

POLYGyny IN ISLAM: A REMARKABLE PHENOMENON AMONG NIGERIAN MUSLIM LEADERS IN OJO LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA, LAGOS STATE

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Abstract: Polygyny which is a form of marriage where men have more than one wife at a time is constitutionally backed by the Islamic law provided the person involved put into consideration all the conditions guiding its practice and permissibility. However, despite the clear injunctions of the *Qur'ān* on it, certain individuals and groups from among the Muslim and non-Muslim elites have either suggested ways of restricting its practices or total eradication due to the perceived injustice they claimed it has created. It is in the light of this that this paper examines this phenomenon among the Muslim leaders in Ojo Local Government Area of Lagos State. The paper employed the use of interviews, observations and focus group discussions as means of data collection. It then presents the key issues emanating from plural marriages such as maintenance of wife and family, justice, competitiveness among wives, necessary love and mutual cooperation between children, division of time between them among others. The paper finally makes suggestions on how to improve about the practice of polygyny in our contemporary time.

Keywords: Polygyny, Muslim, leaders, Ojo, Reality, Marriage

Introduction

Marriage with its intriguing stories, captivating experiences, mesmerising facts, nurtured multi facets calamity, enriched mutable ends have been the focus of many scholars of the past and the present. The entailing stories that go with the social institution are quite numerous together with its concomitant challenges.

Our focus in this paper, however, is to concentrate on an aspect of marriage, polygyny, among Muslim leaders in Ojo Local Government Area of Lagos State, Nigeria. The word polygyny is maintained in this paper because “polygamy” has been defined as “having plurality of wives or husbands at the same time”, while “polygyny” is purely the marriage of a man to more than one woman at a time, and, this is our main aim. It is important to also note that we still withheld “polygamy” as used by earlier writers on plurality of wives, in order to sustain the proper understanding as well as the originality of their works. We shall therefore discuss in this small piece the origin of polygyny as a type of marriage, the various causes that could lead to the adoption of polygyny in marital

bond, the views of those who talk against its practice as well as the Islamic perspective on the topic. We shall trace the origin of this form of marriage among the prophets of God, and, this will cover aspects of such as how polygyny started together with its growth and development. It is necessary to also examine this subject matter in relation to the Muslim leaders in Ojo Local Government of Lagos State, coupled with some background information about the location of the scope of our research.

Origin of Polygyny

The institution of marriage and specifically polygyny is as old as man's history on earth; in fact, it started with the creation of man and woman. All over the world, there are instances where the system of polygyny serves as a means of boasting for races, tribes, and regions at one time or the other either for socio-economic reasons or out of necessity. Polygyny as a form of marital union does not start with the emergence of Islam. Islam met the practice among the *Jāhiliyyah* Arabs, who encouraged it and saw it as a way of knowing how generous a man is in the society. In fact they considered an affluent man who limited himself to one wife as a miser. This forms the decision of Ruqaiyyah Waris when she commented thus: "Indeed, a wealthy man who limited himself to only one wife was considered ungenerous."

The practice was established in such a way that it does not put into consideration the honour, rights and privileges of the female folks. Their status was limited to that of a chattel, whose dignity and respect has been restricted under the sole authority of their male lordship. It was to this end that the *modus operandi* of Islam came to rescue and sanctifies the system to a more humane condition. Islam does not abolish polygyny but committed its permissibility to more stringent conditions and limited the number to four in order to foster a win-win (for both man and woman) atmosphere for the betterment and development of human society.

The Jewish community prescribed polygyny as the form of marriage divinely appointed for man. The Christians only implied from certain biblical passages in proclaiming monogamy. The story of David and Nathan in the Bible and the words of Urea to David prove that marrying more than one wife is an established tradition in Christianity. Biblical evidences abound on this. For instance in Judges 8 verse 30, it

asserts that “All judges must have had several wives each”. King 9:16 also mentioned the case of Solomon who had seven hundred wives, princesses and three hundred concubines. 2 Chronicles 11:21 also informed us that his son had eighteen wives and sixty concubines. This also proves that since antiquity, God has always included the provision of marrying more than one woman in the divine social order of the world. In Africa, the practice of polygyny is deep rooted serving as a form of security and immortality to its practitioners.

