

Polygamy as a Deviation of God’s Original Intention for Marriage

The fall of humanity into sin in Genesis 3 brought far-reaching ramifications that affected humanity to the core and the understanding of marriage institution. Since God’s original intention was violated, other forms of marriage like polygamy began to emerge.

The Old Testament records several instances of polygamy without affirming the practice. The first recorded case of polygamy was the marriage of Lamech to Adah and Zillah (Genesis 4:19–24). In the subsequent generations, polygamy became prevalent, especially among the rich. For instance, Abraham was given a handmaid for procreation (Gen 16:3), Esau married two Hittite women (Gen 26:25), and Jacob was also polygamous (Gen 29:16–20). During the era of judges, Gideon is said to have had many wives (Judg 8:30). Other polygamous men during this period include Elkanah, the father of Samuel (1Sam 1:1–2). During the monarchical period, King David, the second king of Israel, was a polygamist mostly for political reasons (2 Sam 5:13-16; 1 Chron 3:1-9). His son, King Solomon (1 Kings 11:3), had a large harem that included foreign wives, something that violated God’s laws and turned his heart away from God (1 Kings 11:3–4).

The law of Moses addressed issues that come from polygamous families. For instance, in Deuteronomy 21:15–18, a polygamous man was warned against favoring the sons of the wife he dearly loves over the other family. Implicitly, this highlights the tensions and rivalries that frequently occur in such unions. Also, Deuteronomy 17:17 states that the ideal king of Israel should not multiply wives for himself, lest his heart turns away from God. This instruction is commonly interpreted not as solely addressed to kings but applicable to all.

The Ancient Near East laws somehow promoted polygamous unions indirectly. For instance, under the Levirate marriages laws, the deceased man's brother or next of kin was allowed (as a kinsman-redeemer) to take the widow as his wife and raise a family to perpetuate his brother's name and keep inherited land in the family (Deut 25:5–10; Ruth 3:13; 5:5–10; 4:1–12) (Bromiley 1999, 3:901). However, this cultural norm in Israel directly violated God's laws (Lev 18:16; 20:21). Again, "while polygamy was tolerated among the rich and powerful, it was recognized as a violation of the covenantal fidelity that God demanded of Israel, His bride" (Bromiley 1999, 3:902). The law was clear about God's intention for marriage. Some of the reasons given for the existence of this form of marriage within the Jewish cultural setup was "the need to maintain endogamous marriages, the desire to increase the Israelite population, the necessity for providing for destitute widows in order to avoid slavery, prostitution and the like, and the maintaining of the nation's working force" (Bromiley 1999, 3:901). Another law that promoted polygamy in the Ancient Near East is the law that required a man who raped a virgin to pay the bride price for the girl and marry her, even if he was already married (Deut 22:29).

The recorded instances of polygamy in the Old Testament do not justify the practice. In fact, the dangers of polygamy are highlighted when God brought judgment upon Solomon (1 Kings 11:11–13). Similarly, the consequences were disastrous to the entire nation, "These sexual extravagances ultimately brought grave economic problems to Israel, and at Solomon's death the kingdom divided, never to unite again in this age" (Bromiley 1999, 3:901). The heart of the king was lured to deception and idolatry through his polygamous unions. In the Old Testament, we also see many polygamous families, as listed above, struggling with issues of sibling rivalry, feuds, insecurity, and unhealthy competition.

The New Testament presupposed a monogamous form of marriage. Jesus reaffirmed the original plan of God as revealed in Genesis 2 when addressing the issue of divorce. He noted that Moses had allowed divorce "because of the hardness of your hearts" (Mat 19:8). Polygamy, like divorce, was tolerated because of the hardness of people's hearts. In 1 Timothy 3:2 and 12 (also Titus 1:6), the apostle Paul issued a guideline regarding qualifications for church leadership. One of the leadership requirements he lists is that a leader (deacon, elder overseer) must be a husband of one wife. In addition, he emphasizes that church leaders should lead by example. The passage does not explicitly address the issue of polygamy but stipulates the leadership threshold in a

congregation. The Bible passage prohibits a polygamist from serving as an elder in the church. By implication, the church members also needed to measure up to this established standard.

Historical Perspectives

The Greek term for polygamy/ polygyny refers to one man having two or more wives, while polyandry is a case where a woman has two or more husbands (Mbiti, 1969, 142). Polyandry is uncommon among the African people, and therefore the term sounds strange in the African context. Shorter referred to the monogamous form of marriage as a foreign practice among Africans (Shorter 1974, 172). However, this is a far-fetched statement because a majority of African marriages were monogamous.

