

Masculine Justification of Polygamy among the Bukusu of Bungoma County Kenya

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Abstract

The traditional practice of polygamy, whereby only one man is allowed to marry more than one wife in a customary marriage, has long been perceived as an offender of women's right. Despite the fact that there has been a decline in practice of polygamy, it is a continuous cultural practice. This has triggered an intractable debate pitting those who are against versus those who uphold Polygamy. This research therefore sheds light on how the Bukusu men have justified and vowed to continue with their traditional way of life despite the fact that we are in a different generation. The study unravels the factors behind continuous practice of polygamy among the Bukusu. The study employed structural functionalism theory associated with Stevne (1980) as the main doyen, who made use of the theory which views society as a product of continuum interaction among individuals in various settings. The exploratory research design was employed to dig deep to unravel factors that encourage polygamy among the Bukusu men. The study was carried out in Bungoma County .The study employed purposive sampling technique to collect data concerning polygamy in the past and modern day. The purposive sampling was important in acquisition of rich information concerning polygamy in the past and present. Data collection was by literature search, interview schedules, and Questionnaires. Data was analyzed thematically and presented in Verbatim. Some of the reasons for polygamy as pointed out; source prestige since men with many wives were highly respected and given leadership. To have many children who are not only source of wealth but also labour and raise status of man. To give a chance to women to get married, and as a remedy against cases of barrenness in the first wife. Some of the modern Bukusu men claim that it is a continuation of their traditions, while others say they marry more women who have stable jobs so as to accumulate wealth for the family.

Background

Hayase (1997) Asserts that than polygamy in Sub-Saharan Africa is not only a type of marriage, but also also a value system. Polygamy remains common in much of Africa. In the "polygamy belt" stretching from Senegal to Tanzania, it is common for one third of married women to be in a polygamous relationship (Jacoby 1995), Polygamy has been cited as a possible contributor

to Africa's low savings rates (Tertilt, 2005), widespread incidence of HIV (Brahmbhatt et al., 2002), high levels of child mortality (Strassmann, 1997), and of female depression (Adewuya et al., 2007).

Polygamy has been common in the last decade but remains common in West Africa for example 33% of women in Nigeria reported that their husband have more than one wife (Demographical and health survey 2013). Polygamy is most common in Africa and is indeed part of the culture of Africans. Most Africans especially in the past were deeply involved in the practice. In this way I quite agree with Professor Mbiti who says that:

“Technically the term ‘Polygamy’ should mean what the Greek components imply and that is marrying „many“ (wives or husbands). But in popular usage it is applied to mean the state of marriage in which there is one husband and to two or more wives. This should be referred to as ‘Polygamy’ and where one wife has two or more husbands this is „Polyandry“. I shall use ‘polygamy’ in the popular sense even though I realize that linguistically that is only partly correct (Mbiti, 1969).

On March 2014 Kenya's parliament passed a bill allowing men to marry multiple wives. Polygamy is common among traditional communities in Kenya as well as among the country's Muslim community. In Parliament the proposed 2014 polygamy bill had initially given a wife the right to veto the husband's choice but male members of parliament overcame party divisions to push through a text that dropped this clause. The passing of the bill caused angry female members of parliament to storm out of late night vote on the polygamy legislations in protest. The debate, controversy, polemic or argument on polygamy is not doubt a hot one raging for quite some years in the history of the church. There are strong arguments against polygamy just as there are strong arguments in favour of polygamy.

It is Adrain Hastings opinion that:

“Polygamy has been at the heart of the whole marriage debate within the Church in Africa from the mid-nineteenth century until the 1979s though it is likely that in practice other issues are now still more important (Hastings, 1973).

Nasimiyu (2012) notes that Polygamy was encouraged in society by the desire of men to accumulate wealth in both Agrarian and accumulate wealth. Among Bukusu it was necessary to have several wives and many children to share the workload. Among the Bukusu children were valued and they belonged to the man this forced men to marry more women to sire more children for him. Therefore it is from the above background that the study sought to analyze how polygamy is justified from pre-colonial society to present based on masculinism.

