**The Muslim Woman and Polygamous Culture in Northern Nigeria: Between Islam and the West**

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Abstract

*Islam acknowledges Polygamy, an institution whereby a man is allowed to marry more than one wife with full recognition of the rights of both of them due to natural, societal and personal reasons. However, Polygamy if properly practice, addresses social problems of prostitution, illicit sex, high divorce rate, sexually transmitted diseases and extramarital affairs. In Nigeria, where we have both Muslims and non-Muslims population, despite the fact that the Muslim women pray, fast and generally accept most of the teachings of Islam, today many of them claimed that polygamy is outlawed. Nevertheless, their attitude toward polygamy can be traced back to certain influence such as they want to bring the teachings of Islam in line with western cultures and norms, the rise in feminism, an act of jealousy among other things. It is against this background that this paper is aimed at examining why Muslim women in northern Nigeria detract polygamy in line with the western society? The paper will look at northern Nigeria because they are predominantly Muslim. The paper adapt a qualitative method of data analysis; a combination of both primary and secondary sources*.

**Key words***: Polygamy, Muslim Women, Northern Nigeria, Islam, West*

**Introduction**

Prior to the coming of Islam, when there was no spiritual guide, the strong rule the weak, and the rich over powered the poor. Women all over the world virtually had no rights; her wealth would be wrongfully taken away from her; she has no right to inherit, she was prevented from marrying the man of her choice, a man was allowed to marry as many women as he wanted; women were bought and sold in the much praised civilisation of Greece. In addition, they were considered vile object in India, lower in status than poison, snakes, or even death. Women were also neglected, disrespected and some time even buried alive. (Waziri 2011)

By the seventh century, the true liberation of women came directly from Allah through his revelation to the Messenger of Allah, Prophet Muhammad (SAW) i.e. the coming of Islam. This religion freed both minds and souls of women, taking them out of darkness and bringing erresthem into light. It raised their status to a respectable, dignified lifestyle; restricted men from having more than four wives. Islam recognised the fact that womenfolk represent one of the two halves or parts from which mankind flourished. The question is ask then, today, those Muslim women who disdain polygamy, where were they in those days when one man was marrying more than four wives?

From a clearly religious point of view, the almighty Allah stated in Quran 4:1:

*Oh mankind! Be dutiful to your lord, who created you from a single person (Adam) and from him (Adam) he created his wife (Eve) and from them both he created many men and women.* (Ali 2007).

It is important to note that, Islam is a way of life consonant with nature, providing human solution to complex situation and avoiding extremes. Thus, one might conclude that all things which are permitted in this religion are due to the fact that their benefit to the self and society outweighs their harms. Perhaps, men were allowed to marry more than one wife (not more than four), in order to solve some pressing human problems, individuals as well as the society. Islam considers man responsible for observing equality in the necessary areas in respect to marriage. (Abu Saif 2004)

The Western attitude towards polygamy is ethnocentric and hypocritical. (Khan1995). The point that is often misunderstood in the West is that women in other cultures - especially in Africa and Islamic world - do not necessarily look at polygamy as a sign of women’s degradation.  Consequently, to equate polygamy with degrading women is an ethnocentric judgment of other societies, the ethnocentric revulsion for polygamy is best reflected in US Supreme Court’s 1878 opinion in Reynolds vs. United States.  The court refused to recognize polygamy as a legitimate religious practice, dismissing it as “almost exclusively a feature of the life of Asiatic and African people.”  Consequently, the court declared polygamy to be “a blot on our civilization” and compared it to human sacrifice and “a return to barbarism.”  Most tellingly, the court found that the practice is “contrary to the spirit of Christianity and of the civilization which Christianity has produced in the Western World. (wwwislamreligion.com 2006)

However, it is unfortunate that very few Muslim women in Northern Nigeria appreciate how Islam dignified the right of women. Most of them perceived Western societies and ideas on polygamy as their model or an ideal way while jettisoning the teaching of Islam, without paying much attention to the consequences. For instance, in the western societies where polygamy is outlawed, high percentage of men ended up cheating on their wives. More and more children these days cannot know for certain who their real biological father is. Prostitution, high divorce rate, sexual transmitted diseases, illicit sex, women have been turned into a doll, or something like a doll forced into not physically but by monetary demand to sell their bodies, if not for direct physical pleasure then for phonograph. Therefore, forbidden polygamy would no doubt have a negative result in fostering sex outside marriage.

