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# Historical Roots, Contemporary Relevance: Explaining the Persistence of Polygyny in Sub- Saharan Africa

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# Historical Roots, Contemporary Relevance: Explaining the Persistence of Polygyny in Sub-Saharan Africa

By Sam Grey

**ABSTRACT** – *Despite the pervasive belief that monogamous marriage and the nuclear family are natural or inevitable features of modernity, many other nuptial and household forms exist. Polygyny – simultaneous marriage to multiple wives – is one such form. Today, widespread polygyny is virtually a sub-Saharan African phenomenon, and it perseveres here in the face of rapid, ostensibly antipathetic, socio-economic change. Predictions that development and modernization would obliterate traditional kinship systems in sub-Saharan Africa remain unrealized because they fail to appreciate that polygyny is not merely a historical relic or cultural idiosyncrasy, but a rational, internally consistent strategy that enables both individuals and groups, under particular conditions, to set, pursue, and achieve a broad range of goals. Accordingly, polygyny has not disappeared in those areas wherein the management of kin networks and household composition confers clear political, social, moral, or economic benefits.*

**RÉSUMÉ** – *En dépit de la conviction généralisée que le mariage monogamique et la famille bâtie autour d'un noyau sont de naturelles ou d'inévitables caractéristiques de la modernité, de nombreux autres arrangements nuptiaux et familiaux existent. La polygynie - mariage simultané à plusieurs femmes - est l'une de ces formes. Aujourd'hui, la polygynie est un phénomène à toutes fins pratiques d'Afrique sub-saharienne, et il persévère malgré la rapide, soi-disant anti-pathétique évolution socio-économique. Les prédictions voulant que le développement et la modernisation ait pu oblitérer les systèmes sociaux en Afrique sub-saharienne reste infirmée parce qu'elles ne parviennent pas à comprendre que la polygynie n'est pas seulement un vestige historique ou une idiosyncrasie culturelle, mais une stratégie rationnelle et cohérente permettant à la fois aux individus et groupes, dans des conditions particulières, de fixer, de poursuivre, et de parvenir à un large éventail d'objectifs. En conséquence, la polygynie n'a pas disparue dans ces domaines où la gestion des réseaux de parenté et la composition du ménage confère de clairs bénéfices politiques, sociaux, moraux, ou des avantages économiques.*

Marriage is more than a vehicle of reproduction. It is a socio-cultural institution with wide-ranging political, economic, and legal implications that responds to a variety of structural and personal forces (Burnham 1987). Within this institution, cultural norms and economic motives reinforce one another, with the result that evolving marriage patterns are both a cause and a consequence of societal change (Gould, Moav, & Simhon 2004; Solway 1990). Despite the pervasive belief in Western societies that monogamous marriage and the nuclear family are natural or inevitable features of modernity,<sup>1</sup> many other nuptial and household forms exist without being merely historical relics or cultural idiosyncrasies. Polygyny – simultaneous marriage to multiple wives – is one such form.

Today, widespread polygyny is virtually an African phenomenon, found in almost all traditional<sup>2</sup> societies

<sup>1</sup> Here and throughout the essay, the terms 'modern' and 'modernity' will be used not with reference to Modernization Theory, but in the more colloquial sense. To paraphrase Collier (1998): 'modern' is here given as the tradition's lauded opposite.

<sup>2</sup> This essay employs Bay's elegant definition: "That which is traditional is not necessarily linked to a particular period of time or style of living. Nor does the term refer to practices or attitudes that remained unchanged over long periods of time. Rather, 'traditional' is used to distinguish African ideas, beliefs, technologies and social structures at a given moment from comparable institutions and

south of the Sahara.<sup>3</sup> Of the twenty-nine nations in the world classified as having high rates of polygyny, twenty-seven are located in sub-Saharan Africa,<sup>4</sup> where the incidence of co-wives is ten times that found in other polygynous societies, and the institution has unique societal functions (Caldwell & Caldwell 1990; Goody 1973).<sup>5</sup> As Jacoby (1995) asserts, here “[p]olygyny is not a mere cultural curiosity, but has important ramifications” (p. 939). Though the practice is now everywhere in decline (whether rapid or slow), and though this shift is often correlated with ‘development’<sup>6</sup> or a transition to modernity, the interaction between climbing socio-economic indicators and falling levels of polygyny is both subtle and complex. While it is true that the various structural changes associated with modernity and development have had a profound impact on plural marriage, polygyny has proved surprisingly resilient. Predictions that urbanization, educational advancement, economic development, as well as Western capitalist modes of production and social organization would obliterate traditional kinship systems, ushering in the nuclear family as the African norm, remain unrealized (Goody 1973; Kaufmann & Meekers 1998). The logical conclusion must be that the incentives for polygyny retain considerable vigour even in contemporary sub-Saharan Africa, so that the institution perseveres in the face of rapid, ostensibly antipathetic, socio-economic change.

## THE DECLINE OF AFRICAN POLYGYNY: THEORETICAL AND EMPIRICAL ACCOUNTS

In a review of the literature on polygyny’s decline, three main hypotheses provide the bulk of explanation and prediction. One posits that the institution is incompatible with the rise of capitalism, and must therefore fall away as pre-capitalist societies ‘evolve.’ Another asserts that polygyny becomes less desirable to societies as economies develop, and less attractive to individuals as consumption patterns Westernize. A third claims that polygyny is principally a practice of the rural and uneducated, making it a custom that wilts with the advance of urbanization and increasing levels of educational attainment. In an account of the persistence of polygyny, each ‘decline hypothesis’ merits individual attention.

