

Abrahamic and African cultural identities: An appropriation of polygamy

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Abstract

Polygamy as a part of socio-cultural life was not peculiar to Africa but also had a strong biblical root. In this wise, disregard for African cultural values like polygamy, and the insistence on monogamy for the culture of Africa by European missionaries appeared inappropriate. They rather seemed to be an imposition of the European culture on Africans. Missionaries' solution to the debate on polygamy in the Christian church which required the converted African polygamist to divorce all but a wife before baptism seemed to suggest extremism. In fact, socio-economic security and family stability depended on the socio-cultural background, and number of children in the household. These undoubtedly were Abrahamic and African identities. Hence, the security and stability of polygamous households in both cultures seemed to be more at high value than that of monogamy imposed by the missionaries. The paper adopted socio-cultural principle, and hermeneutical method to examine polygamy and its appropriation in Abrahamic and African cultures. The study revealed that while the teachings of the missionaries on polygamy ought to be tailored towards the tenets of the biblical disposition on marriage, they rather considered polygamy in Africa to be an immoral cultural practice and unacceptable marital union. The paper recommended that the missionaries should demonstrate tolerance and magnanimity towards polygamists in Africa.

Keywords: Identity, Family Stability, Socio-Cultural, Polygamy, Abrahamic, African



Introduction

Polygamy is considered to be a necessary accommodation to African culture. This suggestion makes polygamy to be part of African cultural identities and values.¹ In a similar pattern, in the corpus of Hebrew scriptures called the Old Testament (OT), certain cultural practices like polygamy or the ethnicity of ancient Israel could be located from Abraham to Jacob (Israelite) identity.² In this regard, it is argued that polygamy as a socio-cultural life is not peculiar to Africa but also has a strong biblical root. Meanwhile, polygamy has its place in Abrahamic and African cultural identities.

Now, disregard for African cultural values like polygamy, and the insistence on monogamy for the culture of Africa by European missionaries appears inappropriate. It is rather an imposition of the European culture on Africans. Missionaries' solution to the debate on polygamy in the Christian church which requires the converted African polygamist to divorce all but one wife before baptism seems to suggest extremism. In fact, socio-economic security and family stability depend on the socio-cultural background, and number of children in the household. These undoubtedly are Abrahamic and African identities. Hence, the security and stability of polygamous households in both cultures are more valued than that of monogamy imposed by the missionaries. This paper adopts socio-cultural principle, and hermeneutical method to examine polygamy and its appropriation in Abrahamic and African cultures.

Theoretical Framework

To the European missionaries, it has been established that since the practice of polygamy came after the entrance of sin and it was

¹Wilbur O'Donovan. *Biblical Christianity in African Perspective*, India: Oasis International Limited, 1997, 291.

²Abiola Ayodeji Olaniyi, "Dynamism of Authority and Power in the Socio-Economic Mobility of the Israelites" *Journal of Humanity and Social Science*, Vol. 24, Issue 1, Ser. 9 (January 2019), 10, 11.

not among original plans of Yahweh, it is a sin.³ In an attempt to enforce monogamy in African Christian Church, various missions refuse to accept polygamists and their families into church fellowship.⁴ Meanwhile, today in the African Christian Church, possibly, the practice of polygamy is still being viewed as immoral by the European missionaries because polygamy and concubinage belonged to the category of imperfection in the realm of ethics. The union of a man and a woman as husband and wife revealed in the creation ordinance implies equality of genders before human corruption set in.⁵

Abrahamic Cultural Identities in Genesis 16: 1-5

Abram's cultural identity has been traced to a land of idolatrous polygamy, because the narrative in Genesis 22: 20-24 reveals that the brother of Abram, Nahor was a polygamist.⁶ Also, Preez claims that at the time when Abram comes onto the scene of history, there is apparently no written code defining the requirements of God relating to marriage. It is later specifically coded during Moses' era. He further establishes that until the call of Abram, there are two major hurdles. That is, Abram has no children and his wife, Sarai is barren (Gen 11:30).⁷ This probably influences Abram's value argument on polygamy and 'concubinage.' However, as it has been revealed by Preez that from the genealogical evidence and record which indicates that

³Andrew Olu Igenozu, *Polygamy and the African Churches, A Biblical Appraisal of an African Marriage System*. The African Association for the Study of Religion, Nigerian Publications Bureau, 2003, 87.

⁴Julius K. Muthengi. "Polygamy and the Church in Africa: Biblical, Historical, and Practical Perspectives" *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology*, 1995, 58.

⁵Igenozu, *Polygamy and the African Churches, A Biblical Appraisal of an African Marriage*, 87.

