

A Theological and Ethical Reflection on the Bible and Polygyny in Indigenous African Society

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Abstract

The theological and ethical tensions surrounding polygyny, especially within African cultural contexts, have sparked debates among many scholars. While polygyny is rooted in African traditions and kinship systems, the Bible presents a prescriptive sense of secure belonging and a transformative vision of “they shall become one flesh.” This vision is based on the principles of creation, covenant, and equality. The main question is: Why is the polygynous structure difficult to reconcile with the biblical language of “two becoming one”? To achieve the aims of this study, theological and ethical methods are employed alongside qualitative research techniques. The methodology mainly relies on secondary sources, such as scholarly works and published materials. The study shows that African practices often combine philosophical and cultural ideas, including beliefs that polygyny addresses infertility issues, grants immortality, replaces divorce, and seeks a male heir to preserve the family name. Against these views, some African Christians argue that monogamy should be the ideal, since polygyny contradicts the Bible’s prescriptive claim. Also, a superficial interpretation of Scripture, without considering context, theology, and ethics, can be misleading. I, therefore, recommend that the church prioritise sound theological and ethical teachings on ideal marriage. It should adopt a faithful and pastoral approach that upholds biblical truth without causing unnecessary harm. African Christians committed to having only one wife should serve as models for others to refrain from polygyny. Children’s rights must be protected, ensuring that those in polygynous families facing neglect are given equal opportunities. This study addresses the theological and ethical gap between monogamous and polygynous marriages within African Christianity.

Keywords: African Christianity, Bible, Polygyny, Monogamy, Culture, Contextual Theology, Ethics.

Introduction

Descriptive relativism emphasises that marriage norms are shaped by cultural traditions and religious frameworks, making it a complex issue for African Christianity. When a prima facie interpretation is given to biblical texts on marriage without further investigation, it misleads many African Christians. One such ambiguity that encourages some men to engage in the practice is the phenomenon of polygynous marriages in the Bible. While the biblically and legally recognised monogamous marriage means that an individual can marry only one partner, polygyny allows a man to marry multiple women. This prompts significant debate among Christian scholars as a challenge to the message of Christ. In this study, the terms “Bible” and “Scripture” are used interchangeably, as they refer to the Christian canon

of literature. From a Bible-centred ethical perspective, polygyny raises numerous concerns, as it is difficult for one person to share themselves among many women. If practised, it often promotes gender inequality, treating women as property or tools for fertility rather than as equals, and favouring one particular wife over others.

This raises the question of whether a woman can marry a man who already has a wife, possibly with children. Are there any moral implications? Therefore, the study examines the phenomenon through the lens of the Bible, which has the potential to influence social structures. Interestingly, the patriarchs, as God's people, also faced marital issues, with Abraham and Jacob's polygynous marriages serving as an example (Gen. 16:3; 30:1-10). Subsequent generations continued to encounter marital challenges, including the practice of polygyny. Similarly, Tiénou (2014) notes that polygyny is "one of the perennial issues encountered by Christians in all ages and at all places" (p. 2). The persistence of polygyny remains a societal and cultural issue.

It is argued that human beings are inherently social and cultural; there must have been philosophical and artistic ideas that underpin polygyny as a practice. This is one of the stimulating situations that confronts African Christianity. The situation calls to mind Walls' (1996) assertion that "separating an individual from his social relationships, and thus from his society, leads to one unwavering feature in Christian history: the desire to 'indigenise', to live as a Christian yet as a member of one's own society" (p. 7). This means that when someone becomes a Christian, they are torn between living in a way that pleases God and satisfying their family or society at the same time. This occurs because they continue to hear and speak about their cultural values while also discussing those of the Christian faith. This raises the question of whether a convert should abandon their culture entirely to become a Christian. Bediako (1999, p. 11) posits that "the very coming of Jesus presents a problem. If he had not come, we would have had no problem. Now that he has come, we have no excuse." Thus, without prescriptive biblical and moral claims, practices like polygyny may still hold some value. However, with the Bible, it must be closely examined to understand why this practice is prevalent among Africans, which presents challenges for African Christianity.

In certain situations, while one might argue for polygyny based on the grounds that women outnumber men, it could also be suggested that culture and promiscuity are possible motivations. This is consistent with Alhassan's (2023) research findings that "the 'polygyny belt' which stretches from Senegal in West Africa to Tanzania in East Africa, has the highest prevalence of polygyny in Africa. In Ghana, data from 2017 to 2018 by the Ghana Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey reveals the prevalence of polygyny to be 21.6%", both Christians and non-Christians inclusive (p. 2). According to this research, Nigeria has a prevalence of 28%, Mali 34%, Burkina Faso 36%, Sierra Leone 47%, and the Gambia 53%, among many others. While some would support polygyny, it could be argued that the practice contravenes Article 16 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), which emphasises equality, consent, and the protection of the family.

