

Polygamy in igbo culture essay



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In the whole world, there are five continents. Africa is the world's second largest continent, with 80 percent of its area in the tropics. Africa is usually portrayed as a dark continent historically and physically isolated from the rest of the world but it is not. Nigeria is one of the most important country in Africa. It is located in western Africa, bordering the gulf of Guinea between Benin and Cameroon. People living together in a community have their own tradition and customs. Nigerian people do not stay away from this reality especially the Igbo community.

The Igbo community is one of the three major ethnics group in Nigeria. Geographically, it is located in the Eastern part of Nigeria. In this paper, attempt will be made to describe Polygamy In the Igbo culture. As we are moving forward, we will talk about the importance of marriage in the Igbo culture. We will develop what polygamy is, analyzing the causes of polygamy in the Igbo culture and thinking about the consequences of polygamy in the Igbo culture. In the Igbo community there are two different types of marriage systems: the first is the customary marriage and the second is the statutory marriage.

The statutory type of marriage is foreign to the culture of the Igbo community. The customary marriage is indigenous to the culture of the Igbo community. It has been in practice from ages to ages and handed down from generation to generation. Marriage is a family affair in the Igbo community. It is a contract between two families. Without an exchange of money from the family of the prospective groom to that of the perspective bride, it will be very difficult to claim that any marriage has taken place between a man and a woman in the Igbo community.

The payment of a bride price legalizes marriage within the Igbo customary marriage system and transfer the woman and her reproductive rights from her father' control to the control of her husband and his family. Marriage is considered important and essential in the life of every Igbo man and woman. A man who is not married is not respected in the community. He may be considered incomplete, immature. A husband is a woman's prestige. While marriage is considered significant and crucial for both men and women in traditional Igbo society, polygamy is considered as a symbol of high status.

Therefore, what polygamy is? First and foremost, polygamy is the fact that someone get married with more than one spouse at the same time..

Polygamy has different meanings: polygyny is often used for a man who marry several women at the same time. Bigamy is used for a man having two wives. Polyandry is used for a woman who marry more than one man at a time. Finally group marriage is applied for a husband having many wives and those wives having many husbands. In the Igbo society we will develop polygyny often replaced by polygamy.

One custom of Umuofia that would be very different from Western culture is Polygamy, the practice of having many wives. This custom is practiced in the connected nine villages of Umuofia. In fact, a man's wealth is partially measured by the number of wives he has. A wealthy man described in Things Fall Apart, had nine wives and thirty children. Okonkwo had three wives and eight children . Obierika stated:" That is the money from your yams, " he said". I sold the big ones as soon as you left. Later on I sold some of the seedyams and gave out others to sharecroppers..

I shall do that every year until you return. But I thought you would need the money now and I brought it. Who knows what may happen tomorrow?

Perhaps green men will come to our clan and shoot us. " 142. The agriculture of the Igbo society was different than other societies of today. Yams were the main nourishment through every meal and they called these yams " the king of crops. " Furthermore, people used the yams for every traditional celebration and used kola nuts to offer their " chi" or personal god.

These food, as Chinua Achebe had described, sometimes related to or involved with the religion or ancestral spirits. Sometimes there were certain celebrations for each specific kind of food such as the New Yam Festival. Chinua Achebe used agriculture to express certain characteristics of each festival and celebration of the Igbo society. Marriage is one of the most important social customs. Through it, kinship is formed, the lineage is maintained and expanded, and new household unit are created.

The Igbo social order is patriarchal Marriage is both monogamous and polygynous. In the past, polygyny was rather encouraged and supported while today the support is at least tacit or implied since society still accepts it as a lawful form of marriage. We have cited instances first to show the aerial dimension of polygyny, in other words, that it is not restricted to the Igbo people, nor to pastoral and nomadic peoples, and secondly to show the different reasons for, and circumstances in which different peoples adopted and perhaps still tolerate polygyny.

As far as polygyny is concerned, there are various reasons why a man may want to possess more than, one wife : 1)One of the causes of polygyny in

igbo culture is for agrarian purpose. The man is considered as the head of household in the family. The man usually has a large piece of land where he farms so he actually needs large labour to help during planting and harvest seasons so that's why he normally has wives and a lot of children to help him out. So with this, he can accomplish a lot on his farm benefiting the family unit as a whole.