Literature Review

The etymology of the word Polygamy is from the Greek word polygamía, state of marriage to many spouses (Douglas, 2016). It is the practice of marrying multiple spouses. When a man is married to more than one wife at a time, sociologists call this polygyny (Douglas, 2016). Polygynous marriages fall into two types: sororal polygyny, in which the co-wives are sisters, and non-sororal, where the co-wives are not related. Polygyny offers husbands the benefit of allowing them to have more children, may provide them with a larger number of productive workers (where workers are family), and allows them to establish politically useful ties with a greater number of kin groups. Senior wives can benefit as well when the addition of junior

wives to the family lightens their workload. Wives', especially senior wives, status in a community can increase through the addition of other wives, who add to the family's prosperity or symbolize conspicuous consumption (much as a large house, domestic help, or expensive vacations operate in a western country). For such reasons, senior wives sometimes work hard or contribute from their own resources to enable their husbands to accumulate the bride price for an extra wife (Douglas, 2016).

According to Koktredgaard, 2008 Polygyny may also result from the practice of levirate marriage. In such cases, the deceased man's heir may inherit his assets and wife; or, more usually, his brothers may marry the widow. This provides support for the widow and her children (usually also members of the brothers' kin group) and maintains the tie between the husbands' and wives' kin groups. The sororate resembles the levirate, in that a widower must marry the sister of his dead wife. The family of the late wife, in other words, must provide a replacement for her, thus maintaining the marriage alliance. Both levirate and sororate may result in a man having multiple wives.

In monogamous societies, wealthy and powerful men established enduring relationships with, and established separate household for, multiple female partners, aside from their legitimate wives; a practice accepted in Imperial China up until the Qing Dynasty of 1636–1912. This constitutes a form of *de facto* polygyny referred to as concubinage (Koktredgaard, 2008).

Polygamy in Nigeria and Kenya

(Adrian 1973) The merits, of polygamy are of no parallel in the lives of Africans. Firstly, it is noteworthy that whereas the New Testament is silent, lukewarm and uncertain about the issue of polygamy in the church, the Old Testament wholly supports it. The Old Testament is all through positive about polygamy. There are even numerous examples of polygamy among patriarchs. Adrian Hastings fully backs up this position when he writes thus:

The Old Testament presents us with a number of instances of polygamous marriage, notably the cases of Jacob, David, and Solomon. Israelite society of the time undoubtedly accepted polygamy and there is no condemnation of the practice as such anywhere in the Old Testament. (Adrian, 1973).

Hastings (1973) even commended Abraham and Isaac who were also polygamists at one time or the other. In II Samuel Chapter 12 verse 8, God even confirmed that gave David wives to his bosom. The African culture or system welcomes polygamy thoroughly. It suits the system and the system suits it. Thomas Price quite recognizes this when he writes thus:

African Customary Law recognizes that a man may legally have more wives than one and prescribes no limit beyond which he must go (Price, 1954).

Mbiti notes that:

Getting married to two or more wives is a custom found all over Africa, though in some societies it is less common than in others. The custom fits well into the social structure of traditional life, and into the thinking of the people, serving many useful purposes. (Mbiti, 1969).

Such is the situation that Edmund Ilogun writing about polygamy and Christianity in Ibo land quotes that:

From the earliest contact of Christianity with Ibo life and society, polygamy seemed one of the most difficult institutions of Ibo life to be easily thrown away by converts (Iulogun, 1974). The Igbo converts could in the first instance give up polygamy only to go back to it later on and thereby frustrating the efforts of the European missionaries attempting to stamp out polygamy of Africans in the Church. Edmund Ilogu even gave a typical example of John Samuel Okosi in Onitaha who retrenched all his wives except the first, as a condition for baptism but called back all the retrenched wives as soon as he was baptized.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopted the symbolic interactions theory associated with Vago (1980) as the main contributor. The symbolic interaction theory views society as a product of continuous interaction among individuals in various settings. This theory assigns meanings to each other's words and action. It is noted that people do not respond directly to physical things. Rather, they respond to their own interpretation of them. This approach pays attention to what people do, determines meanings people assign to their own actions and to those of others. The criticism for this approach is total transformation is not easily attainable.

Methodology

The study employed exploratory research design to dig deep on unravel factors that encourage polygamy among the Bukusu men. The study was carried out in Bungoma County. The study employed purposive sampling technique to collect data concerning polygamy in the past and the in modern day. Purposive was important in acquisition of rich information concerning polygamy in the past and present. Data collection was by literature search, interview schedules and Questionnaires. Data will be presented in Verbatim. Data was analyzed thematically.