Although the phenomenon is sensitive, this study addresses key areas relevant to this topic. The various areas of interest in this paper include philosophical, biblical, theological and ethical thoughts, cultural perspectives, impacts on families, Christian involvement in the practice, and the influence of the Scriptures on the phenomenon of polygyny. Since God does give us some guidelines on ideal marriage, I hope that the conclusion the study reaches will reflect God's intention for marriage. The work includes a glossary of terms and abbreviations. This intends to fill the theological and ethical gap between monogamous and polygynous marriages.

Statement of the Problem

The interaction between polygyny and the Bible creates significant theological, pastoral, and ethical challenges for the African church. While the monogamous marriage is grounded in the theological vision established in Genesis 2:24 that "therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh" (NKJV), polygyny, by contrast, undermines this theological vision by allowing multiple covenantal bonds that compromise the "one flesh" principle. The problem is: Why is polygyny difficult to fit into the language of "two shall become one flesh" without violating God's moral code for marriage? Hence, polygynous marriage presents several theological and ethical challenges.

Methodology

The methodology used in the study involves a critical theological and ethical approach that examines divine revelation, cultural realities, and the moral vision of Scripture. It combines both thematic and comparative methods to achieve its aims. The study also employs a qualitative approach, relying on secondary sources to reach its objectives. This entails analysing a substantial body of scholarly works from cultural, philosophical, ethical, and theological perspectives, comparing viewpoints, and constructing arguments based on existing research to conclude the work. A qualitative, literature-based approach is most suitable for the research goals because it offers detailed insights and considers the context of the issues examined. Also, it is ideal for developing theories rather than just testing existing ones.

Conceptual (Theoretical) Framework

Philosophical Thoughts: This study is grounded in a conceptual/theoretical framework guided by classical and modern sources, with attention to African and biblical understandings of the distinction between polygyny and monogamy. Some philosophical thoughts embedded in polygyny reveal that the word polygyny originates from the Neoclassical Greek "poly", meaning many, and "gyne", meaning woman or wife. Mbiti (1989) asserts that polygyny as a phenomenon "is applied to mean the state of marriage in which there is one husband and two or *more* [multiple] wives" (p. 138). This differs from "polyandry", a practice where one woman marries multiple husbands, and "polygamy", a

general term for both men and women having multiple spouses (Zeitzen, 2008). Polygyny is known among some African societies, such as the Ewe of Ghana, Togo, Benin, and the southern part of Nigeria, as "nyɔnu geɖe/fuu ɖeɖe". The Ga of Ghana says, "nuu ni ye ɲamei babao/pii". Among the Akan of Ghana, it is "barima a ɔware mmaa bebre". Other African tribes also have their way of describing it in their languages.

To provide a common ground for this contextual framework, it is worth noting the one distinct cultural identity among Africans (Africa Study Bible, 2016), which is "people belong to a community first" (p. 331). Hence, the whole community is responsible for the well-being of its members' marriages and families. This concept is common in indigenous African societies. Interestingly, it is practised by both Christians and non-Christians. The custom fits well into the social structure of traditional life and the concepts, serving many useful purposes. Consequently, some of the philosophical thoughts are that:

1. Among Africans (Africa Study Bible, 2016), "Marriage breakup is aggressively opposed so that the network of relationships does not crumble" (p. 331). For this reason, divorce is discouraged, and polygyny is sometimes considered as a substitute. This agrees with Mbiti's (1989) assertion that "if the wife is barren, the husband may take another wife and keep the barren one, which also saves the 'first' marriage" (p. 142).
2. "The more wives a man has, the more children he is likely to have, and the more the children, the stronger the power of immortality. Such a man has the attitude that the more we are, the bigger I am" (Mbiti, 1989, p. 139). To elucidate the full picture, immortality is the state of living forever or being remembered forever by descendants.
3. Sometimes, some parents put pressure on their sons to marry within their own family to maintain family ties, even when they already have a wife.
4. For economic reasons, pooling resources and labour within the household, Boserup (1970) notes that "polygyny in Africa is precisely its economic aspect that achieves a high status due to the wealth which they can command". Multiple wives often become a status symbol denoting wealth, power, and fame.
5. Guyer (1991) indicates that in some regions, "planting of crops, hunting, kente cloth weaving, fishing, and raising of livestock are usually done by young men. Wives, on the other hand, are responsible for processing food, assisting on the farm, and performing domestic duties for the husband" (pp. 260-261). This leads many polygynous husbands to boast about the number of wives and children they have and care for.
6. Some cultures allow men to marry their brothers' widows even if the man already has a wife. This is done to bring the woman and her children under the care of the deceased's brother to protect his properties and take care of the children.
7. Some men want a male child to inherit their property and carry on the family name. Over here, the key reason is not to marry a second wife but to produce a child to

continue their lineage and honour them as ancestors (Kunhiyop, 2008). This situation occurs when the wife keeps giving birth to female children only. Often, this happens in patriarchal societies where relationships are traced through the male line, known as "patrilineage." Therefore, the man may marry additional women until a male child is born.