Some writers like Barrett have argued that the Bible does not condemn polygamy since it continues the multiplication of humanity (Barrett 1968, 116). Thomas Aquinas & Augustine claimed that the purpose of marriage was to continue being co-workers with God as far as procreation is concerned. They advocated for polygamy for procreation or the multiplication of the human race (Hillman 1975, 181). The prominent Protestant reformers had differing views. Martin Luther argued that sometimes monogamy could not be applicable in all situations. John Calvin argued strongly that polygamy practice was against the Christian way of life known to be monogamous. Thus, according to Calvin, it could not portray love, togetherness, and justice in the family as it created an inferiority complex among the wives (Hillman 1975, 182). On the Roman Catholic position, the Council of Trent in 1545–1563 strongly condemned the practice of polygamy.

Christians before the nineteenth century were at liberty in making their choice of marriage, even if it meant exercising polygamy (Barrett 1968, 117). The subject of polygamy was a low-key matter until the nineteenth century, when the issue arose again due to missiological concerns. When missionaries came to Africa, they had to steer clear on this matter because polygamy was a common practice; they thus advocated for monogamous marriage as the biblical ideal (Barrett 1968, 117). This position elicited opposing views because it went against the African culture. As a result, polygamists were not recognized and were not allowed to fellowship with a monogamous individual in church (Barrett 1968, 117). This response by the missionaries led to the spread of Independent Churches in Africa, which had a lenient policy

toward the polygamists (Muthengi 1995, 57). The following section looks at the prevalence of polygamy, an issue of concern even in the contemporary world.

The Practice of Polygamy in the African States

Polygamy is a phenomenon that has commonly been associated with the African culture. Historically, almost all African societies practiced polygamy and accepted it as a lawful cultural form of marriage even after the colonial era (Kuihiyop W. 2008, 237). The people who married one wife did so not because culture hindered them but because of their economic status. In many cases, polygamists were wealthy, thus paying the required bride price and sustaining a large family. Commonly today, the practice is recognized under customary law and/or religious practice in many African states, as discussed below.

In most West African countries, polygamy is recognized under some attributions like the financial capacity of the husband to support multiple wives and families when the wife is barren or needs more children. Countries such as Burkina Faso and Togo recognize polygamous unions under modern civil law, allowing couples or men to choose between monogamous or polygamous marriages (Kuihiyop W. 2008, 237). In Nigeria, women can choose whether to be in a polygamous marriage or not (Demographic and Health Survey, 2013). However, according to the provisions of the marriage laws in Nigeria section 45 of the Interpretation Act of 1963, some citizens and lawmakers objected that the new regulations did not replicate the people's social norms, which were the traditional culture (Elizabeth Pleck, 1987, 6588). Moving farther from West Africa, Mauritania laws allows a man to marry a new woman with the consent of his existing spouse/s.

In South African countries, polygamy is legal as long as it follows the provisions of the Customary Marriage recognition Act. In an existing customary marriage, a husband wishing to marry a second or subsequent wife is liable to apply to a competent court for such a marriage to be legal (SWAC, 2019). Also, polygamy has been a topic of political concern in the past several years, especially in the 2009 elections in South African. The Zulu community, for example, has been practicing polygamy up to date (Laing, Aislinn 2012, 1).

In North Africa, polygamy is very low compared to other parts of the continent. For example, there has been a decline in polygamy over a century in Algeria, whereas the population has been growing (UN Report 2008). In Morocco, approximately 1% of males are polygamous

(North Africa Times 2008). In Tunisia, polygamy is prohibited; and an individual who practices polygamy before the dissolution of their previous/current matrimony can face up to one year of imprisonment and or a fine; even if the first marriage or the new marriage were not contracted in accordance with the law (Tunisia Family Law, 1996). Notably, polygamy law, which is applied in Tunisia, is far different from the modern family law in some Islamic countries globally. As we know, polygamy so far has been practiced widely among Muslims because the Qur'an permits the practice.

Polygamous marriage also relates to gender issues. The study of gender is not just an effort to understand women or men separately, but how to put both within the context of a social system in which both are integral parts of it. It also positions men and women equally in access, participation, control, and benefits in life activities within the family, community, nation, and state (Mufidah Ch, Psikologi Keluarga 2008, 18). Also, Phiri argues that polygamy lowers the humanity of women, "The majority of African women theologians do not support polygamy because it dehumanizes women. It shows a lack of respect for the dignity of women as full human beings created in the image of God. Polygamy does not value a woman as a person, but only for what she can produce for her husband."