This paper examines the paradox of the Northern Nigerian Muslim Woman in her attitudes toward polygamy with a view to tracing undergoing influences of western cultures and values in relation to the concept of human rights, the Beijing Declaration in favours of feminism among other things. The research is important especially given that the issue revolves around women, Islam and the west; it is a contemporary issue because some Muslim women in northern Nigeria have abused the licence of polygamy as decreed by Allah in the same way they have abused divorced based on the western ideas are corruptive emphasising secularism. It will also serve as an avenue for guidance and positive change not only in Northern Nigeria but the entire Muslim society at large in order to address a problem that surrounds the practice of polygamy.

**The Concept of Polygamy in Islam**

Truly marriage is one of the greatest blessings that Allah has bestowed upon both man and woman. Whenever a man feels lonely or perturbed he turns to his wife for comfort and vice versa. Polygamy is not a new phenomenon. It is the act of having more than one wife. It has always been in existence from time immemorial in different part of the world, practiced by different ethnic and cultural groups. When one goes through the Jewish scriptures, one will find out that polygamy was acceptable and practiced by almost all the prophets of Allah mentioned with the exception of Jesus, who, if he had lived longer on this earth would have perhaps accepted it just like his forefathers.(Abu Saif 2004) Among all the polygamous societies in history, there were none that had limited number of wives.  All of the relationships were unrestricted.  Islam has allowed polygamy, but has limited the number of wives to four while making man the bread winner responsible for all of the women under his care. As rightly pointed out in the Holy Quran (4:3)

*“If you fear that you will not deal fairly with the orphans, marry of the women, who seem good to you, two or three or four; but if you fear that you shall not be able to deal justly with them, then many only one or one that your right hands possess.  That will be more suitable, to prevent you from doing injustice.”* (Ali 2007)

Similarly, this verse from the Quran (4:129) allows a man to marry more than one woman but only if he can deal justly with them. But in another section of the Quran, Allah says:

*“You will never be able to do perfect justice between wives even if it is your ardent desire, so do not incline too much to one of them (by giving her more of your time and provision) so as to leave the other hanging (i.e. neither divorced nor married).”(*Ali 2007).

The Prophet Muhammad (SAW) may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him was given inspiration from God about how to deal with multiple marriages and the difficulties encountered therein.  It is not an easy matter for a man to handle two wives, two families, and two households and still be just between the two.  No man of reasonable intelligence would enter into this situation without a great deal of thought. (Kumo 2005) The bottom line in the marriage relationship is to avoid illegalities and foster social coexistence with a view to enhance mutual help and happiness, creating a just and cohesive society where the needs of men and women are well taken care of.  The present Western society, which permits free sex between consenting adults, has given rise to staggering pre-marital sexual relationships, adultery resulting to the production of “fatherless” children, and many unmarried teenage mothers; all of them becoming a burden on a particular states welfare system/ scheme.  In part, it is such an undesirable welfare burden that has given rise to bloated budget deficits which even an economically powerful country like the United States cannot afford.  Bloated budget deficits have become a political football which is affecting the political system of the United States today.

However, the practice of polygamy in the Muslim world has gone along way address social problems of prostitution and extramarital affairs common in the West.  Instead of cheating – infidelity which is widespread in the west and one of the top reasons for high divorce rate in the West - Islam allows a man to marry more than one wife, with full recognition of the rights of both of them.  The basic principle in Islam is that men are held responsible for their behaviour towards women just as women are responsible for their behaviour towards men. If one looks at the western societies, one finds a staggering rate of middle aged married man cheating on their wives, having appears with desperate young ladies who cannot find husbands. (Khan 1995) Whatever feminists say to the contrary, the reality we see around us is that women are generally monogamous in nature: they yearn for the stability and prosperity which married life has to offer. In short, we find that artificially created monogamy has become a factor in ruining the family structure, and the social, economic and political systems of the country.

