

## **New Trends on the Perception of Polygamous Marriages among Christians: A Study of Selected Churches in Nairobi County**

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### **Abstract**

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This paper assesses the perception of Christians in heterosexual monogamous marriages in selected churches in Nairobi County on the issue of polygamy. The study also highlights the biblical teachings on heterosexual monogamous marriages and ascertains the prevalence of polygamous marriages in selected churches in Nairobi County. In addition, the study sought to determine the perception of Christians on the biblical teachings on one-man-one-woman marriages. The study used the descriptive research design and involved Evangelical, Pentecostal, and African Independent churches in Nairobi County, targeting clerics and laity in 20 selected churches. The simple random sampling technique was employed to sample congregation members, and the purposive sampling technique to sample pastors and church elders. A total of 130 respondents participated in the study.

In summary, the findings indicated that 72% of the respondents indicated that some believers, although few, are involved in polygamy. Also, a marginal percentage of clergy and church elders in the denominations sampled practice polygamy. Significantly, the findings further showed that polygamy was not accepted among the church congregants, as indicated by 96% of the respondents as they perceived the practice as un-biblical. The findings of this study are of significance to the church leaders and their congregations as it helps understand some prevailing perceptions on this topic and clarify the church's stance concerning polygamy. The study recommends that the church proactively teaches and counsels couples to understand God's plan for marriage and family.

**Keywords:** Marriage; Polygamy, Heterosexual, Monogamous, Africa Independent Churches (AICs), Culture.

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## **1. Introduction**

Polygamy has continued to persist in African communities despite the efforts by early missionaries to discourage the practice. During the missionary and colonial era, the cultural practice was a significant stronghold that stood in contrast to the Western understanding of marriage and family (Njoh, 2006, p. 32). Thus, from the Western lens, the cultural practice was retrogressive. Also, according to the biblical interpretation of early missionaries, the African customs and beliefs like polygamy contradicted the biblical teachings hence the need for converts to forsake their customs and traditions. Therefore, anyone who wanted to be a Christian had to wholly renounce their traditional practices, cultures, and beliefs such as polygamy. Maillu (1988:1) argues, “The colonial church, in particular, has been fighting against the tradition on the basis that it is incompatible with the Bible.” Therefore, a polygamous man who desired to be a Christian had to forsake his many wives but chose only one to present to the church. Mugambi opines that abandoning other wives and choosing one did not effectively address this problem (Mugambi, 1989, p. 218). In addition, Wunderink (citing Isabel Phiri) expresses that the missionaries did not effectively tackle the issue of polygamy but instead participated in breaking families without considering the children in such unions (Wunderink, 2009, p. 17-18). Bishop John Colenso of Natal acknowledged that the teaching and practice of converting a polygamous man into Christianity, where he is only allowed to follow the Bible selectively, is in opposition to God’s Word (Hillman, p. 266). This missionary approach indirectly sent away many converts who readily found a new home in the African Initiated Churches (AICs).

The African Initiated Churches, in their policy, fully accommodated polygamists as members (Jenkins, 2010, p. 582). Furthermore, Kombo, quoting Jenkins, notes that locating polygamous families in the African-initiated church congregations was very likely. Hillman echoes these sentiments and blames the African churches for taking a more tolerant position on polygamy (Hillman, p. 182). In other words, the AICs view was liberal compared to the conservative stance of the missionaries and mission-founded churches. These two different historical approaches contribute to the contemporary situation where polygamy remains an issue to date in the church.

In reviewing the standpoint of Densen Mafinyani on the Zimbabwean Council of Churches (ZCC), De Bruyn noted that it was paramount for the ZCC to respect the African way of life and culture, especially on the issue of polygamy. Polygamy is neither wrong nor evil in the traditional African context (De Bruyn, 1988, p. 98). According to him, each context is unique, and it was wrong to demand that polygamists denounce their unions with other wives to be part of the universal church. He further emphasized the difference between the African and Western epistemologies on the indissolubility of monogamous and polygamous marriages. Since the African traditions

discourage divorce, some AICs decided to allow the practice of polygamy, believing that “authentic polygamy” was not a significant problem compared to “unofficial polygamy.” Due to this difference in approach between the missionary churches and the AICs, the latter drew more converts (Kahiga, 2007, p. 119 –147). It readily embraced those isolated by the positions taken by the missionary-founded churches. They welcomed and admitted them to partake in the church ordinances like baptism, Lord’s supper and gave them access to leadership positions.