⁶Richard M. Davidson, https://www.academia.edu/9014651/Polygamy_in_the_Old_Testament, *Polygamy in the Old Testament*, accessed February 22, 2019, 9.

⁷Ronald A. G. du Preez, *Polygamy in the Bible with Implication for Seventh-day Adventist Missiology*, Berrien Spring: Adventist Theological Society, 1993, 154-157.

Abram was the tenth generation from the monogamous marriage of Noah,⁸ and the argument of White that God communicated his will to Abram concerning marriage. It could be safe to come to the conclusion that Abram knew the requirements of God's law and the divine 'will' regarding ideal marital form or marriage relationship.⁹Notwithstanding the idolatry practice in the land of Ur, the divine call came and Abram had to leave for Canaan with the promise of a son that he would become a great multitude through his wife Sarai who was invariably barren. Thereafter, the action of Sarai in her childlessness or barrenness was probably influenced by some biblical narratives. This is because Genesis does assert that in some cases, God actively withheld the blessing of children from some women or actively granted that blessing to other women (Gen 20:17-18; 25:21; 29:31; 30:2, 22-23; 49:25).¹⁰

Possibly, the faith of Abram and Sarai, which had remained constant for ten years, now gave way. Probably, Abram did not realise that the delay was divinely appointed to his faith and to develop his character. Due to the delay of the arrival of an heir, impatience seemed to set in.¹¹ Now, the view is held that Sarai's hope of giving birth to children seemed to have been lost. She "decided to go in the practice of her native country in order to provide an heir for the family."¹² This action was a norm in her society where polytheism was practised. This is because the legal codes of Mesopotamia recognised the practice whereby a childless wife might give one of her slaves to her husband and obtain children by means of her, and determine precisely the right of such offspring. Now Abram hearkened to the voice of his

⁸Preez. *Polygamy in the Bible*, 155.

⁹E. G. White. *Patriarchs and Prophets*. Michigan: Remnant, 2000, 87.

¹⁰Robert M. Bowman Jr., "Genesis and the Definition of Marriage: Monogamy and Polygamy in Biblical History and Ethics," Paper presented to the Evangelical Philosophical Society Evangelical Theological Society annual convention, Atlanta, November 17, 2015, 14.

¹¹F. D. Nichol, ed, "The Book of Deuteronomy." *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*. Volume 1. Washington: Review and Herald, 1978, 317.

¹²Nichol, ed, *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, 317.

wife, Sarai because faith may be genuine and yet proved to be weak in moments of stress and perplexity. There are also instances in the narratives that Abram's faith was weakened and influenced by his polytheistic culture.¹³ The biblical narrative shows that Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar her maid, the Egyptian, to her husband as wife, but it should be pointed out that Hagar is called אִשְׁת־אַבְרָם (Abram's wife). In reality, she still functioned under Sarai as a slave girl.¹⁴ אִשְׁת־אַבְרָם could be woman of Abram, wife of Abram or female belonging to Abram (noun, feminine). That is, woman as conceiving, bearing children. The interpretation of wife in Genesis 15:1-5 suggests woman belonging to a man, of one betrothed.¹⁵ However, the Hebrew term used here לִילְאִשָּׁה, is often used to describe a regular *marriage*.¹⁶ Likewise, Preez establishes that Hagar was taken as a *wife* in a polygamous situation and not just for cohabitation for the purpose of having a son as revealed by the biblical narrative. He further opines that verse three of Genesis chapter 15 shows how Sarah took Hagar to Abraham as a wife,¹⁷ because this action of Sarai was a common practice in the ancient Near East.

Now, it was Sarai's idea for Abram to have sexual relations with her Egyptian servant Hagar in order to produce a child.¹⁸ To Bowman, the fact that it was Sarah's idea is strongly emphasised, since it is stated four times in the first six verses of the passage. Therefore, Sarai was the principal actor in this first scene in the narrative about the birth of Ishmael.¹⁹ This could be because childlessness or barrenness is commonly viewed in the ancient world (and even by many people today) as a dishonour or

¹³Nichol, ed, *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, 317.

¹⁴Davidson, *Polygamy in the Old Testament*, 9.

¹⁵F. Brown, S. Driver, and C. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, Preabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publisher Marketing, 2014, 61, 84.

¹⁶Preez. *Polygamy in the Bible*, 157.

¹⁷Preez. *Polygamy in the Bible*, 157.

¹⁸Bowman Jr., "Genesis and the Definition of Marriage: Monogamy and Polygamy in Biblical History and Ethics," 13.