### *Social Evolution, Capitalism, and the Globalization of Markets*

Engels (1942) posits polygyny as a feature of mid-level societal complexity, and as yielding to monogamy with the rise of social classes and ‘civilization.’<sup>7</sup> This theory has been borne out, to some extent, by historical analyses and cross-cultural research (White & Burton 1988). It is true that polygyny is strongly associated with less socially stratified cultures,<sup>8</sup> and that it is virtually non-existent in modern, fully industrialized societies (Timaeus & Reynar 1998). Socially imposed monogamy, coupled with privatization, typically leads to primogeniture, allowing much more flexible transfers of capital between generations, and thus facilitates at least part of the wealth accumulation necessary for the emergence and intensification of capitalism (Mueller 1995; Engels 1942). The webs of affinity created by polygyny, by way of contrast, redistribute wealth; indeed, to do so is part of their logic (Engels 1942). Because it is far more common in subsistence than exploitative economies, polygyny is found principally in extensive agricultural and some pastoral and semi-industrialized settings – descriptions which still apply to many sub-Saharan African societies today. Here, the occurrence of polygyny is most often tied to female value, measured in terms of contributions (potential or actual) to traditional modes of production, reproduction, and exchange (Goody 1973; Jacoby 1995). In polygynous societies, resource rights are typically vested in lineage groups, the household is the unit of labour, and accumulation and investment are concentrated

values that have been [more] recently imported, mainly from the West” (1982, p.122).

3 Historically, this region includes settled savannah agriculturalists and pastoralists (the ‘cattle complex’), and excludes the desert nomadic peoples (the ‘camel complex’) and tropical forest hunter-gatherers (White, 1988).

4 The other two nations are Kuwait and Bangladesh. Today, high rates of polygyny are said to occur where at least ten percent of married men are involved in a polygynous union (Tertilt, 2005).

5 This being said, even where polygyny is normative, demographic and economic constraints have never permitted more than a third of men to engage in the practice (Adams & Mburugu, 1994).

6 For the purposes of this discussion, the definition of ‘development’ will be descriptive (versus normative), broad, and principally economic: development tracks along a path toward increasing per capita income, and a concentration of industry in the tertiary and quaternary sectors. An underlying assumption is that economic development processes ideally translate income per capita into increased access to, and quality of, services such as education and health, thereby increasing life expectancy, knowledge and skill, and the standard of living in a given country. This encompasses conceptualizations of development as planned intervention as well as those of development as a historically imminent process of structural transformation – in this case, it is the effects that are at issue, rather than either the intentions or means.

7 According to Engels (1942), in addition to the cleavage of society into classes, ‘civilization’ is characterized by an increased division of labour, including the emergence of merchants; trade expansion; the advent of money, and hence moneylending; the commodification of land, giving rise to private property; a sharpening opposition between the rural and urban; and a concentration and centralization of wealth.

8 Although far more common in wealthier strata, polygyny has been found to span social ranks, and its incidence is not confined to the richest households (Anderson, 2000; Goody, 1973).

in social goods (Goody 1973; Solway 1990).

In pre- and peri-capitalist societies, gradual enclosure of land and resources, the rise of the cash economy, and the introduction of wage labour in general (and a market for female labour in particular) all mitigate against polygyny's large households and extended kinship networks (Kazianga & Sinha 2005; Timaeus & Reynar 1998; Ware 1979). Globalization,<sup>9</sup> in its turn, widens the scope and deepens the effects of these processes. Over the past century and a half, incipient global trade and rising Western demand for goods such as coffee and cocoa has steadily diverted land from traditional crops, which were associated with a higher number of female hours per hectare (Jacoby 1995). The result has been a reduction in women's economic value, and thus the value of wives; a consequence that has been exacerbated by a growing national dependence on the cultivation and export of new, primary commodities and the subsequent uptake of modern farming technologies (Jacoby 1995; Lee 1979). Smallholder farming in sub-Saharan Africa has been (and is still being) either supplanted by intensive commercial agriculture or combined with wage labour and other non-agricultural activities (Kitching 1983), neither of which confers an advantage on families with two or more wives (Goody 1973; Lee & Whitbeck 1990). Coincident with this change, there has been a steady move to accumulation and investment in material goods rather than social resources, and the expression of class-based relations rather than kinship ties (Solway 1990). The rental of land to tenant farmers is now found in place of the household, lineage-based cultivation rights formerly seen in polygynous societies, while population growth has reduced the availability of land (and other resources) overall (Comaroff & Roberts 1977; Dorjahn 1988; Jacoby 1995; White & Burton 1988). Because these outcomes have been seen to different degrees in different regions, some theorists have looked to traditional socio-economic relations to explain variations in polygyny's ebb.<sup>10</sup>

The timeline of that ebb has itself lent credence to the capitalism-based decline hypothesis. Polygyny's wane has been most noticeable in the Southern sub-Saharan region, where the impacts of capitalism and class formation were felt earlier and harder (Kaufmann & Meekers 1998). In fact, paralleling the historical path of socio-economic development, drops in polygyny occurred about ten years earlier in Southern Africa, as evidenced by the proportion of polygynously married women in older age groups.<sup>11</sup> In addition to declining earlier, plural marriage has been ebbing fastest in the South. To a certain extent this is to be expected since capitalism's narrowing of kinship ties weakens polygyny as an institution, which in turn weakens the depth and breadth of kinship ties.<sup>12</sup> Overall incidence of polygyny is lowest in Southern sub-Saharan Africa (where less than a third of nations are highly polygynous), and climbs as one moves through the Eastern to the Western regions (with half of nations in the former and 80% of nations in the latter showing high rates of polygyny). Jacoby (1995) refers to this West-East swath as the 'Polygyny Belt,' extending from Senegal to Tanzania (p. 939).

