

POLYGAMY AND WOMEN WITHIN THE CULTURAL CONTEXT IN BOTSWANA

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Abstract

One of the key elements of a family is the marriage institution. It plays an important role in the relationship that exists between men, women and children. Among the Batswana there exist two distinct forms of marriage, the monogamous and the polygamous form. In the past, the polygamous form of marriage¹ was accepted and accommodated by the society. It depended largely on economic status of men. This means that a man could marry as many wives as he could support economically. The system was not only controlled by men, but empowered them economically and socially at the expense of women. Women within the polygamous relationship were not only economically disadvantaged, but also marginalized, controlled, dominated and subject to the will of men and deprived of basic human rights. The nineteenth century missionaries found this situation to be very different from what they were used to in Europe. This was a new challenge for them, and one for which seminaries had not prepared them. However, they immediately formed an opinion about it and concluded that the practice was against Christian principles. This created a problem for the newly established churches, which through the proclamation of the Gospel, attracted new converts from across the social structure, some of whom were from the polygamous families. They struggled with the problem of not knowing how to treat converted polygamous men. In Botswana and elsewhere in Africa the problem has persisted to the present day. This is 150 years since the inception of Christianity in Botswana; the church has still failed to come up with a clear policy on dealing with the problem. Individual churches or leaders are normally at liberty to decide on how best to deal with such a situation.

Keywords: Batswana, Marriage, Polygamy, Women

Introduction

This paper attempts to put polygamy into context – that is, where it belongs and where it can be best understood, in the cultural context of the lives of men and women who lived it in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This can be done effectively by looking at the Tswana culture of the time, its expectations, the position and reactions of women and their immediate families, especially the children. The paper also examines the attitudes of European missionaries and the position they took on the question of polygamy when it came to the issue of church membership. While missionaries were themselves divided on this issue; they all found the practice of polygamy to be a stumbling block in the spread of Christianity among Batswana. They generally worked towards seeing the practice completely destroyed in order to pave a way for the rapid growth of Christianity. Missionaries

¹ Defined here as one man marrying two or more women.

expected polygamous men to abandon their many wives, except the senior one, before they would be admitted into church membership. The other less radical view was that the man in a polygamous marriage be admitted into church together with his many wives, but not be allowed to play any leadership role in the church. For the missionaries who worked among Batswana, especially those of the London Missionary Society (LMS), the primary, and arguably the most influential missionary organization in Botswana, the first option was most commonly used in dealing with such cases.

Putting Polygamy into Cultural Context

For a deeper understanding of the concept of polygamy and how it affects women, a broader definition is needed. According to Maillu (1988:1) a polygamist is simply a man who is married to more than one wife, living with them at the same time. In his definition Maillu gives the impression that only men can be polygamous. He says nothing about women. His position is supported by what we find in most African societies, including the Batswana. In these societies, polygamy is generally reserved for men with high economic, political or social status and power. It is a symbol of manhood and shows that wealth belongs to men, while women are generally dependent on brothers, fathers, husbands and uncles for meeting their day-to-day needs. It is for this reason that *bogadi* was only given by the groom's parents in the form of cattle and crops because the men were believed to be the only wealthy and powerful individuals, able to afford more than one wife.

Polygamy also improves and strengthens the economic and political position of men. To this end, Altman and Ginat state that:

...because families are often holistic economic units, with men, women and children engaged in fishing, agriculture, animal husbandry, or trade, the more hands the better. Wives are central to the economic viability of families in traditional cultures because they often do a great deal of the work, and they bear children, who also contribute to a family's pool (Altman & Ginat, 1996:90).

Despite this Altman and Ginat also point out that a polygamous marriage leads to conflict, competition, jealousy and a variety of other stresses. To solve this problem Batswana introduced sororal polygamy (marriage of sisters by the same man) on the assumption that sisters may be interpersonally compatible, and better able to live and work together in harmony. This was hoped to overcome the jealousy of polygamy. In spite of this it is in most cases discovered that polygamy also spoils the love between sisters (Altman & Ginat, 1996:92).