According to Abu Saif (2004) and oral interview conducted in the study area, a man can have more than one wife but not more than four based on the reasons highlighted below (among others):

The number of women in the world exceeds that of men.  The surplus is a result of men dying in wars, motor accidents, violent crimes, and women outliving men.  The upsurge in homosexuality further increases the problem.  Bertrand Russell wrote, “And in all countries where there is an excess of women, it is an obvious injustice that those women who, by arithmetical necessity, must remain unmarried should be wholly debarred from sexual experience.”  Polygamy, then, is the only responsible solution for this predicament

Polygamy is an alternative to divorce in case of some marital problems.  Instead of divorcing a sick or infertile wife, Islam permits a man to marry another woman while taking care of the first if she chooses to stay with him.

The teachings of Islam, including polygamy, conform to human nature.  Men and women differ in their desire for sex.  These differences are universal.  According to evolutionary scientists men are “hard-wired” to spread their seed.  Men everywhere - whether single or married - want more sexual partners than women do.  The Islamic solution provides the only responsible alternative to the naturally ingrained desire in men.

There is a universal biological constraint in male and female reproduction.  A woman’s reproductive capacity declines after her 20s and ends with menopause, but even a man in his 70s retains the ability to father children. Polygamy is a solution for a man who desires more children, especially in traditional, agrarian societies.  This may seem irrelevant in the Western context where childbearing is increasingly becoming independent of marriage.

Polygamy is also an alternative for a man who desires to satisfy his natural sexual appetite relations within the bounds of marriage, but whose wife may be averse to them due to age or sickness.  Moreover, Islam prohibits sexual relations during a woman’s monthly cycles.  Therefore, the prolonged menstrual period of the woman which prevents the husband from having sex with her, or a man whose sexual urge is not satisfied by one wife, may marry another.  Islam permits such men to realize their desire within a legal framework, making them responsible for their sexuality, so they do not have to resort to cohabitation or prostitution.

Institutional polygamy controls the spread of sexually transmitted diseases like Herpes and AIDS. Such venereal diseases spread in promiscuous societies where extra-marital affairs and prostitution are widespread.  This may be due to a husband’s bringing back the diseases he is infected with in an extramarital affair when he returns back to his ‘monogamous’ relationship with his wife.

**Islam in Northern Nigeria**

The area that is now Nigeria was home to ethnically based kingdoms and tribal communities before it became a British colony in the 20th century. In spite of European contact that began in the 16th century, these kingdoms and communities maintained their autonomy until the 19th century. In 1914, the British merged their Northern and Southern protectorates into a single state called the Colony and Protectorate of Nigeria. Nigeria became independent of British rule in 1960. (Ajayi and Crowder 1976)

Nigeria is by far the most populated of Africa’s countries, with more than one-seventh of the continent’s people. According to 2006 National Population Census, Nigeria’s population stood about 160 million. (National Population Census figure 2007). The people of Nigeria belong to many different ethnic groups and practiced the two universal religions: Islam and Christianity. Muslims are the majority in Northern part of the country. The first record of Islam and Islamic influence in Nigeria was in Kanem Borno where Mai Hume Jilme was converted to Islam by one Muhammad Mani in the 11th century. In Hausaland, in the 14th century AD, about 40 Wangarawa traders were said to have brought Islam with them during the reign of Ali Yaji who ruled the city of Kano (1349 to 1385 AD) as a result of the trading activities along the Trans Saharan trade route. (Ajayi and Crowder 1976) Subsequently, Islam spread to other part of the study areas through the energetic rulers both in Hausaland and Borno as well as itinerant Muslim Scholars. This process continued up to the eighteen century when Muslims at that time began to abandon the real teaching of Islam.

The characteristic of the inhabitant of this area (to be precise) was just like that of the pre-Islamic era i.e. the Jahilliya Period. In 1804 a Fulani scholar, Uthman Dan Fodio, declared a *jihad* against the Habe Hausa rulers, whom he condemned for allowing Islamic practices to deteriorate. Local leaders, motivated by both spiritual and local political concerns, received Uthman’s blessing to overthrow the Hausa rulers. With their superior cavalry and cohesion, the jihadist overthrew the rulers and also conquered areas beyond and established an Islamic state, Sokoto caliphate. (Bobboyi and Yakubu 2006)