¹⁹Bowman Jr., "Genesis and the Definition of Marriage: Monogamy and Polygamy in Biblical History and Ethics," 14.

disgrace to the woman. There was no greater sorrow for an Israelite or Oriental woman than barrenness.²⁰ Also, when Sarai turned barren, Kunhiyop argues that she becomes desperate for a child and encourages Abram to have a child with Hagar, her Egyptian slave (Gen 16:1-16).²¹ Since it is cultural in ancient world for a barren woman to bear children through her maid, Sarai's action here cannot be seen as societal absurd. However, Kunhiyop reveals that some commentators such as Dwight and Kaiser do not accept the action of Abram with Hagar to be an example of polygamy. To Dwight, a husband that is childless may lawfully, with the consent of his wife connect himself temporarily with his female slave, but not as a wife. In the same view, Kaiser, argues that Sarai talks Abram into a temporary sexual relation with Hagar. Countering these commentators, Kunhiyop is of the opinion that the narrator indicates more than just a temporary sexual relationship. No doubt, Abram practises a polygamous household for at least some period of time²²

While Genesis 16:1-5 suggests that Sarai's infertility is unfortunate and unbearable, Abram cannot move into plural marriage until 10 years after his arrival in Canaan. It is assumed that the stigmatisation that Abram and his wife would have experienced would be unbearable. Nevertheless, to some scholars such as Davidson, it is unjustifiable to exonerate the circumstances of Abram's carrying out Sarai's suggestion.²³ In corroboration, Igenoza maintains that in the ancient culture (Babylonian), with full rights and responsibilities, a man was entitled to a legally married wife. As a result, a marriage contract was drawn up. He further reveals that according to Hammurabi, if a man takes a wife and does not arrange with her the proper contracts, that woman is not a legal wife.²⁴ Igenoza reveals that

²⁰Bowman Jr., *Genesis and the Definition of Marriage: Monogamy and Polygamy in Biblical History and Ethics*, 14.

²¹Kunhiyop, *African Christian Ethics*, 230.

²²Ibid., 230.

²³Davidson, *Polygamy in the Old Testament*, 11.

²⁴Igenoza, *Polygamy and the African Churches, A Biblical Appraisal of an African Marriage System*, 108.

what Sarai does is not so much in obedience to an impulse as in conformity with family law of the Hurrians, a society whose customs the patriarchs knew intimately and followed often.²⁵ However, the following might be the contributing factors why Abram succumbs to the suggestion of Sarai, his wife. That is, it could be understandable because Sarai has passed the age of child-bearing according to the dictates of nature (Gen 18:11), and that the couple come from a background which is relatively polygamous (cf. Gen 22:20-24).²⁶ Notwithstanding, subsequently, it is revealed that throughout the narrative, God never refers to Hagar as Abram's wife. Although the narrator refers to Hagar as Abram's wife, but in the contrast between human understanding and Yahweh's disposition, Hagar is emphatically referred to as Sarai's maid not as Abram's wife.²⁷ In corroboration, Bowman, assumes that Abram's sexual union with Hagar is not only something God has not commanded, he suggests that the way Sarai and Abram's actions are described it is an action that lacks divine approval.²⁸ Probably, God was rejecting Sarai's idea here because she was committing some great sin. The problem is, she is suggesting works of the flesh to bring God's plan to pass. God's plan can never depend upon the works of the flesh not even to accomplish the tiniest item in that plan.²⁹

According to Bowman, Wenham vehemently argues that the reader is meant to understand that Abram errs in allowing his wife to persuade him to have sexual relation with Hagar.³⁰ As it has been established by scholars, in fact, what Sarai suggests here is not out of the ordinary. It is a cultural norm for a barren woman to allow her husband to desire a child by a servant, and

²⁵Igenzoza, *Polygamy and the African Churches, A Biblical Appraisal of an African Marriage System*, 107.

²⁶Ibid., 108.

²⁷Davidson, *Polygamy in the Old Testament*, 9.

²⁸Bowman Jr., "Genesis and the Definition of Marriage: Monogamy and Polygamy in Biblical History and Ethics," 14.

²⁹Adreson, www.kukis.org *Exegetical Studies in Genesis*, 21.

³⁰Bowman Jr., *Genesis and the Definition of Marriage: Monogamy and Polygamy in Biblical History and Ethics*, 21.

for the child to be raised as her own. Sarai's persuasion is not far outside the norm. This is because there has been a custom that, if a man died before siring a child by his wife, she could petition that his brother step in and impregnate her, with the child being the deceased brother's child. Since God did not accept Eliezer of Damascus as Abram's adopted heir, how would God's promise be fulfilled? Possibly, Sarai thinks that the only solution is with Hagar, and Abram agrees with her.³¹ Therefore, it is not a great leap for Sarai to suggest that Abram has a child through a surrogate mother—her slave girl, Hagar.³² Nevertheless, Sarai's persuasion to Abram is a great temptation and it is clear from the narrative that Sarai is going to have problems with the result of this union.³³