History also has it that prophets who came before Prophet Muhammad (may Allah be pleased with them all) also practiced polygyny. The likes of Prophets Ibrahim, Ya’qub, Sulaiman, Dāwud, Mūsa (may Allah grant them peace) etc. got married to many wives who bore them children.

In Africa, it is an established custom to marry more than one wife. Nigeria clustered with multi ethnic and multi religious identity has Islam and Christianity as the major faith, with concentrated number of Muslims in the north largely practicing polygyny and few southerners as exponents of monogamy. In Iboland, the tradition is for the father to marry the first wife for their son while he is expected to marry other women of his choice subsequently in the future. They even consider men who do not practice polygyny as someone who is not physically strong and agile among his peers in the community.

Islamic Position of Polygyny

Allah commanded thus in *Qur’ān* 4:3: “marry such a woman as seem good to you, two, or three, or four, but if you fear that you will not do justice, then (marry) only one...”

The above narrated verse made it permissible for Muslim men to marry more than one wife but not more than four at a time. It thus makes polygyny a legal relationship between a man and a woman. This point was rightly corroborated by Abu Ameenah Bilal Philips and Jameelah Jones in their joint work titled: *Polygamy in Islam* when they posited that: “Polygyny is not a decadent or indecent relationship but a valid part of the marriage system of Islam.”

It is however significant to note that Islam wishes to eradicate all what could lead to extra marital sexual relationship and at the same time curtail the natural excesses of

both male and female who have the high state of sexual instincts or who at a point in time lose their husband to wars, plagues or to other natural disasters, to find a partner who can satisfy their needs emotionally, psychologically and financially at an appropriate time in a legal way in order not to involve in sexual atrocities as found in most human societies of today.

More so, it is essential to also emphasize here that the legal status given to the institution of polygyny as a form of marriage was not to serve as an obligation enjoined on all able male Muslims but as an exception in conditional circumstances. This is a view shared by Maulāna Muhammad ‘Ali when he asserted that:

As a rule Islam recognizes only the union of one man and one woman as a valid form of marriage, and under exceptional circumstances allows the man more wives than one, but does not allow woman more husbands than one.

In another verse of the Holy Qur’ān, Allāh emphatically established that justice can never be maintained by men in this regard even if they wished to do so. The verse reads thus:

You will never be able to do perfect justice between wives even if it is your ardent desire, so do not incline too much to one of them (by giving her more of your time and provision) so as to leave the other hanging (i.e. neither divorced nor married). And if you do justice, and do all that is right and fear Allāh by keeping away from all that is wrong, then Allāh is Ever Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful. Qur’ān 4:129

The legal backing to this was also inherent in the *Sunnah* of Prophet Muhammad, who was considered as the last law bearing prophet of Allah (may Allāh bless him and grant him peace). History have it that not until the death of his wife Khadijah in 619 C.E he was a committed monogamous man, who spent the excited youthful period of his life in conjugal bliss with just a single woman. He resorted into marrying up to twelve other women at the same time, total of which was thirteen, two of which their marriages was not consummated and two of which died before his own death due to the situation of the time *viz-a-viz* the death of many of the male companions, to abolish certain practices, to

offer guardianship to orphans, to provide husbands for divorced women or marriageable widows and to supplement the depleted male population of a family or community.

It is surprising to see modern day Muslims under the influence of civilization opposing the practice of the prophet (*Sunnah*) because they found it as a form of infringement to the rights of women. Perhaps it can be well argued that polygyny is not an obligation placed upon every Muslim men but it is a *Sunnah*, that if done correctly will attract reward from Allah. However, this does not in any way create a ground for its denial as often done by some Muslims who are modern oriented.

Several reasons could be adduced for this misunderstanding, some of which include women openly competing with men for the same job, men suing their wives for support payments, women clothing styles which now include wearing of suits and using of ties and men's clothing styles which include bracelets, necklaces, ear rings and long hair among others.

The hallmark concern of Islam is to create a peace loving society for all and sundry. An egalitarian society based on absolute justice and irreversible appropriative rights most especially for the female folks who have been marginalised in the past ages and civilizations. Therefore, Islam based the required standard of permissibility of polygyny on equity and justice. The Qur'ān 4:3 says: "...but if you fear that you will not do justice, then (marry) only one".