8. Young women facing financial difficulties are coerced or manipulated into polygynous marriages.
9. Amevenku and Boaheng (2020) note that in the olden days, "After conquering a village, great numbers of the men were slaughtered, leaving children and women. The conquerors took the majority of the women and children away. The women then became concubines, slaves, and in some cases mistresses of the conquerors" (p. 36).
10. Lastly, Efedia (2016) notes that others indulge in the practice due to "love" or a promiscuous lifestyle. In Africa, "it was not until the post-colonial era that polygyny began to be viewed as unjust or taboo".

Literature Review

Biblical/Theological Perspectives: Literature by Kalu (1998) provides a comprehensive explanation that the first two chapters of Genesis contain what is generally known as the cultural mandate, which includes the concepts of "stewardship and creativity" (p. 290). His literature reveals that after God created the world, He introduced man to culture: how to work, take care, what to eat, how to give names, when and how to marry and bear children, among others (Gen. 1:27-28; 2:15-24). But when Adam and Eve sinned against God, culture was tainted by sin (Gen. 3). Meticulously, Berger (1967, p. 27) posits that "culture is human achievement in the first place. It describes the activities of natural man. Therefore, culture is always social. Culture is the world of the society's values, which it conserves and transmits to future generations", of which how people approach marriage is a part. Marriage as a universal practice does not mean that marriages are the same in all societies (Rae, 1995). There are many variations from society to society as to who and how many women someone marries.

Biblical literature notes that the practice of polygyny was first indicated in Genesis 4:19, "Then Lamech took for himself two wives: the name of one was Adah, and the name of the second was Zillah" (NKJV). Kunhiyop (2008, p. 228) notes that, "His character has traditionally been interpreted as an indication of moral depravity in other areas of his life as well". Beginning with Lamech, sinful humanity's decline from God's created order can be seen in marriage, though we are not told why he married two wives. But in Africa, some Christian missions and churches strongly reject the appreciation of the social justification of African polygyny. According to Niebuhr's (1951) Christ against culture typology, it "affirms the sole authority of Christ over culture and resolutely rejects culture's claims to loyalty" (p. 42). They demonstrate the quality of staying firm in support of Christ against culture. Hence, polygyny is seen as (Hastings, 1973) "one of the gross evils of heathen

society, which has become unlawful within the church of Christ" (p. 12). It is because the act has been declared contrary to the divine institution of marriage. After all, it is written "let every man have his own wife" (1 Cor. 7:2). This means every man should have his own wife and not wives. Literature by Bediako (1999) asserts that the "Scripture is the record, the fruit and the outcome of the engagement of gospel and culture, the yardstick, the measure for testing" (p. 2). For him, if the Scripture compromises its principles, the gospel of Christ becomes unfruitful.

Cultural Perspective: Christians who want to remain pure in their commitment to Christ try to separate from the world of culture. In this category, all expressions of culture are viewed with a high degree of suspicion that the world is corrupted by sin. Hence, these Christians think they must be faithful to the Bible (Macaulay, 2024). According to Walls (2002, p. 7), "we are conditioned by a particular time and place, by our family and group and society, by 'culture'". Both monogamous marriage and polygyny are cultural and universal practices. Socially, marriage is the means of forming a family unit within indigenous African societies. Also, it serves as a common ground for both monogamy and polygyny, because it is basic (Gyekye, 1996); for both are known as "marriage". Societies and cultures throughout the world have their own concept of how people should marry. While some of the concepts about the legitimacy of marriage are based on God's Word, others are based on traditional cultures. Still, while some have based theirs on social concepts, others are based on the individual's perception of marriage (Rae, 1995). Traditionally, polygyny, for Kunhiyop (2008, p. 224), "is not regarded as in any sense equivalent to adultery". Usually, it is a sexual relationship by a married person outside of the marriage, which is often referred to as adultery. Mbiti (1989) postulates that, "Others call it infidelity or 'cheating'. When adultery is discovered in some societies, it is severely dealt with" (p. 225). Mbiti's literature explains that while adultery is to have sex with a man or woman you are not customarily (legally) married to, polygyny is to live with women you are legally married to. Here, the uncommon ground is what Niebuhr (1951) establishes that "in a society where biblical rules are not acknowledged, some rules are nevertheless in force" (p. 50). This is where polygyny sets in to fulfil cultural desires.

Philosophical Perspective: On the grounds of human rights, Mwambene (2017) remarks that where rules other than the biblical rules are in effect, "The practice has long been perceived to conflict with the ideals of gender equality, inherently subordinates women, and violates the dignity of women" (p. 2). While Yemo (2025) agrees with Mwambene that the issue of polygyny breaches the "rights of women and children, and should be criminalised and abolished," others highlight the dangers of abolishing or criminalising the practice (p. 99). Socially, polygynous families frequently face, for example, discrimination against children. This incident fosters hatred among rival wives and a sense of superiority among the children.

Pastoral/Ethical Concerns: Despite some disagreements regarding the morality of specific human actions, Henry (1973) comments on the consistency of the moral code within all people everywhere. He says, "There is a basic pattern of similarity among ethical codes. Such things as murder, lying, adultery, cowardice are almost always condemned" (p. 620). These vices are viewed as consequences of deviating from God's moral code, and by extension, polygynous marriage must equally be seen as a deviation from the ethical code, regardless of having more females than males worldwide. This emphasises Niebuhr's explanation that biblical rules need to be acknowledged among cultures. All the literature consulted in this study notes the engagement between culture and Scripture, which is geared towards God's institution of monogamous marriage.