The Islamic revolution inspired by Uthman Dan Fodio in the late eighteenth century west Africa not only mirror that of the prophet Muhammad SAW but became the precursor to the present Islamic awakening in northern Nigeria. He established one of the greatest states in Islamic history. Uthman Dan Fodio conclusively proved that the life of the prophet can be recreated in any age and any place. After the war, a loose federation of 30 emirates emerged, each recognizing the supremacy of the caliph of Sokoto, located in what is now northern Nigeria; the Sokoto caliphate dominated the region socio-cultural, political, economic life throughout the 19th century.(Bobboyi and Yakubu 2006)

Islam advocate to people to be married and develop a good family structure.  It also realizes the requirements of the society and the individual where polygamy can be the solution to many problems. In the Muslim societies today, especially Northern Nigeria, polygamy is not frequently practiced despite legal permission in Islam. It appears that Muslim women are now deviating from the true teaching of Islam.

**Muslim Women Approach to Polygamy**

Despite the fact that Northern Nigeria was predominantly an Islamic territory as earlier noted, some Muslim women today desperately want to adjust the teaching of Islam to go in line with western cultures and norm. And since polygamy is frowned in the west, they created all sorts of negative flimsy excuses regarding the institution. They often misinterpret the Quran false fully in order to show that they are progressive minded people. Such that, whenever it comes to the issue of polygamy they often say ‘no man can do justice between his wives. More so, the rise of feminist ideology and feminism in the west and broadcasting of these ideas via the globalisation medium, which have affects Muslim societies has led many women to reject polygamy without even caring about what the matter. In fact some of the Muslim women in northern Nigeria like those in the west directly and indirectly supported their husbands to have extra-marital affairs instead of taking another wife.

Polygamy have become the cause of serious ridicule and misinformation among Muslim women in Northern Nigeria which have misled many, and some misled themselves, by publishing and promoting “unscientific” views and advocating practices of the west that have no basis in the true teaching of the Quran. They are brain washed by Western ideologies that polygamy, stripped off women’s’ right, creates grudges between husband and wives as it does among wives themselves, thereby becoming a source of disputes among co-wives and stepbrothers thus leading to the spread of anarchy, instability in the family life and immorality of the offspring discarding the religious provisions as ordained by Allah.

However, according to the research conducted through oral interview within the study area, most of the polygamous wives are explicitly aware of Allah’s command, but due to negligence of the Islamic command, feminism and influence of the western “values”, this has adequately influence them in their marital life. A quite number of them clearly expressed their opinion that polygamy serves only the animal-like lusts of men and that woman are stripped of their rights. They argue that women are been maltreated in polygamous relationships, that co-wives of the same man will fight one another, their children will hate each other, the younger wife will charm and possessed the husband, among other evil deeds. From a perpetual point of view, this idea was initiated and reiterated by the west through publications and mass media, promoting unethical values and advocating practices contrary to the true teachings of Islam. Similarly, these Muslim women maintain that polygamy is only practice by those who do not acquire western education and those that lacked modern awareness or the so called civilisation. We should know that western civilisation in all intends and purposes emphasis Godlessness and secularism.

It is important to note that people who made such criticism tend to remain silent on issues such as adultery, prostitution, fornication among others. What prompted them to do so was the influence of the west, and the west, it must be noted, is to a large degree anti-Islam who found their ways into pure teaching of Islam. As a result, Muslim women in northern Nigeria lacked the courage to have desire of polygamous marriage, and those with the experience continue to influence our young unmarried sisters not to marry a husband with more than one wife for various ends, actually baseless reasons. In fact those women could go to any length discouraging their husbands to take a second wife, not minding the implications of their actions and reactions.

Despite the fact that most of the perform their religious duty pray and fast and generally accept most of the teachings of Islam, many Muslim women in northern Nigeria today claim that polygamy is outlawed or most correctly discouraged in Islam, even though the permissibility of polygamy in Islam is established by clear proofs in the Holy Quran. Yet, they try hard to misinterpret the true context of the Quranic verses or they rely on unclearly interpretation of the Quran. These Muslim women generally cite the following two verses to further their claimsusingQuran 4:1:

*And if you fear that you shall not be able to deal justly with the orphan girls, then marry (other) women of your choice, two or three or four, but if you fear that you shall not be able to deal justly (with them) then many only one or(the captives and the slaves) that your right hand possess. That is nearer to prevent you from doing injustice.* (Ali 2007).