Although God is not shown as condemning Abram's behaviour as immoral, but it is explicitly revealed that God insists that Ishmael is not the child he had promised. The promise is that the child will be born through Sarai.³⁴ Possibly, the duty of raising this child would fall into Sarai's lap. This would be Hagar's desire as well. But in reality, no matter how this might look culturally that Hagar, a surrogate wife would raise the child, and it would be Abram and Sarai, would later become unpleasant scene. The consequential event was that, after Abram had sex with Hagar, she conceived, and she began to look down on Sarai, her mistress. At this point in time, there was nothing amiss with Abram's potency. The problem with conception was with Sarai.³⁵ Meanwhile, to Hagar, Sarai had become quite diminished in her eyes, and she saw herself as superior to Sarai. Possibly, this was because Hagar received some unusual attention by Abram, and she began to see herself in a different light. Now, naturally her present condition lessened her commitment as a slave, and caused her to think more about the big picture. Thereafter, she

³¹Igenzoza, *Polygamy and the African Churches, A Biblical Appraisal of an African Marriage System*, 109.

³²Adreson, www.kukis.org *Exegetical Studies in Genesis*, 16.

³³*Ibid.*, 16.

³⁴Kunhiyop, *African Christian Ethics*, 230.

³⁵Adreson, www.kukis.org *Exegetical Studies in Genesis*, 33.

began to treat Sarai with disrespect.³⁶ She was under Sarai's authority and she was bucking this authority now. Hagar was considering herself to be greater than Sarai. As a result, Sarai was upset and tended to shift her detrimental condition upon Abram with some agonising complaints. Here, Sarai's complaints seem valid and reasonable because Hagar's attitude is an unintended consequence which could have been foreseen. Although Sarai blamed Abram for this, yet, it was her idea that Abram should have seed through Hagar. Obviously, the opinion could be that calling for God to judge between the two of them seemed irrational. Because Sarai knew the promises that God had made to Abram, she blamed God that she did not conceive.³⁷

In this pattern, it is appropriate and imperative to consider the intertextuality of Genesis 16:1-5 and Genesis 3:1-17. It is because the narrative's intertextuality between the polygamous relationship of Abram with Sarai and Hagar and the fall narrative of Adam of Eve and Serpent seem to be both informative and instructive. It could be argued that there are strong verbal parallels between Genesis 16:1-5 and 3:1-17. Davidson reveals that in the Garden of Eden, the woman "took" the fruit and "gave" it to her husband (Gen 3:6). Similarly, Sarai "took" Hagar and "gave" her to her husband (Gen 16:2).³⁸ Importantly, it has been established by critical commentators like Davidson that the same Hebrew words such as "took", "gave", "listened" and others are used in the same order. For instance, Adam listened to the voice of his wife, Eve (Gen 3:17). Likewise, in Genesis 16:2, Abram also listened to the voice of Sarai, his wife. These assertions above suggest intertextual parallels that are relevantly indicated that Abram and Sarai fell in the Hagar scandal. So also, Adam and Eve fell in the Garden of Eden as a result of the deceptive act of Serpent.³⁹ Critically, Bowman describes the actions of Adam and Eve, and Abram and Sarai in the Genesis narratives. He analyses the Abram's sexual union with Hagar and that of the fall of Adam

³⁶Ibid., 33.

³⁷Ibid., 45.

³⁸Davidson, *Polygamy in the Old Testament*, 14.

³⁹Ibid., 14.

and Eve in the Garden of Eden. The narrative in Genesis 3:6, 17 reveals the actions of Adam and Eve. That is, in verse 17, "...because you *תשמעו* (have listened), to the *קול* (voice) of *אשתך* (your wife). Verse six indicates that ... she *ותקח* (took) some to her *אשה* (husband)." From the same point of view, Genesis 16:2-3 states, "...and Abram *וישמע* (listened) to the *קול* (voice) of Sarai... and Sarai, (Abram's wife), *ותקח* (took) Hagar... and *ותתן* (gave) her to Abram her *אשה* (husband)."⁴⁰