Analysis and Discussion

A comprehensive theological analysis of polygyny reveals that at the "fall", Adam and Eve lost their sinless, harmonious relationship with God (Gen. 3:8-10). Adam and Eve's relationship with each other also began to deteriorate as Adam blamed and accused his wife for his own choice to disobey God (Gen. 3:12). They entered into a time of separation from, and struggle with, the rest of God's creation. The full effects of sin's distortion are indicated in Scripture.

Biblical Thoughts: Polygyny, as the subject at issue, attracts references to some characters in the Bible who were involved in multiple marital relationships. Some of these people, among many others, include Caleb in 1 Chronicles 2:46, 48, King David in 2 Samuel 5:13, and King Solomon in 1 Kings. 11, yet they were used by God. 1 Kings 11:3 states that Solomon "had seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines; and his wives turned away his heart" (NKJV). The prima facie reading of these Scriptures can be misleading and would mean polygynous marriage is right. Even though God "allowed" Solomon to have these wives, allowance is not the same as approval. Solomon's marital decisions were in direct violation of God's laws, which attracted unforeseen ramifications, a development that implicated the unity of the kingdom of Israel.

Attention is drawn to a school of thought that interestingly argues that the Bible nowhere explicitly gives a "thou shalt not marry multiple wives" command. Against this view, we must note that God does not approve of polygyny in his church. For this reason, a polygynist is ineligible for church leadership in the New Testament church. In 1 Timothy 3:2, 12 "a bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife" (WEB). And "let deacons be the husbands of one wife". Also, Titus 1:6 says, "if a man is blameless, the husband of one wife" (WEB). With these texts, one would argue that there were polygynists in the church (Kunhiyop, 2008). This suggests that God disapproves of the practice. The statement, "the husband of one wife", prohibits both polygyny and promiscuity, and therefore discourages them.

It is generally agreed among Evangelical Christians that Christ did not come to endorse unacceptable cultural behaviours, but he came to transform them. This agrees with Walls

(1996) that, "God in Christ takes people as they are in order to transform them into what he wants them to be" (p. 8). Here, it could be argued that since the gospel and culture engagement is about transformation, which includes polygynous marriages, it has the potential to transform new Christians to recognise monogamy as God's ideal marriage. According to Kalu (1998, p. 284), "We need to constantly seek the insight of the Holy Spirit, in helping us to better discern where the gospel challenges, endorses or transforms a particular culture". An attempt in this direction is to have a sexual relationship with one person in the same way that Adam "knew his wife Eve and she conceived and bore Cain" (Gen. 4:1, NKJV). The first couple set the paradigm as to how people, both Christians and non-Christians, should approach marriage (Kunhiyop, 2008).

One perception that presents a common challenge to monogamous marriage is that most of the Bible "stories" simply describe what people did in particular situations instead of making statements about the immorality of their actions. Typical examples are the cases of David, Solomon, and Rehoboam, among others, who were Israel's kings who violated the command, "neither shall he multiply wives for himself" (Deut. 17:17, NKJV). Nonetheless, one would argue that the Bible has some clear-cut statements on monogamous marriage as copiously indicated in both Old and New Testaments. In the Old Testament, "...a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife..." (Gen. 2:24, NKJV). Juxtaposed with the New Testament Scriptures, Zeitzen (2008, p. 3) reiterates this biblical vision that "...a man will leave his father and mother, and will be joined to his wife..." (Eph. 5:31, WEB). Contrariwise, in polygynous marriage, this mutuality and equality are often compromised. Many polygynous husbands are tempted to play a dominant role over multiple wives, which violates their rights. This contradicts New Testament ideals, such as to "submitting to one another in the fear of God" (Eph. 5:21, WEB). In modern theological and ethical systems, the notions of reciprocity in marriages, for instance, mutual consent and equal dignity, are seen as incompatible with polygyny.

Cultural Perspectives: One thing that is certain and cuts across almost all the major customs, particularly in Ghana and in Africa as a whole, is that polygynous and monogamous marriages begin with knocking rites. Caesar (2001) notes that "it is at this stage that the prospective husband and some elders of his family approach the family of the woman he intends to marry, to inform the family of their son's intention" (p. 263). The knocking rites among Ghanaians are so fundamental to marriages under custom that among the Ewe it is called "Uɔfofo"; among the Ga it is "agbo shimo da", and in Akuapem it is "ɔpon akyi bɔ". This is done (Caesar, 2001) "to ascertain that the woman is single, and her parents are receptive to a proposal" (p. 263).

