

Counting Blessings with Cautions: Wisdom and Vitality of Polygamy In Islam

Khadijah Tukur Batagarawa¹, Atiku Garba Yahaya²

¹Department of Islamic Studies Umaru Musa Yaradua University Katsina, Nigeria

²Department of Islamic Studies Usmanu Danfodiyo University Sokoto, Nigeria

Corresponding Author: Khadijah Tukur Batagarawa,

Abstract: Polygamy is an issue recently generates heated debate regarding the rights and liberty of women. It causes concern to non-Muslim as they consider it to be an act of oppression against women. The West with their advocacy for women rights and liberty wants Muslims to jettison this social practice, which predate even Islam itself. The West and other who condemn polygamy either does so out of ignorance or to belittle a practice that is so entrenched and well perfected by Islam. This paper argues that there is great social wisdom in polygamous practice and vital blessings to enjoy both in this world and hereafter. But it must be approached with knowledge and caution. The Prophet (S.A.W.)'s polygamous marriages and the Qur'an provide illustrative examples in taking those cautions and in practicing it based on the Shari'a to enjoy these blessings, accordingly.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The concept of family is the bedrock of Islamic society and indeed of any society. That is why it is tragic that this concept is gradually being destroyed by western civilized countries and being replaced by their morally deficient norms, all in the name of freedom and liberty. One cannot write on the concept of family structure in Islam without knowing the main aim of legislating rules pertaining to it by Allah the all-knowing. Because how the Qur'anic framework is carried out in practices is largely determined by cultural factors, and differs from one society to another. Thus it is incorrect to attribute abuses that undoubtedly exist within the Islamic world to Islam itself rather than the human nature.

The existence of polygamy within Islam reflects the cultural norms of ancient societies. Great figures of the Bible had more than one wife, and it corresponds to metaphysical possibility, and on the other hand, societies always had surplus of women; the men being killed off in battles, wars and conflicts. Thus, polygamy fulfilled a social need, giving women social security and a sense of belonging. Allah (SWT) legislated polygamy as an optional rule for those willing and have fulfilled the requirements. Since Islam is a religion, which does not cause hardship to people or violate their legal human rights, it therefore leaves this issue open so as to be utilized at an appropriate time.

II. CONCEPT OF POLYGAMY

There are different terms that are associated with marriage organisations in different societies and at different historical epochs:

1. Monogamy: one man marries to one woman.
2. Polygyny (a kind of polygamy): one man marries to two, three or at the most four wives. The term "polygyny" is preferred because polygamy means multiple spouses (one husband and multiple wives or one wife and multiple husbands) whereas polygyny only refers to marriage of one man to multiple women.¹
3. Polygamy is defined as the practice or custom of having more than one wife or husband at the same time.²
4. Polyandry is multiple husbands of the same woman.³

¹<https://www.al-islam.org/.../concept-polygamy-and-prophets-marriages-sayyid-muha...Sayyid Muhammad Rizvi, The Concept of Polygamy and the Prophets Marriages>

²<http://en.oxforddictionary.com.poly>

III. POLYGAMY IN HISTORY

One of the common myths is to associate polygyny with Islam as if it were introduced by Islam or is the norm according to its teachings. No verse in the Qur'an or *Sunnah*, which states that either monogamy or polygyny is the norm. Like many peoples and religions, however, Islam did not out-law polygyny but regulated it and restricted it. It is not obligatory but permissible under certain conditions—one of which is to be capable of being fair and just to the spouses and ability to feed, shelter and clothe them, accordingly. The only passage in the Qur'an:

If you fear that you shall not be able to deal justly with the orphans, marry women of your choice two or three or four; but if you fear that you shall not be able to deal justly (with them) then only one ..." (Qur'an 4:3).

This is the only verse, which explicitly mentioned polygyny and restricted its practice in terms of the number of wives permitted and the requirement of justice between them. The verse was revealed after the Battle of Uhud in which dozens of Muslims were martyred leaving behind widows and orphans. This provides a moral, practical, and humane solution to the problems of widows and orphans who are likely to be more vulnerable in the absence of a husband/father figure to look after their needs: financial, companionship, proper upbringing, and other social and psychological needs. It should be noted that in polygamy all parties involved have options: to reject marriage proposals as in the case of a proposed second wife or to seek divorce or *khul'* (divestiture) as in the case of a present wife who cannot accept to live with a polygynous husband. While the Qur'an allowed polygyny, it did not allow polyandry (multiple husbands of the same woman). This is because its practice raises thorny problems related to the lineal identity of children, and incompatibility of polyandry with feminine nature.⁴