It is undeniable that polygamy still prevails in Sub-Saharan African societies. It is more common in Africa than elsewhere globally and poses one of the most significant problems for Christians and those who wish to embrace Christianity (Parrinder, 1958, p.8). However, polygamy is on the decline today, and monogamous marriages are increasing, but mainly in urban areas where urbanization and modernization have transformed people’s lives. According to Karanja (1994, p. 195), the increase in pressure from some religious and political leaders to support monogamous marriage had taken effect in Sub-Saharan Africa. Phiri observes that in the modern times

Most evangelical denominations encourage monogamous marriages as God’s ideal form of marriage. Nevertheless, they are prepared to baptize converted polygamists and accept them as members of the church who are free to partake of Holy communion. The most controversial issue is whether a converted polygamist can hold a position of church leadership or not. (Phiri, 2006, p. 430)

In addition, polygyny has been declining in industrialized urban areas because most women in these setups are unrestricted by the traditional economic setting (Karanja, 1994, p. 196). The empowered women in urban areas can make independent decisions that may not fit into the customary understanding of women and polygamy. However, the decline in the practice does not mean that it has ceased. The coming of Christianity to Africa has primarily contributed to this decline. Christianity during the missionary era advocated for the union of one man one woman as God’s ideal form of marriage. Most African women theologians have criticized polygamy as a practice that “devalues women.” They argue that polygamy does not accord women their God-given value and dignity as persons in the image and likeness of God (Phiri, 2006, p. 430). As much as some would want to paint polygamy as something positive, one also needs to look at the abuses (physical, emotional, psychological, economic, and sexual) that sometimes women go through in such unions. Many African cultures are male-dominated; hence men are given additional power in a polygamous marriage. The added control can either be used positively or negatively by men.

Up to this point, we have reviewed the approaches taken by different churches since the advent of missionaries to date. It is worth noting that the conservative position taken by the missionary-founded churches and the liberal position by the African Initiated Churches complicated the Christian response to the cultural feature. There was no singular Christian approach to the issue

because of the inevitable hermeneutical, missiological, and pastoral aspects involved. The following section summarizes the biblical teachings on marriage.

## **2. God's Plan for Marriage**

In Genesis 2:18–24, God established the marriage institution by placing a man and a woman (Adam and Eve) into a monogamous union. According to God's plan, the two partners must leave their families to form a new family unit. In the New Testament, Jesus reaffirmed God's original intentions for marriage in Genesis 2 when answering the Pharisees on the question of divorce (Matt 19:3–9). He referred them to God's blueprint as laid out in Genesis 2 of a lifelong union between one man and one woman. Divorce, pressing concern to the Pharisees in the first century, was a deviation of God's original intentions. Polygamy, like divorce, can be attributed to the fall of humanity into sin and the resultant hardness of the human heart. The practice of polygamy became prevalent after the fall of humanity in Genesis 3 with the cited examples of Lamech (Gen 4:19), Abraham, Esau, Jacob (Gen 26:34; 29:16–20), David, and Solomon (1 Kings 11:3), among others. It is worth noting that the Old Testament records these kinds of marriages without necessarily making an approval. In the prophetic section of the Old Testament, the prophets used the symbolism of monogamous marriage to depict the relationship between Yahweh and the ancient nation of Israel (Hos 2:18; Isa 1:1; Jer 2:2; Ez 15:8). God had cut a covenant with the nation of Israel and thus expected them to be a faithful partner, just as required in a marital union.

As a result of the fall of humanity, human cultures have normalized the practice of polygamy. Even in antiquity, the Ancient Near East cultures (Israel included) encouraged polygamy in certain situations, thus contradicting God's revelation. For instance, Leviticus 18:16 forbids sexual relations with a brother's wife. However, the Ancient Near East levirate marriage laws permitted the practice of marrying the wife of a deceased brother to perpetuate the brother's name and keep inherited land in the family (see also Deuteronomy 25:5–10; Ruth 3:13; 5:5–10; 4:1–12) (Bromiley, 1999, 3:901).

In the New Testament, the instruction on polygamy is not explicit. Instead, monogamy dominates marital instructions of the New Testament (Col 3:19; 1 Cor 7:2; Eph 5:28-33 & Tit 2:4). Perhaps because of the prevailing cultural context of the first century that did not wrestle with the problem of polygamy. In the Graeco-Roman world, monogamy was a norm. Cicero, the first-century Roman orator, described a family unit comprising a married couple and children. Likewise, a typical Roman household was composed of husband, wife, unmarried children, slaves, freedmen, and clients (Jeffers, 1999, p. 238-240). Although the topic of polygamy is inexplicit in the New Testament, Jesus had pointed out the instruction of Genesis 2 as the ideal and divine form of marriage when addressing the issue of divorce. In the apostolic church, it was a requirement for early church leaders

to be in monogamous unions (1 Tim 3:2; 12; Tit 1:6). In summary, in the Christian perspective, polygamy symbolizes a fall from God's standards, while monogamy denotes the will of God. The New Testament maintains the revealed will of God in the Old Testament on this aspect.