After the knocking, the next stage is the customary marriage ceremony itself. The customary marriage may be very simple and informal, or it may be highly ceremonial. Customary marriage is known among the Ewe as "dekɔnu srɔɖeɖe". While this is known among the Ga as "kusum naa gbalashihile", the Akan call it "adehye wareɛ". After the man

has complied with the requirements of the custom and presented the items agreed upon as the marriage gifts, Akuamoah (2021) notes that, "The woman is given to the man and depending on the custom, is sent to the man's house. This does not in any way mean that the woman is put up for sale" (p. 10). Where these rites are not performed, it is rendered as cohabitation "ɔ̃gutsu kple nyɔnu fe wonɔewo gbɔ ɔ̃ɔ̃ko ko tabiabia manɔ emee" among the Ewe. Interestingly, the two types of marriages – monogamy and polygyny involve customary rites. Because polygyny is cultural in Ghana (Afim-Narh, 2008), "marriage under customary law is often described as potentially polygamous" (p. 16). This flexibility is rooted in traditional practices that form part of the customary legal system, and is recognised by law in many African countries.

Among Africans, when a woman becomes pregnant, she becomes a special person who is treated with dignity by the family and her neighbours. Macaulay (2020) explains that "This special treatment starts before and continues after childbirth". He added that "there are instances where some husbands humorously put their ears on the stomach of the woman to listen to how the unborn baby leaps in the womb" (p. 348). This is because Mbiti (1989) states that in some African communities, "marriage is not fully recognised until the wife has given birth" (p. 107), to a child. Therefore, childless couples are despised among almost all the ethnic groups of Africa; hence, parents put pressure on their children to have one (Kunhiyop, 2008).

On the grounds of religious traditions, a religion, such as Islam, allows polygyny under certain conditions, and women willingly enter polygynous marriage as part of their religious obedience or faith-based decisions. Comparatively, while, in Nigeria, 40% of Muslims are polygynous, Christians are 8% (How Does Religion Impact Polygamy Views: The Ethical Compass).

The Christian Involvement: While some Christian men are involved in polygyny, some women see it as a survival strategy for marriage in environments where men control economic resources. Hence, there is the probability of exploitation, mistreatment, dependency and victimisation, and many others, of young women who are coerced or manipulated into polygynous marriages because of financial difficulties. Also, there are instances where Christian women may prefer to share a successful man rather than remain unmarried. This calls to mind Alhassan's (2023) research conducted among Ghanaian Christians, which enumerates that the prevalence of Ghanaian Christian women's involvement in polygynous marriage was 12.2% (p. 4). This provides valid grounds to offer a comprehensive explanation that some Christian women go to great lengths to take advantage, and ultimately engage in polygyny due to either delayed childbirth or infertility in the marriage of a man who is desperate to have a child.

While some parents pressure their daughters to marry because they want to see grandchildren before they pass away, others see the practice as a way to avoid remaining single. Some single Christians and those without children in their marriages often succumb to this pressure. This desperate situation of the victims hampers their marriage. While the

man's parents suggest that the son take another wife, the woman's parents also blame their daughter's husband for being "impotent". Sometimes this pressure leads married couples to be unfaithful to their partners. This happens because (Walls, 1996) "the Christian inherits the pilgrim principle, which whispers to him that he has no abiding city [heaven] and warns him that to be faithful to Christ will put him out of step with his society" (p. 8). To avoid frustration, the consequentialist and utilitarian might expect one to maximise their pleasure entirely by marrying a second woman to fulfil their desire for the greater good. This could be having a male child to inherit their property and carry on the family name. The Christian deontologist would oppose this idea and argue that pleasure-seeking, known as "hedonism", should not be the basis for marriage. This is because the ethical principles of unqualified absolutism and deontology contend that the end does not always justify the means. For Geisler (2010, p. 73), "results are never used as a rationale for breaking rules, even if the results are desirable". Thus, moral integrity must be maintained, even if the results of polygyny seem beneficial. Indeed, some of these ideas about marriage go against Christ's instructions on marriage. Hence, (Bediako, 1999) "mental assent to the gospel is not sufficient, because when crises come, people will go where they feel they are spiritually connected" to seek a solution to their plight (p. 11). Kunhiyop (2008) indicates that:

Those who insist that children are essential to a marriage need to be reminded that a childless marriage can still be full of love, companionship, and sexual fulfilment. This is because the presence of children is no guarantee that these important aspects of marriage [love, companionship, and sexual fulfilment] are present. (p. 198)

When they have children, morally and pastorally, phenomena such as street children, overpopulation, and the rise of social vices are some of the unavoidable consequences on families and society. This raises the question of how the Bible might influence cultural attitudes within the broader context of Ghanaian society. Interestingly, while some churches believe in monogamy, others believe in polygyny. Thus, polygyny seems to challenge the Scriptures in indigenous African society. Though traditionally, as mentioned earlier, polygyny is a traditional legal marriage, and therefore, not the same as adultery, in Scripture, both are unacceptable sexual relationships of a married man with a married or unmarried woman. This practice is categorically prohibited in Exodus 20:14, "You shall not commit adultery" (NKJV), which is an ethical instruction. This means Scripture does not encourage a monogamous married Christian to have an additional wife. But when it happens, it comes with some harmful effects. It is believed that polygyny has detrimental effects on the psychological makeup of women. The competition among co-wives for their husband's affection and resources can create tensions and feelings of inadequacy, perpetuating a cycle of inequality within the household. An example is the deliberate provocation from Peninnah to her rival, Hannah. This is noted in Scripture that Hannah, being a childless woman, suffered under emotional stress: "And her rival also provoked her severely to make her miserable...therefore she wept, and did not eat" (1 Sam. 1:6a, 7b, NKJV).