### *Economic Development and the Westernization of Consumption*

If one thing is indisputably true of sub-Saharan Africa, it is that everywhere its societies are undergoing rapid socio-economic and demographic change (Timaeus & Reynar 1998). There appears to be a strong correlation between polygyny and development concerns in this context, since both underdevelopment and polygyny are found to a far greater extent here than anywhere else on Earth. Over 93% of highly polygynous nations are located in sub-Saharan Africa, and three-quarters of these are classified as 'Least Developed Countries.'<sup>13, 14</sup> Not surprisingly, a causal relationship has been actively sought, so that the macroeconomic picture of polygyny is consistently damning, with most political economists describing the institution as an outright 'engine of decline.' These analysts focus on the exchange of bride-wealth, an element of polygynous unions in which a positive 'price' for a bride is paid to her male kin to signify or seal the marriage contract. Because the accumulation of wives and female children thus constitutes an alternative investment strategy,

9 The term 'globalization,' for the purposes of this article, refers to a reconfiguration of geography, remapping social, economic and political space in a way that minimizes the importance of place, distance and border. In the past quarter century, globalization specifically describes trans-border exchanges, both within and beyond the market, in which distance and time are almost inconsequential. See, among others, Jan Aart Scholte, *Globalization: a critical introduction* (Hampshire and New York: Palgrave, 2000).

10 For example, according to Kaufmann and Meekers (1998), women in Lesotho enjoyed higher status in traditional society than did their peers in Botswana; consequently, earlier access to productive resources was replicated in later access to wage labour, and their marriage and kinship systems have more successfully adapted to capitalism.

11 In Southern Africa the sharpest drop is observed in the 30-39 and 40-49 age groups, while the 20-29 and 30-39 age groups are the ones in which the greatest drop is observed in West Africa (Hasaye & Liaw, 1997).

12 In other words, the movement toward capitalism's class-based relations and away from those mediated by kinship appears to be a self-perpetuating phenomenon. Once initiated, the transition drives steadily toward the 'death' of plural marriage.

13 The United Nations currently defines 49 nations as LDCs, using criteria of: low national income (GDP per capita < US \$900), weak human assets (a composite index using indicators for health, nutrition and education), and high economic vulnerability (a composite index measuring instability of agricultural production and exports, inadequate diversification, and economic smallness indicators) (UNCTAD, 2002).

14 See the table attached as Appendix A.

polygyny 'crowds out' investment in human capital (i.e. skills) and physical assets, with negative implications for the savings rate, aggregate capital stock, wages, interest rates, and gross domestic product per capita (Tertilt 2005; Tertilt 2006). Policymakers and planners following the development-based decline hypothesis thus favour "increasing a monogamous norm," since it ostensibly brings with it rising investments in human capital and economic growth in the longer term (Gould, Moav & Simhon 2004, p.30). In Cote D'Ivoire, for example, polygyny was outlawed in the 1964 civil code in an attempt to legislate into being the Western-style household that was considered a precondition for economic development (ibid.). The Westernization of consumption patterns that often accompanies such development, promoting a consumerist ideal, has worked largely as political economists expected: rising lifestyle expectations and individualistic concerns about economic security have contributed to a growing perception of polygyny as prohibitively expensive, and as scattering wealth (Adams & Mburugu 1994; Anderson 2000; Comaroff & Roberts 1977).

This being said, accounts of polygyny's decline based on economic modeling have, by and large, tended to beg the question.<sup>15</sup> They have done so by decontextualizing choice, assuming the uniform availability, appeal, and priority of certain economic options – for instance, in their call for across-the-board investment in material rather than social spheres, when to do so appears wholly counterintuitive at the household level (i.e. when the present and future well-being of the family seems to depend on increasing the size of the domestic unit and the extent and robustness of kinship ties).<sup>16</sup> The result is an account of rational behaviour that is blind to the very motivations it hopes to describe. This calls attention to the fact that, "[t]he economic determination of value is perhaps particularly pronounced in the West, but it has been projected onto African societies by Western writers who see these societies as somehow 'simple' and characterized by economically determined behaviour" (Kaufmann & Meekers 1998, p. 110). These authors devote insufficient attention to the fact that polygyny is neither a monolithic nor an insular phenomenon. Polygyny is, in fact, part of a complex web of context-specific social institutions; it is, as White (1988) has asserted, "multiply embedded" (p. 529).

### *Education and Urbanization*

Education and urbanization, both strongly associated with increasing levels of development, have emerged as the principal factors affecting intra-regional rates of polygyny. It is true that the higher the educational attainment of spouses, especially the wife, the lower the rates of polygyny observed (Agadjanian & Ezeh 2000; Coast 2006; Madhavan 2002). Of course, as Adams and Mburugu (1994) note, at best education can be cited as an indirect cause, since one must still explain how it actually acts to reduce plural marriage. According to supporters of the education-based decline hypothesis, 'modern,' educated lifestyles may be seen as antithetical to polygyny's extended households for a number of reasons. Educated individuals are more likely to want to see all of their children educated, which may prove an economic hardship in larger families (Coast, 2006). Education also correlates with livelihood diversification in general, and urban employment in particular, both of which are limiters of polygyny (Coast 2006; Gulbrandsen 1986). Similarly, education tends to diminish the influence of polygynous elders, since an educated individual is more likely to become the head of an independent household at a younger age than did his or her parents (Coast 2006; Hasaye & Liaw 1997). Education may also directly limit the demand-side of the polygynous marriage market, since educated individuals often seek a comparably educated spouse (Bledsoe 1990). Finally, there is likely to be some truth to the hypothesis that Western nuptial norms have been disseminated through education, since many African schools have their roots in missions, and Christianized African elites tend to characterize polygyny as "'backward' or 'bush' behaviour" (Hasaye & Liaw 1997, p. 294).

Acknowledging the validity of the above arguments, evidence of polygyny's continuing relevance is available even among the most highly educated African men and women. Although only a small minority of contemporary African university-educated women are co-wives, they have been articulate and passionate in their defence of that status. From these women comes a description of modern, urban polygyny as "a creative combination of legitimacy and autonomy" (Arndt 2000, p. 716), which allows a woman to regard her husband "as both lover and friend" (Crumbley, 2003, p.600). These women typically have a separate household, sometimes living in a different city than their co-wives, while still securing legitimacy and access to their husbands' resources for their children (ibid.).

