

Exploring the Practical Application of Polygamy as a Relevant Tool for Social Construction in Post-Colonial Igbo Land

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Abstract

Polygamy is such an ugly term in various discourses. Many Africans have grown up hating the concept. This is because of the influences of the Africans. With colonialism came slavery and westernization. Polygamy became consigned to the past and all that was wrong with the past, like the killing of twins in some Nigerian communities prior to the coming of the British. Hence various people would be ashamed that their roots were ever associated with polygamy. It is simply a fact that polygamy has a lot of drawbacks. In recent times, however, people's perceptions about it have begun to change. Part of the reason is the social problem created by the non-marital status of numerous young and old women who have attained marital age but are unable to get attached to male partners. The writer has observed this phenomenon for years and was prompted to conduct research on it. He is of the conviction that the practice may be reviewed. This is where writers have a role to play. Materials for the research were obtained mainly from journal articles and books on social issues.

Keywords: pre-colonial, post-colonial, Igbo society, Single motherhood, polygamy, colonialism.

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INTRODUCTION

Marriage is a union of people who choose to be close to one another biologically. In many parts of Nigeria, it has evolved greatly from the polygamous form in the pre-colonial times to a predominantly monogamous order. This is most profound in Igbo land, where records show that men married many wives due partly to economic considerations, as bloated families translated to enormous wealth. Upon conversion to Christianity and the shift in career options, especially with rural to urban movements, many males began to turn away from polygamy. A lot of people became westernized and became drawn to the ways of the English colonizers, who restricted themselves to one wife to a man.

Some commentators observe that the new lifestyle and issues like migration to places outside Africa led to loss of the male folk, who are naturally outnumbered by the women. Churches promote the new system, which is depicted in films and texts that the Africans consume. Discussions are now heated on what many people refer to as a social problem. It refers to the outrageous number of single ladies in society. There are opinions by some people that the discontinuation of the practice of polygamy partly swells the population of

prostitutes, for instance. As a result of the development, some others argue, young women are driven to other vices.

Be it in the pre-colonial or post-colonial period, polygamy is widely known to be problematic. There are usually accusations of favoritism levelled against husbands at polygamous homes. The offspring of the adults who work tirelessly to create harmony among them and their other relations hardly achieve their goals. For these and other reasons, many people are disinclined to going into polygamous relationships. Polygamy was a male preserve in Igbo land, and the men enjoyed it quite well. Urama is one writer who examines polygamy extensively. It is doubtful, though, that the type of polygamy she refers to exists or existed. Urama remarks thus, Igbo culture also encourages polygamy. A man can also bring in his mistress into his home and sleep with her with the knowledge of his wives. In most cases, the wife is asked to go to the house of the mistress and invite her for her husband, cook for the mistress, and entertain her. His wife would go into her hut while her husband takes the mistress in his obi for the fun. Men are exempted in adultery but a man who catches his wife with another man in bed is permitted by culture to kill his wife's lover if he can. It is seen as a way of regaining that man's dignity on the shame brought to him by his wife.

In some parts of Igboland, a man is also encouraged to divorce his wife on the ground of her infidelity, yet men can have as many mistresses or wives as they want [6].

Igbo culture is not known to condone this type of reckless act from anyone. As we will point out eventually in this work, Igbos did not bring strangers into their homes for mere coitus.

Polygamy, Trends in Pre-colonial Igbo Land

In pre-colonial Igbo society, people married according to their abilities. A man might see the need to add another wife to the one he had. If he thought, in error most times, that the woman he was living with could not bear him a child or beget a particular gender, in order not to be cut off in the stream of life, he might get a second wife to accomplish his aim. He may widen his household as much as possible. This might be as a result of improvement in his fortunes. Having a large family may make the cultivation of large expanse of land easier. People are seduced by the types of phrases used for wealthy people, thereby exerting themselves intensely to become successful in life. Since number swells the man's profile, he may become very ambitious. Another man living a few meters away set his goals differently and may still point to great achievements, even with one wife. This second man may stop at one because he believed adding any more thing to his collection may be hurtful to him and his family. The law and the society were pleasant with the two genders. What were recognized were their commitments to the progress of the society. They however had to maintain certain rules in their households.