Ample discussion abounds the scope of justice mentioned in the above verse of the glorious *Qur'an*. *Shaykh Ibn Bāz*, a onetime head of the Saudi Arabia League of Islamic Scholars opines that, justice here is of two different phases. The first is the justice within one's ability and that is to be fair in the division of time and maintenance. While the second is the justice that falls outside one's ability and this relates to the matter of love and sexual relations among the wives.

The *Sunnah* of the Prophet is to split the nights between all of his wives equally. However, there are cases of some of the wives who gave their rights to their co-wives. This was done out of their own volition and not by coercive consent. For instance, Saudah one of the eldest wives of the Prophet (p.b.u.h) was said to have conceded her rights of time with the Prophet (p.b.u.h) to Aisha, perhaps she felt she is weaning old and do not have the physical strength as her. On this Aisha reported thus:

Never did I find any woman more loving to me than Saudah bint Zam'ah. I wished I could be exactly like her who was passionate, As she became old, she had made over her day (which she had to spend) with Allah's Messenger (p.b.u.h) to Aisha, she said, "I have made over my day with you to Aishah", So Allah's Messenger (p.b.u.h) allotted two days to Aishah, her own day (when it was her turn) and that of Saudah.

The man who intends practicing polygyny must also be ready to acquaint himself with some equitable traits such as maintaining balance in given of allowances and gifts to the wives. The accommodation given to each of them must be appropriate and just to their standards as wives. He must not be partial in housing one of the beloved wives to him in a luxurious apartment and desert others to settle in unsuitable housing blocks.

Debate on Polygyny: The Antagonist Views

The antagonists of Polygyny constitute the group of people who either oppose directly its practices, call for its abolition or are against some aspects of it. Among these people are Muslims as well as non-Muslims. There are Muslim populated countries such as Turkey and Tunisia who laid total ban on polygyny as a form of marriage. While Turkey gave secular reasons for its ban in 1926, Tunisia's position in the legislation passed in 1956 and 1964 respectively was premised on religious ground. Some other Islamic countries such as Egypt, Iran, Pakistan etc. have only placed certain conditions to be fulfilled before it will be accorded its legal status and approval.

The activities of the female Muslim feminists are also worth mentioning in this regard. They clamour for an egalitarian society whereby the female Muslim folks will not be marginalised. Their position most times is premised on advocating for the rights of the fatherless or orphans, infertility, financial stability on the part of the husband, as these are charitable and honourable purposes to be considered before practicing plural marriages in Islam. It is very possible that this position was taken by virtue of their knowledge about the life history of the prophet's marriage contracts conducted with his wives during his lifetime and the choice of language used by the Qur'ān.

The non-Muslims on several fora accused the Muslims of religious and physical abuse of women in the early marriage and polygyny. They made attempts on various

sorts of compatibility between the *Sharī'ah* as regards Islamic Family Laws with international Human Rights' Laws that allow the participation of women in the position of authority, equal rights and status in marriage as their male counterparts, among other provisions stipulated in the act. Aside from viewing it as a negative side of Islam, they found no differences between it and slavery. They maintained that since slavery is abolished, polygyny should also be treated as such. The orientalist are also of the view that Muslims use polygyny as a means to exploit their women, degrade their status and restrict their fundamental human rights.

While there are Muslims who are monogamous by practice and do not oppose the permissiveness of polygyny as a form of marriage sanctioned by the divine scripture of Islam, there exists modernist Muslims (scholars and non-scholars alike) who see no reason for Islam approval of polygyny as a viable form of marriage. They misconceive the language of the Qur'ān by claiming that reference is been made to the practice prior to the message of Islam where men engage in plural marriages from two women upwards and the eventual landing of the message contained in the verse back to one, supports this notion.

Morrison and Jutting are of the opinion that: "Polygamy entails inequality between men and women because usually there is a difference of 20 to 30 years between the second (or third) wife and her husband."

