

Persistence of Polygamy among the Alle of Southern Ethiopia

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In Ethiopia there are institutional, legal and policy provisions that discourage the practice of polygamy. For instance, the country's National Reproductive Health Strategy (2006–2015) states that polygamy, along with female genital cutting, early marriage and wife inheritance, is a principal social and institutional parameter that affects the Reproductive Health (RH) of women; and that success in improving the RH of all Ethiopian women hinges on the removal of these constraints (Federal Ministry of Health 2006). Furthermore, article 11 of the revised family code of Ethiopia (No.213/2000) prohibits bigamy. The Department of Women and Children's Affairs has been addressing these issues, teaching local women about their marital rights and encouraging them to appeal to the department whenever these rights are violated. Despite these efforts, however, polygyny is persistently practised among the Alle people.

This study aims at understanding the concept of marriage, emic explanations for polygamy, the situation of co-wives in polygamous households and changes in these practices among the Alle of southern Ethiopia.

Definitions of Polygamy

Polygamy is defined as marriage to more than one spouse at the same time. There are two varieties. The more common variant is polygyny, in which a man has more than one wife. The rare variant is polyandry, in which a woman has more than one husband (Shechtman 1980; Grey 2008; Kottak 2010; Nwazonobi 2013). In this paper we deal with polygyny, but we prefer to use the term polygamy because it is more commonly used in the literature.

The occurrence of polygamy has been explained in different ways. In the early days of anthropology, polygamy was believed to be typical for early stages of human social development (Engels 1942). Today, that perspective has shifted. Zeitzen (2008) argues that the existence of polygamy correlates with those economic and political systems where the most important resources are human resources.

Polygamy allows a man to have more children, providing him with a broader productive base, as he controls the labour of his wives and children to a large extent. On the other hand, Slomin-Nevow and Al-Krenawi (2006), working on the Middle East, associate polygamy with power and prestige. The larger the family unit, the greater its power, influence and honour among community members. A study conducted in western Africa (specifically Nigeria) shows that polygamy can be understood as a mechanism for building a security fence around one's life and family: it provides companions with whom to share thoughts and problems, and it supplies people who can help withstand attacks from other, larger families (Nwazonobi 2013).

Matz indicates that more than ten percent of all marriages are polygamous in Ethiopia; the rate is even higher in the Oromo Region, where approximately one third of mar-

ried women are married to a man who has more than one wife. Polygamy is common among different ethnic groups in southern Ethiopia, including the Gedeo, Kambata, Gamo and Gurage, among whom it is associated with male prestige (Matz 2016).

Locating the Alle

The Alle are among the Cushitic peoples found in the Southern Nations, Nationalities and People Regional State (SNNPRS) of Ethiopia. They share a common boundary with several districts: in the north with Derashe, in the south with Borana, in the southeast with Konso, in the west with Bena-Tsemai, and in the northwest with Male, Kamba and Bonks.

The Alle are agro-pastoral people, and their livelihoods depend on the agro-ecology of their settlements: in the highlands, they produce barley, wheat and *enset*; in the lowlands, cotton and millet are the major crops.

Alle society is divided into two subgroups that are hierarchically ordered. Farmers hold the uppermost stratum and are called 'pure people or citizen' (*esako*). Subordinate to them are the craftworkers, who are divided into potters (*ore*) and tanners (*hadhe hashha*); both are considered impure, though the latter is considered the most tainted. As in many other Ethiopian societies, intermarriage between farmers and craftworkers is prohibited, and interaction limited and regulated (Freeman and Pankhurst 2001, Epple 2018).

This article is based on research carried out from January 2015 to November 2015 among the Alle of southern Ethiopia.¹ We utilized qualitative methods because it was important to understand some social phenomenon from the perspectives of those involved and to contextualize issues in their particular socio-cultural-political milieu (Glesne 1992). Data was collected from interviews and case studies with polygamous households (husbands, co-wives and children), local elders, and the Department of Women and Children's Affairs. Much of the data came from males because it was difficult to make direct contact with women; as a result, the descriptions below reflect the male point of view.

Concept of Marriage among the Alle

According to numerous interviews, the term 'marriage' (*akke*) has a double connotation among the Alle people. First, it implies an established bond between a husband and wife. The fundamental purpose of the union is to bear 'children', by which they only mean male children. This is because, according to Alle custom, every male individual is born with an innate debt² to his father. He is freed from this once he marries and substitutes himself by producing a son. According to local tradition, childless men and fathers of only girls have the same status; they are derogatively described as *bahako* (barren or one who has no heirs).

