

European Influences On Polygamy In Marriage Culture In Africa, 1900-1970: The Igbo Example

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Abstract

Polygamy is an acceptable institution in African culture and Igbo land in particular. Its practice remained relatively composed until the early 20th century when Christian missionaries with the support of the British colonial rule, ignorantly, raised hammer against it in the area. This study investigated and observed that both polygamy and monogamy in the area were respectively, associated with economic and social values that were accentuated by the tradition and culture of the people. These values were what the Europeans and Christian missionaries of different denominations and appellations failed to venerate in their various encounter with the Igbo, for instance. They attempted to eliminate polygamy through altering marriage rules and giving preferential and fondness treatments to monogamous men. It was equally, discovered that in doing so, numerous negative effects, namely; increasing rate of infidelity in marriage, such as adultery, and death, increase in number of illegitimate children, excessive concubinage game among men, increasing spread of sexually related diseases, among others, were left on

the people. This study as well, observed that there is nothing wrong with polygamy. It is a matter of understanding the tenet, its practice and the parties involved. Either monogamy or polygamy is not relevant to Christian salvation. Of course, the bible did not recognize any of them as being sinful. The work relied on both primary and secondary sources. Its data were analyzed qualitatively according to contents.

Keywords: European, Influences, Polygamy, Marriage and Culture

Introduction

Polygamy is a traditional practice that made provision for a man to marry more than one wife. It (polygamy) is as old as marriage culture in Igbo land. Certain issues were meant to be solved by the practice. Yet, there was no evidence that it gave below expectations before the arrival of the Europeans with their Christianity. However, various influences from the Westerners and their Christian missionaries led to the development of suspicion, mistrust, skepticism and hatred for polygamy in Igbo land. It is therefore, intended here to present premises for dispelling certain wrong notions about polygamy in marriage culture in Igbo land.

The practice has been perceived differently by different contributors, especially with its exposure to the Western Culture. Some have seen it as an application to address social, political and economic issues in Igbo. While others have either seen it as being against God (Christianity), an offender of women's rights¹ and a means of buttressing that there is joy in sharing. Be that as it may, this study shows concern on the values of and gaps filled in Igbo culture and

tradition by polygamy. This is done to justify why the practice should receive no condemnation in any religion in Igbo land.

Since its contact with Christianity, the practice has received numerous arguments for or against. Some have conceptualized it as an embodiment of Old Testament practices. Therefore, it could have a place in traditional society, but not in modern one.² This work could be of help in reconciling the rising positions of people and theological thinking of various Christian denominations on polygamy in Igbo land. It consciously, established premises reflecting and strong essence of polygamy in both the traditional and modern societies. In other words, the positive sides of polygamy and why it should be sustained capture the pursuit of this work.

Polygamy and the Traditional Society of Igbo land

The Igbo were involved in the reality of polygamy in marriage culture. Its practice in marriage culture of Igbo land was soaring enthusiastically until the Western education and Christian activities fashioned reasons for giving bad names to the practice. In the past, numerous Igbo men engaged in polygamy. The polygamous home consisted a man, his wives and children. Men sometimes engaged in polygamy for economic, social and political reasons. These reasons formed the background, aura and vitality for engagement of the Igbo in polygamy.

Economically, polygamy was regarded in Igbo societies of Abakaliki, Awka, Nkanu, Nsukka, Arochukwu, Uturu, Orlu, Nnewi, among others, as a source of labour.³ The practice enabled them to have more people in the family to help in farming activities, for instance. Men were mainly and

wholly known as the breadwinners of every household in Igbo land, with women as the supporters, *odozi akụ*. Doubtlessly, farming was the famous means of livelihood. It therefore, required labour. The quest for labour made some writers to see polygamy as the original means through which men acquired status and labour.⁴ It indicated that the more wives a man had, the more children he could have and the greater would be his labour force. To this effect, livestock management, preparation of fields, planting of crops, controlling of weeds, harvesting and transportation of inputs and outputs would be easier and time saving. This generally, resulted in increasing productivity, harvest and wealth of a household. Just as a wealthy man saw polygamy as a way to show his wealth and ego, it equally, remained a means to facilitate acquisition of wealth in the traditional societies of the Igbo.