In terms of urbanization as a reason for polygyny's decline, it is true that polygyny is far more common in rural than urban areas, and is strongly concentrated in those regions most affected, historically, by male-out

<sup>15</sup> 'Begging the question' is a logical fallacy in which the premises assume (implicitly or explicitly) the truth of the conclusion, or even claim its truth outright. It is similar to circular reasoning.

<sup>16</sup> Other problematic assumptions of the economic models include, *inter alia*: uniform production technology, homogenous productivity of women, homogenous cost of women, and 'fair' prices of inputs (Kaufmann & Meekers, 1998).



labour migration and sex-based survivorship<sup>17</sup> (Anderson 2000; Bergstrom 1994; Dorjahn 1988; White & Burton 1988). In fact, a survey of five diverse sub-Saharan nations found that the likelihood of an urban household being polygynous was 45% lower than that of a rural household, even controlling for factors such as education and wealth (Timaeus & Reynar 1998). Supporters of an urbanization-based decline hypothesis claim that the modern urban context mitigates against polygyny's large households in several interrelated ways: a higher cost of living, which precludes co-wives having their own houses and thus lowers the desirability of co-wife status; lower incidence of widow remarriage; higher risk of unemployment; widespread housing shortages; impeded privacy; higher transportation costs; lower wages, especially in the informal sector; elevated costs of raising and educating children; erosion of supportive social mechanisms and socialization processes, including rites of passage; lowered economic contributions of minors, and unfavourable sex and age ratios (Adams & Mburugu 1994; Bledsoe 1990; Comaroff & Roberts 1977; Dorjahn 1988; Gage-Brandon 1992; Hasaye & Liaw 1997; Jacoby 1995; Klomegah 1997; Madhavan 2002; Meekers & Franklin 1995). There is also evidence that wealthy polygynists, who can afford metropolitan living, locate their households away from urban centres as a form of insulation against (what is perceived as) the city's harsh or negative family environment (Anderson 2000).

All of these factors, though, can be said to drive down the urban *incidence* of the practice without necessarily depressing urbanite *views* of polygyny, or the practicality of extended households in certain situations. In a survey done amongst rural and urban Ghanaian women, polygyny was characterized by both groups as "a recognized and appreciated custom that can transverse certain social and economic structures" (Anderson 2000, p.111). Similarly, a 1995 study revealed that up to 80% of currently monogamous urban men in Francophone Africa desired a second wife (Ezeh 1997). It bears mentioning, too, that rates of all forms of marriage are lower in urban areas, where even monogamous couples may find that establishing a household is an unaffordable luxury (Anderson 2000).

## EXPLAINING THE PERSEVERANCE OF POLYGYNY IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

Those who describe the waning of polygyny seldom base their accounts on a single set of factors. Whatever the contributing elements cited, though, the ebb itself is invariably painted as inevitable, rapid, unwavering – and further, as logical or 'right,' given the assumptions of the major decline hypotheses. What those theories gloss over is the fact that the institution of polygyny is not *per se* inconsistent with development, modernity, or more broadly, rationality. A robust analysis must posit plural marriage in contemporary sub-Saharan Africa as more than a cultural artefact, which entails looking at the benefits polygyny confers today, in the context of the region's economic conditions, ethical systems, and social and political traditions.

### *Power, Fertility, and Social Elaboration*

Social practices and institutions are geared toward the perpetuation of the society itself (Klomegah 1997), and in most of sub-Saharan Africa, "the indigenous model of social structure is still based upon the notion that plural marriage leads to the elaboration of the hierarchy of social units which comprise the society" (Comaroff & Roberts 1977, p.97). Simply put: if marriage can be seen as the creation of political, economic, and social ties – the alliance of lineages, rather than merely the union of individual persons – then many more such linkages can be made through polygyny (Hasaye & Liaw 1997; Klomegah 1997; Kuper 1975; Solway 1990). Further, polygyny allows the progressive accumulation of alliances as an individual manages a lifelong career (Bledsoe 1990; Comaroff & Roberts 1977). In many African societies, traditionally "the main strategy for social advancement [was] to secure followers or dependents, rather than gaining access to land, ritual knowledge, or livestock. The latter [were] employed chiefly as a means to increase the number of dependents and [did] not constitute ends in themselves" (Meekers & Franklin 1995, p.318). Polygyny may thus be practiced today for its symbolic value, if nothing else. As a form of conspicuous consumption it grants prestige long after the practical basis of that prestige has withered (Adams & Mburugu 1994; Aluko & Aransiola 2003). Thus, in societies in which polygyny is or has been normative, it is still "the model in terms of which political rivalry is ordered" (Comaroff & Roberts 1977, p.117).

Yet there are significant enduring (rather than vestigial), moral (as opposed to politico-economic) and practical (versus merely perceived) benefits to the institution. In sub-Saharan Africa, the kinship networks created by polygynous unions expand families' usage rights over communally owned resources (Bledsoe 1990; Hasaye & Liaw 1997; Jacoby 1995). They also establish a kind of credit and insurance system where a formal market

<sup>17</sup> In many of the areas under discussion, certain phenomena (for example, periodic or sustained armed conflict, or even the physical dangers associated with traditionally male occupations, such as hunting) acted to depress the number of men in the population.

for these is lacking, using risk-pooling to address long-term security, short-term shifts in needs and means, and periodic crises (Coast 2006; Jacoby 1995; Kazianga & Sinha 2005; Oppong 1992). Polygyny additionally acts as a retirement and disability strategy, since bride-wealth facilitates consumption in later life and failing health (Dorjahn 1988; Jacoby 1995; Tertilt 2006). Moreover, networks of kinship accomplish these various ends without resorting to contract-type relationships; they evidence, as Solway (1990) has expressed it, the logic of investments in people over investments in things. Polygyny is thus “an expression of a way of life which is deeply embedded in cultural obligation” (Klomegah 1997, p. 73), and in which there is far more going on than simple utility maximization:

A critical aspect of kinship which requires special consideration is its morality [...]. Kinship [...] is the basis of long-term commitment, characterized by sharing without reckoning and by generalized reciprocity within kin groups. Such relationships are invaluable for helping to maintain the viability of insecure small units in precarious circumstances, in which long-term reciprocity, with no immediate calculation of debt and repayment period, may make all the difference to survival (Oppong 1992, p. 75).