Masculine Justification of Polygamy among the Bukusu

This section unravels the vindication of why men among the Bukusu community continue to uphold the old fashioned custom of polygamy.

Wife Inheritance

One of the best advantages of Polygamy is that it has a place for, accommodates and takes care of widows, the handicapped and it solves the problems of unwilling spinsterhood. On widows, Thomas Price is of the opinion that:

It offers solution to the problem of accommodating widows who have lost their husbands and with them their guaranteed social place (Price, 1954).

Thomas Price is also of the opinion that polygamy solves the problems of unwilling spinsterhood and serves as natural contraception for Africans who practice it. Thus he writes:

... It solves problems of unwilling spinsterhood in communities with fewer men than women, and of male deprivation imposed by lactation taboos which forbid sexual intercourse with a nursing wife (Price).

According to an elder among the Bukusu Matore he asserts that:

Khukhwila khu namulekhwa (inheriting a widow): Sibukusu nafasi ya omusecha, mukha wandaye nafwile. Na omusecha kela khu namulekhwa ave omukhasi wewe amulindile babana.

A brother inherits a widow that is the late brothers wife to become his wife so as to take care of the late brother's children and his properties.

Problem of Childlessness and Giving Birth to Girls Encouraged Polygamy

According to an informant Simiyu he asserted that among the Bukusu girls were not children and they were referred to as bikhana bino bi Malaya. Therefore a man was supposed to marry another woman so that she can give birth to the boys who were considered children who will inherit and take care of his property.

Some marry where there his wife is barrenness on the part of the wife. Some modern men justify their marriage to more than one woman by quoting more the Bible in reference to Abraham who became polygamous for this reason. Where the man resorts to polygamy he does not have the problem of waiting in anxiety in anger for his handicapped wife.

Here it should be noted that polygamy could also be a way out for a wife giving birth to only daughters. The above sentiments concur with Mbiti who noted that:

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 children childlessness and partly to remove the shame and anxiety of apparent unproductively (Mbiti, 1969).

Wives Complement each other

In desperate situation the wives still complement one another. Such situations as when one wife gives birth others assist her, if one wife is sick they do so too or even if a wife dies, others do take care of her children and their husband. "If one wife is barren others bear children for the family so that the torch of life is not extinguished (Mbiti, 1969).

Kuchenja lirango bise bakhasi bakofulanga ebweni we basecha. Nono wesikhana nio mbo amukhasi Oyo amukofushe sikila omukhasi we khuranga aba kakofule sanyala ekasi ye kumubili ta. (marrying another woman to take care of them during the old age the first wife is old sexual inactive);

Professor Mbiti has studied this situation properly when he states that:

This is corporate existence. For example, when one wife gives birth, there are other wives to nurse her and care for other children during the time she is regaining her vitality. If one wife dies, there are others to take over the care of her children" (Mbiti, 1969).

By far the most complex in this issue is that of those who have been polygamists for long before desiring to join the Church. The church demands that they put away other wives except the first before baptism. It sounds quite absurd. Adrian Hastings has the right words to describe this situation. Thus he writes: To do so is frequently to cause very real injustice and misery both to wives and children. To impose this upon other defenseless people is a strange way of preparing for baptism. It is the women and children, not the men who mostly suffer in enforced separations of this kind. (Hastings, 1973).

Although some informants noted that among the Bukusu men practiced polygamy when the wife is unfaithful.

Omukhasi omueyi Omukhasi alaba omueyi mala saria omusakhulu wewe ta, omusecha oyo anyala kabeisha omukhasi okundi. (Unfaithful wife causes a husband to marry another wife)

Accumulation of wealth and more Kids

Among the Babukusu man married a second wife for the purposes of producing more children but retained the barren wife. Polygamy was a common practices among the Bukusu during pre-colonial period. To some extent it was perceived as having to do with giving security to

the man. Another reason advanced in support of polygamy was that a man's wealth was measured in terms of the number of wives, children or livestock he had. A man who was wealthy was respected. It was therefore prestigious to have many wives. Wife inheritance was one of the cherished institutions among the Bukusu. One a woman is married belonged to the clan.