When one of Okonkwo's wives does not guide her tongue and almost loses her life because of Okonkwo's recklessness, Okonkwo is reprimanded by the community. Uzowulu is dragged to the court in a public hearing over domestic violence. The judge explains to him his excesses and his in-laws are advised to be civil in their eventual actions (Achebe 68). It conforms with Nwoko's observation when Nwoko remarks that [t]here must be a father figure to culturally legitimise the marriage. Culturally, these male relatives provided or were regarded as support and as a bulwark for their sister in case of any maltreatment later in the marriage by her husband. It was believed that the absence of the bride's male relatives could suggest that her in-laws were at liberty to maltreat her anytime they wanted since she did not have any male relative to defend or protect her [3-5] relatives could suggest that her in-laws were at liberty to maltreat her anytime they wanted since she did not have any male relative to defend or protect her.

The man's motivation in seeking a second woman might be appetite for sex. He might be in need of the company of another woman, with the case of Okonkwo in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. In that

event, somebody also loses a wife. A man in pre-colonial Igbo society might get a new wife on account of losing a wife to death. Getting a second wife might be the outcome of a prize at a wrestling competition. Someone may not find his wife because she may have fallen victim to kidnapping or slave raids during the slave trade across the Atlantic Ocean, making the man concerned not to have known the fate of his wife.

Female Husbands or Ikuchi Nwanyi

A woman who bore her husband no child or who may be unsatisfied with the female children they have, may desire a stronger legacy, which society advocated. Out of the concern, the woman may seek the consent of the community, look for a woman of child-bearing age and bring her into the family. The community is now aware of this arrangement in which a young man is contracted to do that which the other union had failed to accomplish. The widow kept the fruits and they young man had to look elsewhere to produce his own children. He respected the reason why he had access to the young woman and that he merely performed a duty. The young woman in the arrangement did not recognize any person as her husband other than the widow (Sharifu 272)).

Death may make people resort to this system that is known as 'nkuchi.' If the young widow does not find it necessary to leave the household or retire to her parents, one of the dead husband's brothers may represent the brother by producing children with the woman. The children come under the name of the deceased. He has merely kept the brother's lineage running. To avoid complications, he may still not forfeit the chance of having his own wife and children. Therefore, it is not done at the expense of the donor; that is, he foregoing the entitlement of to a family. They may not be good examples of polygamy, as we notice that children of different mothers may have been fathered by one man.

There is also the concept of the male daughter, whereby the daughter could be held back in her father's house for continuity. she foregoes marriage and begets children in her father's house. This occurs especially when the father is deceased (Nwoko 4). Urama elaborates on this aspect of marriage in Igbo land when she opines thus, [S]ame-sex marriage as practiced in some Igbo societies implies that the children of the male daughter retain their mother patrilineage. The practice of male daughters and same-sex marriage among women in Igbo culture does not make Igbo society less heterosexual. All sorts of amorous relationships are forbidden among the same gender in Igbo culture. The bride of the "female husband" and the "male daughter" are exposed to physical, psychological, and health risks in having sexual intercourse with men to have children. In most part of Igboland, they are not allowed to choose their own lovers. Men are arranged to be sleeping with them

without even consulting them. The succession and inheritance issues that enforce male child dominance in Igbo culture, therefore, form the basis for the “male daughters,” “female husbands,” and same-sex marriage in Igbo culture that endanger the life of women (2-3). He bride of the “female husband” and the “male daughter” are exposed to physical, psychological, and health risks in having sexual intercourse with men to have children. In most part of Igboland, they are not allowed to choose their own lovers. Men are arranged to be sleeping with them with-out even consulting them. The succession and inheritance issues that enforce male child dominance in Igbo culture, therefore, form the basis for the “male daughters,” “female husbands,” and same-sex marriage in Igbo culture that endanger the life of women. In most part of Igboland, they are not allowed to choose their own lovers. Men are arranged to be sleeping with them with-out even consulting them. The succession and inheritance issues that enforce male child dominance in Igbo culture, therefore, form the basis for the “male daughters,” “female husbands,” and same-sex marriage in Igbo culture that endanger the life of women.