Polygynous kinship networks can also serve women’s specific interests and needs. Traditional lineage structures, with their networks of support and interdependence, secure access rights for women in contexts where men usually control resources (Caldwell, Caldwell & Urubuloye 1992; Cook 2007), while offsetting limited rights for unmarried women to own assets, confer legitimacy to their children, inherit, and make independent decisions (Anderson, 2000; Gould, Moav, & Simhon 2004). The more numerous and robust kinship ties established through polygyny also better protect women against the outright appropriation of their labour, since wives essentially exchange a share of their output for access to productive resources (Bay 1982; Jacoby 1995; Oppong 1992). Finally, for both men and women, meeting fertility goals is a very important incentive in pro-natalist African societies,<sup>18</sup> wherein it is considered every fecund individual’s right to have children, generational succession is a key concern, and being childless is both a fearful and a pitiful prospect (Adams & Mburugu 1994; Aluko & Aransiola 2003; Caldwell & Caldwell 1987; Cook 2006). Polygynous men, on average, both desire and have more children than their monogamous peers – indeed, the desired number of children per polygynous man typically exceeds the total fertility rate, creating the perceived necessity of meeting reproductive goals by taking on additional spouses (Kazianga & Sinha 2005; Ezeh 1997).

#### *Labour and Household Productivity*

In most extensive agricultural and some semi-industrial societies the family is the unit of labour, and as such “must be structured in such a way as to maximize productive efficiency according to specific environmental and technological conditions” (Lee & Whitbeck 1990, p.22). Polygyny in sub-Saharan Africa can, therefore, be seen as a strategic response to the economic forces that make multiple-worker families advantageous (Lee 1979). These forces tend to arise where activity is small-scale and labour-intensive; production is extensive and non- or only superficially mechanized; and “large and differentiated work groups are at least potentially adaptive” (Lee & Whitbeck, 1990 p.22). Accordingly, polygyny is most often observed in non- and semi-industrial settings, where an increase in the number of workers leads to an increase in per capita productivity (Klomegah 1997). Herein, “it is labour [...] that is the scarce factor in production, and it is not available on any market other than the marriage market” (Oppong 1992, p.74). The economic reasoning employed here is sound, since a polygynous household augments the workforce without the need for supervision, and without the need to pay wages (in this, the practice is similar to sharecropping) (Adams & Mburugu 1994; Hasaye & Liaw 1997; Jacoby 1995). Further, production is coincident with childcare, care for the elderly and ill, and work-at-home, while such cooperative activity often yields higher value in and of itself (Aluko & Aransiola 2003; Anderson 2000; Dorjahn 1988; Oppong 1992). It is for these reasons that Steady (1987) characterizes polygyny as both “a survival mechanism and a subsidizing institution” (p. 212).

Simply put: polygyny provides labour to the domestic enterprise (Kazianga & Sinha 2005). Cross-cultural studies have tended to focus on female labour in particular, noting that in Africa, “economic productivity in women is usually highly valued” (Bay, 1982 p.6), and that “the economic role of women [here] is significant – and in several respects unique” (Singh & Morey 1987, p. 744). Higher female productivity is correlated with polygyny in the sub-Saharan region where hoe/shifting agriculture is practiced, in certain semi-industrialized modes of production, and/or where women are active in trade networks – in all of which contexts they make significant

<sup>18</sup> Though fertility has declined throughout sub-Saharan Africa, which has for the past several decades undergone a unique ‘fertility transition’ involving all reproductive ages, traditional views endure (Hasaye & Liaw, 1997).

contributions to the household's earnings (Goody 1973; Hasaye & Liaw 1997). Yet because women are also the mothers of sons, polygyny benefits productivity regardless of whether it is female or male labour that confers an economic advantage (Aluko & Aransiola 2003; Lee & Whitbeck 1990). Further, it is necessary to consider the economic contributions of children, which can be considerable in this context, and which are also maximized under polygyny (Bledsoe 1990; Cook 2007; Goody 1973; Gulbrandsen 1986).<sup>19</sup>

Labour contributions to the household, maximized under polygyny, are not just limited to production for internal consumption or external exchange. They also extend to work-at-home (Goody, 1973). In 'less developed' countries in particular, the work performed by the extended household is often critical to maintaining the family's income and well-being (Singh & Morey, 1987). Study data from West Africa shows that, in one polygynous agricultural community, the value of home production amounted to almost two-thirds of the level of family income derived from the farm itself.<sup>20</sup> Although goods produced by the household seldom show up in national accounts, since many are neither marketed nor even directly measurable, a high percentage of products and services consumed by families have traditionally been home-produced (Singh & Morey 1987). Though in recent years imported goods and changing tastes have eroded the efficacy of this practice, home production remains a major subsistence strategy in sub-Saharan Africa (Bay 1982).