It must, however, be pointed out that in household affairs, women have a lot of influence and recognition. Compounds were generally known by the name of the wives. Each wife was known by the name of her first child. If the first child's name is Tebogo, the compound will be referred to as "Ko ga Mma-Tebogo" (at Tebogo's mother's place). Women are in fact bosses in their own kitchens. Tlou and Campbell point out that a polygamous husband is expected to build a house and allocate some cattle to each wife. According to them, he could not take the cattle back without the permission of the wives. The wives also had the right to own fields in which they grew sorghum, millet and watermelons, etc.

In the past polygamy was therefore fairly common among the Batswana. Generally most commoners married only one wife, with a few having two, or in exceptional cases, three. Polygamy was, however, more common among *dikgose* (kings) and other privileged and wealthy people in the society. The usual practice was that having married more than four or five wives, each wife had her own compound and stayed with her own children.

Wives were normally ranked in order of who got married first. The first to be married was automatically the senior wife; the last, the most junior. This state of affairs was confirmed by David Livingstone in the early 1840s when he wrote thus:

Very many have two wives, others have four, some have five, some six, and others, such as chiefs, seven. Now each of these wives has her own hut and store hut for preserving corn etc., and this state of things operates most injuriously against the increase of children (Schapera, 1961:41).

John Mackenzie, another LMS missionary in the 1860s, confirms that polygamy was often seen as a sign of wealth and prestige. For instance, he points out that: "Polygamy is sanctioned by the traditional customs of the Bechuanas... The headmen have usually from three to six wives, according to their wealth and social standing. Sekhome had twelve wives" (Mackenzie, 1871:410).

The reasons for high numbers of men engaged in polygamy among members of the royal family, especially *dikgose*, resulted from the following factors:

- (i) Polygamy was entered into for political reasons. Political marriages were essential and common among members of the royal family. They were important for cementing the *morafe* (the tribal group) by forming strong political allies between influential individuals in the society. Families such as those of prominent *dingaka* (medicine men) and *dikgosana* (headmen) were specifically targeted for this purpose. At times marriage agreements were reached between *dikgosi* of two different neighbouring *merafe* (plural for *morafe*) for the sole purpose of creating a friendly and peaceful political atmosphere between the two paramount chiefs and their tribes, by giving one's own sister or other close relative to marry with another leader.² This was believed to create a friendly atmosphere between two warring tribes. Although there is no known example of such a case among the Batswana, the marriage of Moffatt's daughter to David Livingstone was interpreted in this light by Mzilikazi. He refrained from attacking the Bakololo because he could not attack a people where the daughter of his friend Moffatt was residing.³ He regarded Moffatt to be the king of Kudumane, and gave him the same status as an African king.
- (ii) Polygamous marriages were also entered into for social reasons. The ability to raise and support a large number of wives, children, especially boys, and servants was seen as a high status symbol. A man with a large contingency of wives and children was deemed greatly favoured by the *badimo* (ancestors). The birth of boys ensured continuity of the family name, which the society and men in particular, valued highly. Boys were seen as an important economic asset in cattle farming. They usually played a leading role in the management of the cattle posts. This last point leads to the other important reasons.
- (iii) Polygamy resulted from economic reasons. A large family was seen as a source of labour and productivity. The more wives a man had, the more fields he could cultivate, which resulted in high crop yields for the sustenance of his economic status and wealth.

² Sekgoma I in 1857 arranged that his eldest son Khama III should marry a daughter of a prominent traditional doctor and headman for this purpose (Mackenzie, 1922:109).

³ Nkomazana, F. *The Story of the Bakololo Mission Disaster: "Inaugurated So Auspiciously and Ended So Fatally."* Master of Theology Thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1990:18.

Among the Batswana, therefore, polygamy was a culturally accepted and preferred form of marriage for these abovementioned reasons. It was regarded as crucial to the survival of the family because it enhanced growth, security, continuity and prestige or status. It was also thought to have an integrating function within the kinship system. These factors are adequately and best summarized by Eugene Hillman, who writes:

A large number of offspring is regarded as a matter of socio-economic urgency in an area where subsistence food production depends on the labour force that each family provides for itself, where the average rate of child mortality is very high, where the continuation of the family through male heirs is a grave responsibility, where each marriage contract multiplies the number of mutually helpful relatives, where leadership qualities are developed only through the good management of large families, where personal relationships are always regarded as more valuable than the possession of things, where a large number of well-brought-up children is looked upon as the greatest of human achievements. Where the desire for as many children as possible is paramount, as it is in the family units of almost every efficient means of realizing socially approved goals and social ideals. A man with more than one wife is normally going to have in his family more children than a man with only one wife (Hillman, 1975:114–115).