And Quran 4: 129:

*You will never be able to do perfect justice between wives even if it is your ardent desire, so do not incline too much to one of them (by giving her more of your time and provision) so as to leave the other hanging (i.e. neither divorced nor married). And if you do justice, and do all that is right and fear Allah by keeping away from all that is wrong, then Allah is Ever Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful.* (Ali 2007).

In interpreting these two verses, they say that, in the first verse (4:3) Allah permitted the practise of polygamy, stipulating that one must be just between his wives; and that in the second verse (4:129) Allah SWA made it clear that doing justice between wives is impossible even if one desired so, for woman heart is flexible. Based on these premises, they reach the conclusion that polygamy is ‘*haram’* (forbidden). In other words, they argue that Allah wanted to forbid polygamy, but instead of outright saying are forbidden, He said, it is lawful if a man can do justice, but such clarified justice is not attainable to man.

The question we need to ask ourselves is, what does it mean to do justice between wives in Islam? Is it that one must treat his wives equally in matters over which he has control- such as food, clothing, and a home; and spending an equal amount of night with each wife, or does that justice include matters over which a man does not have control, such as feelings of extra-love in his heart for a particular wife? Well it is obvious that it is possible for a man to treat his wives equally in regards to material matters: how much food and drink he provide for each wife among other things. What is not possible for him is to do is to love each of his wives equally because this is matter of the heart something which he has no control over unlike the material aspect of the justice. The justice whom Allah is referring to is that of the material not that of the heart, because one of most important principle of Islam is that Allah does not charge man with duties that he cannot possibly bear. Allah said in Quran 2:286:

*“Allah burdens not a person beyond his scope”* (Ali 2007)

**Islam vs. the West**

Muslim women who criticise the practice of polygamy would do well to remember that our outlook on life is different from that of non-Muslims especially the west. Our first and foremost obligation in life is to worship Allah. We should not allow our minds to determine what is lawful and what is unlawful; rather, we use our minds to come to the conclusions that Islam is the religion of truth, to which we must submit to the commands of Allah and his messenger Prophet Muhammad (SAW). We know that polygamy has a positive impact on society, if properly practice according to the teaching of Islam. The overall benefits of polygamy is certainly marvellous, as we have remarked above if compare to a societies where it is outlawed. Imagine, what would happen to a man who is no longer interested or his wife no more attract him in a monogamous passion? Chances are that he either cheats on her or divorce her, because he cannot control his desires, and society offers him no third option. But in Islam, if a man is in that position, he doesn’t have to divorce or cheat on his wife, he can simply take another wife as a solution to his problem.

The fact that Western concept of monogamy is based on double-standards can be illustrated with an example.  Cohabiting women is legal, socially acceptable, and even mass-marketable to be aired on TV show, but a polygamous marriage involving moral and financial responsibility towards a woman and her children is considered socially immoral and illegal!  There are even some who support “open marriages”, in which each spouse is free to have “extra-marital” partners. For instance (Playboy magazine’s November 2005 edition) displayed its 80 year old founder-owner, Hugh Hefner’s three live-in women.

Monogamy does not protect women, but the men who exploit her.  Polygamy protects the interests of women and children in society.  Man is opposed to polygamy, not because monogamy is moral, but because he wants to satisfy his desire by indulging in unlimited adultery. (Waziri 2011) That is why man is opposed to plurality of wives which commits him to many duties and responsibilities, financial and otherwise.  Monogamy allows him to enjoy extra-marital affairs without accompanying economic consequences.  He can “play around” without taking responsibility for his sexual conduct.  Legalized polygamy would require him to spend on his additional wives and their offspring.

Furthermore, in the West today, it is common for married men to have extramarital relations with mistresses, girlfriends, and prostitutes. Consequently, the Western claim to monogamy is a misnomer. ([www.islamreligion.com](http://www.islamreligion.com)) How common are they?  Estimates of about 50% men and women in the US had an extramarital affair during their lifetimes.  More than 50% of all husbands have had a series of affairs, and nearly 70% of married men younger than 40 expect to have an extramarital relationship. ([www.islam](http://www.islam)religion.com) Islam on the other hand, offers polygamy to serve as a solution to this issue. This is not to say that people that are practicing polygamy could not indulge in extra-marital affairs elsewhere.