### **3. Literature Review**

#### **Marriages in the African Context**

The practice of polygamy is rooted in African cultures (Taryor, 1984, p. 112). Thus the tradition goes back beyond the reach of written records. Before the advent of Christianity, polygamy was a common cultural aspect in Africa (Taryor, 1984, p. 112). Burton points out that the first missionaries to visit Africa in the latter part of the fourteenth century found the issue of polygamy a significant stumbling block in the path of Christian conversion (Burton, 1940). Unfortunately, the missionary approach condemning the practice did not address the matter adequately. It was prestigious to be polygamous in the African traditional societies. Although, a man had to be wealthy to pay the bride price for each woman. Paulina Makinwa-Adebusoye approximated that nearly a third of married women were in polygamous marriages of two or more wives at the close of the twentieth century (Makinwa, 2001, p. 25 -45). She proceeds to note that most women were married at a tender age and to older men who were wealthy.

Polygamy was a vital cultural component of the African understanding of marriage and family. Culture embraces the totality of a people's way of life in response to the needs and circumstances of its existential situation. Kroeber and Kluckhohn summarise the basic ideas about the meaning of culture as consisting of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behavior acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievement of human groups, including their embodiments in artifacts. The essential core of culture consists of traditional ideas and especially their attached values; culture systems may, on the one hand, be considered as products of action, on the other as conditioning elements of further action (Kroeber, 1952, p. 357). Thus, polygamy is a cultural tenet that finds meaning in African life.

According to Hillman, the patterns of culture are delicately interwoven with multi-colored threads; they form a web of thought categories, values, scales, emotion responses, aesthetical norms, and education methods. It also includes survival techniques, food production, household management, economic insurance, child-rearing, social control, mutual assistance, among others (Hillman, 1975, p. 266). Culture, therefore, refers to a whole system of life. For example, when one talks of African cultures, one must consider its religious content, family, clan, society, marriage, and so forth. So African cultures include marriage and procreation. The moment one touches on the issue of marriage in African communities, polygamy is an inevitable subject.

All human beings belong to a particular culture. According to Haviland (1975, p. 14), every human being is a member of a culture and society. The cultural identity and the surrounding community influence the institution of marriage, and the forms it takes are part and parcel of the culture of the people (Omorege, 1979, p. 368). Therefore, marriage operates within a particular socio-cultural milieu (Mendonca, 2009, p. 426).

Polygamy was a cultural norm practiced for several reasons in the African context. First, polygamous unions guaranteed many children who would continue the family line and ensure posterity. The practice was also encouraged as a remedy to barrenness. Mbiti remarks, “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 childlessness, and partly to remove the shame and anxiety of apparent unproductivity” (Mbiti 1967, p. 142). Again, polygamy enhanced the social status among African men. Second, polygamy ratified intercommunal alliances; in such cases, the marriage was more about the extended family and community than an individual (Hillman 1975, p. 92). Third, some considered polygamy for economic reasons. Many children guaranteed labor and enhanced productivity (Muthengi 1995, p. 59). Fourth, polygamy served to continue a family line of deceased kin. Similar to the levirate laws of the Ancient Near East, a brother or close relative was allowed to marry his brother’s or cousin’s widow to continue the family. Fifth, sexual reasons promoted the practice of polygamy. Some cultures required abstinence from sexual union from the time of conception up to at least two to three years after that (Muthengi 1975, p. 60). Thus polygamous marriages favored men during such more prolonged periods of abstinence.

### **Culture and Christianity**

Ariarajah (1994, p.3) comments on how culture relates to Christianity. He defines the term culture as the tool that shapes the human voice that answers the voice of Christ. He points out three points worth highlighting. First, culture always refers to a specific group at a particular place. There is a variation in what people believe and practice in their communities. Second, culture is not static; it changes according to generation, time, and place. Third, culture is a human-made institution containing positive and negative elements. Mbiti rightly argues that humans make culture, and because humans are sinful, what they create bears the imprint of human sinfulness (Mbiti, 1978, p. 274–281). Thus, polygamy is a cultural aspect, and like any other culture, it has positive and negative elements. The Holy Scriptures enable Christians to identify and avoid these cultural practices that deviate from God’s revelation.