Hillman mentions another important reason why polygamy was encouraged in the past-high child mortality rate. Polygamy was believed to increase the birth of children, and enhanced security, social status and the esteem of the father. The failure to leave behind sufficient offspring to ensure the continuation of the family was seen as a major disaster. The strong bond between the living and the *badimo* – the belief that a person lives on after physical death has profound significance in relation to the practice of polygamy (Mbiti, 1975:119). Hillman (1975:117) expresses it as follows: “Procreation is the link with after-life and overcomes absolute death. Because of this polygamy is fairly widespread, for if a marriage remains childless a man marries again. To forbid polygamy to the Bantu can mean a question of survival or extinction”.

In summary, therefore, it has to be mentioned that the fear that a man might die without being survived by a male child was one of the main reasons why polygamy thrived. However, as already pointed out, polygamy was not only motivated by the need for children. It was also believed to create a sense of family solidarity, stability and continuity of cultural traditions. For political and practical reason leaders also married many wives. This facilitated the formation of political alliances between divergent groups in the society. Polygamous arrangements created bonds between families and clan groups leading to political stability and solidarity.

It was considered shameful to die without children, since childbearing was an essential element of being human. Productivity was seen as contributing to the existence of society. It also strengthened the peoples’ offering and sacrifices.

The fact that polygamy may persist by reason of being a social obligation is an important point which needs further elaboration. Other social factors are:

1. When a man dies, one of his brothers is expected by custom to inherit his wife or wives, particularly when the deceased was not survived by a male heir. In this case, a brother of the deceased is obliged to marry his brother’s widow(s). This is done for several reasons – (a) for cultural continuity, especially to maintain the family name; (b) for inheritance and security, that is, economic and psychological support.
2. In response to social pressures for more children, especially the need for a male heir, or, in the case of the woman’s barrenness.

3. It provides husbands with a socially accepted way of gratifying their continence following pregnancy and during lactation. A woman in her menstrual period is not supposed to be near a man because it was believed she would contaminate him. Sexual relationship during this time was believed to be fatal. A woman was believed to be able to kill a man by not telling him that she was menstruating, when he made sexual advances.
4. In recent years advocates of polygamy argue that in the past no woman was left unmarried. Every woman was given an opportunity to bear the responsibility of childbearing and upbringing. A woman who could not bear a child was despised and was without honour. They argue that since the ratio of women is higher than that of men in Botswana, polygamy is to be encouraged so that more women are married.

In summary, therefore, polygamy was considered to be a function of socio-political alliances and solidarity. Both in the political and social realm, it was a source of prestige, power and influence. New relationships from both sides of the couple's family created new patterns, connections, alliances, security, cohesion and multiple support systems.

Missionary Observations and Attitudes

The commentary of the early missionaries of the 19th century on polygamy as practiced among Batswana, contributes insight, understanding and some information to allow readers to draw their own conclusions. The problem, however, is that their diaries, journals and letters do not provide enough information on *the women*. Their feelings, views and beliefs are marginalized. Academic history also ignores this fact. These sources, therefore, do not allow the researcher to follow the lives of these women adequately.

The practice of polygamy in Botswana was more pronounced before the advent of Christianity. It gradually effaced with the advent of Christianity. Missionaries such as Robert Moffatt detested polygamy, considering it satanic. Its decline was seen as symbolising the fall of Satan and the victory over the powers of darkness. In 1902 Haydon Lewis wrote that "Polygamy still holds the people in its grip and has the chief as the prime advocate" (Chirenje, 1977:273). David Livingstone also opposed it and suspended Kgosi Sechele I from church membership to coerce him to abandon some of his wives. Sechele conformed but within a short time one of his abandoned wives, Mma-Kgokong was found to be impregnated by him. Sechele was subsequently suspended from church as a disciplinary measure but later reinstated in 1889. Before this Sechele had been deeply impressed by the preaching of Livingstone (Livingstone 1857:12, 15–16). He subsequently became an ardent convert to Christianity but remained a polygamist for a long time. *Bakwena* old men became very skeptical of the Bible. They declared that the "mysterious book" was harmful (Schapera, 1960:298). They believed that the missionaries, especially Livingstone, had bewitched their king and that he seriously needed the attention of the elders of the tribe. The book was said to drink people's brain, and render them too weak to think normally or rationally (Schapera, 1970: 33ff; Macnair, 194:(33–37).