Second, marriage is understood as a tool with which to build up family/clan power. According to this perspective, marriage not only unifies couples but also integrates their respective families and clans. This view of marriage has a political dimension, indicating an alliance between exogamous groups. Such an alliance creates mutual benefits and

1 We conducted this research as part of our academic responsibilities, next to teaching and community service. We did the fieldwork on different phases and the project fund was covered by our university (Arba Minch University).

2 The duty to replace oneself and thereby ensure the continuity of one's family line.

joint responsibilities. Lineage groups that unite through marriage cooperate over social obligations, such as marriage ceremonies, birth, death and funeral rituals, and in times of chaos, especially during feuds with enemies. A large family/clan also contributes to social recognition and respect.

Traditionally, most marriages in Alle were arranged by the parents of the bride and the groom, a practice that is locally called *bottolungoo* (betrothal) marriage. The prospective spouses have no role in the marriage negotiations between the two families and simply accept their parents' decisions. Though boys sometimes suggest a potential mate, the final decision lies with the parents. Girls traditionally have no say in choosing their spouse.

Another form of marriage is made through the agreement of husband and wife, a practice that is locally called *marsee*. Both male and female informants explained that this form of marriage is less complex and, therefore, proceeds much quicker than *bottolungoo*. In addition, marriage payments in *marsee* marriages are less costly. It does not involve the parents endorsing the marriage. Instead, a boy presents his marriage proposal to a girl he likes through a close male and/or female friends or through his sisters. If the girl accepts the boy's request, they arrange a date for her to move to the home of one of his relatives.

Once she is there, the boy sends a go-between – usually an elder to his father – to negotiate with the girl's parents to accept him as a son-in-law. The marriage can only be finalized after all parties have agreed a process that involves lengthy negotiations and may take up to two or three months.

A third variation of marriage is through abduction, locally called *sitakko*. This is when a boy marries a girl by force. Among the Alle, this form of marriage occurs for a number of reasons. First, a boy may abduct a girl when he suspects or discovers that there is a rival man who might attempt to kidnap her; this happens particularly when they are already engaged. Second, a boy may kidnap a girl if her parents have refused to accept (due to some of the factors mentioned above) the formal marriage request made by his parents. Last, abduction may occur when a girl rejects a boy's marriage request. In short, participants (both male and female informants) substantiated that a boy abducts a girl when he fears that a planned marriage or elopement might fail.

Recently, there have been changes in the patterns and practices of two of the forms of marriage among the Alle. *Bottolungoo*, traditionally the most common form of marriage, is now only partially arranged by the parents. Their involvement is now limited to checking the social background of their child's spouse and conducting the marriage ceremony. Mate selection, negotiation and decision-making are performed directly by the children themselves, or through their agents/friends. According to the participants, Christianity and its effects on indigenous culture are behind this change. Meanwhile, incidences of *sitakko* are declining because it is now a criminal offence and increasingly viewed with disapproval. These changes have allowed *marsee* to become the most preferred form of marriage today.

Through marriage, a woman is integrated into her husband's clan and she is called *kaf-ikkoo*.³ This means that, in everyday life, her husband's family members have the right to oversee her. When a husband dies, depending on the decision of his clan head, his brother or close kin inherits his wife. They are then socially and culturally recognized as partners, but their children are named after the deceased husband not their biological father, be-

3 Meaning she belongs to all and is bone and flesh of them.

cause the purpose of the marriage is to ensure the descent continuity of the dead. In addition, the woman and her children continue to live in their own homestead, freely using the property; her brother-in-law acts as household head but only visit her infrequently.

Divorce is generally outlawed according to the local custom, even when issues such as barrenness, domestic violence, disagreements and conflict are causing marital problems. Occasionally, however, a husband may divorce his wife if he has the approval of the clan chief. In such cases, the husband has the right to remarry but the wife does not. If the woman wants to escape the situation, she has to leave the Alle lands and live in another community, where she might be able to remarry. Even then her new husband is obliged to pay compensation (*maaso*).⁴

Local Explanations of Polygamy

Among the Alle people, polygamy is fundamentally embedded in their perspective on marriage. However, we can classify the influences on the practice of polygamy into two categories: basic justifications (changing social status, patrilineality and male preference, levirate marriage, rite of passage to customary politico-religious leadership); and supporting (social prestige, social prohibition) factors.