Thus, Islam did not invent the system of polygamy. It only perfected the traditions. Polygamy has existed from the earliest days of human history. Many holy personalities of the Bible had many wives or concubines. Similarly, Ibrahim (A.S) had Sarah and Hajar and was first blessed with a son through Hajar whom he named Isma'el (A.S), and a son through Sarah whom he named Ishaq (A.S). Also Yaqub (A.S) had four wives and concubines. It is from these four wives that Yaqub (A.S) had twelve sons who became ancestors of the Twelve Tribes of Israel. Likewise, Dawud (A.S), had at least eight wives.⁵

In pre-Islamic era, the Arab societies practiced polygamy, to the extent that there was no limit to the number of wives a man could marry. So, at times many women lived under one husband without regard for the effects this would have on the women or the oppression, problems and pressures placed on the wives.⁶

IV. ISLAM AND POLYGyny

When Islam came, it inherited the existing marriage system. The laws of polygyny were revealed at a time when corruption and severe maltreatment of women was the dominant practice in Arabia. The women of Arabia had zero rights and were certainly not given any respect. A man could marry as many wives as he wanted and treat them in any way he desired. Women were considered disposable properties. It is to the credit of Islam that it modified and reformed the system in existence at the time. It firstly, put a limit to the numbers of wives that a person can have at one time—maximum of four wives and many concubines as so desired, and secondly, put stringent conditions on a person who wanted to marry a second wife. He must be able to provide and maintain the family, and also deal with both on the basis of justice and fairness. In Chapter 4:3, after allowing the Muslim men to marry two, three or four wives, the Qur'an immediately says: "... but if you fear that you will not do justice (between them), then (marry) only one..." (Qur'an 4:3)

Islam does not make it obligatory upon Muslim to marry more than one wife. Also it does not oblige woman to marry a man who has another wife; it is optional for her. There is no Qur'anic or Prophetic legislation that obliges monogamy. In fact, Islam forbids it where the husband cannot treat all the wives with justice and equality. The Messenger of Allah said: 'Whoever has two wives and favors one of them over the other, he will come on the Day of Resurrection with one of his sides leaning.'⁷

³ Jamal A. Badawi, (n.d). "Gender Equity in Islam", World Assembly of Muslim Youth WAMY Studies on Islam, PP.7-8.

⁴ *Ibid*

⁵ Op cit

⁶ Al Fauzan, S.F. (2003). "Rulings Pertaining to Muslim Women" Translated by Burhan Loqueman, Second Edition, Darussalam King Fahad National Library Cataloging in Publication Data, Riyadh. P. 11

⁷ (Narrated by al-Tirmidhi, saheeh by al-Albaani, in saheeh al-Targheebwa'l-Tarheeb – no. 1949)

V. THE WISDOM OF POLYGyny

Polygyny is a beautiful alternative to otherwise damper marital situations:

- i. It offers a solution for a man who is married to a barren or sick wife and desires children, yet does not want to part away from this wife.⁸
- ii. It protects women from the type of suffering that can occur from being without a husband. Sometimes widows and divorcees need a husband, a provider. Sometimes children need a father, and a guardian.⁹
- iii. It also protects women from social humiliation in situation where husband cannot derive sexual satisfaction from a single woman.¹⁰
- iv. It provides men with adequate sexual satisfaction from multiple women.
- v. Polygyny guarantees more women to enjoy the security and happiness found in marriage, as we know there are at all times in history (modern and ancient) more women in the world than men.¹¹
- vi. It protects both husband and wives from placing themselves in potentially haraam situations or abnormal sexual behaviors.¹²
- vii. Cultural practices and social status: African traditional societies viewed monogamy as the natural form of marriage. Monogamous men in most of the African communities are regarded as weak men and thus, could not stand up for his responsibilities in the society. This is one of the reasons, which led to most of the African men to be polygamous in order for them to fit into the social classes.¹³
- viii. Heath reasons: When a wife is sick or suffering from an incurable physical deformity or unsoundness of mind or she becomes weak and cannot look after the sexual needs of the husband there will be tendency for the man to engage in adultery. Polygamy prevents adultery.¹⁴
- ix. Migrant labor: When men are transferred to work far away from home, they need to have another woman who will stay with them while away from home for work reasons.¹⁵
- x. During the period of war or calamity when men are killed, women and children are left behind in large numbers. Polygamy can thus be a best solution to this social problem. The period of the *sahabah* provides good historical examples.¹⁶

VI. THE EFFECTS OF POLYGAMY ON WOMEN

Women are jealous. Where jealousy between wives cannot be self-controlled, it may escalate to different levels and can lead to violence and to physical injuries, suicide and murder among women. This is because families live mainly in overcrowded conditions, which aggravates conflicts and stress between co-wives. Below are some of the negative effects of polygamy on women.