According to an informan Simiyu who notes that

Khuima Omwana Omusoleli Basakhulu bakali babukulanga omwana omusoleli khuba we nganga khukhila we sikoko. Nono Kaba bali omukhaye we khuranga Ali ne lisaye lie bakhana bong'ene, omusakhulu anyala kabeisha omukhaye okundi nio amusalile babana basoleli. (Looking for a boy child when the first wife has only children who are girls the man marries another wife to bare him children who are boys)

Khuima babana bakali khubela basakhulu bapara Bali babana bakali emali: Basakhulu balala baparanga bali babana bakali emali nio. Nono ili basale babana bakali, Kenyikha Khubeisha bakhasi bakali. (looking for many children as many of Bukusu men took many children as many of Bukusu men took many children as wealth).

Polygamous men do have many children, if they are able to take care of the children, eventually, the children also do take care of the men when they are old. Some African men and women Christian or no Christian do prefer polygamy. In fact when properly managed polygamy could be a better system of marriage in African than monogamy.

Accumulation of wealth comes in when the father has got so many children who are girls it during the negotiation of dowry he is usually give a larger portion than the wives. Cows and bulls were paid as bride wealth in installment. The number of cattle posed by the Bride's father. The Bukusu were predominantly agriculturalist cattle were plenty. Therefore twelve cows given as bride wealth (Anne Wepukhulu O.I 20/4/2020 Bungoma)

Some of the modern men noted that they marry more than one wife because they want more wealth in his family that's why some of them ended up women with stable jobs. The respondent gave an example of his father who had three wives one was a Doctor, Lecturer and also a teacher. The respondent further emphasized the polygamy was a trend in his family from the time his grandfather was alive. The grandfather had eight wives he did marry them because he was rich man and he wanted more women to take care of him and his wealth.

Therefore from above verbatim it is evident that polygamy was a generational trend those might be some of the reason why some men at this age are still practicing it. According to Nasimiyu 2012 she observes that in African society children belonged to the man. She further gave an example among the Babukusu male progeny encouraged men to add to their number of wives. In patriarchal societies male children were and are much more valued than female children. Inheritance was solely a male prerogative female children had and have no significant in genealogies. The father was and is believed to live on only in his male children as he was remembered from one generation to another. A woman therefore who bore female children was held in low esteem. Nasimiyu further notes that The blame for failing to bear sons was leveled against her head, was considered a failure by her, shame and guilt were heaped on her. Then community advised the man to marry another wife or more wives in search for male children. Therefore that's how the man was introduced to polygamy marriage in the name of the circumstance.

Prevent Prostitution among Men

An informant Simiyu Walekhwa noted that:

Bakhalukha bwe bakhasi : Basecha balala bali nende bukhalukha bwe ba khasi Too much desire for women (Simiyu Walekhwa chwele/May 2020).

Mbithi (1969) contend that Monogamy has no place at all for widows, the handicapped and unwilling spinsters. Polygamy to a large extent rules out or prevents adultery and prostitution. Hence Mbiti writes thus, Polygamy helps to prevent or reduce unfaithfulness and prostitution, especially on the part of the husband. The same sentiments were emphasized by (Nasimiyu, 2012) postulates that Polygamy protected African men against prostitution and reduced unfaithfulness. May be polygamy may prevent men from unfaithfulness but it does not do so with regard to women.

Conclusion

From the above study it is evident that polygamy is entrenched among the Bukusu and it has become a modus operandi of enslaving women in the name of the following: Wife inheritance for social and economic support after the death of the husband, A source of wealth and having more children, Combat childlessness by marrying another woman, unfaithful woman and woman who gives birth to female children, and some Bukusu men claim it is a way of dealing with unfaithfulness because of their high appetite for women. Therefore it is overt that the promotion and encouragement of polygamy were based on grounds that favored men by boosting their personality and reducing that of women. Since it has been all about men being allowed to practice polygyny the question is what if women are allowed to practice polyandry? Will the African men Bukusu tolerate that obviously the answer is No therefore this links this section to my recommendations.

Recommendation

A polygamous marriage can be complicated or comfortable depending on the people involved. The women should be educated among the Bukusu on the dangers of polygyny marriages. Bukusu men should be enlightened the benefits of having one wife and the dangers that outweigh the benefits of polygyny.

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