As analysed above, the woman (Eve; Sarai) initiated the series of events. She "took" something (the fruit; Hagar) and "gave" it "to her husband" (Adam; Abram). Both passages reveal that the man "hearkened to the voice of" his wife and accepted what the wife gave him, and did what she proposed, that is, he ate the fruit; as in the case of Adam, or sex with Hagar as in the case of Abram.⁴¹ It is significant to note that the parallel shows intentional act of both Abram and Adam. Possibly both Abram and Adam could choose not to yield to the persuasions to have sexual relations with Hagar and Eve respectively, and to eat fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Also, in Genesis 3 and 16, just as Adam had tried to shift the blame for his eating of the forbidden fruit to his wife (Gen. 3:12), Sarai tried to shift the blame for Hagar's contempt to Abram (Gen 16:5).⁴² Therefore, it is likely that both narratives reveal human error which is the violation of God's principles, and the error in both narratives actually later manifested in human blame and regret. Also, as a result, both narratives (Gen 3 and 16), reveal that the eyes of Adam and Eve were opened into fear, shame and nakedness, and were sent out of the Garden of Eden, just as Hagar also demonstrated pride towards Sarai, and Hagar her son were sent out of Abram's household. Genesis 16 shows how Yahweh tolerated the polygamous life of Abram. Although there is no explicit condemnation on the polygamy of Abram, the aftermath consequences reveal that Yahweh did not sponsor the practice.

⁴⁰Bowman Jr., *Genesis and the Definition of Marriage: Monogamy and Polygamy in Biblical History and Ethics*, 14.

⁴¹Ibid., 14.

⁴²Ibid., 15.

Now, it could be opined that polygamy remains a distorted marital union.

African Cultural Values and Identities

African history shows that a lot of activities that have gone on in the continent for many thousands of years. These include migrations, calamities, wars, invasions, hunting, fishing, food-gathering, domestication of animals, farming, mining, metal work, and settlements in villages and cities. Great empires and kingdoms have arisen and gone such as those of Ghana, Mali, and Songhay in Western Africa, the kingdoms of the lower Congo (now Zaire), the kingdoms of the Zulu in Southern Africa, the kingdoms of Axum in Ethiopia and Nubia in the Sudan. There have been great civilisations, the first of which evolved in Egypt and continued for many thousands of years. There were other African civilisations in North Africa, in East and Central Africa, in the Congo basin, and in West Africa. Some of these existed for a short time and left little trace behind them, while others lasted for more than a thousand years and influenced many people in Africa and beyond.⁴³

It is important to opine that African peoples consider the universe to be centred on man.⁴⁴ However, from the biblical narrative it believed that God is put as the centre of the universe and not man (Gen 1: 1-31). Mbiti argues that because man assumes himself to be above all other creatures of the globe, from a consequential point of view, to man the whole universe exists for his benefit. It is in this opinion that African peoples tend to look for the benefits they can derive from the world. The opinion here suggests that what the world does to man and how man can use the world for his own good are important to African peoples and deeply engrained in them.⁴⁵ Meanwhile, the increasing awareness of the global cultures has greatly aided in creating

⁴³John S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, Ibadan-Nairobi-Lusaka: Heinemann Education Books Ltd, 1975, 4, 5.

⁴⁴Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 82.

⁴⁵Ibid., 43.

consciousness of the position nature of one's worldviews, though not as rapid as one expects.⁴⁶With a close observation of Africa and its societies, it is important to note that religion is at the root of African culture and plays a major role in determining the principle of African life. In fact, the opinion here suggests that for Africans, religion is the determinant factor in whatever they do. It has been argued that both in this world and the world to come, religion does not only give meaning to African lives but also gives significance.⁴⁷ The belief is that African religion affects the African way of life. It is safe to opine that religion is part and parcel of the African heritage that seems to go back many centuries ago. In fact, African Religion is part of the African heritage. The opinion here assumes that religion is found in all African peoples and it has influenced them strongly in terms of thinking and experiences.⁴⁸

It is African Religion which gives its followers a sense of security in life. Within that religious way of life, they know who they are, how to act in different situations, and how to solve their problems. This does not mean that African Religion has no weaknesses and no false ideas. But as far as it goes, it has supplied the answers to many of the problems of this life even if these may not have been the right answers in every case. Because it provides for them answers and direction in life, people are not willing to abandon it quickly, otherwise, they would feel insecure afterwards unless something else gave them an additional or greater sense of security. When Africans are converted to other religions, they often mix their

⁴⁶William E. Padan *Interpreting the Sacred, Ways of View Religion*, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1992, 3.

⁴⁷Kofi Asare Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, Accra: Fep International Private Limited, 1978, 1

⁴⁸Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 10, 12

traditional religion with the one to which they are converted. In this way, they think and feel that they are not losing something valuable, but are gaining something from both religious systems. African Religion functions more on a communal than an individual basis. For example, its beliefs are held by the community, therefore it does not matter much whether or not the individual accepts all these beliefs. The ceremonies are performed mainly in or by a group of the family, by relatives, by the whole population of one area or by those engaged in a common occupation.⁴⁹