Understanding African polygamous marriages and Christian monogamous marriages should go beyond the surface. John Mbiti stresses that marriage is a complex affair with overlapping

economic, social, and religious aspects (Blum 1989, p.73). In every culture, we find marriage one of the most critical components (Blum, 1989, p.73). The fundamental character of polygamy in African society emanates from the fact that this form of African marriage is the base of the extended family, which is the backbone of African communal relations and living (Makoka, 2003, p.5). It indicates that polygamy is ingrained so deeply in the African culture.

Early missionaries' wholesale condemnation of African culture brought more harm than good. It created African Christians who live a double life where converts still hold some unbiblical aspects of culture. Such Christian teachings make them be Christians Africans in the daytime, but Africans Christians at night. It has rightly been observed that "the African, not unlike other nations elsewhere, is in many respects still entangled in a tradition and custom on the one hand, and Western values on the other." African culture is in a transition stage where the new trends cannot simply supersede the old; there must be an evolutionary development towards something, perhaps a synthesis of both elements (Moila 2002: 78). Mbiti advocates for the termination of "cultural imperialism" to allow the indigenous culture to relate more effectively with the gospel, on its own terms and without pressure from outside; "with humility and gratitude, let us borrow and learn from other cultures, but let us not become their cultural slaves" (Mbiti, 1978, p. 274–281).

Conversely, the proponents of the African culture were wrong in defending and justifying every African custom without giving due consideration to the biblical teachings. The reactionary approach divided the church in a significant way. The incarnational model of the Word becoming flesh (John 1:14) would have resolved the tensions. This model implies that the universal love of God as revealed in Jesus Christ through the power of the Spirit manifests itself uniquely in particular contexts and through cultures (Ariarajah, 1994, p. 1). Ariarajah further observes that colonization, westernization, and evangelization efforts assumed superiority over the religions and cultures of the "conquered" natives (Ariarajah, 1994, p.6). This kind of posture would not have sustained a healthy theological conversation on the matter.

Although Christianity and cultures have had far-reaching interactions, no single culture stands over and above all others. No set of cultural patterns and social structures is specifically Christian (Hillman, 1975, p. 66). Whether in Africa, Asia, or America, the ignorance, insensitivity, and outright rejection of other cultures as primitive, pagan, heathen, or savage have been documented. The missionaries forgot that country, language, and customs are incorrect indicators of whether one is a Christian. Christians have no cities of their own, use no peculiar dialect, and practice no extraordinary way of life (Hillman, 1975, p. 266). In summary, the proclaimed gospel did not engage on the African realities with a long-term theological solution to pertinent questions. Hillman believes in dialogue between Christianity and cultures because the church is bigger than

race or nation. The church is “not bound exclusively and indissolubly to any race or nation or to any particular way of life or any customary pattern of living, ancient or recent. Faithful to her own tradition and at the same time conscious of her universal mission, she can enter into communion with various culture models to her own enrichment and theirs too” (Hillman, 1975, p.267). This discussion on culture and Christianity provides us with a foundational understanding of the arguments used by the proponents of polygamous marriages in Africa.

The study in the next section argues that the perception of marriage as one-man-one-woman has recently been changing, particularly among Christians. This heretical teaching emanates from some pastors and church leaders who sympathize with African customs and practices. These leaders emphasize the recapitulation of the old traditions of the African people. These heretics thus encourage their followers to embrace polygamy. These trends and teachings have been featured even in the local dailies. Recently, for instance, a pastor who was justifying polygamy claimed that too many women were growing old without husbands, not out of choice but for lack of spouses (The Standard Nation, February 10, 2018). There are also voices from prominent Kenyan politicians asking churches to consider polygamy to boost family responsibility (NTV News, April 03, 2018). This study, therefore, sought to understand the perception of Christians in selected churches in Nairobi on monogamous and polygamous marriages. In addition, the study sought to find out the views of Christians on the teaching of one-man-one-woman unions and the changing trends in monogamous marriages.

#### **4. Research Design**

The study employed a descriptive research design involving collecting data about an already existing phenomenon from a population. Also, the design allows the researcher to ask individuals about their perceptions, values, behavior, and attitudes (Cresswell, 2013, 7). The descriptive survey design was considered the most appropriate since it allows the researcher to examine the trends in the perception of polygamous marriages among Christians in the selected Churches in Nairobi County. The population for the study constituted some churches in Nairobi County. Specifically, the study targeted the clergy and church members in the sampled churches. Data collection utilized structured questionnaires, and the data were analyzed using both descriptive and content analysis techniques.