1. Psychological problems: There is a close relationship between polygamy and psychological problems among children and women in polygamous families. The expectation of a polygamous marriage is a high number of children. There is possibility or inability to provide the needs to such high families. This can put

⁸Personal Interview with Nafeesah Ahmad Batagarawa (A house-wife) at Batagarawa Town, Katsina, on Thursday 28th December, 2017, from 9:00am to 10am.

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Ibid

¹²<https://www.polygamy.com/articles/.../polygamy-in-islam-marrying-multiple-women> Oct 9, 2015

¹³Bappa, A.M. (n.d) "The Supremacy of Islamic Law". Hudahuda Publishing Company, Zaria.

¹⁴ Personal Interview with Dr. Nasir Abubakar Bakiyawa at General Hospital Katsina, on Saturday, 31st December, 2017, around 9:00pm to 10pm.

¹⁵Public Lecture presented by a prominent woman scholar Malama Murjanatu Ibrahim Duwan in Katsina, on Thursday 28th December, 2017, around 4:30pm to 6:30pm.

¹⁶ Ibid

pressure on the husbands and at times on the wives. The above problem often led to conflicts in the family and often can lead to break offs. As a result, this could lead to humiliation, frustration and psychological trauma.¹⁷

2. Social difficulties and low educational level: It is confirmed that one of the biggest problem in polygamous marriage is that education attainment of children is often very poor. It affects the rate of dropouts of school among children, escalates drug and alcohol abuse, juvenile delinquency as well as causes low self-esteem. Sometimes, there is disparity in education. Children from a certain woman may be educated while others may be non-educated.¹⁸
3. Competition and Unequal distribution of works: Studies conducted in different countries in the Middle East and Africa found that polygamy causes competition and unequal distribution of the works in the household among co-wives. They also discovered a disproportionate number of women from polygamous families among in-patient populations and psychiatric outpatients in Kuwait. The same phenomenon was noted in different societies in Nigeria.¹⁹
4. Mental health: Polygamy has negative effects and influences on mental health more especially for adolescents and teenagers. The problem in polygamous families would be aggressive behavior and causes difficulties in communication and adjustment of their problems.²⁰
5. Children from polygamous families often engage in sinful conducts and behaviors, poor in self-concept and high rate of attrition of school as well as sexual activity and abuse of drug and alcoholism.²¹
6. Poor livelihood: Women and their children also suffer from poor livelihood due to bad nutrition and low interest and care.²²
7. Conflict and Instability: Moreover, family conflict is considered as usual phenomenon in polygamous families. Polygamous women suffered from low self-esteem, phobias, anxiety, depression, hostility, and stigmatization more than women who live in monogamous families. Moreover, the wives compete for love and power. They are only recognized by the number of children they would give birth to and boys were superior to girls. This makes them enemies and not friends which in essence, directly affects their marriage and indirectly affects their children.
8. Child-parent relationship may be poor and not effective in polygamous families.
9. Lack of trust: It is often true that women in a polygamous marriage do not trust each other.

VII. THE WISDOM IN PROPHET'S MARRIAGES

One of the examples of the attacks that we see on the Internet these days is the one liner statement like: "Muhammad was a womanizer; he had nine wives." For Muslims who have studied the books of the Orientalists and the Crusade-minded missionaries, such statements are not new. But if one studies the life of Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) one would see that the Prophet was a man of highest character, even long before he started preaching Islam.

At the age of twenty-five, Prophet Muhammad married a famous and a highly respected lady of Mecca, by the name of *Khadija bint Khuwaylid*, who was 15 years older than the Prophet,²³ and he remained married to her for twenty-five years until she passed away in Mecca. So for the first 50 years of his life, the Prophet had only one wife, and had ten wives during the period of thirteen years. And so the question comes, what was the rationale behind the other marriages of the Prophet during the last thirteen years of his life? All the marriages of the Prophet, other than that with Khadija, had good political or religious reasons. We may divide these marriages into four categories, and some of the marriages had double purposes or reasons. In any case, all the marriages of the prophet just like his entire life were to serve as examples for mankind, especially Muslims.