It is important to note that most African peoples did not know how to read or write, yet it is interesting to argue that they could orally pass on pieces of information from one generation to another without losing their values. Although most likely some things were forgotten and there was consequential confusion of the repeated stories, it is worthwhile that tradition and some valuable information about African origin and heritage are still retained.⁵⁰ Corroborating the above assertion, Awolalu and Dopamu concur that the following oral traditions are preserved. That is, in Africa, West Africa in particular, paintings, carvings, mouldings, and engravings are the proud artistic works of many. These arts and crafts, symbols and emblems, names of people and places, shrines and sacred places are immortally passed on. The belief is that the preservation of these oral traditions is to convey certain sentiments or truth.⁵¹ When it comes to marital relationship, adultery is not tolerated whether the culprit is a man or woman. But in Africa, a culprit woman receives more severe punishment than that of a man. The belief could be that harlotry tends to destroy fertility in women, because infertility of

⁴⁹Ibid., 13

⁵⁰Ibid., 4

⁵¹J. Omosade Awolalu and P. Adelumo Dopamu, *West African Traditional Religion*, Lagos: Macmillan, 1979, 32

women seems to threaten the existence of African community. The African view on marriage concurs that in a polygamous system, the wives do not have exclusive right over the husband. It is interesting to note that a man caught in the very art of adultery could only pay a statutory compensation to the wronged husband, while a culprit woman could be beaten up and sent back to her parents.⁵² However, Kunhiyop reveals that in one Nigerian tribe, an adulterer would be subjected to drinking of excreta from black dog. In a consequential event, the testicle of a he-goat (a symbol of promiscuity) would be hung around his neck. In a shameful manner, the culprit would be paraded through the entire village.⁵³

To Muthengi, polygamy seemed to have been accepted all over Africa as the cultural norm.⁵⁴ In agreement with Muthengi, Taryor argues that polygamy is a feature of the African people and it is a fabric of their culture. In Africa, before the introduction of Christianity, polygamy was a common cultural pattern. It was part of the framework of the African society.⁵⁵ Mbiti assumes that when a man has many wives, there is a tendency for him to have many children as well. He further stressed that the more children one has, the longer he would likely be remembered, long after his death. Many descendants would succeed such a man with the power of immortality and remembrance.⁵⁶ In another perspective, Ola opines polygamy to be a basic part of African social system, and polygamous individuals were the wealthy and influential people of each community, starting with the kings and

⁵²Emefie Ikenga Metuh, *God and Man in African Religion*, London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1981, 112, 113.

⁵³Samuel Waje Kunhiyop, *African Christian Ethics*, Kenya: Hippo Books, an imprint of World Alive, 2008, 224.

⁵⁴Julius K. Muthengi. "Polygamy and the Church in Africa: Biblical, Historical, and Practical Perspectives," *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology*, 1995, 58.

⁵⁵N. K. Taryor, *Impact of the African Tradition on African Christianity*, Chicago: IL, Strugglers' Community Press, 1984, 112.

⁵⁶Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 4.

chiefs to the nobles.⁵⁷ Maillu assumes that the beginning of polygamy in sub-Saharan Africa and Africa generally marks an immemorial era that goes beyond any document.⁵⁸

It is argued by Schreiter that polygamy exists all over the African continent.⁵⁹ In agreement with Schreiter, Gbadero keenly observes that Africans do not practise individualism like that of the Westerners. Meanwhile, marriage is a family and a community affair which is really associated with polygamy. Before the advent of Christianity, African people seemed to have been used to polygamy as a popular form of marriage. This suggests that polygamy has been long part of the people of Africa. In Africa, polygamists are born and brought up within the context of a polygamous society in which the practice is not only permissible, but culturally can be a sign of social status and wealth. Because it is deeply rooted in the culture of its people, the institution of polygamy is nothing strange to Africans, especially among those who practise it.⁶⁰ Now notably, Muthengi has revealed what scholars have suggested to be the contributing factors of polygamy among Africans. These are stated below:

1. Man could go for more than one wife in the case of barrenness which is often assumed to be a woman's fault. Such a man uses polygamy to rescue his family for the infertility.
2. The thirstiness to be associated with the well-founded families could encourage polygamy. In Africa, there

⁵⁷Joseph Adebisi Ola, *Training for Evangelism among the Yorubas of Nigeria*, Andrews University Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary: A Project Report Presented in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Ministry, August 1989, 92.

⁵⁸D. G. Maillu, *Our Kind of Polygamy*, Nairobi, Kenya: Heinemann, 1988, 1.

⁵⁹Robert J. Schreiter, ed. *Faces of Jesus in Africa*, New York: Orbis Book, 1991, 12.

⁶⁰M .O. Gbadero, "A Biblical Analysis of Polygamy and Monogamy in African Christianity," *Biblical View of Sex and Sexuality from African Perspective*, Ibadan: A Publication of the Nigerian Association for Biblical Studies (NABIS), Biblical Studies, Number 5, 2006, 204.

seems to be a strong belief that marriage goes beyond an individual. It is an involvement of families and communities.