Another prominent personality of the time was Kgosi Sekgoma of the Bangwato who had twelve wives, but unlike Sechele, he resisted Christianity. However, he passionately discussed the issue of polygamy with James Chapman, a traveler and hunter, who reached Shoshong in the early 1850s, saying:

I should like to be a missionary, and to become a Christian, if I should be allowed to keep my wives. I don't want any more. I have transgressed, and nothing can ever undo that which has once been done; but I cannot turn my wives and children out. All men's hearts will be against me; I shall be alone on the earth. To have my wives disgraced and my legitimate

children branded with a false and ignominious name would bring overwhelming ruin and trouble without end upon me (Chapman, 1868:220).

Sekgoma refused to abandon polygamy for two important reasons: First, he did not want to disgrace his wives; second, he feared the punishment of the *badimo*. The missionaries were not sympathetic to his position. They were very critical of Sekgoma's polygamous status because his action was understood to be an obstacle to the spread of Christianity. Robert Moffatt's words are a good example of the attitude of the missionaries to this issue. He wrote:

Among numerous examples of the power of Divine grace, it ought to be particularly noticed, that polygamy, that formidable barrier to the success of the gospel among barbarous nations, has in numerous instances given way to the principle sanctioned by Christianity. Submission to this law is the severest test to which a savage can be subjected. When we see a man, for conscience' sake, parting with one or more favourite wives, can we deny him the credit of sincerity? Can we demand a more satisfactory demonstration of the reality of the change? Among the converts at Griqua Town was a Mosutu, who had ten wives, and he cheerfully parted with nine, in obedience to the requirements of the Gospel. I believe all the missionaries among the Bechuanas are unanimous of the opinion, that not only an elder, but also every member as having the rightful claim, unless she voluntarily renounces it, which has sometimes been done. Of course it is understood that such are provided for by the husband as long as they continue unmarried (Moffatt, 1942:574–575).

The missionaries expected their male converts to be the husbands of only one wife. Whenever these men became converted to Christianity they held the view that the first wife had the legal claim to her husband unless she renounced it. The rest of the women were to be abandoned. They did this because they understood marriage to mean becoming one flesh as described in Genesis 2:24, which they understood to imply monogamy.

How Polygamy Disadvantaged Batswana Women

Marriage Formation

The choice of a man's first wife was a male dominated affair because marriage was seen as a means of continuing the patriarchal lineage. The most important function of a wife was thus seen as childbearing (Brown, 1926:58–65; Willoughby, 1923:46–138), in which production of boys is a crucial factor. No-one is excused from getting married. Every father expected all his sons to continue his family lineage (Schapera, 1956:28–29). A woman who deliberately chose to remain single, was not only virtually unknown, but also an embarrassment, and a shame to the family and community. But the question might be asked, which is better, a hungry, free person or a well-fed slave?

In the cultural context of the Batswana, a woman who chose a single life was believed to be refusing to fulfill the fundamental duty of childbearing. It was for this reason that the old maids, the unmarried old females, were known as *mafetwa* (those who have been passed by). This was the worst social stigma with which one could be associated as a woman. Mafetwa are seen as possessing bad luck. They are not to touch children, lest they pass their bad luck on to them. Other women do not want to associate with them. A woman who remained single was also considered immature, irrespective of her age. This was, in effect, a form of indoctrination that forced women to see polygamy as an alternative.⁴ The woman was never involved in marital negotiations (called *patlo*), while her married peers

⁴ The people involved may have seen this indoctrination as quite justified.

and younger sisters participated in such activities. This environment makes marriage prestigious and desirable to every woman, because one would then be considered a “real” woman. From this perspective the golden ideal of wisdom with age, applied only to men. Women were forced to see themselves through the eyes of a biased society. On the other hand, unmarried women remained economically dependent on their fathers, brothers or uncles. The embarrassment of a woman remaining under her parental authority, gave marriage, even polygamy, an enhanced social value. A woman, therefore, desired to get married so as to become a mistress of her own household, bear children for her husband and escape disgrace. But isn’t this a vicious cycle of power relations? It forced women to see polygamy to be better than not getting married at all.