Politically, the number of children that a man had, made his value appreciated by the society, and it gave him high status. His need of recognition was as well, met by his many wives. Thereby, when considerations for leadership position arose, he was usually considered above others, due to his ability to rule a large number of people.⁵ It is evident that numerous rulers in the Igbo traditional societies, such as David Ogwale of Ezzama and Agom Eze of Onicha Igbeze kingdoms, were polygamists. They were however, considered for the position due to their fame in catering for and managing their expanded homes. In terms of election in the Igbo traditional societies, a polygamist gained significant influence from his large family. The already recorded supports from the members of his family implied that he had numerous people in the society canvassing for his support and emergence as a ruler.⁶

The practice was still, maintained in Igbo land to enable immortality of a man's family and the desire for a male heir.⁷ The Igbo held much to patriarchy. So, it is common among the people in their traditional societies that anyone that lived without a male child was considered to be either under curse or be facing any other devastating social problem. In most Igbo traditional societies, a marriage without male child stood on weak and trembling ground. Such circumstance usually presented room for polygamy as the most viable alternative in Igbo marriage culture. Female children were considered as appendages in an Igbo home. They seemed not being serious factor for marriage stability. For Kimathi, "... a marriage into which only girls were born is pitied."⁸ By implication, all marriages in Igbo land that were graced by female children were threatened and opened to polygamy. Thus the saying, girls are chickens for visitors in Igbo land, *umụ agboghọ bụ anụ okuko e ji ele ọbịa n'ala Igbo*. On the other hand, boys were likened to cola nut that welcomes and attends to all visitors, *umụ okorobia bụ ọjị nke na-anabata ndị ọbịa niile*.⁹ This submission depicted that girls are not to stay in their parents' home forever. They were expected by the tradition and practice to get married, but male children stayed, married and had children to sustain the positions, lineage and continuity of the family in the area.

Ill-health and or other inabilities of one's wife were alternatively handled by polygamy rather than divorce, in the Igbo marriage culture.¹⁰ For instance, a wife's ill-health or infertility was neither seen as a reason for her husband to abstain from sex nor remain son-less. If a man's wife was ill or barren for a long period, his family members, sometimes, his wife encouraged him to think of and go for a second marriage. This implies that in any case, everybody was

involved in contributing to the sustenance and continuity of a family in Igbo. This was the similar case that made Sarah to encourage Abraham to have and go in with Hagar.¹¹

It might contradict one's imagination that one's husband who could be closely around his wife in times of all odds, devoted his times and resources in bringing, settling and entertaining his new wife or wives. Yet, it became the unthinkable-thinkable because in most cases, the woman with the inabilities initiated or consented to polygamy wholeheartedly. This is one of the few circumstances that necessitated the need for modification of marriage terms and values, but not total elimination of polygamy in the marriage culture. By so doing, the means to handle such condition if either a woman or man is involved would be spelt out, and accommodated in the marriage culture. As Mbiti asserts "Marriage and childbearing are the medicines against death. While death continues to demolish life, marriage and childbearing keep ahead of it all the time."¹² In line with that Maillu postulates "... polygamy is the kindest solution in the case of a wife who is infertile, because this is preferable to being expelled from the household, and having to look for another husband."¹³ In Igbo traditional societies, man needed many children (especially sons) to ensure the survival of the lineage. It equally increased the man's power within the clan.

Polygamy in Igbo land sometimes was considered as a way of handling the case of menopause among the ageing women. It is believed in Igbo land that women might no longer engage in sexual activities once they have entered menopause. The position was that women with married daughter(s) and son(s) was regarded as someone who had finished her sexual role in marriage.¹⁴ She was considered too

old for sexual encounters. Another and younger wives were taken to fill the gap. In most cases, an older woman encouraged her husband to get a new wife. Such was an indication that she had fulfilled her sexual obligation and was ready for exemption. This provision gave men opportunities to continue to have sexual relations after his aged wife must have stopped. It therefore, tended to confirm the view that women were mainly for procreation in Igbo land.