3. Another notable causative agent of polygamy has been argued to be the chronological age gap between men and ladies at the time of marriage. The argument suggests that in many parts of Africa, men normally get married late in life. This consequently leads to many marriageable women in the locality.
4. Some men seem to have been married for economic reasons. This is often assumed that when one marries more than one wife he produces several children that ensure more manpower. For the enhancement and sustainability of productivity, more wives are often encouraged.
5. The passion of care and concern that African men have for the widows has often led to polygamy. In Africa, this has been considered to be customary norm. And it greatly contributed to preservation of the lineage of the departed.
6. Abstinence of women from sexual intercourse as soon as they are pregnant is a factor that encourages polygamy in Africa. For some African men to stay for nine months or two to three years without sexual intercourse could be observed as an unbearable situation.
7. As a sign of honour and prestige, some wealthy men choose to marry to young ladies. This has often encouraged polygamy in many parts of Africa.⁶¹

In a similar pattern, Kunhiyop reveals that polygamy fulfils a number of functions in Africa. He further stresses that polygamy serves in terms of preservation of the family's status and property. This is extended in space and time, from generation to generation. It vehemently plays the role of making women to bear children where they have no job other than marriage and to support the lineage of their husbands. In fact, it is so interesting

⁶¹Muthengi. "Polygamy and the Church in Africa: Biblical, Historical, and Practical Perspectives," 58-60.

that some of the roles being played by polygamy in Africa have many similarities with that of the biblical times when it comes to the system of levirate marriage.⁶² To Kunhiyop, in African culture, polygamy is by no means equated to adultery. In Africa, adultery is assumed to mean having sexual relations with someone that is not legally pronounced as one's spouse.⁶³ Polygamy could be considered as the acceptable marital union in Africa prior to the arrival of the first missionaries who introduced Christianity, and it has continued subsequently.⁶⁴ Corroborating the above arguments on polygamy, Babalola also argues that the practice of polygamy is an indigenous socio-cultural phenomenon across Africa. Therefore, to condemn polygamy which is part of the cultural identity of African people as being against the tenets of the God of good news is erroneous.⁶⁵

In Africa, it is observed that the rate of child mortality has been on the high side compared to other continents such as Europe, America, and others. Hence, the security and stability of monogamous households in Africa seem to be more at risk than that of polygamy. The belief is that socio-economic security and family stability depend upon the number of children in the household. Meanwhile, it is the general opinion that in a situation of high child mortality rate, a plural of wives clearly makes for greater security and stability in-so-far as more than one wife will likely produce more children.⁶⁶ There is the fear that a man might die without a surviving male child in Africa. One of the causative

⁶² Kunhiyop, *African Christian Ethics*, 224.

⁶³ Kunhiyop, *African Christian Ethics*, 224.

⁶⁴ Prosper B. Lyimo, "Polygamy in Sub-Saharan Africa and the Munus Docendi: Canonical Structures in Support of Church Doctrine and Evangelization," Doctor of Canon Law Diss., Saint Paul University Ottawa, Canada, 2011, 15.

⁶⁵ Sunday Funmilola Babalola, "The Practice of polygamy and the Concept of Evil among the Yoruba" *Selected Studies in the Humanities*, Arakeji: A Publication of Humanities, Joseph Ayo Babalola University, 2013, 97.

⁶⁶ Eugene Hillman, *Polygamy Reconsidered, African Plural and the Christian Churches*, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1975, 116.

factors behind the practice of polygamy in Africa could be lack of a male child in a family. This is because in African societies, there is strong attachment to a male child in every family. This belief suggests that a family without a male child is considered as a family that is tagged with partial barrenness. It is important to note that an African man would like to preserve his inheritance both now and thereafter through his male child, because no matter the number of female children, they would all relocate to their husbands' household. Also, for the female children to preserve and immortalise their father's name and clan would be far from reality.⁶⁷

Beyond the shallow thinking that polygamy in Africa societies is driven by unrestrained sexual impulses, there are functional uses of polygamy. These functions are considered to be so similar to that of the OT.⁶⁸ To Alalade, the OT recognises the authenticity of both monogamy and polygamy. He opines that this recognition seems to have formed the groundwork for the perspective and projection of marriage in the New Testament (NT).⁶⁹ Alalade quotes Barth, McKenzie, and Schillebeekx to clarify how polygamy seemed to have been treated in the era of NT. From the above scholars, it could be observed that there is no single text in the NT that neither forbids polygamy nor explicitly decrees monogamy as an ideal form of marriage. This is because the teaching of Jesus on marriage seems to have been limited to the affirmation of the indissolubility of marriage.⁷⁰ As earlier asserted, in Africa, bearing of many children through which property may be passed on in space and time is highly placed. In this sense, the practice of polygamy often comes to play. Other functions that polygamy plays in Africa are in a way supporting

⁶⁷Hillman, *Polygamy Reconsidered, African Plural and the Christian Churches*, 117.