(a) Providing Protection and Dignity to Widows

Sawdah bint Zam'ah: A Muslim lady whose husband had died in Abyssinia. When she returned to Makka, her father and brother were not only infidels but also enemies of Islam. She could not seek shelter with

¹⁷<https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/negative-consequences-polygamy-zainab-al-hammadi>

¹⁸<https://goodmenproject.com> › Families, Home / Families / Impact of a Polygamous Marriage on Children and Family. Nov 19, 2016

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Personal Interview with Dr. Nasir Abubakar Bakiyawa, Op Cit.

²¹ Murjanatu, Op C

²² Dr. Nasir, Op Cit

¹⁰ Ibn Kathīr in *al-Bidāyah wa an-Nihāyah*, vol. 2 (Beirut: Dar Ihyā' Turathi 'l-'Arabi, 1408) p. 360 as well as in his *as-Sīrah an-Nabawiyah*, vol. 1 (Beirut: Dar al-Ma'rifa, 1396) p. 265

them; they were so much opposed to Islam that they could even torture her to death. The Prophet, now a widower himself, married Sawdah in order to provide protection to her as well as to forge important link of kinship with his opponents.

ZaynabbintKhuzaymah: A widow for the second time, when her second husband ‘Abdullah bin Jahsh was martyred in the Battle of Uhud. Now, she herself faced hard times. The Prophet wanted to maintain her prestige, and so he married her in the 3rd year AH.

Umm Salamah: She was first married to ‘Abdullah Abu Salamah. She migrated to Abyssinia with her husband. When she became a widow and had orphan children, the Prophet married her in the 4th year A.H. She was also the sister of the chief of a powerful Meccan tribe of Makhzum. This marriage had the element of forging the link of kinship with his opponents in Mecca.

Umm Habibah: Daughter of Abu Sufyan. She was married to ‘UbaydullahibnJahsh and had migrated to Abyssinia. He became a Christian; while she continued the Islamic faith and separated from him. Her father, Abu Sufyan, was a radical enemy of Islam by then. When she returned to Medina, the Prophet married her in order to provide protection for her.

(b) To set women Slave Free

Juwayriyyahbint al-Hārith: After the Battle of BanuMustaliq in the 5th year AH, the Muslims took two hundred families of that tribe in slavery. Juwayriyyah, the daughter of the chief of that tribe, had become a widow. The Prophet set her free and married her. The Muslims, who had made the two hundred families of BanuMustaliq their slaves, realized that by Juwayriyyah’s marriage to the Prophet, all these two hundred families were now related to the Prophet by marriage. Out of courtesy to the Prophet, the Muslims set them free. Impressed by this nobility, the whole tribe of BanuMustaliq became Muslim. By this marriage, the Prophet was able to transform a hostile tribe into an ally.

(c) To Forge Friendly Relations for the Sake of Islam

Hafsahtbint ‘Umar ibn al-Khattāb: She became a widow after her husband was killed in the Battle of Badr. The Prophet married her in the 4th year AH.

SafiyahbintHuyaiyibnAkhtab: She was the daughter of the chief of BanuNadhir, a Jewish tribe of Khaybar. She became a widow when her husband was killed in the Battle of Khaybar. She was taken as a captive by the Muslim forces. The Prophet married her in the 7th year AH to maintain her noble status.

(d) Desire to relate to the Prophet

Maymunahbint al-Hārith al-Hilaliyyah: Her second husband died in 7 AH. She came to the Prophet and “gifted” herself to him if he would accept her. She only desired the honour of being called “the wife of the Prophet”. The Prophet (based on Qur’an 33:50) accepted her as his wife.

(e) Break a Taboo

ZaynabbintJahsh: The circumstance of her marriage to the Prophet was very unusual. She was given in marriage to Zayd son of Hāritha, an Arab slave whom the Prophet had freed and then adopted as a son. After that adoption, Zayd was being called, Zayd bin Muhammad – Zayd the son of Muhammad. The marriage of Zaynab to Zayd soon turned sour. So, finally Zayd divorced her. At the same time, Qur’an 33: 4-5 were revealed which declared that adoption was not recognized in Islam. But in order to fully abolish the system of adoption, Almighty God ordered the Prophet to marry Zaynab, the divorcee of Zayd.