In East African countries, taking Tanzania as a case, polygamy is practiced by many communities but is much more common in Muslim communities. Under Islamic marital jurisprudence, a man can take up to four wives, so long as he treats them all equally. While it is true that Islam permits polygyny, it does not require or impose it: marriage can only occur by mutual consent, and a bride can stipulate that her husband-to-be is not to take a second wife. In the Kenyan context, in March 2014, Kenya's Parliament passed a bill allowing men to marry multiple wives. Polygamy is common among traditional communities in Kenya and among the country's Muslim community (The Guardian, March 2014). The Bill was made legislation on 1 May 2014. The Kenyan President described the Act as one that consolidates various marriage laws and provides procedures for separation and divorce. It also regulates the custody and maintenance of children in the event of separation and divorce. The Act also defines marriage registered as the voluntary union of a man and a woman, whether in a monogamous or polygamous union (Wanje 2008, 237).

Common Reasons for Polygamy

The practice of polygamy has thrived in African cultures to date because of several reasons. One, polygamy, as opposed to monogamy unions, provided human labor, thus a means of wealth creation. Two, polygamy was practiced to allow all females to be married, and this is based on a population index where there are more females than males. The practice makes it possible for a widow and her children to be cared for. Three, polygamy was also for male sexual gratification. For instance, to have sexual intercourse during the menstruation period or when the wife was sick or was away. Four, it was also an antidote to barrenness among women. In some cases, husbands would marry another wife who would supposedly give birth to a boy child if the current wife didn't sire a boy (Kuhiyop W. 2008, 237). Five, polygamy was seen as a solution to marital problems (Kuhiyop W. 2008, 237). The following section highlights the views of Christians at AIC Losirwa located in Uasin Gishu County (Kenya) on this subject.

Research Design

The descriptive research design was best suited for this study because it allowed the researcher to gather numerical and descriptive data to assess the relationship between the variables. The researcher used questionnaires to collect data from the respondents. The total population was two hundred and eighteen. The sample design was deployed from Yamane's formula, which yielded 139 respondents who formed the study sample randomly selected to represent the entire population.

Study Area

The study was conducted at Africa Inland Church Losirwa, located in Uasin Gishu County, 7 km away from Eldoret town along Eldoret-Kaptagat road in Naiberi Centre. The researcher selected the church (which also happens to be the place he serves as a pastor) to highlight the views of Christians on the issue of polygamy. The research problem is a matter that has not been adequately addressed in many churches. Therefore, although the researcher had familiarity with the study area, he objectively carried out the study to find out about the views on the practice.

Target Population

A population is a group of elements or cases, whether individuals, objects, or events conform to specific criteria and to which we intend to generalize the research results (McMillan, Schumacher 2006, 12). The target population comprised the church leadership and members of AIC Losirwa located in Naiberi. The approximate population is approximately 218 members encompassing 13 church officials and 205 church congregations (AIC, Losirwa Church Records, 2020).

Sampling Method

The study utilized purposive and simple random sampling techniques to sample a specific representative who formed part of the data collection. These are the Non-probability and probability sampling that gives the entire population matrix an equal chance of being selected. The sampling methods are ideal since they limit the researcher's biases. The views of 13 church leaders were highlighted through the purposive sampling technique, while simple random sampling was used to sample the church members.

Sample Size

The study adapted Yamane's formula in finding the sample size of the church members, excluding the 13 church leaders who were purposively sampled. The formula formed the sample size as recorded below.

Church members	Target population	Sample size
Church leaders	13	8
Men	41	27
Women	73	47
Youths	54	35
Total	213	117

A total of 139 questionnaires were administered, and the return rate was 94%. The respondents gave information as per the structured questionnaires.

Data Analysis Method

Data analysis is the process of evaluating data using analytical or statistical tools to discover useful information (Nisbet 2009, 40). Analysis means categorizing, ordering, manipulating, and summarizing data to answer research questions (Bless 2006, 184). The researcher coded the respective responses as per the research instruments used. Quantitative data used the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) to derive the desired output on the adopted Likert scales. The data collected was then analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequency distributions, percentages, mean scores, and standard deviations) and inferential statistics (T-test and correlations).