The practice of polygamy in Igbo was equally, seen as a preventive measure against unfaithfulness in marriage. It paved way for a man in a long distance or mobile jobs to make a wife for himself according to his different places of work or as the case may be.¹⁵ To this effect, a man that worked far from home was permitted by the tradition to have another wife with him as other wives could be at home taking care of children and household. This situation tried to regulate a man from concubinage relationship and having affairs with commercial sex workers in different places. It was equally, believed that if a wife was less interested in sex than her husband a reason for polygamy was undoubtedly, established. This implies that it regulated a man's vulnerability to the temptation to commit adultery in Igbo land.

Again, polygamy in the traditional Igbo society was engaged in to save people especially women from cases of social valueless and outcast. Unmarried women that had come of age were considered to be socially valueless and outcasts.¹⁶ This traumatized, dehumanized and caused mental and psychological depression on them (unmarried women). Worse still, any grown up man and woman in some Igbo communities that died childless was seen to have died shamefully and ingloriously. Relatives were forbidden from

mourning such victim openly. They believed that mourning the deceased openly would attract him or her back into the family through re-incarnation. So, the deceased was either thrown into evil forest or buried in children cemetery without burial rites. The only burial rite that was done in the wilderness, was meant to ward off such curse on the family. To save the Igbo from such infamous case, polygamy was encouraged to enable the numerous unmarried women in a society of limited men to have access to husbands. For many ladies, it was better to marry a polygamist than to remain unmarried. This therefore, promoted childbearing among the people of Igbo, and made them both socially valuable and free from being outcasts.

Igbo Polygamy and the European Culture up to 1970

The Europeans and Christian missionaries came to Igbo land before the end of 19th century, with monogamy as a norm. They insisted on and advocated for monogamy as the only acceptable form of marriage. This revealed their determination to confront and oppose polygamy at the point of conversion of any indigenous person of Igbo. By their standard, a man who wanted to be accepted as a baptized Christian and church member was required to bring one wife into the Church (for Church marriage/ wedding). While the unmarried converts were charged to embrace monogamy.

Debates commenced on the positions of Christian polygamists and Christian anti-polygamists. Some scholars and church leaders were involved in heated and unresolved argument on whether God is really against polygamy or it is against God. These commentators questioned the stand of the Bible on the issue as converted polygamists abandoned their

divorced families. In other words, they promoted divorce without responsibility being taken for the children and women victims. Investigation unveiled that it was an attempt to please the Church, rather than God. People as Solomon, David, Abraham, Jacob,¹⁷ among others, were polygamist, and were never blamed by God. God further, blessed them richly. This revealed that the Church, not God, is against polygamy.¹⁸ Of course, God condemned divorce except in severe case of infidelity. In contradiction, the same people secretly subscribed to concubinage attitude and commercial sex workers to regularly satisfy their human sexuality. This circumstance revealed the element of idealism rather than realism in Christianity and European culture.

This time, the character of church members and exponents of monogamy was not far from pretence. The said-concubinage and increasing patronage to prostitutes instead of polygamy, made families be highly vulnerable to several Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs). The confrontation against the practice made those converted to the new faith to begin to develop largely, prudish attributes and hypocritical attitude toward human sexuality. They pretended to be erotophobia and anti-sexual, but in their real character, sexual promiscuity and sex addiction lifestyles captivated them to prostitution, and its increasing patronage in Igbo land.¹⁹ That the Igbo allowed for polygamy in their marriage culture as one of the ways to protect one's image and maintain morality, even as he/ she was not forced to suffer unwarranted and unsatisfied sexual urge, could be stating the fact. Therefore, the need for regulating the demands of inherent human sexuality partly, justified polygamy in Igbo marriage culture.