There is gain saying that the above position represents the position of some segment of the society and not exhaustive nor representing the views and thoughts of all and sundry on polygyny, it remains unbinding on all. Dr. Annie Besant who is an eminent woman scholar had always advocated for the practice of polygyny. In her objective confrontation of the monogamists, she opined:

You can find others stating that the religion (Islam) is evil, because it sanctions a limited polygamy. But you do hear as a rule this criticism which I spoke about one day in a London hall where I knew that the audience was entirely uninstructed (about Islam). I pointed out to them that monogamy with a blended mass of prostitution was hypocrisy and more degrading than a limited polygamy.

Her speech provoked the sensibility of her audience but she care not in giving credence to the Islamic law which according to her is far better beyond the law of the West.

Another notable Christian evangelist, Dr. Billy Graham vehemently opposed the present-day attitude of modern Christians to polygyny which in the real sense has not wiped off the social ills in the society and praise Islam for not adjudicating for one husband with a wife, which allows the practice of mistresses under the guise of monogamy.

Reasons Why Muslims and non-Muslims go for Polygyny

In an attempt to review some of the reasons adduced by the practitioners of polygyny we shall pick from the sum lump of information espoused by theorists and advocates of this course in certain situations. However, this will be subjective to the opinions of modern and classical scholars specifically those from the Islamic world.

A study which is concerned with the views of different women about the law of personal status in Kurdistan, Irāq on polygyny has suggested sexuality as one of the reasons for polygyny. Sexuality in this regards beacon on the very physical emotional activities between a man and a woman through intercourse. One of the Khurdistan women states that, there are women who cannot satisfy their husbands sexually and that to her is a very valid reason for him to marry another woman. Also, another woman named Najwa is of the view that unfulfilled sexual desires within men could have detrimental ramifications for the family as the man will commit adultery. Keeping his sexual desires under lock will make the man a less functioning human being.

Abu Ameenah opines that, at birth women outnumber men and lives longer than them. He justified his position by citing the records advanced by the Center for Health Statistics on the average expectancy age of an American woman who can live up to a period of 77.9 to men who can live to 70.3 years. He went further to broach on the havoc violent crime among males, dead in wars and the alarming rates of homosexuality had infringed on the population of male which has made it impossible to match the one woman to a man without recourse for mistresses, girlfriends and playmates to fulfil their sexual drive. Some of the reasons also subscribed to him is in a situation when a woman

is barren and cannot bear children. Unlike what is at stake in other religions where the man will not be allowed to take another woman as wife, Islam supports the marrying of another woman in order to support family unity and at the same time taking cognizance of individual desires without jeopardizing the earlier relationships provided he is able to fulfil the requirements of plural marriage in Islam.²⁵

Polygyny: A Remarkable Phenomenon among Nigerian Muslim Leaders in Ojo L.G.A

The reality and practicability of polygyny as a form of marriage in Islam is undeniable. In Islam, marriage is seen as a divine institution between a man and a woman, for it is believed that through it the social structure of human society is placed. For this reason, Muslim's all over the world have knowledge of this and imbibe it in their practices. The Muslims in Ojo and specifically the Muslim leaders there are not excluded from practicing this form of marital union, as there is rarely a household entirely monogamous complacent. The number of wives married by the Muslim leaders in Ojo varies. There are some who have two wives, three, four and even more for cultural or personal reasons.

Ojo is a Local Government Area and town in Lagos State, Nigeria. It is the host community to the highly prestigious Lagos State University. The famous Alaba Market, Okomaiko and Ajangbadi are all located within Ojo. The community falls under the Badagry division in the five main divisions of Lagos with Ikeja, Ikorudu, Epe and Lagos Island as the other four. These divisions are covered by the acronyms 'IBILE'.

A personality among the Muslim leaders in Ojo related that he had up to twenty-one wives, five of them bore him children, his first wife as at the time of the interview is dead, the next have divorced him while two among the wives are presently living with him, seventeen others are living separately on their own. Although, he is still carrying out his duties with them as husband and father of their children.

Like other Muslims all over the world, Muslims leaders in Ojo have an avid grip of the Quranic ruling (4:3) regarding polygyny. One of the interlocutors explained that the tune of the *Qur'ān* makes it explicitly insightful by starting from two, three, four and reverting back to one as the basis. He then went further to state that women are world on

their own and no one can say it all because it depends on personal experiences individual's gain from their companionship.