Marital Rules: Ije Di Abali Ano

The process of bringing a man and a woman together as husband and wife is tasking. They had to make it appear that two families and even communities were being brought together. It started with the initial point of notifying the two people. Having passed that stage successfully, two communities became aware of the development. Various ceremonies that would almost exhaust the two parties, followed. At a point, they set a keg of palm wine on the bride’s head and the bride was escorted to the groom’s family home by her relations. She familiarized herself for four days (ije di abali ano) with activities in her future home (Ernest-Samuel 65). This practice is what Ernest-Samuel refers to when she says that the Igbo have a tradition of Ije di abali ano- a cultural rite that permits the bride to visit her suitor for just four days prior to the proper marriage. It seems that two strangers could meet and marry without knowing each other’s people or background. In Sacred Tradition, the idea of a groom being handed over a hooded bride is akin to that. One defends the lady’s plight of not taking part in the decision concerning her marriage because the Igbo of old run a patriarchal system. (65-66)

The bride price exchanged hands, in which each family tries to hold its ground, followed. The bride finally would be released to the new husband and the couple had to live according to the principles of married life. Some men played a passive role in the process because of distance, and a wife was delivered to them after certain rites were fulfilled. There were therefore a lot of networking and match-making that involved. Somebody may have spoken about her sister or brother

or son or daughter, or relation. Emissaries would be sent to the other camp as fact-finding missions. It became difficult to break the chain of relationship, a system that discourages divorce. The different parties opened their doors to one another because they cherished their relationship and were aware of the rigors and the emotions planted in the marriage.

Advent of Colonialism

When colonialism set in, the indigenous people began to pay attention to the injunctions of the Christian religion that had been introduced. They found out a lot of things in the Bible and by what Christian preachers said. The Bible contains numerous lists of men who did things exactly how they were done in Igbo land. Those men loved their housemaids and do not hesitate to marry them. Among the sins some of them committed was not having hundreds of wives, but mere disobedience. Biblical record has it that men like Abraham, David and Solomon had up to 700 wives and concubines. It did not count against them. The Igbo Christians were told they did not have to align with indulgences because they depicted events in the Old Testament. If they opened to passages in the New Testament, they would discover that Jesus Christ ushered a new beginning (Adamo).

The number of wives for each person was reduced to one. The lives of the colonists confirmed the course of events in the New Testament. People who came to the Igbos with the Bible and who took over the political and religious affairs of the locals lived according to these dictates of the Old Testament. In European society many books wrote about where the colonists came from, and these places had the exact practices the Christian religion talked about. However, the Europeans or English did not keep marriages sacrosanct, unlike what was being portrayed. An important personality like King Henry VIII is famous for marrying seven women and putting two of them to death. The English had brought their ways to Igbo land, where divorce was rare. When they discovered they could not continue with a marriage, there was nothing they could do. Again, polygamy was not permissible (Ward 83-90).

Agrarian to Clerical and Other Careers

Previously, together with his large family, the harvest in a man’s house was large. With colonialism, people had begun to leave vocations for which polygamy was desired. The new vocations discouraged polygamy. People adjusted to what were thought to be modern and Christian ways. Loyalty to the new was the norm. If the person was educated, it became even an alien practice. The women came to be educated as well. They would not tolerate having a second woman in the same home. Some men, who desired to have second wives abandoned the idea because of the complicated process. Many ladies frowned at being second wives. Before making the decision of marrying a second wife, a man had to think of the effect on his children. People no longer married

because several people would bring some resources to the home, which were based on physical exertion. It became old-fashioned. It was however never discarded (Grossbard-Shechtman (415-417)).

Pains of Polygamy

A man marries a second wife these days to show he is not satisfied with the first wife. The first one is reminded she is not as beautiful or sexually attractive as the second one. The second one believes these are some of the reasons why she came into the household. The excitement she enjoyed with the husband had evaporated because of the presence of the new wife. The husband may rediscover some attractions of the first wife. Anything that went around became, be it a gift or house fitting was found to be used to disparage the other one. The husband must learn the art of making both women contented. Checks will show that this is unattainable. In fact, the man does things that encourage acrimony. He is unreasonably biased. His first wife's jokes turn to admonition.