With the children working in fields he can also increase the harvest at a lower cost than hiring workers. The man can use one part of the products to feed his huge family and later on he was able to sell products in order to buy clothes for the family. 2) However men also preferred polygyny in Igbo society because of sexual gratification and diversity in mates. Men were always the one who took the initiative in sexual relationship. They like to pleasure share their love with their wives. 3) During menstrual period or in case of pregnancy, it was forbidden by customs and taboos to have sexual intercourse with his wife.

In order to solve this problem in Igbo culture, men used polygyny. Among savages, women age early and lose their attraction for men. In fact, we can understand that problem easily because after giving birth to a lot of children, women in Igbo society get old. The fact that they do not have attraction for men encouraged men to have many wives. 5) Men like change in sexual relationship. Often time I hear them saying that they get tired with the same woman. It is natural because God created so many beauties in the world.

Women are part of men . And men in Igbo society are tempted by their attraction.) Quite often, the barrenness of the first wife leads to taking a second, in conditions namely, where great value is placed on posterity". Among the Igbos, polygamy was adopted for economic and social, and for sexual and other reasons. In the past, it was the normal ambition of every family-head, to continue to add to the number of his wives throughout his life. The man needed many hands so as to cope with the work in his farms. Women themselves are generally very good at farm work. A wife does not only help but within some few years, her children will join the team.

Love for having children is another dynamic factor that leads to polygyny among the Igbo people. Children are a great asset, and so every marriage has procreation as its *raison d'être*. When a marriage has proved fruitless, then another woman, (at times one already pregnant outside marriage) is sought to redeem the situation. If the husband fails to or delays before taking a wife, he sets the ball of gossip rolling. Often people advise him to act quickly. " Marriage must be fruitful. Of what use is it, if it is not fruitful? One year is enough for any woman who would have a baby to begin making one".

A second wife may also be taken if the first becomes impossible to live with. Both will now compete to win the good favour of the husband. We have also seen cases where the first wife led the way in marrying a second wife into the family. It is not only for economic reasons or to have children that has made polygyny to flourish as it did in Igboland. Many people, especially Chiefs married for social prestige. Just as it is the custom that among the Lango people of Uganda, there is no limit, so also among the Igbos there is

none either. It is not uncommon to find a man with 5 to 10 wives or sometimes even more.

It is taken for granted that such men can feed the wives, otherwise they fall prey to public criticism and gossip. It is important to point out here that the polygyny meant here as found among the Igbo people is different from the 'harem' type. It is polygyny in the strict sense. We can not say that sexual reasons are completely absent from Igbo polygyny but from our observations it can be said that they are not among the principal ones. Igbo women were never enclosed in harems. One of the arguments usually adduced against polygyny is that it implies a disregard for the feelings of women.

However this may not be applied in the case of the Igbos and many need to be careful and have a good behavior. In Igbo society where Okonkwo had three wives, they could pass any disease from one person to another. There are many types of sexually transmitted diseases and viruses out there which can be easily treated or can become terminal (deadly). But all of them are dangerous. We all have unanswered questions about std's and viruses, and being properly informed is without a doubt our best defense to preventing, contracting, and/or spreading these harmful disease's and bacteria's.

When caught early many infections and parasites can be successfully treated and cured so seeing a medical professional immediately is the first and most important step. But remember that not all Stds are curable. Std's such as Chlamydia or gonorrhoea and Syphilis can be cured with different antibiotics. While other Std's such as Genital warts (HPV) or Herpes (HSV) are incurable and will be with you for life but can be controlled with different drug and

topical treatments. In a society where a man can marry with as many wives he can afford, it is very important to think about Std which can kill a lot of people.

Later on, people living in a polygamous relationship are going to leave behind them their children orphan for the rest of the family. Moreover, in our submission, the statement is too sweeping and at bottom, a complete misrepresentation of the actual situation. This is because, the fact that polygyny is accepted among a people does not necessarily mean that their sexual morality is low. Polygyny well understood and as it exists among Igbos is as distinct from promiscuity as darkness is from daylight. In short the Igbo woman is well reconciled to the idea of polygyny.

Where there were many wives often there were also many children and so an assured hope of a most resounding second funeral ceremony - an honour which pagan parents so much cherished and looked up to. Where it is difficult to obtain a husband, polygyny creates a situation that will make it possible for many more women to be absorbed into the married state. In fact, women in a polygynous household are usually on good terms. They give help to one another and bring about the better organisation of the household.