As the campaign against polygamy continued to gain grounds in Igbo land, a wife in monogamous family gradually, developed more hardworking character and commitment for work to discourage his husband from going for more wives. This is because it was believed that polygamy was a source of labour for family enterprises. The woman equally, tried to convince her husband on the needs to support the family with hired labour instead of engaging in polygamy as a sole source of labour. Their mission of discouraging polygamy, sometimes, made them to accept Christianity and lured their husbands into the church as one of the means to distract them from the thoughts of polygamy, in any case. To further deter polygamy, most married women became more jealous of their husbands and aggressive against any detected relationship between other ladies and their husbands.²⁰ All these were not the real character of the traditional Igbo women that saw polygamy as a norm and system, whose practice should be regulated and sustained.

At independence of Nigeria in 1960, numerous people of Igbo were already brainwashed to be strongly, desirous of European way of life. For example, in some cases of childlessness or son-less marriage, the people of Igbo that earlier frowned at accepting and introducing a strange blood into their families, were encouraged by the Christian missionaries to embrace adoption of baby(ies) instead of polygamy. The teachings of the Church on the panaceas to such cases in families of the Igbo equally, sustained either adoption of babies or having faith in God and remaining childless or son-less till death; instead of engaging in polygamy. The Church therefore, established their commitment to and involvement in all that concerns their members.²¹

For instance, childlessness was not considered as a punishment or curse on the Igbo Christians. Those that died childless were celebrated, buried ceremoniously, and sometimes, prestigiously by their church members. That opposed the tradition and custom of different parts of Igbo land that believed, celebrating such circumstance would attract it back to the family.²² It is evident that polygamy was mainly, introduced to families to solve one problem and another in the area. As a solution to a challenge, it should be given way in the area, provided that its seeming side effects could be regulated and values of the society sustained. The practice saved numerous families of the Igbo from a lot of mental, psychological, social and economic trauma caused by childless or son-less marriage and human sexuality and desire. Most importantly, the side effects of polygamy, just as monogamy, could be regulated and managed. So, its total elimination as advocated by the Church and proponents of European culture should not be considered as a viable option in Igbo societies.

Again, the Nigerian civil war of 1967-1970 resulted in the death of numerous Igbo men. This however, affected the population of the men of Igbo origin, adversely. It implied the availability of numerous unmarried ladies in relation to the limited and few unmarried men. A situation as this, worsened the question of overstay of ladies without marriage. Before the war, the issue of one man for one woman marriage (monogamy), was already occupying much space in the life and character of numerous Igbo Christians, educated and enlightened ones. Yet, the aftermath of the war necessitated them to re-consider polygamy as one of the ways forward.²³ By implication, the desire for men and marriage was intensified among ladies. In spite of their religion and level of

exposure, they did not mind whether a man, was a polygamist or not. What was important to them was a declaration of interest in marriage by any man. While some churches resorted to modification of their doctrines to accommodate both the polygamists and monogamist, others still, maintained preferential treatments to the monogamist.

Conclusion

It is discovered here, that both the monogamy and polygamy were acceptable institutions in the Igbo marriage culture. Engagement in each in the area had social, economic and political reasons and implications. The practice of polygamy, in particular, remained justifiable in marriage culture of the people until the early 20th century when Christian missionaries with the support of the British colonial rule, confronted it with the aim of eliminating it in favour of monogamy. The Europeans and Christian missionaries of different appellations did not revere the values of polygamy in the marriage culture of the Igbo, in their various rendezvous.

Their efforts to eliminate it resulted in development of new character trend in the life of the people. They developed concubinage attitude and saw reasons to encourage institutionalization of prostitution in the area. This doubtlessly, made numerous families to be unguarded from some Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs), and aided moral decadence, such as fornication, adultery, prostitution, among others, in Igbo land. It is therefore, established here, that there is nothing wrong with polygamy. What matters most, is how, it is managed by each family in Igbo. Either monogamy or polygamy is not relevant to Christian salvation. They filled gaps in the lives of the people, and should be allowed to exist

in all religions in Igbo land. Of course, the bible did not recognize any of them as being sinful. So, the Church, not God, is against polygamy.

Endnotes

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