The first wife's food becomes tasteless. The man looks for excuses to deny the woman's children their requirements for school. He forgets his children must not see their mother being abused. When a man is past caring about how his wife feels, he is hardly aware if the woman's children are sick. He is willing to love the second wife's children like their mother. It is also his desire that they have a giant share in his will. The first wife's children may not be remembered when the will is being drafted.

In situations where a second woman came due to the death of the first one, the man thinks less and less of the wellbeing of the motherless children. He is interested in the woman of the moment and her views. The child or children are the furthest things on his mind, while the children of the second wife are favored. The children tremble in the presence of their stepmother. She misuses the office she inherits, and becomes committed to destroying those children's lives. The woman becomes driven by the fear of her stepchildren outperforming her children in any worthy endeavor. She declares war on them. Later in life, these children look back to those moments. They may want patch the torn relationship, but their trust in brotherhood has been weakened. The suspicion may become mutual. This is why Bahari *et al.*, reveal some negative aspects of polygamy, saying that [p]olygamy may create a complex family system involving the husband's relationship and relations between subsequent wives and children [...]. Polygamous families have distinct household problems, usually stemming from jealousy between co-wives over the husband's affections and resources [...]. In addition to studies documenting polygamy's detrimental effects on wives' health, researchers have identified polygamy as a risk factor for adverse child health outcomes.

They go further to state that [p]olygamous women are genuinely at risk of experiencing psychological and emotional distress. For example, one study found that women in polygamous marriages are at a higher risk of low self-esteem and depression than women in monogamous relationships and enjoy less marital satisfaction and more problematic mother-child relationships [...]. There were significant differences between women in polygamous and monogamous marriages. There was a higher prevalence of somatization, depression, anxiety, hostility, paranoid ideation, psychoticism, general symptom severity, positive symptoms total, and psychiatric disorder, as well as lower ratings of life and marital satisfaction, family functioning, and self-esteem among polygamous wives [...]. A recent study also demonstrated similar findings but showed no significant difference in women's marital satisfaction between polygamous and monogamous marriages [...].

Global and Igbo Male-Female Ratio

There is a sharp departure in the figures obtained on head count of male and female around the world from the reality, especially in regions like Nigeria. In some parts of the world like China and India, males outnumber females as a result of preference for males, given government policies and cultural impositions. This is what Hesketh and Xing point out when they say, Just over half of the human population is male. In 2004, males accounted for 50.4% of the global total [...], but in some regions of the world the proportion is considerably above this average. Here, we examine the reasons for this rise and explore its consequences. We first explain how some natural fluctuation in sex ratio occurs in human populations, and we illustrate this with the example of the effects of war. We then demonstrate how the tradition of preference for male offspring has led to huge distortions in the sex ratio in some countries. The wider social and political consequences of these distortions are discussed, with particular reference to China, India, and South Korea. Finally, we suggest measures that will help to reduce sex selection and lead, eventually, to normalization of the sex ratio. (13269-13270).

In Igbo land, the picture is clearer and different from the ones cited above. Curiously, many Igbo ladies are not willing to accept the fact of the sheer number of their population against the lean number of the males. A lot of factors make them not to realize this. When a girl comes out of a relationship, she enters another one. She can eat out of the hands of many men. She finds herself in the middle of many men who do not know each other, but she thinks it is a measure of the availability of marriageable men. Each man works hard to keep her by being untruthful to her. They keep her hopeful that marriage is imminent. She loses them one after the other as days go by. She might be told she can find them in the church. But inside the church, it does not look like how

it looks outside. It is usual for the pastor to give the female members all the hope that she might meet somebody there or outside (Johnson 172-174).

At the start of a relationship, a young man feels he has been working very hard to make a lady think highly of him. He executes a plan to show her he is capable as anyone to cater to her needs. The lady has devoted her life working to meet the approval of any man she believes her story can be like the stories of her friends who had had impressive weddings and in wonder homes. She does not want anything less. She believes that the society has a lot of men she can choose from. The Igbo young man would like to avoid a marital life in which there would be more pain than happiness. He is close to breaking point, but cannot attain the type of goal he set for himself. There is only a slight difference between his ambition and that of the female. In his own case, he is the person who has to go and pluck the fortune (Hesketh and Xing 13269-13270).