Thus all these marriages had some social, political or religious reasons and were to serve as examples to the Muslims and further establish Islam during the period. In modern times, Muslims could also engage in similar marriage to promote Islam.²⁴

VIII. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the above discourse, it is important to recommend as followings in order to ease the tensions of polygamy and ripe its *vitality and wisdom*:

1. If polygyny seems to be too much of a challenge for you, avoid it. By all means, never insult it neither with the judgements you make on those who practice it nor with your own actions if you practice polygyny incorrectly or in an abusive manner.
2. Looking at the psychology of humans, only exceptional people have that quality of justice and fairness. Based on that, certain Muslim governments (like Iran and Egypt) regulate the provision of polygyny: the person who intends to marry a second wife has to seek approval from the family court and prove the need for a second wife and the ability of providing for both in an adequate manner.

²⁴<https://www.al-islam.org/.../concept-polygamy-and-prophets-marriages-sayyid-muha..>

3. A modern women's ambition is to behave like men, and their greatest endeavor is to imitate the worst aspects of non-Muslims, by not accepting polygamous situations as their parents did. This causes the current detrimental situation we are experiencing today. These corrupt thinking should necessarily be avoided, hence they are the sources of the problems not the *shari'ah*.
4. In a situation where there is no state to deal with social problems, communities should produce leaders within themselves and the duty should be upon these leaders to make rules in order to see that a man marrying more than one wife does justice to all of them, if he is cannot, the leaders should prevent him from taking such a step.²⁵ Some of the following conditions could be considered:
 - i. A person having insufficient income should not be allowed to marry more than one wife.
 - ii. If a man has sufficient income but cannot do justice to the wives and children, then the state or the appointed community leaders should fix the shares of each wife and her children accordingly.
 - iii. A man with bad or weak health condition may only be allowed to marry one wife.
 - iv. In all cases, the conditions should be laid down that a man before proposing a second wife must satisfy the authorities that he is able to fulfill his responsibilities towards the family and that his conduct in the past has been such that he may be expected to keep good terms with the family in case he marries more than one wife.

V. CONCLUSION

Islam is a practical religion; its laws are in line with human nature. It does not deny the natural forces in humans, rather it confronts them and provides guidance to control them without disrupting the peace in the society. It is important for us to remember that there is *vitality and wisdom* in every law Allah (SWT) gives us and in the lifestyle of our Prophet (PBUH). Jealousy is a very real and uncomfortable experience for any woman in any marital situation, and one might assume that this amplifies in a polygynous marriage. But wives should keep in mind that the practice is permitted in Islam, and that husband has not violated any teaching of Islam, and it is better to marry than engage in any form of illegitimate relationship which will create social problems and punishment hereafter. And the wisdom Islam gave to the wives experiencing jealousy is the reward of Mujahidun; Allah says:

Jihad is ordained for you, though you dislike it, and may be that you dislike a thing which is good for you and that you like a thing which is bad for you..." (Quran 2:216). It is worth noting that the polygamous problems being experienced today are our own making and obviously not within the context of the *shari'ah*. This is because during the time of the Prophet and the *Salaf*, polygamy seems harmless to the society. Thus, most social problems today which range from depression, anger, illnesses, suicides and killings are as a result of our attitudes towards understanding of Islam and lack of total submission to Allah the Almighty (S.W.T.).

And even today, these effects depend on the tolerance and patience of the wife, the environment that a woman affects her ability to accept being part of a polygamous marriage, as well as the attitude of the husband and at times his relatives, friends and neighbors.²⁶ On the other hand, a husband must consider the emotions of his first wife, as experts have said such feelings were expected. It is the responsibility of the husband to relieve those emotions, who had to make the right decision when remarrying. Husbands should make sure that they are just to all parties; whether women or children, in terms of finance, moral support, attention, care and education of children. For a man to marry several wives, he needed to be financially secured and emotionally mature. His responsibility is the most important factor.

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²⁵ Ajjjola, A.D. (2006), "*The Concept of Family in Islam*". Adam Publishers and distributors, Pataudi House- Darya Ganj, New Delhi. P 55

²⁶ <https://www.thenational.ae/.../polygamy-can-negatively-affect-women-study-finds-1.2...sept.26.2014>

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