#### **5. Results**

##### **Prevalence of Polygamous Marriages**

On the prevalence of polygamous marriages, 72% of the respondent believed that the practice still exists. On the cases of polygamy, the study found that there were a few cases in the different



churches considering, with five instances being the highest in some churches. Further, the study indicated that there were cases of polygamy among the clergy and church elders, as shown by 6% of the respondents.

The study also found that 96% of the respondents in the selected churches in Nairobi do not accept polygamy. Most of the respondents think that polygamy is unbiblical practice. As discussed above, this view is well-supported in the Bible. For example, Genesis 2, 1 Timothy 3:2,12: “Now the overseer is to be above reproach, faithful to his wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach others.” Verse 12, “A deacon must be faithful to his wife and manage his children and his household well.” Also, according to Titus 1:6, “An elder must be blameless, faithful to his wife, a man whose children believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient.” The explanation was that pastors and elders and church leaders should be in monogamous unions; by extension, this requirement also applied to the congregants. Again, these and many other verses like Matthew 19: 5 emphasize monogamy as God’s ideal plan for the institution of marriage.

In addition, the study evaluated the general perception of Christians on polygamous marriages by looking at how the church handles polygamous marriages and converts. Unlike the historical closed-door policy to polygamists, most respondents expressed that those in polygamous marriages can receive Jesus as their Lord and Saviour and be encouraged to provide Christian leadership in their families. This new conviction is more tolerant than former approaches. This finding signals a significant shift in how Christians look at this cultural practice, but still, there are some reservations. For example, in cases where a convert was polygamous before coming to Christ, the church can accept such converts but not allow them to take any leadership position in the church. It is interesting that sometimes the church hypocritically treats polygamist converts with suspicion by allowing them only to attend church services, give their tithes and offerings but not be fully part of the church membership. In addition, some churches sampled do not permit former or present polygamists to take up leadership positions. They see them as immoral and untrustworthy people. In these churches, Christians and church leaders who embrace polygamy are summoned, suspended from holding the positions in the church, and less respected than those who have one wife. However, ironically, polygamists are allowed to lead in cases where few elders are available in the congregation.

On the new trends on the perception of polygamous marriages, 56.2% indicated a decrease in polygamous marriages. At the same time, 88.5% of the respondents noted an increase with the “*mpango wa kando*” (literally ‘side plan,’ meaning, sexual relations outside marriage) arrangement among Christians. The practice was increasingly becoming informal, unlike in the traditional context

where it was a formal union. Polygamy is increasingly taking a new dimension, with many people having “secret marriages and families.” Those against polygamy explained that it is unscriptural, it limits one from serving God fully, and that polygamy creates a lot of confusion and fighting among co-wives. Those who argue for polygamy argue that children are a blessing and that getting many children implies more blessings.

## **6. Conclusion**

This paper assessed the perception of Christians in heterosexual monogamous marriages on the issue of polygamy in selected churches (evangelical, Pentecostal, and African Independent churches) in Nairobi County. The study also interrogated the approaches churches took in responding to polygamy. The missionary founded churches maintained the biblical teaching that polygamy was against the biblical teachings. While the AICs took a more liberal position by embracing polygamists in their congregations. The study also examined representative biblical texts on marriage and concluded that God’s plan for marriage is for one man and one woman. Polygamy resulted from the deviation of God’s plan and the hardness of the human heart. Human cultures worldwide are fallen, and thus the prevalence of polygamy is not a surprise. A balanced approach should take the practice as a critical component of culture that needs transformation and reconsideration. The second part of the study highlighted the findings of research done in selected churches in Nairobi. The research goal was to determine believers’ perceptions of the practice of polygamy. The analysis indicated that polygamy is a practice that is still present, although minimally and indirectly, in some congregations. At the same time, the study showed that most of the respondents perceive polygamy as unbiblical. They believe that the Bible presents monogamy as God’s ideal form of marriage. Thus those involved in such unions can be embraced in the church but barred from leadership positions.

## **7. Recommendations**

The study recommends that, first, the church should counsel couples and ground them on the doctrine of the Bible of one husband and one wife. The church should develop clear procedures known to all congregants early to avoid ambiguity later in their Christian life. Second, the church should advocate for monogamy through its teaching and encourage members to adopt alternative conflict resolution mechanisms instead of marrying many wives as a way of running away from conflict. Third, the church should create more awareness through campaigns, workshops, and seminars to discourage polygamy among Christians through education on the disadvantages of polygamy in the entire society. Fourth, those involved in polygamous unions before getting saved should be nurtured in the Christian faith and encouraged to be responsible for their families.

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