Ethical Thoughts and Impact on Families: The phenomenon of polygyny raises several ethical considerations depending on cultural, religious, and philosophical contexts. The ethical interpretation of polygyny involves evaluating the practice through the lens of moral principles such as justice, equality, human dignity, and love. The analysis based on ethical grounds reveals that if polygyny is not God's prescriptive practice, then it must be a descriptive act expressed in the Bible. This is because the practice goes with some devastating consequences for those who practise it. One biblical example is Jacob's firstborn son, Reuben, who had sex with Bilhah, his father's concubine, within a polygynous household (Gen. 35:22). Another incident is when David's son Amnon raped his half-sister, Tamar, also within a polygynous household (2 Sam. 13:11, 14). Furthermore, David's son Absalom had sex with his father's concubines, among many others (Lashua, 2023).

In many instances, adolescents from polygynous families have lower self-esteem than those from monogamous families, because proper attention is not given to many of them by their parents. This leads many to be deprived of good education and other human developmental skills. Again, Alhassan (2023) shows that, "Many studies have identified polygyny as one of the factors that influence domestic violence and harmful traditional practices" (p. 2). Though monogamous marriages are not without marital challenges, children born in polygynous homes experience discrimination, superiority, envy, hatred, and are vulnerable to all kinds of harm among themselves. To argue that this can lead to psychological problems in polygynous families than in monogamous families is not an arbitrary statement. Typical biblical evidence is the sale of Joseph into Egypt by his brothers (Gen. 37:28).

Ethical principles grounded in the teachings of Jesus emphasise the dignity and equality of all people. Therefore, Galatians 3:28 states, "There is neither... male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." This affirms love as the highest moral principle. However, polygyny seems to violate this principle by creating an unbalanced relationship, often favouring men. Some argue that the population of women in Africa appears to outnumber that of men; therefore, there is a need for men to marry more than one woman, or some women may not have a husband. This draws our attention to Africa and the world population. The Worldometer (2025) report, based on the United Nations World Population Prospects (2024 revision), estimates Africa's total population at approximately 1.5527 billion. Thus, on August 4, 2025, while the male population was around 777 million, the female population was 773 million. According to this report, the difference between the male and female populations in Africa is about 0.52% more females than males. The reason is that males tend to die earlier than females. And by extension, as of July 2025 (UNWPP, 2024), the world's total population remains approximately 8.23 billion. Demographically, the percentage of men in 2024 is 50.3%, while that of women is 49.7%; thus, there are 101 males for every 100 females globally. The two most populous countries, China and India, have a higher male population; consequently, there are more males than females worldwide. Although the female population in Africa appears to outnumber that of men, the world's

population contradicts this assertion, because in principle, a woman still has a man in the world to marry.

As mentioned earlier, cultural relativism may approve of the polygynous practice in certain cultures and societies, but with God, it is referred to as “adultery”. The rational ground this statement provides for faith is that the terms used to describe the relationship between husband and wife are frequently used in Scripture to describe Israel’s covenant with the Lord. This is not accidental, but a purposeful use of language. This is because the marriage relationship was to reflect the relationship between God and his people, Israel. The Old Testament prophets often likened God’s relationship with Israel to a faithful husband married to one wife. For instance, Isaiah 54:5-6 says, “For your Maker is your husband...For the Lord has made you come back to him, like a wife...” (NKJV). The use of covenant terms for marriage, such as “husband” and “wife”, reveals two powerful truths in the Old Testament as a covenant term God used to establish his relationship with Israel (the church): one husband, one wife. Also, marriage in its most ideal form is an image or type of the kind of relationship the church is to have with her Bridegroom, the Lord Jesus Christ (Eph. 5:22-32).

The question is, if a polygynist becomes a Christian, what should he do with his many wives? To juxtapose polygyny with intermarriage is the case of the Israelites during Ezra’s time, which seems to be similar, but not the same. Thus, in Ezra 10:10-11, then, Ezra the priest stood up and said to them, “You have transgressed and have taken pagan wives, adding to the guilt of Israel. Now therefore, make confession to the Lord God of your fathers, and do His will; separate yourselves from the people of the land, and from the pagan wives” (NKJV). This is a different case and not about polygyny, but the godly marrying a pagan woman, a non-Christian. This goes against God’s command in Deuteronomy 7:2-3, which says, “You shall make no covenant with them...Nor shall you make marriages with them” (NKJV). Ezra thought that such marriages were sinful and ought not to be tolerated as children of God. He was addressing the inter-racial marriage problem among the Israelites and asked them to separate themselves from them. It means that what has been unjustly obtained cannot be justly kept. It is argued that intermarriage and polygyny share no common grounds, nevertheless, both are disallowed in the Christian faith.