### *Women's Networks: Support, Autonomy, and Cooperation*

Another key benefit of polygyny is its ability to give rise to various kinds of female networks. 'Wealth-increasing polygyny' is associated with co-wives' profitable economic cooperatives, while in 'subsistence-maintaining polygyny,' women's cooperatives devoted to work-at-home and child rearing are "expressed through the idiom of polygynous marriage" (Anderson, 2000 p. 102). Income-generating female economic networks are observed far more commonly in the Western region, since West African women are more likely to earn their own living, typically by trading (Caldwell, Caldwell & Orubuloye 1992; Steady 1987; Ware 1979). In these unions, co-wives are often invited into the marriage by a first wife looking for help with her market-based activities (Ware 1979). These second wives may be based elsewhere, for example along key distribution points in regional trade networks, yet the household still operates as a cohesive economic unit (Bay 1982). Even beyond the confines of the Western region, household-based female economic cooperatives are relatively common, and a broad range of skills training among co-wives has been noted right across sub-Saharan Africa (Bay 1982; Steady, 1987; White & Burton 1988).

Female networks in 'subsistence-based polygyny' orbit reproductive, rather than productive activity. African women often cite meeting children's needs as their paramount concern, with income-generation outside the home valued only insofar as it helps them to achieve that end (Anderson 2000). Because "[s]ocial, economic, and cultural institutions in Africa prescribe different costs and benefits of childbearing and childrearing for women and men" (Dodoo 1998, p. 233), major childcare benefits accrue within female networks (Bay 1982; Bledsoe 1990), in which "the presence or absence of the husband seems irrelevant" (Anderson 2000, p. 102). Consequently, where fosterage and other alternative childcare systems are in place, rates of polygyny are lower (ibid.). In fact, one author asserts that Southern African polygynous marriages "resemble contracts among females to allocate child care far more than contracts among men to allocate women" (ibid., p.109). Further, because women-headed households throughout Africa and the diaspora allocate far more resources to meeting children's needs, and polygynous households contain greater numbers of women, polygyny has been posited as a kind of 'intermediate form' between female- and male-headed family units (Anderson 2000; Kerns 1995).

Many beneficial aspects of female networks are simultaneously practical and emotional. Within the polygynous household, junior wives contribute to more than just a more equitable division of labour (Hasaye & Liaw 1997; Ware 1979). Their presence helps to counter the confinement and isolation a sole wife may feel, while lending other forms of psychological support that may not be forthcoming from the husband; indeed, polygynously married women often express that they are better friends with their co-wives than they could ever be with their husbands (Anderson 2000; Gage-Brandon 1992; Solway 1990). In fact, it is not uncommon for an estranged first/only wife to return to the household once a co-wife is in place (Anderson, 2000), since unhappily married wives are content to "share the burden of an unsatisfactory marriage with another woman" (Meekers & Franklin 1995, p. 321). This may help to explain why research from Nigeria, backed by similar findings in Kenya, shows that marriages with two wives are actually more stable than monogamous ones (Ezeh 1997; Gage-Brandon 1992). While competitiveness and covetousness certainly do exist between co-wives, they are not necessarily sexual in nature (as Western writers often insist) but rather often reflect a desire for each wife

<sup>19</sup> In Burkina Faso, for example, almost 80% of children aged 10-15 are economically productive (Kazianga & Sinha, 2005).

<sup>20</sup> Where \$770 was generated through crop production, \$470 was simultaneously generated through work-at-home (Singh & Morey, 1987).



to secure resources for her own children (Meekers & Franklin 1995; Solway 1990; Ware 1979). Offsetting this negative potential, co-wives note that through polygynous marriage they can “plan together to advance the welfare of the household as a whole” (Ware 1979, p. 189). This synergy is especially important in certain social strata. In the families of ‘headmen,’ for example, negotiating the needs of many and frequent guests is seen as a socio-political necessity that is beyond the coping ability of a single wife (Meekers & Franklin 1995).

At broader levels of concern, it has been argued that polygyny’s domestic networks entail the kinds of bonds between women that help to limit patriarchy,<sup>21</sup> providing a subtle resistance to male domination and offsetting economic dependence (Oppong 1992; Steady 1987). When discussing normative or liberatory strategies, African women can, and often do express different priorities, for instance emphasizing general economic interests (those affecting the community as a whole) over more familiar feminist issues (those affecting only women) (Ware 1979). In those contexts where the purpose of husbands is principally to confer legitimacy on children, some African women cite polygyny as an outright liberating force (ibid.). Arguably, wives can have more autonomy in a polygynous household than in a monogamous one – indeed, since the relationship between husband and wife is not 1:1, some measure of independence is unavoidable (ibid.). Further, the layout of a traditional compound sees each co-wife established in her own home, where she wields considerable authority (Madhavan 2002). These women feel that, because of the influence co-wives can collectively exert, they command more disposable income than do their monogamous peers, while enjoying a comparatively certain position in the household (unlike monogamously married women, who may well become co-wives in the future) (Anderson 2000; Ware 1979).

Ultimately, although Western authors almost invariably paint polygyny as straightforward female subservience to autocratic husbands, a counter-case can be mounted (Solway 1990). The ideological biases present in some of these analyses, while exhibiting an empathetic focus on the plight of women, tend to gloss women’s agency by viewing polygyny as inevitably imposed and always exploitative. These authors forget that “women are social actors in their own right who try to achieve their own goals within certain constraints imposed upon them” (Meekers & Franklin 1995, p. 322). Kaufman and Meekers (1998), for example, describe how “in societies that greatly value fertility, potency has a literal meaning, and women will choose [polygynous] marriage as a strategy to gain power” (p.110). Similarly, women interviewed in the late 1980s in South Africa stated plainly that they benefited from polygyny far more than did their men (Anderson 2000). In the end, even committed opponents of the institution must admit that African women’s views of polygyny are mixed, and only fully comprehensible within their particular cultural, historical, economic, and personal milieux (Madhavan 2002; Meekers & Franklin 1995; Timaeus & Reynar 1998; Ware 1979).