In matters of authority, a woman must submit to her household head, normally the father if unmarried, her husband if she is one of the “lucky ones”, or other family head, depending on her circumstances. Whether they get married or stay single, their status remains unchanged; they do not have a right to make their own independent choices. At every level a woman has no power to make decisions on such matters as whether or not to work outside the home, have children or use contraceptives. Men are in total control within and outside the family sphere. In a polygamous family the situation is even worse, because women are treated as a group, and not as individuals, who have personal needs, rights and preferences.

Betrothal Negotiations

Traditionally, the choice of the bride and all the betrothal arrangements in a plural marriage, as in the case of the first wife, rests with the man’s parents, especially his uncle and father. Her parents can choose a suitable spouse for her without consultation and she was expected to honour their choice. Regarding this, Eugene Casalis, a French missionary among the BaSotho also wrote: “The marriage of all the wives is contracted in a similar manner; but a very marked distinction exists between the first and those who succeed her. The choice of the great wife (as she is always called) is generally made by the father, and is an event in which all the relations have interest” (Casalis 1861:186–7). The word generally used for the process of negotiation was *patlo* (betrothal negotiations). The girl herself is referred to as “*sego sa metsi*” (the one who fetches water for the family for domestic use). The process and the terminology used basically express the purpose for which the bride was sought – to bear children and serve the new family in a host of domestic duties. While this undermines the status of a woman, other women envy those who go through the process, all the same.⁵

The agreement between the two families is a legal guarantee for the marriage. John MacKenzie (1922:198) tells us how *Kgose* (King) Sekgoma of the Bangwato, in 1887, had arranged a wife for his elder son Khama, saying: “Before his banishment, Sekhome (*sic*) had desired his eldest son [Khama III] to take to wife a daughter of Pelutonia...”. While Khama, who had now become a staunch Christian, objected to the arrangement, Sekgoma did not give up on the idea. Many years afterwards when the former had already got married, he still insisted that he should marry Pelutonia’s daughter as his second wife. Although this plan never succeeded, Sekgoma saw this arrangement to be of considerable political significance. Through such marital arrangements Sekgoma hoped that he would create

⁵ The arrangement led to a substantial proportion of women marrying at an early age – say 16–19 years. It was culturally shameful for a woman to stay unmarried for a long time. Choosing and arranging wives for sons ensured they married from good families which meant stable marriages.

strong ties with his political allies such as Pelotona, a prominent headman and *ngaka* (traditional doctor).

The preliminary negotiations and agreements meant that the prospective husband has the right to visit the woman's home freely and cohabit with her. This has serious implications if the man decides to terminate the relationship at this stage, when he had borne children by her. The Tswana law only demands that he pay compensation for the spoilt marriage prospects and maintenance of the child. However, this amounts to about a meager six head of cattle.⁶ If the relationship is terminated by her death, her younger sister or another relative may sometimes take her place, especially if *bogadi* had been given (Roberts, 1972:42–43). This was a continuation of the polygamous marriage that had been entered into by the two families. The women in this case had no say or choice, but simply gave in and acted as married to their husbands. In fact the practice was never challenged or seen as oppressive. The male dominated society did not even make an effort to listen to the feelings of women. They were treated as children, having no rights to complain or challenge the *status quo*.

While the impregnation of an unmarried woman by a man other than one betrothed to her generally resulted in the termination of marriage agreements, a man in the same position, who impregnated a woman, did not suffer the same fate. For a woman this is a lasting, shameful social stigma. This state of affairs also jeopardized the family name, and advertised the single women of that household negatively. The woman further became a victim of the tradition which states that the father has a legal claim over her children. This is justified on economic grounds because the woman has no resources of her own. The term used for a woman who, for one reason or another, remains unmarried, but engages in an adulterous affair with a married man is *nyatsi* (concubine).⁷ Wives were not expected to question the whereabouts of their husbands if they decided not to spend a night at home. The Setswana proverb "*Monna thotse o a nama*" (literally meaning a man is like a seed, he spreads his branches everywhere) gives men the license to practice adultery. The people who fall prey to this practice are mostly unmarried women, especially *mafetwa*, divorcees, and widows, because they are traditionally deprived of economic resources. The *bonyatsi* system entails a flow of gifts from a man to reciprocate his *nyatsi*'s hospitality. She in turn looks to him for help with the building of a house or the provision of psychological security and other needs, in addition to the economic benefits.⁸ The alternative is to turn to her father's household for these resources. While it is a supportive relationship, it ties the woman to that patriarchal economic power, influence and identity. Despite such disadvantages, the traditional system made it very difficult for women to live on their own.