Though there are no common grounds of comparison, still, Kunhiyop (2008, p. 238) argues that attention should be given to “marriages that are contracted in terms of culturally accepted norms before becoming a Christian and be tolerated mercifully”. This applies to those who are already polygynists and have now become Christians, perhaps, together with their families. For him, it is because if we consider culturally married polygyny as a sin, then divorce is equally sinful, and two wrongs cannot make “a right”. Under normal circumstances, this is a difficult and controversial position in many denominations. For many Christians, this does not mean that polygyny should be encouraged, let alone be an acceptable practice in the church. Nevertheless, we cannot deny that polygyny is still practised in many places and in some churches where members have multiple wives. They

likely acquired them before becoming Christians. However, to provide rational ground for faith, no man who is a committed disciple of Jesus Christ would attempt to have more than one wife. This is because there are principles in Scripture that can guide African Christians as they sensitively and obediently follow the Holy Spirit's leading, although they have the right to marry and do it of their own volition.

Christians have to accept the fact that they are the custodians of the Scriptures. It means that though polygyny is practised in the Old Testament, it is unacceptable, because Jesus' response to the Pharisees in Matthew 19:4, 5b says, "... he who made them from the beginning made them male and female....and the two shall become one flesh?" (WEB), shows that it was not a male, and many females. It also attests to the fact that they were one man and one woman. Hence, Proverbs 18:22 says, "He who finds a wife finds a good thing, and obtains favour from the Lord" (NKJV). This is also about a wife, and not wives, which denotes monogamy.

The Influence of the Scripture: Looking at the case of Ghana, Bediako (1999, p. 9) asserts that, "It is not possible in Ghana for us to talk about the gospel and ignore the impact it has on culture and vice versa. It is culture that shapes our response to the gospel". Hence, it can be argued that the gospel influences culture. This can occur only when the Scripture is contextualised within a cultural setting. When a person accepts Christ as Saviour, it (Walls, 1996) "does not mean that he starts or continues his life in a vacuum, or that his mind is a blank table [slate]. It has been formed by his culture" (p. 8). Therefore, human beings are cultural beings, and (Bediako, 1999) "Jesus is the hermeneutic, the interpreter of both the gospel that he is, and the culture into which he comes. In coming to us, Jesus enters our world and our culture" (p. 11). The purpose is to show us the way; therefore, the Bible engages with various cultural practices, including polygyny.

It is fascinating to observe that cultures are not without mistakes because they are man-made; nonetheless, (Tiénou, 2014) "God has no favourite among cultures. He accepts them all. The cultures as they stand are incredibly varied and rich. Yet everyone is a mixture of good and bad components" (p. 3). Therefore, Christians as the epitome of Christlikeness should become so convinced of the authentic biblical (Sanou, 2016) "values and beliefs so that they end up seeing them as universal and normative for everyone" (p. 112), and live by them. The approach to the gospel message should positively reflect and result in lives that exemplify the teachings of the Bible, thereby having a positive impact on marriages in Africa.

Sanou (2016) quotes Slate, who asserts that some believe that "the biblical documents were produced in and to some extent influenced by culture" (p. 107). Contextually, if the transcendental biblical documents are relevant, then they have to be made useful in African culture and to other cultures as well. In this context, the Bible provides the impetus for the direction the Christian should take. Consequently, Walls (2002, p. 13) establishes that "if the Word ceases to be made flesh in a community, the Christian group in that community is

likely to lose, not just its effectiveness, but its power of resistance” or existence. So, under no circumstances should the Christian blend in with unacceptable societal norms.

How can the Scriptures transform African culture? Laryea cited Pobee to explain this point that (Laryea, 2019) “language is more than syntax and morphology; it is a vehicle for assuming the weight of a culture” (p. 40). Kalu (1998, p. 295) posits that since “every culture is not a holy ground, the *gospel* [Scripture] should be a liberator from life-denying aspects of culture”, a position which calls for the transformation of the ungodly behaviour to align with the right. For Kalu (1998), “These are not rules or principles but a total vision of life, to which we are called to respond with freedom” (p. 288). The Scripture must have an impact on unacceptable cultural practices, and lead Christians to live according to the biblical principles as taught by Jesus Christ, which substantiate their claim that they are his true believers. For Bediako (1999), the “*gospel* [Bible] has to shape the minds of those who believe differently so they can come to understand reality differently” (p. 11). I agree with Bediako (1999) because the adherents of the Bible are distinct people who are to demonstrate particular life qualities. This is about acquiring a total, comprehensive view of the Bible. Here, (Laryea, 2019) “a person is not only exposed to the text, they also fully encounter and participate in their own text and context as well” (p. 43), to avoid any distorted biblical message, which is harmful to their spiritual nourishment. Hence, Sanou cites Hiebert (2009) that there is a need for “every *gospel* [Bible] communicator to master the skill of human exegesis as well as biblical exegesis to meaningfully communicate the *gospel* [Bible] in a human context”. (pp. 12-13).

