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Polygyny in The Gambia

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Introduction

The opportunity of traveling to Africa was something that I could not pass up. My desire to go came from all that I had seen and heard – many of these images and much of the information came from programs on the Discovery channel whose motto is “explore your world.” On television Africa is portrayed as an exotic continent with an abundance of wildlife and rich cultures. I knew nothing about The Gambia prior to going, except that it is a small country in West Africa. In fact, I had to look at a map to find its exact location! Once I knew where I was going I grew more excited, filled with anticipation about what I would see and whom I would meet. I tried to imagine what it would be like – from the landscape, people, language, food, to all the aspects of a new and different culture.

Once we arrived I was struck by how dry, brown, and sandy it was. I, like many other Americans, thought of Africa as virgin land with rich natural resources and abundant wildlife. The Gambia and much of West Africa, unlike Central and East Africa, is not as picturesque as I had imagined, and much of the vegetation and wildlife have been destroyed. As in many developing countries that are trying hard to industrialize, there is usually a price to pay for short-term economic gain. Though the Gambian landscape was not what I had imagined from programs such as Wild Discovery, it still has many beautiful areas. The people and the culture more than compensated for the absence of the large mammals of Central and East Africa that I imagined seeing.

Once we became acclimated to our new environment, it was time for each member of the group

to decide what he or she would like to research. Half of the group planned on doing research on medical and health questions, which I considered and also thought interesting. We were fortunate to receive a very thorough tour of medical facilities in the Gambia. I decided that I wanted to focus on a topic that related to how Gambians live, so I picked kinship as my subject of focus. However, kinship is an extremely broad topic, so I had to think about some specific aspect of kinship that I found interesting and that the Gambians themselves are interested in discussing. I knew that The Gambia is an Islamic country and that



Eric looking at artifacts from Genieri war well

the majority of its citizens are practicing Muslims. According to Koranic law, a Muslim man may have up to four wives, provided that he can support them. Having learned that polygyny – the practice in which a man is married to more than one woman – is quite common in the Gambia, I decided that I would focus on this interesting topic. The practice appears to be at odds with the growing civil rights

movements, particularly feminism and women’s rights, around the world.

Background: Marriage and Family In Gambia

Marriage and family structure in Africa, particularly in Muslim West Africa, are very different than in the United States. Traditionally, marriage in West Africa is a process that occurs over a long period of time (Bledsoe and Pison 1994). Elaborate ceremonies and rituals often are performed. These rituals legitimate the union and strengthen the bonds between the extended families of the couple. Certain obligations must be fulfilled by the husband and his family, and at times by the wife and her family. For

example, the husband may be required to pay a bride price, commit to farming his in-laws' fields, and perform other tasks that display his character and worthiness, as well as his financial commitment to his wife and her family. Marriage often involves and creates stronger and more solemn financial rights and responsibilities between the couple and their families in West Africa than in the United States.

Another dissimilarity is that men and women tend to have separate budgets. The man is responsible for food and shelter while the woman is responsible for her clothing, as well as her children's, and their school supplies. This division of financial responsibilities ties in with the social and cultural roles that each gender is expected to fulfill. Traditionally, men have been the financial backbone of the family. Thus, they were and still are expected to provide money for their family's financial needs, while women are expected to provide for many of the domestic needs. Any money that a woman earns is her own. Thus, women are free to keep their own separate budgets. A man may accept money from his wife and safeguard it for her, but if she were to keep it people would think poorly of his ability to provide for his family.

In virtually all societies marriage is the norm. The Gambia is no different. Marriage is the family structure norm and is strongly encouraged because the ultimate goal of matrimony is to have children. By having children a family increases its opportunity to improve its economic and social status. As in most agricultural societies, children are highly valued and seen as an asset, the more the better.

Moreover, if a couple is unable to have children, a stigma is often placed on them. Infertility is viewed as a great misfortune and is acceptable grounds for a man to seek divorce. In this patriarchal society, it is usually assumed that the problem is the woman's responsibility. If a man is unable to have children with his wife he may be viewed as not being a man. By practicing polygyny a man increases the probability that he will be able to have many children, thus freeing him from the possible stigma of impotence and inability to fulfill his role as a man. Women are pitied but not shunned if they are unable to bear children and thereby not fulfill their roles as mothers to the next generation. Among the Mandinko, women who have never given birth have their own 'society' with special privileges. Nevertheless, there is great social pressure on men and women alike to marry and have children. This pressure often comes from other family members. For instance, many times men are encouraged by their sisters, mothers, and friends to marry a second wife. This encouragement is often subtle but at times quite direct. The reasons behind this encouragement stem from the belief that the more

wives a man is able to provide for, the higher social status he's accorded because it reveals his skill as a man. Simply put, it reflects well on the man and his natal family.