Birth control, the ease of abortion and opened sex are for fun to Western women.  But she is still the one who suffers the trauma of abortion and the side effects of birth control methods.  Also, if a man wishes to have a second wife he takes care of, and have children, he is considered a criminal who may be sentenced to donkey years in jail.  However, if he has numerous mistresses and illegitimate children his relation is left unpunished. Is this the kind of life you want us to have in a Muslim society? I think with the liberation of Muslim woman by Islam has gone a long way to serve as a blessing to all Muslim society.

The hypocrisy of the West towards polygamy can also be seen in the fact that taking a second wife, even with the free consent of the first wife, is a violation of Western law.  On the other hand, cheating on the wife, without her knowledge or consent, is legitimate in the eyes of the law.  What is the legal wisdom behind such a contradiction?  Is the law designed to reward deception and punish honesty?  It is an unfathomable paradox of the modern ‘civilized’ world.  Furthermore, homosexuality is legal, but polygamy is illegal and, in some cases, criminal.

Some Western men take the position that monogamy protects the rights of women. (Khan 1995) But are these men really concerned about the rights of women?  Society has many practices that exploit and suppress women, and this is what has lead to the formation of women’s liberation movements, from the suffragettes of the early twentieth century to the feminists of today, and which still drive these movements to continue their campaigns for equal treatment socially, as well as before the law.

Moreover, on top of leaving a substantial number of women ‘on the shelf’ by denying their attachment to a man as a second wife, western nations further deprive surplus woman of the male sex by legalizing homosexuality. (Khan 1995) It is inhuman to have a woman as a second wife, according to these biased standards, but if the second “wife” happens to be a male “mistress,” then it is not a crime.  Homosexuality, we are told, is an acceptable lifestyle in conformity with the requirements of the modern man!  The Western attitude is the logical outcome of rejecting God’s revelation that brings harmony between human beings and their innate nature.

Taking aside the plagues of venereal disease, herpes and AIDS, the male continues to enjoy himself free of worry. (Kumo 2005) Men are the ones protected by monogamy while women continue to be victims of men’s desires.  Polygamy is very much opposed by the male dominated society because it would force men to face up to responsibility and fidelity.  It would force them to take responsibility for their polygamous inclinations and would protect and provide for women and children.

One can clearly see that there are many benefits which result from the allowance of polygamy.  Many societal ills are left untreated, if not created or worsened, due to modern restrictions placed on polygamy.  One should not always regard their culture and time the most superior in history, but rather they should analyze customs, traditions and beliefs based on solid and tangible facts according to the teaching of Islam.  When people do so, keeping an open mind and heart, they will draw nearer and nearer to the truth until it becomes clear as the light of day.

**Conclusion**

Polygamy is an old institution going back to time immemorial. Islam permits a man to have up to four wives as long as he will fulfil certain rules and regulations, such as equality in food, clothe among other provisions. However, despite the fact of the declaration of *Shahada* and performing all obligations prescribed by Islam, many of the Muslim women in Nigeria today like the non-Muslims in the west treats polygamy with disdain. The fact is that the West considerably influenced the thought of Muslim women through their modernist but corruptive ideas, making them to perceive polygamy as a threat to their marriage life. These women maintain that polygamy was only established to fulfil men desires and in their own way stripped off the women’s rights, create grudges between stepbrothers and their mothers who live under the care of a man. They also create all sort of false accusations regarding the institution of polygamy. However, polygamy, if properly practiced, will go a long way in preventing rampant illegal sexual relations; prostitutions s and curtail the spread of venereal diseases such as HIV/AIDS, and other sexual transmitted diseases. To this end, there is need for Muslim women in Northern Nigeria to revive their character and to adhere strictly to the teaching of Islam not the West. For they must know that they are to be judged by their actions in the hereafter, and that their adherence to Western “values” system and ungodly theories and concept would only reduce them to going astray since the west have always look at other peoples culture and traditions as “barbaric” and project theirs as superior and civilised which needs to be copied and adopted by other race as a necessary criteria for their swift evolution to high social values typical of the Europeans.

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