In addition to Hiebert’s assertion, the ideas, beliefs, languages, and philosophical thoughts that people learn as members of a society are to be taken into consideration. It is believed that the Bible has the power to transform culture, especially if the phenomenon of polygyny is seen as sinful. This will give fresh impetus to theological and ethical engagement with culture within indigenous cultural contexts as Christians’ philosophical thoughts are realigned to conform to Scripture. If preachers can explain the gospel clearly, it would have more impact on people’s perception of polygyny. In effect, carefully considering the consequences of polygyny, churches need to give good and helpful counselling to members who are polygynists with children before becoming Christians. This will help foster harmony and peace in the home and church.

Saint Augustine (Nicene and post-Nicene Fathers Series 1 Volume 1 on Marriage) saw a conflict with Old Testament polygyny and wrote that “the good purpose of marriage, however, is better promoted by one husband with one wife, than by a husband with several wives”. Augustine was cited by Marcus (2006), that “the reason patriarchs had many wives was not because of fornication, but because they wanted more children. However, from the look of things, the world now seems to be overpopulated, which has led to floods, shelter, and health issues. As tribal populations grew, fertility was no longer a valid justification for polygyny” (pp. 152-164). From this viewpoint, it shows that the early church Fathers discouraged polygyny. It could be argued that there are no common grounds of the practice

because preceding arguments indicate that Christ's teaching elevates the marriage bond to a sacramental and exclusive union. On theological grounds, marriage is portrayed as a mystery that mirrors the relationship between Christ (the Bridegroom) and the church (His Bride) (Eph. 5:22-33). It has been noticed that, although polygyny was practised in the Bible, monogamy is, without a doubt, God's ideal for marriage. To make this fact more explicit, African theologians and ethicists should make the gospel message vividly comprehensible and applicable in a cultural context.

Conclusion

In conclusion, drawing upon a wide array of sources, the study indicates that polygyny is a practice among Africans because divorce is discouraged, and polygyny is considered a substitute. Hence, it is clear among Africans that polygynous and monogamous marriages have the same performance of customary rites, which is foundational to both marriages. It is fascinating that a polygynous marriage was practised among some patriarchs in the Old Testament of the Bible. Nevertheless, from an African Christian theological viewpoint, the study argues that although polygyny was practised by some of the patriarchs in ancient times, it was not the Christian standard, because they also had their weaknesses, like us. It should be fully accepted that polygyny violates God's norm of a monogamous and indissoluble marriage. Just as Christ has only one bride, which is the church, so should a man have only one wife in a faithful covenant.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, the New Testament strongly indicates that polygynists were disqualified from positions of leadership in the Christian church (1 Tim. 3:2, 12, and Titus 1:6). To correct the anomaly, Jesus said, "he who made them from the beginning made them male and female" (Matt. 19:4, WEB). This indicates that they were not a male and females; therefore, monogamous marriage is encouraged among Christians. For this reason, I wish to establish that African Christians should agree that when cultural beliefs seem to conflict with Scripture, one must prefer the Scripture. The Bible challenges the church to embody a renewed vision of marriage rooted in creation, covenant, and Christ's love as the *sine qua non* for the church. If monogamous covenant and love seem to fall apart, theological and ethical integrity, cultural intelligence, and pastoral compassion should come to centre stage to redeem it through Christ.

Finally, polygyny, although culturally accepted in some societies, often conflicts with human rights principles of equality, dignity, freedom, and protection from harm. Efforts to address these issues should include legal reforms, public education, and empowering women to make informed life choices. I must note that this study is not without limitations, because it does not cover every cause and effect of polygyny; therefore, it requires further examination.

Glossary of Terms

- **Consequentialism:** is the ethical theory that holds that the morality of an action is determined solely by its consequences, or the greatest good for the greatest number.
- **Customary marriage:** refers to a marriage that is conducted according to the customs, traditions, and cultural practices of a particular ethnic group or community. It involves traditional rites such as dowry, family introductions, and rituals.
- **Deontology:** is an ethical theory that focuses on duties, rules, and obligations rather than consequences of actions. It focuses on what is right, not what brings the most benefit.
- **Hedonism:** is the philosophical belief that pleasure or happiness is the highest good and the proper aim of human life.
- **Knocking rite:** known as “knocking on the door” is a formal pre-marriage ceremony where the family of a man visits the family of a woman to formally declare the man’s intention to marry her. It is a way of asking for permission and showing respect before any further arrangements.
- **Monogamy:** is a term used to describe a marriage system in which an individual has only one spouse at a time.
- **Patrilineage:** refers to a system of descent that is traced through fathers and grandfathers of a family.
- **Prima facie:** refers to an information that is accepted as correct based on initial evidence, unless disproved, rebutted or contradicted by further evidence.
- **Relativism:** what is moral or right can vary from one society/culture to another.
- **Sine qua non:** is a Latin phrase that means an essential condition or something that is absolutely necessary. Prerequisite.
- **Unqualified absolutism:** is an ethical theory that holds that moral laws are absolute and without exceptions; they must be obeyed at all times, in every situation, regardless of consequences.

Abbreviations

- NKJV means New King James Version.
- WEB means World English Bible.

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