Results and Discussion

Preliminaries

The majority of the respondents, 86, representing 66.2%, were female, while another 44 (33.8%) were males. A total of 35 (26.9%) members were above 50 years, while those with ages 35-40 and 41-50 were each 27 (20.8%). The respondents representing 17.7% were of ages 30-34, while those below 25 years were 13.1% of the total respondents. Approximately 48% of those sampled had a college education, representing close to half of the respondents in the study. Those who had university education were 21.5%, while those who attained secondary education were 20.8%. A small number of respondents, 9.2%, had primary education, while 8% of the respondents had no form of education.

The first question of interest to this paper was determining the nature of the respondents' families and upbringing. It was discovered that 74.6% of the respondents were brought up in monogamous marriages, while 22.3% were from polygamous marriages. Furthermore, the parents of those respondents from polygamous were not necessarily Christians. This finding indicates that polygamy is still an issue in modern society.

The second question sought to find out the number of respondents who are presently involved in polygamous unions. It was noted from the data that four respondents (representing 3.1%) were currently in polygamous marriages. Understandably, the practice is not prevalent among believers because of the church's historical approach to the matter.

The third question looked at the perception of the church members on the practice of polygamy. Most of the respondents (86.15%) disagreed with the practice of polygamy, while

13.07% were neutral in their view, and another 0.7% agreed with the practice. The fourth question examined the perceptions of the challenges of polygamous families as compared to the monogamous unions. On this question, 69.2% of the respondents believe that the difficulties arising from polygamous marriages affect families to a great extent. Another 23.1% believe that it affects the families moderately, while another 7.7% opine that it has a minimum extent. The researcher found out that most church members at AIC Losirwa believe that polygamous families face many challenges compared to monogamous forms of marriage.

Fifth, on whether the church leadership at AIC Losirwa condemns the practice, the findings showed that 42.3% strongly agreed. Those who moderately agreed that the practice is condemned were 11.5%. However, 14.6% disagreed that the church condemned the practice, another 24.6% strongly disagreed. Finally, the undecided stood at 6.9%. This question indicates that the church leadership may not have boldly asserted their official position, hence the varying responses.

The sixth question explored whether polygamous unions were perceived as a means of enhancing marital satisfaction. The data indicated that 16.2% strongly agreed, while 5.4% moderately agreed. However, 34.6% of the respondents disagreed that polygamy is a means of enhancing marital satisfaction, while another 25.4% strongly disagreed that polygamy enhances marital satisfaction. Also, 18.5% were unsure of whether the practice enhances marital satisfaction.

The questionnaire also looked at whether polygamy enhances the labor force in the family. The responses were: 34.6% strongly agreed, 12.3% moderately agreed, 28.5% disagreed, 8.5% strongly disagreed, and 16.2% were unsure whether polygamy enhances labor in the family. Additionally, the findings indicated that 34.6% of the respondents strongly agreed that polygamy is practiced due to the influence of African tradition, while 28.5% disagreed with the assertion.

In summary, the findings from the research revealed that some of the church members at AIC Losirwa come from polygamous families and have an understanding of the challenges associated with polygamous unions. The data also indicated that a marginal percentage of church members were involved in polygamous unions. Also, most of the members disagreed with polygamy and believed that the practice originates from the traditional African culture. Since the practice of polygamy is regarded as against God's plan for marriage by the AIC church, the

church leadership upholds the same position. Notably, those in polygamous unions are accepted in the church but are not allowed to be church leaders.

Conclusion

The study looked at the practice of polygamy and the church's response. It highlighted monogamous marriage as God's ideal in Genesis 2. However, the effects of the fall of humanity into sin in Genesis 3 distorted God's plan, and there came various forms of marriage. The Bible records case of polygamous unions but does not approve of it. In addition, the study looked at polygamy as an inevitable cultural aspect that the early missionaries had to address in the proclamation of the gospel. The question of whether to allow or disallow polygamists into full church membership was addressed differently by the missionary-founded churches and the African Independent Churches. In addition, the study also looked at the prevalence of polygamy in African states today and highlighted it as an issue of concern. Last, the study sought to determine the views of the Christians at AIC Losirwa on the research topic. It showed that the issue of polygamy, though not widely practiced in the church today, is still an issue of concern. The church leadership does not approve of the practice since it is deemed as contrary to the biblical teachings.

Recommendation for Further Research

The research is not conclusive; thus, the researcher recommends that further studies be carried out on other regions and other church denominations to ascertain the perceptions of church members on the practice.

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