Adultery and Divorce

During the missionary period there were fewer marriages ending in divorce as compared to today. However, the population figures of the mid-twentieth century reveal that there were more divorced women than men.⁹ One obvious factor that contributes to this, is the fact that

⁶ Gulbrandsen, O, "To Marry – or Not to Marry Marital Strategies and Sexual Relations in a Tswana Society", in *Ethnos*, Vol. :7–28.

⁷ The phrase traditionally used to describe this situation was *sereti sa motes*, referring to the elevated position/status a man's presence brought to a home.

⁸ See footnote 7.

⁹ The earliest census of 1946 shows that only 2.3% of married men and 4.9% of the married women were described as divorced (Schapera, 1970:43). The low rate of divorce was attributed to the nature of the traditional

historically the grounds for divorce were always different for men and women. For men the grounds for divorce are the wife's infidelity, barrenness, sorcery, refusal or failure to perform domestic duties and other acts the society regarded as insubordination.

Divorce is not a pleasant option for women because customarily, there were adverse consequences associated with it. Whenever divorce occurred, the right to property and the custody of children is granted to the man. On the contrary, a wife would not divorce her husband on grounds of infidelity and cruelty, unless his behaviour was extremely excessive. Perseverance was expected of women, in the face of marital problems.

A male adulterer was liable to the payment of damages to the aggrieved husband.¹⁰ Failure to fulfill this requirement could lead to the woman being divorced.¹¹ However, in the case of a male offender, the wife has no such legal redress or protection against her husband's unfaithfulness (Roberts, 1956:56). Divorce for a woman also has shameful consequences, because it means returning to her father's home without any property or children, and once again, coming under the guardianship of a member of her own family group, who subsequently becomes responsible for her maintenance. Such a woman is treated with suspicion. She is regarded as being incorrigible, and having gone beyond her husband's control. Her economic dependency is also socially demoralizing. Like polygamous marriages, divorce works in favour of men.

Patrilocal Settlements and Inheritance

While the traditional marriage is patrilocal it is also potentially polygamous.¹² In such marriage relationships, patriarchalism is strongly felt. While each of these families are a part of several different households, living side by side, culturally they acknowledge a common male elder, who unites them to a common grandfather. This male elder co-ordinates important domestic events and activities such as marriage negotiations, feasts and clearing of new fields (Schapera, 1953:40). Kgosi Sekgoma I, for instance, is said to have been endowed with supernatural power and was therefore a uniting figure for his royal family. He also used his economic power to acquire a number of wives and thus support his social status.¹³

The law gives the man a superior position to his wife or wives. He can decide to marry another wife or have a concubine and the other wife or wives have very little say. The sayings "*monna selepe o a adingwana*" and "*Monna poo ga a agelwe lesaka*" simply mean that a man cannot be confined to one partner. It is culturally expected and permitted; the

mode of resolving disputes. The attempt to reconcile the partners, with the case revolving between the extended family, ward and the main *kgotla* persisted for a long time.

¹⁰ One of the extreme examples of the allegations of the manipulations of women involved Motswasele II, Sechele's father, who sometimes took other men's wives for himself by force and allowed his favourites to do so with impunity. As a result he was assassinated by his people at a *kgotla* assembly in 1823 (see Schapera, 1970:141 citing *Hermannsburger Missionsblatt*, 1859:38). An extreme example of actions aggrieved husbands could take involved sending her back to her parents.

¹¹ Schapera (1970:141–142). Although men could be divorced for sorcery, desertion, habitual ill-treatment or lack of support, they could not be penalised for polygamy, adultery and concubinage (*bonyatsi*) or for frequently visiting at the concubine's home. This practice gave rise to bitterness, envy, jealousy, etc.; sometimes a wife retaliated by assaulting the concubine or setting fire to her hut.