### **TRANSFORMATIONS AND VARIATIONS IN PLURAL MARRIAGE: THE EMERGENCE OF QUASI-POLYGYNOUS TEMPLATES**

In situations of societal change, continuity and discontinuity often occur in tandem. This observation proves true of polygyny in the contemporary African context, so that plural marriage here is currently being both sustained and transformed. In sub-Saharan Africa, there has been a rise in alliances wherein one wife is ‘legal,’ and others are participants in a less formal union (Meekers & Franklin 1995). These quasi-polygynous templates include serial monogamy, *deuxieme bureau*, concubinage, outside marriage, polyandrous motherhood, and ‘sugar-daddy’ relationships (Bledsoe 1990; Dorjahn 1988; Madhavan 2002; Smit 2001). A man today may undertake several unions, and then begin to shape outcomes and manipulate costs by “selecting a principal wife and marginalizing the rest as outside wives” (Bledsoe 1990, p. 122). A woman, for her part, may opt to be the informal partner of a wealthy man, instead of either the co-wife of an affluent man or the sole wife of a poor monogamist (after all, it is not uncommon for ‘outside wives’ to be set up in their own homes, and even in their own businesses) (Adams & Mburugu 1994; Siegel 1992). Polygynously married women are aware, and somewhat fearful, of these informal partnerships; somewhat ironically, this fear serves to bolster their opinions of polygyny as an institution. Unlike co-wives, outside wives have a status that is “fluid and uncontrollable” (Ware 1979, p. 187), and are thought to command a disproportionate amount of resources, particularly if they have children of the husband’s lineage (Meekers & Franklin 1995; Siegel 1992). Thus, in a survey of urban women in Nigeria, 75% of interviewees stated that they would prefer a husband to take a co-wife rather than a girlfriend (Aluko & Aransiola 2003).

Of course, there are differences between traditional polygyny and these more recent quasi-polygynous templates. One is, as Solway (1990) rightly points out, that both sexes can play at this ‘new game’ of extra-marital sexual expression and alliance. Another difference concerns the effects that these newer forms have on social elaboration. Some authors argue that the structural implications of polygyny and quasi-polygyny are

21 See, among others, Clignet, 1970.

identical, since the individuals engaged in informal or serial unions may still use them to initiate and manage a network of affinal alliances, while others point out that these new kinship ties are neither as broad nor as deep, and thus neither as enduring nor as powerful (Comaroff & Roberts 1977; Solway 1990). Despite these dissimilarities, practices like concubinage and serial monogamy are clearly strategies employed to resolve problems arising from “the transformation of a polygynous marriage system [...] as this is expressed in the context of [specific] cultural logic” (Comaroff & Roberts 1977, p. 119).

Polygyny is on the decline in sub-Saharan Africa – but so too is marriage itself. Here economic forces, attitudes, and behaviours have been changing apace. Alongside the rising feasibility of being a self-supporting widow or divorcée is found growing freedom in partner choice and extra-marital expression, and increasing acceptance of spinster households and extra-marital births (Comaroff & Roberts 1977; Hattori & Larsen 2007; Oppong 1992). In recent years, Africa as a whole has experienced a significant growth in the number of never-married women,<sup>22</sup> and while marriage still “legitimizes sexuality and fertility” (Timaues & Reynar 1998, p. 149), it is decreasingly seen as the only means to this end (Mokomane, 2006). This behavioural shift may be an outcome of the fact that “contemporary marriage offers few of the protections of former times yet requires undiminished, even increased, energies from women” (Bay 1982, p. 13). In many regions the privatization of bride-wealth alone, by moving to cash instead of cattle, seriously weakened the obligations that traditionally bound menfolk to the causes and support of women (Adams & Mburugu 1994; Anderson 2000; Hasaye & Liaw 1997). Meanwhile, sub-Saharan African nuptial systems and household forms show adaptation, with a continuing influence of polygyny.

## CONCLUSION

Though levels of polygyny in Africa fell precipitously between the late 19<sup>th</sup> and mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, they have levelled off since, and periodic rises have actually been observed.<sup>23</sup> Further, in only three sub-Saharan nations<sup>24</sup> is there evidence of a sharp drop in plural unions over the past few decades.<sup>25</sup> As should be expected, polygynists are not a homogenous group, and therefore no single, well-defined hypothesis has proven able to account for patterns – past or present – of African polygyny (Spencer 1980; Timaues & Reynar 1998). Micro- and macro-level factors affecting the practice occur, overlap, and penetrate to different degrees in different areas, with no one factor operating independently. Further, forces which fail to account for its prevalence or intensity in one context are often undeniably implicated in another. Unfortunately, the actual ‘complex social shift’ affecting polygyny has lent itself to simplification in the literature (Solway, 1990), with the only certainty being that “the nuclearization of the African family has failed to materialize” (Jacoby 1995, p. 939). The indigenous model, while undeniably changed, retains a firm foothold in the nations of sub-Saharan Africa today (Kaufmann & Meekers 1998).

Decline hypotheses forfeit much of their predictive power because they fail to appreciate that polygyny is not an irrational cultural artefact or *per se* impediment to development or modernity, but an internally consistent strategy that enables both individuals and groups, under particular conditions, to set, pursue, and achieve a broad range of goals (Hasaye & Liaw 1997). Plural marriage has not disappeared in those areas wherein the management of kin networks and household composition has clear political, social, moral, or economic benefits. In reflecting on the relative advantages and disadvantages of polygyny it is important to remember that, “every social system is a reflection of its historical response to human problems, and these constitute different solutions that are peculiar to the system. [Further], no two systems of social organization are ever the same, nor are human solutions ever perfect” (p. 75). As a highly contextualized adaptive strategy with strong cultural and moral roots, polygyny can and will continue to evolve as economic conditions, political pressures, personal preferences, and individual and collective values change across the diverse socio-cultural geography of sub-Saharan Africa.

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22 See Appendix A.