Surprisingly, he sound unconvinced in his language when he exclaimed that “A man with one wife has not seized to be a bachelor.” He illustrated this further with the possession of only one car. According to him if the car develops fault he will have to trek to wherever he is going if there is no alternative. Interestingly, he gave a reason for the choice of polygyny when he maintains that negativity in inter-personal relationship of husband and wife can influence the decision of taking another wife, whereas, if the relationship is cordial and tranquil he may not think of such not to talk of embarking on it. In addition to the attitudinal expression of some women and how it influence the decision of practicing polygyny, another interlocutor added that, the level of religiosity displayed by the first wife also matters, most often men whose piety had risen significantly feel ashamed of marrying a woman whose *Imān* (faith) keeps dwindling without no positive prospect. Other responses gathered on reasons that influence the decision of marrying more than one wife suggests that polygyny is found in Yoruba culture which was later adopted by Yoruba Muslims due to its permissiveness by Islam. Some also stated that, it is a way of following the footsteps of one's parents, individuals will or the practice of the Prophet (p.b.u.h).

Conspicuously, polygyny brings visible challenges just like a monogamous marriages, this according to some Muslim leaders in Ojo, is an inherent phase in the life of whosoever traverses such path. The case of Prophet Ibrahim (*a.s*) was cited as a perfect match to explain the problem one must face before achieving a successful second marriage. He was of the opinion that Prophet Ibrahim (*a.s*) ensured that the first and the second wife did not live together in the same place after the consummation of his marriage with the latter, a tactical approach to wade off any form of conflict within the home. A reflection of the anguish witnessed by Hajar in the hands of Sarah is what developed to be a model to some female folks today. Reports has it that Sarah used to chain Hajar, send her out of the home, beat her up and tie a ring round her neck and ear, things that later led to the use of ear rings and necklaces by women.

At the highest level, the first wife stands to provoke, plot against and victimize the husband in the home even though he is quietist. This form of attitude could be as a result of advice taken from friends without taking time to think deeply about it.

We observed during the course of our research that, justice among women as recommended by Islam is understood differently by Muslim leaders in Ojo. They have all tried to interpret the injunction as they unanimously agreed that Allāh is the most Just and no can be like Him in this regard. To one of my interlocutors if he spends a sum of ten thousand naira on one of his wives and another demands for five thousand naira, it is important for him to fulfil it, because if he refuses that will amount to injustice.

The Quranic ruling regarding justice among wives, however, is an elaborate and serious issue which rises above the present happening in many Islamic communities in the world in terms of application and implementation. The Prophet (p.b.u.h) who is the best of those who lived their lives in accordance with the will of God was reported by Ai'shah (*r.a*), in a tradition as the best of those who divides their time equally among their wives and would always pray, that Allāh should not hold him accountable for things he has no control over (i.e. affection).

Abu Ameenah advocates for the willingness of the man to divide his time and wealth in an equitable fashion before he is allowed to have more than one wife. Inability of a man to provide feeding, clothing and shelter for all his wives justly should be taken to mean incompetence to betroth more than one woman.

The philosophy behind what constitute justice and equitable relation between wives in a polygynous setting reveals in discussion with some of the Muslim leaders in Ojo. For instance, on division of time between wives, their responses differ. While some explained that the nature of their wives' jobs determine how they allot nights to them, others deliberately decided not to engage in such, a style which greatly astounds the likely inferential status and their understanding of the religion. However, they all replied in the affirmative that they take care of their responsibilities at home by providing convenient shelter, feeding, school fees etc, for the wives and their children as the situation demands. It is interesting to note that some of our interlocutors even suggested that women should be empowered to have their own businesses, for this will relief the husband to only support them where necessary, while little expenses can be taken care of

by the wife. Some went further to state that, “a man who refuses to allow his wife to work in this present time is a confused man who purposely implanted problem into his home.”