¹² Lloyd, E, 1895:76; Mackenzie, 1871:397. See Mackenzie To LMS, Shoshong, 19 March, 1866 in Mackenzie, 1922:108; Schapera, 1953:39–40. Mackenzie 1922:100; Livingstone, 1875:8–10; Mackenzie, 1971:415–416. Macheng, a son of Kgari's head wife, was the legal heir, but Sekgoma, the eldest son of a subordinate wife, usurped the throne and killed the supporters of Macheng's mother, who fled with young Macheng to the Kwená capital.

¹³ The Setswana word *mojaboswa* means the principal heir to his father's property.

wife can actually send children to call him from his concubine's house. On the other hand, for a woman adultery is a serious matter. The husband can send her back to her parents or claim damages for the adultery. This only leads to more mumblings because these women are not given the opportunity to speak out their minds (Northrup, 1995:9).

Another problem results from the fact that polygamous marriages do not only complicate their inheritance procedures among males, but further uses inheritance to the disadvantage of women. The laws of inheritance are influenced by the fact that Tswana traditional society is predominantly patrilineal. Family membership and descent are exclusively traceable through the names of their male leaders' agnatic ancestor. This also means that inheritance was passed from the father to the eldest son, or any other legitimate male family successor. While the other sons get smaller shares, women receive nothing substantial, which means that they remain economically dependent. On the other hand, women cannot dispose of their share of the cattle without their husbands' permission. Even when the deceased man has no male offspring the inheritance is passed to the nearest male agnate (Schapera, 1953:37-43 & 1938:28ff; Roberts & Comaroff, 1976). Through the custom of *tshwaiso* (earmarking of animals to someone) sons begin to acquire cattle long before their marriage, which is not there for daughters in most cases.

The ranking of the wives of a polygamist creates a problem in matters of inheritance and the distribution of household property at the death of a husband. This is why it is referred to as *nyalo ya lefufa*, meaning that it encourages jealousy and witchcraft among women.

Generally land and other forms of property are traditionally subject to male ownership and management, with women using them with the consent of men. This is the case possibly because only the husband has the legal rights to acquire land in a patrilocal residence. At her matrilocal residence the women can only use the land allocated to her father. On the death of her husband she is entitled to occupy her husband's dwelling but if she decides to return to her descent group she may only use her father's land (Roberts, 1956:40-42). Following divorce a woman could only take household property which is associated with a woman's social role. All the other major property, such as land, cattle, etc., naturally becomes the husband's property (Roberts, 1956:42-50). In this way the Tswana culture discriminates against women. They have no land rights.

Views on Polygamy Today

In his paper *Marriage and Family Life in Botswana Today: A Christian Perspective* Professor James Amanze argues strongly that Christian marriage is founded on monogamy. According to him, polygamy should not be accepted in Christianity because it is the institutionalized expression of the inequality of men and women (Amanze, 1996:5-6). Amanze writes:

...in a Christian marriage there should be no room for superiority or inferiority. Husbands and wives are called to a partnership of respect. Polygamy therefore is not accepted in Christianity for it is the institutional expression of the inequality of men and women enabling men to possess the lives of an indefinite number of women, to suit their own pleasure or convenience (1996:8).

However, Amanze observed that though the Zion Christian Church's official policy forbade adultery, most of its members practiced polygamy. The church did not consider monogamy a fundamental issue of salvation. Some of the African Independent Churches (Zionist type) also argue that the Old Testament does not teach against polygamy.

Contrary to Amanze, Prof Gilbert Sekgoma¹⁴ has argued that monogamy is not a Scriptural condition. His position is that the Bible does not insist on monogamy as the only form of acceptable marriage. He argues that “becoming one flesh” as described in Genesis does not necessarily refer to one man marrying one woman. Sekgoma says that it can mean one man marrying more than two wives and then becoming one flesh with them in marriage. He says that oneness here basically refers to the state of commitment to the marriage vow between a man and his legally married wife or wives. He also states that in 1 Timothy 3 the Bible only objects of a Bishop marrying more than one wife, but not other ordinary Christians. The International Pentecostal Church (PC) of which Prof Sekgoma is a member, does not have any difficulties with polygamy on a spiritual basis, but can only advise against it as a matter of common sense or on economic grounds.