⁶⁸Kunhiyop, *African Christian Ethics*, 224.

⁶⁹Adekunle A. Alalade. *Limiting Factors to the Success of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Africa, the Nigeria Case Study*, Ibadan: Agbo Area Publishers, 2008, 177.

⁷⁰Alalade. *Limiting Factors to the Success of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Africa, the Nigeria Case Study*, 178

and catering for the neglected women in the society that do not tolerate women independence and adultery. Also, polygamy at the same time serves as a solution to identity, in term of wife's infertility.⁷¹

Abrahamic and African Identities: An Appropriation of Polygamy

It is important to note that the first mention of post-flood polygamy appears in the polygamous relationship of Abram. Although his polygamy has often been argued as circumstantial marital relationship of a God-fearing man and a friend of God, but it has also been described as the lapse in sense of judgment, concerning the seeming normal cultural marital relationship with Hagar that his wife, Sarai suggested to him. This circumstantial polygamy particularly in Genesis 16:1-5 has been described by scholars such as Igenzoza and others as the true demonstration of activities of a barren couple. In their barrenness, Sarai thought that God could bless them with children through Hagar, her maid. Meanwhile, she suggested to her husband, Abram to sleep with Hagar in order to have heirs through her. The action of Sarai here suggests human flawed effort in assisting God to play his role. Resting on Richard M. Davidson's arguments on the ideal marriage relationship in the biblical era, in Africa, barrenness is not a licence for any African Christian to engage in polygamous relationship. God's plan for every couple in church must not be influenced by human flaw aid (polygamy). In the polygamous (concubinage) relationship of Abram with Hagar, the opinion assumes that it is a negation of the highest order to the divine original principle of the biblical marital union. Just like how Eve deceived Adam in the Garden of Eden when she gave the forbidden fruit to Adam, her husband, so also Sarai deceived Abram, her husband by providing Hagar, her maid for him to sleep with and have children through her. Although it is culturally normal for them to do such, however it could be argued that no cultural norm ought to be placed above the divine original principle of the biblical marital union. The

⁷¹Kunhiyop, *African Christian Ethics*, 224.

encouragement that is for every church member seems to be tailored towards adhering strictly to the divine original principle of the biblical marital relationship (monogamy). Meanwhile, any cultural value or norm that seems to stand against or negate God's principle on marriage should be willingly discarded by every African Christian.

However, in as much as the church tends to embrace the biblical original plans for marriage; care needs to be taken in the treatment of her polygamist members and the intending Christian polygamists. It could be acceptable to adhere strictly to the teaching that in Eden, God established the union of oneness between a man and a woman. Nevertheless, the treatment of the church in Africa, that in no case should a polygamist be admitted into the fellowship of the church through baptism seems to explicitly stand against the biblical tolerance demonstrated towards polygamists in both OT and its progressive revelation, the New Testament (NT). It has been established that tolerance is not translated as approval; meanwhile the church is admonished to tolerate her polygamist members and admit her intending polygamist members through baptism into full membership. Considering some Abrahamic and African cultural heritages and values of polygamy, the practice seems to still linger. In the Abrahamic identities, there were some cultural heritages and values of polygamy as earlier asserted which are similar to those of Africa. Yahweh seemed to demonstrate tolerance and magnanimity towards biblical polygamists not that he sponsored the practice but possibly to teach the future generations the uncommon lesson of the tolerant treatment of Yahweh.

Conclusion

It has been discovered from the biblical passages examined that the narratives on polygamy suggest divine disapproval. Although in no way would Abrahamic and African cultural identities consider polygamists to be outcast or candidates of hell, nevertheless the consequential events of polygamy such as rivalry, jealousy, envy and other events seem to support its repudiation. While the patriarchs of the Israelites: Abraham,

Esau, and Jacob headed polygamous households, and great kings of Israel, such as David and Solomon, were polygamists, yet it has been shown that polygamy is a strong consequential activity of sin against the biblical creation on the divine principle of ideal form of marital relationship. In fact, while polygamy is considered to be a necessary accommodation to African culture by some liberal theologians, still strong emphasis is placed on the biblical account on marriage in Genesis 2:24-25 (divine principle on monogamy) by several commentators as an important indicator of an ideal form of marriage. However, considering some African cultural heritages and values of polygamy, the treatment towards the practice by the African Christian church should be tolerant and magnanimous.

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