The choice of who to marry (virgin or divorced) also constitute part of the issues of polygyny among Muslim leaders in Ojo Area of Lagos State. One of our interlocutors relates that his first marriage in 1950 was with a married woman who bore him a child that same year. There are instances where Polygyny among Muslim leaders in Ojo constitutes part of what made some of their wives to become Muslims. Many of the wives married were either divorcees or widowers who were without husbands at a point in time with little or no Islam. But due to the involvement of their husbands in some meritorious deeds and their activities in advancing the course of Islam, they were convinced to see the light of Islam and profess the *Shahādah* (acceptance of Islam) and become better Muslims.

In an attempt to direct the affairs of the home free of inter-personal rift and conflict, different measures were employed by the Muslim leaders in Ojo to combat this without necessarily cursing, disowning and deserting their children. One of the Muslim leaders in Ojo shared one of the tactics he used to unite all his children together in his words: “I fetched water in a bowl and asked each of them to drink from it. I then warned them to desist from quarrelling with one another and should not bear grudges or malice against one another, because whosoever engages in this after drinking in the water, such a person will face the consequences of the oath”. This water he quickly adds was free of any diabolical contents, but this will not be disclosed to both the wives and the children. In another realm, while explaining the preferential likeness reciprocated by children, they maintained that despite the desire of parents to display this, children always reciprocate later in the future differently. For instance, one of them relates that: “The female children love me more than the males”. An important feature in both monogamous and polygynous relationships emerged from the above statement. It confirms the assumption and happening in life experiences that female children tend to love their parents more than the male children. Despite being married off to another family, they still care and monitor the welfare of their parents most especially their mothers than the male children.

There are instances where shelter is taken out of the focus of the husband as part of the needs to provide for the wife due to its possession by some of the wives. One of our interlocutors confirmed that some of his wives had their houses already built by them, and he only visit them in their houses without necessarily bringing them home to live with other wives. On the average, Muslim leaders in Ojo who married more than ten wives have about 5 or 6 who bore them two children. This only confirms the goal that marriage in Islam is not only to bear children but to form a union where peace and tranquillity reigns as some creatures are created barren. The Muslim leaders in Ojo are also of the opinion that special lessons abounds by Muslim ladies to learn from the practice of polygyny by their fathers and grand-fathers, because it instil in them the correct manners, tolerance and sense of humility towards their would be husbands. There is also the culture of maintaining a single pot for cooking for the entire household, to create a mutual cooperation and love among all and sundry living under a husband.

The natural trait found in every female is the inability to withstand sharing of their husbands with another woman. They always love their husband and do everything to please him. The remark of one of the Muslim leaders in Ojo bore witness to this when he said about his wives, ‘Many of my wives love me but not one another. My in-laws also love me dearly’.⁴⁷ This situation expressly suggests that there is usually emotional and physical conflicts between them which may make them sometimes perpetrate evil acts towards one another or even blackmail each another in the presence of their husbands. Anthropological findings on co-wife relationship reveal that jealousy, tension, strain and competitiveness are usually found in plural marriages. While there are exceptional cases such as the Masai of Africa where close and supportive relationship is established between co-wives, it is not so in many other settings in Africa.

This situation is aptly covered by Abu Ameenah when he asserts that it is naturally found in every woman the thought of not willing to share their husband with one another. He further explained that plural marriages provides a ground for jealousy to rise, however, the law of Islam always give priority to what will cause a positive turn in the general welfare of the society over individual personal preference or discomfort.

Conclusion

In this study attempt has been made to analyse the practice of polygyny among Muslim leaders in Ojo Local Government Area of Lagos State. Opinions of some selected personalities within this social class were presented with recourse to their private lives as Muslims and a leader in the society. The study traced the origin of polygyny; appraised polygyny in Islam, highlighted views of antagonists of the practice and concisely presented reasons why Muslims and non-Muslims opt for the practice of polygyny as an acceptable form of marriage.

The narratives suggest how Muslim leaders in Ojo are pragmatically conscious of the attitudes and reactions of their wives at home, including caring, household chores, training of children and other domestic tasks as these are elementary assignments engaged in by women virtually everyday through which we can examine how strong the couple's interaction is in the home.

The study strongly contends as being upheld by some Muslim leaders that since Islam provides a wealth of guiding principles to develop new body of laws, there is the need for re-evaluation of the Islamic family laws to tackle modern challenges attributed to the practice of polygyny.

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