Marriage legitimizes sexual relations between men and women. In the case of polygynous marriages men can licitly and legitimately have sexual relations with more than one woman. A man 'rotates' his attention equally among all his wives unless they are



Camara household from Bajakunda village, patriarch with one of his wives and many of his children

breastfeeding an infant or menstruating. Many believe this arrangement decreases the frequency of male infidelity. Under Islamic law, adultery is a very serious offense and may be severely punished. In many ways, the institution of marriage in West African society is shaped by and supports a patriarchal system where women are treated in ways that Westerners would view as subservient.

To summarize, in Gambian society men and women have distinct, well-defined roles that they are expected to fulfill. Men are primarily responsible for providing the major economic support for their families, while women are required to take care of the many domestic duties, including: cooking, cleaning and child care.

Women also grow cash crops such as peanuts or vegetables and may earn substantial amounts of money through other economic activities. With a larger family, a man is able, once his children are old enough, to pull together a more substantial work force, thereby increasing the family's economic stability.

Methodology

To gather data and other information on the practice of polygyny and attitudes toward it, I needed to conduct a number of semi-structured interviews with informed persons who were willing to express

both their personal views and their opinions about Gambian society and practices generally.

I conducted a series of interviews with teachers at the New Town Primary School, and the Gambia Teachers college. I also had the opportunity to speak with the director of the National Council for Arts and Culture (NCAC) and a highly knowledgeable public health officer. From the public health officer I was able to obtain demographic data on the Gambian population, including marriage data. I also spoke informally about various aspects of marriage and family life with a number of other people in the Bakau area. I had about a week to do these interviews. Notes were hand-written, with the knowledge and permission of those being interviewed. Relevant demographic characteristics of those interviewed, too, were recorded for future reference.

In these interviews I wanted to obtain the Gambian perspective and attitude on polygyny. I formally



Women with children near kitchen area in Bajakunda village

interviewed eight people: six males and two females (the reason for the lack of a more even number of people being interviewed was that access to males was easier). In these interviews, I recorded, among other things, their gender, age, occupation, educational level, and marital status. I asked several questions about family structure and marriage, including what they personally think about polygyny. Specifically, I asked whether they support it or are against it, and why they are either pro or con this practice. Finally I asked where they see this practice heading. I spoke with teachers because they were readily available to talk with, they were well informed, articulate, and willing to share their views. They also spoke excellent English and thus allowed me to get around my local language limitations. I also wanted to speak with educated Gambians because I

hypothesized that the more educated a person was the greater their willingness to discuss polygyny outside of its Islamic (religious) context. Further, I thought that the more educated a woman was, the less likely she would be involved in a polygynous marriage.

Results

Population data show that polygyny is far more common in Gambian society than in Muslim societies generally. Worldwide, less than one of every twenty (5%) Muslim marriages are polygynous (Oman, 1992). As of the early 1990s about one-half of Gambian women and more than one-third of Gambian men were involved in polygynous marriages (Republic of the Gambia Population Data Bank 1993). More than one-fourth of men (26%) had two wives, and one of every ten married men (10%) had three or more wives. Less than half of women (49%) were in monogamous marriages. About one-third (29%) were in polygynous marriages with two wives, and nearly as many as (21%) were in marriages with three or more wives.

Just as polygyny is not wholly explained by Islamic religious custom and practice (Oman 1992; Bledsoe and Pison 1994), it is not explained in any substantial way by an imbalance in population distribution by gender or age. Gambia has a comparatively high total fertility rate (TFR) of 5.9, compared with 2 for the United States. Gambia's population is a comparatively young population with an evenly balanced distribution of males and females. So, polygyny is not necessary to compensate for some population distribution problem. Polygyny does

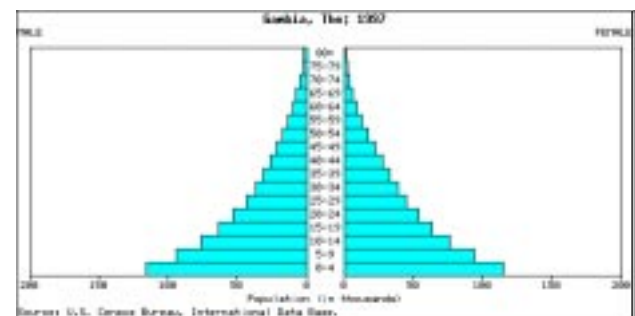


Figure 7.1 This population pyramid portrays a young population that will continue to increase rapidly.

appear to be strongly correlated with early age of first marriage for females and later age of first marriage for males. Although marriage at some point in life is nearly universal among Gambians, on average men marry much later in life than do women (Republic of the Gambia Population Data Bank 1993). More than half of Gambian women are married before age 20,

whereas less than one of every five men are married by age 20. More than half the men 29 years old or younger still haven't married yet, but a large number finally do marry around 30 years of age, a full decade later than most women. This suggests very strongly that older men, perhaps men of property and economic substance, are marrying younger women as second or third wives, and that younger men must devote a number of years to establishing themselves economically and socially.