Shalom Epstein of the Jewish Society in Botswana pointed out that in Judaism marriage has been sanctioned by God. He also mentioned that in Judaism humanity traces its history to the second chapter of Genesis. He argued that marriage could not be forced upon anyone. Should the Rabbi discover that one of the parties was coerced he would grant a divorce. While the Jewish custom encourages levirate marriage, it does not support polygamy and homosexuality (Amanze, 1996: 17, 20, 21).

Another comment on the place of polygamy in the Botswana society comes from Swami Saradanda of the Hindu Society, who states that Hinduism views marriage as a sacrament and not just a legal contract. He describes an ideal Hindu marriage as the strongest social bond and lifelong commitment of one wife and one husband (Amanze, 1996:24). This position is slightly varied by Sheik H Hassan of the Islamic Council of Botswana, who states that there are not statistics to show whether Muslims in the context of Botswana are monogamous or polygamous. While the majority of Muslims in Botswana are chiefly monogamous, Islam does not prohibit them from marrying more than two wives. He writes:

There are very few polygamous Muslim families in Botswana. Polygamy is not actually a law, it is an option which is meant to address certain social exigencies. This takes place if a wife is barren ... while the husband is in need [of children]. Under this condition the Islamic law provides him an alternative of having a second wife who will bear legitimate children for him than having children outside wedlock (Amanze, 1996:44–47).

Referring to Schapera (1970:126), Obed Kealotswe argues that the decline in polygamy in Botswana has led to an increase in concubinage (Amanze, 1996:56).

Conclusion

This paper has observed that traditionally, polygamy was regarded as a symbol of prestige and value among the Batswana. While polygamy was evidently an acceptable way of life among Batswana in the past, the voices of women were suppressed and marginalized to the point that they became the helpless and mindless victims. It must be noted that despite this acute neglect experienced by women, they were generally able, hardworking, sincere and intensely religious. While these women seem to revere polygamy as a sacred arrangement, they continued to wrestle with the disappointment and loneliness that so often resulted from their neglect by the male dominated society. Men used their position of authority to advantage. They had all these women as wives with all the corresponding rights and privileges.

¹⁴ Gilbert Sekgoma is an Associate Professor and Head of the History Department at the University of Botswana. He has also a member of the International Pentecostal Church (IPC). Interviewed: 19.07.2004.

One of the most sensitive issues facing these women is their land tenure status. Most women in polygamous relationships only gained rights to land through relationships with men. They were never owners of land but owners of crops. They had rights to cultivate and rights to dispose of crops, but not rights to allocate or alienate land. Their ultimate rights to use land were associated with their position toward men – as mothers, wives, sisters and daughters. Men use their position of dominance in society to appropriate women's rights to land. Women, whose rights to farm a plot of land were guaranteed by marital or kinship status, lost these rights at divorce and faced a diminished tenure status that underlies a greater economic and social insecurity.

Polygamy was seen as a status symbol for men. A man's wealth was deduced by the number of wives and children he had. As the paper has shown, affluence rather than any other factor determined whether or not a man had more than one wife. As he became more prosperous, he was better able to afford having multiple wives. Although polygamy always results in frequent fights between wives, the first wife often welcomed other wives as additional workers.

The other reason for polygamy was procreation, which was considered an obligation as well as a right. Both men and women placed huge importance on having children; a childless marriage was regarded as a curse. Boys are traditionally prized more than girls. It would be unthinkable for a Motswana woman to be without a boy child and have a normal marriage. Whenever a woman found herself without a child, especially a son, she was compelled by the societal expectations to yield to her husband's demand for another wife.

Another problem which affected women in a polygamous relationship had to do with the custody of children. In most cases custom favoured the father or his family in obtaining custody of the children, after a divorce, due to the payment of *bogadi*, which gives custody to them. The other consideration was that the husband had better resources to support the upbringing of children than the women.

Lastly, there was the issue of inheritance of property, which was a clearly male-dominated affair. The customary inheritance practices of the Batswana tended to leave women with little or nothing at the death of a husband or father. Boys and men usually inherited much more from their father's property than women.

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