Some are confused and nervous about what to do when it came to the expensive marriage process, which is like gathering all their life savings and giving them away, and thereafter explaining why they head a wretched family. Many pursue wealth and go to foreign lands. Yet, it still ends differently for most men when compared to women. Migration has become a bane in Igbo society. It is leaving many ladies without men. More men than women have reasons why they have to relocate temporarily. The fiancé a girl had invested emotions in ends up in the arms of another woman outside the country. She realizes when she is almost losing her dignity at home that the man is not coming back to her. It is a handful that want to reactivate an old relationship even when they return. The unexciting news is that he is now another woman's husband (Hesketh and Xing 13270-13271).

Northern Nigeria and the Extant Problem

We must confront this problem. It is an unpleasant situation. It all appears calm in northern Nigeria, a region many people can say with certainty has a far lower case of unattached single girls. The fact is that northern Nigeria is bleeding, too. Many northern ladies are raising their voices, pleading with their men to be more humane and take more wives. This can reveal where the Igbo society belongs in this regard. Also, many Igbo ladies have been sending appeals to their fellow females to relax their opposition to polygamy and help their fellow women. Expectedly, a lot of women are enraged at the suggestion. They do not see the wisdom in pairing a man and two women when there is a good supply of women. Many men and women are quoting Bible passages to dismiss the calls. However, leaving things the way they are has left many females depressed. Many women are left childless and roaming the streets (Nnatu).

Single Motherhood

Single motherhood refers to a single female parent of a child. According to Chavda and Nisarga, A single parent can be a single mother or a single father, a solo parent, where the individual is a divorcee or a widow or widower, separated from their partner and unplanned pregnancy, or could be a single parent by choice, where a man or woman chooses to become a single parent through donor insemination or adoption living with one or more dependent children without the presence and support of an adult partner sharing the responsibility of parenting. Reasons proffered by Chavda and Nisarga could be some of the factors responsible for single motherhood, yet a few decades ago, death of the spouse used to be the most common cause of the rise in single-parent households, whereas now we see a rise in other reasons for single parenthood such as parental divorce, parental separation, unplanned pregnancy, and choice to be a single parent by adoption or donor insemination. (Chavda and Nisarga)

Some people think affected young ladies can give up on marriage and embrace single motherhood. Many are not persuaded by it. They want somebody's name given to their children. The Igbo society is too reluctant to accept such change. A woman must not miss married life and also remain childless. The society judges harshly when it does. It has no cultural net to support such status. Many people would be crushed to see their daughters or sisters cuddling children when they are not married. The shame would never leave the family. They can be reminded quickly that some fathers stopped their daughters from leaving the household and permitted child-bearing at home. They are still part of these society that is one of the poorest in the world. Bearing and raising a child requires a collective effort of father and mother. It becomes a huge issue.

CONCLUSION

Africans or Igbos in the pre-colonial times had many reasons to practice polygamy. A man could have several wives and children. The large populations usually assisted with production of food. A man with such privilege found security in what he did. People willingly gave out their children to marriage to men who already had wives. It is yet to be ascertained if women felt oppressed by the practice. Further research in this area may have to provide answers to this puzzle. Once admitted into a home, a woman was also protected by the laws of the immediate community. Every one of the women considered herself a builder. Polygamy can be an assemblage of women for a lustful man. It could be done for other reasons, one of which is as a result of debt liquidation. What cannot be ignored are the numerous problems of polygamy. Problems multiply with polygamy. These problems affect the men, the children and the women involved. Some people become hurt and injured for life, as a result of polygamy. Outside these problems and outside the home, non-practice of

polygamy leads to social problems. This might also account for why marriages in the West are marked by monogamy, which Igbos adopted as a result of colonialism.

The contemporary society may detest polygamy, but more and more people, including unmarried women, have begun to observe some of its merits. Too many women cannot face society anymore on account of not being married. They feel rejected by a society that does not tolerate people staying unmarried. This ill-treatment by the society makes these women to be depressed a lot of young women descend to such professions as prostitution, where they can find solace. To build a balanced society is impossible, but we can create one where many people will be accommodated. Killings, emigration and the low number of males as against females make marriage to be out of the reach of too many women. This is where writers of books, especially novelists, entertainers and governments should help to reduce the number of unattached women in Igbo land.

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