23 For example, in Senegal in the period 1974-94 (Timaues & Reynar, 1998).

24 These are Ghana, Kenya, and Rwanda. See Appendix A.

25 See Appendix A.

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APPENDIX A  
HIGHLY POLYGYNOUS SUB-SAHARAN AFRICAN NATIONS: SELECT DATA AND INDICATORS<sup>1</sup>

COUNTRY	SSA REGION	DEVELOPMENT <sup>2</sup>	STATUS OF POLYGYNY <sup>3</sup>	GEI <sup>4</sup>	SEX RATIO <sup>5</sup>	P.M. MEN <sup>6</sup> (%)	P.M. WOMEN <sup>7</sup> (%)	CHANGE IN P.M. WOMEN <sup>8</sup>	WIVES/MAN <sup>9</sup>	NEVER-MARRIED WOMEN <sup>10</sup> (%)	TFR <sup>11</sup>
1. Benin	West	LDC	Illegal	41	50	31	45	...	1.4	22	5.1
2. Burkina Faso	West	LDC	Restricted	52	50	40	54	...	1.7	16	6.4
3. Cameroon	West	Moderate	Legal	49	50	56	58	-3% <sup>a</sup>	1.4	23	4.5
4. Central African Republic	Central	LDC	Legal	42	51	13	29	...	1.3	20	4.3
5. Chad	West	LDC	Restricted	41	52	22	39	...	...	13	5.6
6. Comoros	Southern	LDC	Legal	...	50	...	25	...	...	...	5.0
7. Congo, DRC	Central	LDC	Illegal	...	50	20	32	...	1.3	...	6.4
8. Congo, Republic	Central	Moderate	Legal	43	50	32	38	...	1.6	...	6.0
9. Cote d'Ivoire	West	LDC	Illegal	37	50	20	35	-12% <sup>b</sup>	1.3	30	4.4
10. Gabon	West	Moderate	Restricted	53	50	27	21	...	1.4	32	4.7
11. Gambia	West	LDC	Illegal	49	50	35	20	...	...	...	5.2
12. Ghana	West	Moderate	Legal	58	50	16	23	-19% <sup>b</sup>	1.2	24	3.9
13. Guinea	West	LDC	Illegal	51	50	37	53	...	1.6	13	5.8
14. Kenya	East	Moderate	Legal	59	50	13	16	-34% <sup>b</sup>	1.2	30	4.8
15. Liberia	West	LDC	Legal	...	50	...	38	...	1.3	...	6.0
16. Malawi	Southern	LDC	Legal	48	50	10	20	...	...	17	5.7
17. Mali	West	LDC	Restricted	50	50	29	42	-2% <sup>c</sup>	1.3	14	7.4
18. Mauritania	West	LDC	Legal	49	51	...	11	...	1.1	...	5.8
19. Mozambique	Southern	LDC	Restricted	64	51	11	27	...	1.2	16	5.3
20. Niger	West	LDC	Legal	47	49	15	38	...	1.3	10	7.4
21. Nigeria	West	Moderate	Legal	43	49	...	35	-5% <sup>a</sup>	...	25	5.5
22. Rwanda	Central	LDC	Illegal	80	50	...	12	-22% <sup>a</sup>	1.2	34	5.4
23. Senegal	West	LDC	Restricted	55	50	41	46	-2% <sup>a</sup>	1.5	26	5.0
24. Sudan	East	LDC	Legal	41	49	16	20	+20% <sup>d</sup>	1.2	40	4.7
25. Tanzania	East	LDC	Restricted	58	51	16	28	...	1.2	23	5.2
26. Togo	West	LDC	Legal	39	51	32	43	...	1.5	25	4.9
27. Uganda	East	LDC	Legal	64	50	16	32	-13% <sup>c</sup>	...	20	6.8

<sup>1</sup> This table shows select development, gender equity, geographical, demographic, legislative, and marriage and fertility-related data/indicators for sub-Saharan African nations in which at least 10% of married men have multiple wives. Compiled using data from CIA, 2008; Mokomane, 2006; SW/TWI, 2008; Tertilt, 2005; Timaeus & Reynar, 1998; UNDP, 2007; UN/ESCCHR, 2003; and Von Struensee, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Level of development measured using United Nations criteria. 'LDC' refers to a nation classified as a 'Least Developed Country.' 'Moderate' is used to refer to countries classified as 'middle income' and having 'medium human development.' These are nations with a per capita income of between US \$876-\$10,725 and a Human Development Index (a normalized measure of life expectancy, literacy, education, standard of living, and GDP per capita, with a value of between 0 and 1) of 0.500-0.799 (UNDP 2007).

<sup>3</sup> Legal status of polygyny, where 'restricted' refers to countries in which either the consent of the first wife is required or the number of wives is limited by law. Note that in some nations polygyny is illegal only in Christian marriages, but not civil, Islamic, or traditional unions - Tanzania is one such example (Meekers & Franklin, 1995).

<sup>4</sup> Score on the 2008 Gender Empowerment Index, which uses a selection of indicators in three different dimensions (education, participation in the economy and empowerment). A maximum value of 100 indicates complete gender equity in all three dimensions.

<sup>5</sup> Sex ratio, or the percentage of the population that is female, using 2007 data tables.

<sup>6</sup> Percentage of married men in a polygynous union (measured using both legal marriages and cohabiting unions).

<sup>7</sup> Percentage of married women in a polygynous union (measured using both legal marriages and cohabiting unions).

<sup>8</sup> Change in the number of married women in polygynous unions, given as a percentage gain or drop, for available survey years: a = 1977-1993; b = 1977-1996; c = 1986-1996; d = 1977-1990.

<sup>9</sup> Average number of wives per married man.

<sup>10</sup> Percentage of women aged 15-49 who have never been married.

<sup>11</sup> Total fertility rate, or the estimated number of children per woman over her life cycle, using 2007 data tables.