Consequently, it can be said that in the past, polygyny was in its zenith among the Igbo where affluence existed and where the desire for a large family was strongest. Today however, a change of attitude may be noticed among the Igbo women. As an informant told me, it takes more time, more money, more anxiety to bring up children today than it did in the past. It will

not do, merely to bring children into the world, there must be some notable assurance of being able to educate them. Moreover the Christian religion which has thrived in Igboland teaches that true marriage is monogamous and that polygyny must be abandoned.

Therefore the present change of attitude towards polygyny is not merely due to the defects inherent in polygyny as such, but also due to contact with the western civilisation, the emphasis on higher education and higher standard of living and the impact of the Christian religion. Just as it is said that no system of government, is necessarily the best, so also it can be said that all things being equal, no system of marriage is necessarily the best. Monogamy is the prevalent institution in many parts of the world, but this does not mean it has not got its defects.

In fact monogamy is a lofty ideal to be aspired to, but its practice is so imperfect that at times it would seem better to legalise polygyny. This is a speculation. The point we are making is that monogamy in practice is equally full of many defects and scandals in the world of today, while in principle it is a lofty ideal. The polygynous system can lead to the economic exploitation of women, that is, by reducing them to mere tillers of the soil, fetchers of water and hewers of wood. In the case of harem polygyny, the woman can be reduced to the man's pleasure object, things that are destined to the satisfaction of his sexual urge.

Furthermore, it does sometimes happen that the women are too many for one man to cope with, so that, they of necessity have to seek lovers outside the family. Socially it may at times not be to the best interests of the woman.

According to certain cultures the other wives of the polygynous household, are subordinate not only to the husband but also to the ' chief wife'. Being a second wife has other disadvantages. For instance, the co-wives are not admitted to baptism as long as their husbands is alive and cohabits with them.

This creates a highly embarrassing situation, not only for the priest and his assistants, but also for the women who after attending catechism in preparation for baptism, often get the apology , " Sorry madam, I I can not baptise you, it is against the law of the church". In fact many Igbo women still find themselves in this awkward predicament. In this way, polygyny holds back the forward march of evangelisation among many peoples of Africa. Now we come to the maintenance of the family. In general, only the well-to-do are expected to take more than one wife.

But it does often happen that people who began life rich end up in stark poverty. This is worse in a polygynous household, where there will be too many mouths to feed but very little output due to the fact that the man and his wives must have grown old or at times are suffered from prolonged unemployment. We have already said that the women of a polygynous household cohabit peacefully, and this is true in most of the cases I have personally observed. However I have to add here that this amicable cohabitation always presupposes the existence i n that family of a fair amount of wealth and contentment.

Many a time children from polygynous household show signs of incomplete parental upbringing, especially on their father's side. Today for instance, it

would cost ten times normal to keep the polygynous household and to educate the children. To begin with, all we are saying here is that monogyny being the approved and ideal, is in practice full of abuses. Polygyny has its good points but is not to be compared with monogamy. Polygyny is condemned on the grounds that it implies an outrage to the feelings of women. This may be true but only up to a point.

For as we have already shown, Igbo women, do not detest the husband's marrying other wives. As for the Igbo, so also the Kaggirs, the Ashanti, the New Guineans, and the Eskimos. An Akikuyu East African woman gave the following message to the women of Europe: " Tell them two things, one is that we never marry anyone we do not want to, and the other is that we like our husband to have as many wives as possible". What this lady said applies very much in the case of the Igbo women as has been made clear earlier on. It applies too to the different peoples among whom polygyny is found.

Consequently the opinion that it arouses feminine jealousy has to be modified. Feminine jealousy, it must be remembered, is much more a product of social condition than anything else. It is an effect, not a cause. It shows the woman's desire not to part with the male on whom she depends for protection and economic support. It does not as a rule refer to the relations of the male with other females, as long as the said relations do not form any danger to the economic and love association.

In many cases this does not happen. It can be argued that our contestation here applies only to women of the far distant past and not to those of today, since what used to be true of the females in the past need not necessarily be

true of those of today. This is due to the fact that women today enjoy more social, economic liberty than their counterparts ever did in the past. It must be admitted however that the so-called emancipation of women has not given to all of them economic independence. For one thing, women today with higher education and emancipation, still need protection from their husbands.

For another, the number of working women that have attained economic independence is infinitesimally small considering them on a world basis. As we have shown before, polygamy will stay one of the challenging topic. As long as women and children are suffering from it, we will continue to think about what it is, in Igbo culture, what are the real causes and the consequences. In the future next generation will be able to have a better view of it and may have a chance to take good decision for themselves. As an old African proverb said: not to know is bad but not to wish to know is worse.