Though illustrative, this information does not generally answer why polygyny occurs fairly frequently in The Gambia and West Africa. To really understand or at least try to gain some understanding of the basis for this practice, I had to rely more than anything else on the Gambians' perspectives and insights. As I stated in the methodology section of the paper, I wanted to focus more on the male perspective and get at men's explanations for the practice of polygyny. Knowing that The Gambia is a patriarchal society, I wanted to understand if males were simply following a tradition and custom that has been a cornerstone of West African culture and society. Or, as I see it, if they simply enjoyed some of the liberties that appear more accessible to them. The majority that I spoke with did cite the traditional reasons for polygyny: the familial institution has been polygynous for hundreds of years. This is what they had experienced growing up; it carries solemn obligations and duties. Generally, they saw more benefits than disadvantages to this type of system. The benefits that they mentioned included a large family with many children, and the ability to procure children if the first wife were barren. With more children the man and his family are able to increase their wealth because of a larger labor force, at least in rural areas. Even in a more urban setting, the more children a family has increases the probability of some of the children obtaining a good education and thereby allowing the family to gain economically and socially. Perhaps just as important is that children in general are valued. Gambians like having them around, and they are seen as a blessing from Allah. Many of the men also mentioned that adultery and divorce are much less frequent when men have legitimate access to other sexual partners. When I asked them if they felt they could care for their wives equally they responded that a man must outwardly treat all his wives the same regardless of any private or personal preferences. One of the men that I interviewed summarized well the ideal of what a man should be capable of doing. He said "It takes skill to maintain peace with more than one wife!" It was clear to me from the interviews that I conducted that the men were generally in agreement with polygyny. They all

seemed to believe sincerely that the ability of managing a polygynous marriage shows how much skill a man has and reveals in many ways his capabilities as a man. If done well, a polygynous marriage is fair to all parties involved.

The women that I spoke with viewed polygyny very differently from the men. All said they did not enjoy being in polygynous marriages but fell in love with their husbands and felt they must persevere. I found it interesting and noteworthy that they seemed to view marriage as an arduous process that is a test of a woman's character. Women in Gambian society are expected to display fortitude in the most difficult circumstances. For example, one woman mentioned that domestic violence is never discussed. It is implicitly understood that a man has the right to beat his wife and children if he deems it necessary. A woman does not openly discuss any problems she may be having with her husband. She does, however, have her natal family for support if the husband does not fulfill his responsibilities or becomes abusive.

None liked the idea of sharing their husbands with another woman. They all spoke of the tension that at times is present with their co-wives because of feelings of jealousy. Despite the negative impression of polygyny that they presented, they were positive individuals and hopeful for their children's future. All believed that polygyny is an antiquated practice, and that it is becoming obsolete. They all believe that as the younger generation is educated, they will be less likely to practice polygyny. This is especially true for young women, who they believe are beginning to assert their rights, both within the Islamic faith and in all aspects of social life, including marriage. In fact, there are now many women's organizations that address many problems in Gambian society that affect women. They also mentioned that economic



Co-wives with children

development is likely to play a strong role in the decline of polygyny, particularly the transformation from an agriculturally based economy to a more modern, service-oriented economy.

Conclusion

Polygyny is a very interesting phenomenon in the Gambia and carries with it a certain notoriety that is summed up well by Oman, an Islamic scholar: polygyny in Islam is notorious not because of its relevance but because of its possibility. Certainly the license to marry more than one wife has been grossly abused by some Muslims who did not appreciate it as a conditional permission. Even with that abuse its occurrence is no more than three per cent (3%) and with the increasing education of women and reformed understanding of the real Islam, polygyny is on the decline (Oman 1992:19).

From what I observed and learned, I too believe that polygyny is a dying practice in Gambia. It seems that with education women and men will leave this practice. The changing economic system, shifting



As more girls are educated, the practice of polygyny may decrease.

from agrarian to a more service-oriented economy, also seems to make this practice less appealing and less viable. With the higher cost of living, large numbers of men may no longer be able to bear the financial burden of supporting more than one wife. Regardless of the future for this practice, my experience in researching this subject and discussing it with highly informed people, and with those involved in the practice, has taught me that those involved are sincere and honorable people who are doing what they think is best and appropriate, for themselves, and their families.

Though I feel that I addressed the topic of

polygyny fairly well in this paper, after reflecting and thinking about this polemic issue, I realize that there are a number of other questions and issues to consider. Unfortunately, because of time constraints, I was unable to compare the marriage practices of uneducated Gambians with those of the educated. I also would have liked to compare rural marriage practices with urban marriage practices, but again time constraints precluded this. It would have been very useful to make my decision earlier on a study topic, and spend more time in preparation before leaving for Gambia. Though I tried to present many aspects and explanations for the occurrence of polygyny, I would have focused more on the cultural influences of the phenomenon rather than the economic and material reasons. However, overall I learned a great deal about polygyny in Gambia and tried to convey what I learned as best as I could. I sincerely hope that future students can continue research on this very interesting practice, which will increase our knowledge of an integral part of Gambian society.

Works Cited

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Another view of famous slave factory/fortress on James Island



All set for a trip down the coast