Changing social status

Among the Alle, individuals who belong to a large family are socially respected in everyday life, whereas those from small families are less honoured and are marginalized. They are harassed in the drinking houses, market places and public streets. They may work with individuals from large clans in reciprocal labour organizations, but people reject them, claiming they can make no difference because they are inferior. They are sometimes even intimidated and their property (land and cattle) forcefully taken by men from large clans. In order to escape their status as vulnerable, many become involved in polygamous marriages, by which they can increase their family size, especially by producing to male children. The case described below clearly illustrates this.

Case 1: Getachew was one of our key informants. His father bore nine children, eight were female and one was male. His father was rich and owned many hectares of land and cattle. However, he was single and unprotected and people disrespected him in the social arena. Repeatedly he was intimidated and harassed, his cattle were forcefully taken. Getachew grew up witnessing his father's troubles and chose to marry two wives, who bore twenty-three children (twenty-two male and one female). The first three children on their part got married and bore twenty-three male children. Others are on the way to that. Getachew said, including his grandchildren, there are forty-five males in his family and they are now secure and publicly accepted in comparison to the former shameful times.

Patrilineality and male preference

The Alle are a patrilineal society, descent is reckoned only through the male line and women belong to the lineages of their husbands once they are married. Because of this,

⁴ Compensation can amount to between 7000 and 8000 ETB in addition to cattle gifts to the ex-husband.

preference for sons begins at birth. Females are not as valued as males and are not entitled to inherit their parents' property. Some of our key informants explained that they became involved in polygamy because they had fathered only female children and worried about the continuation of their descent line.

Levirate marriage

According to Alle custom, when a woman gets married to a man, she totally integrates into his family. A family or clan head has social obligations to secure the widow's inheritance and ensure the descent continuity of their dead relative. This leads to levirate marriage, which prevents the widow marrying someone outside the family and the property of her deceased husband thus falling to another family.

Occasionally women support levirate marriage in order to preserve social acceptance. During our fieldwork, the Alle Woreda's Department for Women and Children told us that a woman had come to their office to complain that her brother-in-law had refused to inherit her for the fifteen years since the death of her husband. According to the Department, the woman explained that she had been waiting him all those years in order to maintain her social acceptance in the community, because divorce despises the status of woman.

Among the Alle people, a younger brother has an obligation to care for and have sexual intercourse with the wife of his elder brother if he is absent for a long time, for example, when he is doing military service or in prison. In such cases, the levirate marriage is sustained until the husband is released from service or jail. On his return, the woman and any children born in levirate are given to him. The following case illustrates this norm.

Case 2: Teshome was one of our key informants. He had been in military service during the military regime. During his 10 years in military service, his younger brother inherited his wife, who gave birth to a son. Upon the fall of the military regime, Teshome returned home with a new, Eritrean, wife. On his arrival, his brother returned his former wife and the son to him. Teshome explained that his brother did so with compassion, so that he would have many children. And he was happy with his brother's action. Nevertheless, his Eritrean wife had a culture shock, which lasted until she got socialized to Alle custom.

Rite of Passage to customary political-religious leadership

Alle tradition obligates the customary political leaders (clan leaders) to marry multiple wives. A clan leader may have married one or more wives before taking his clanship position, but he has to marry another woman, 'a crown wife', as a mandatory rite of passage to clan leadership. The crown wife is recommended and selected by the community members of his jurisdiction. She is selected from a pure and respected family and is considered the senior wife; all the wives before her are junior. Our informants confirmed that there are nine clan leaders in Alle, and each has more than five wives, an indication of their status and prestige.

Social prestige

Informants elucidate that 'affluent' men usually get married to many wives because they want to celebrate their status by having multiple wives. This desire for social prestige

even encourages competition among women. Both male and female participants indicated that some women encourage their husbands to get married to other wives by saying, 'You are not less than someone, get married and let us have many children and be influential!' Such women arrange second marriages for their husbands and even share their household properties with co-wives.⁵

Social prohibition

According to Alle custom, parents are prohibited from having sexual intercourse once their first son gets married, regardless of their age and sexual needs. The restriction applies particularly to the woman; the man is free to marry another wife. Elderly informants elucidate that the prohibition is associated with the community's belief that violation of the custom causes misfortune and plague to fall on family members, cattle, production and productivity.

Polygamy and the Situation of Co-Wives

Alle custom prohibits co-wives from living in a single home. Polygamous husbands construct separate houses for each wife, in order to reduce distrust, suspicion, envy and conflict between them. Female informants indicated that, despite this, the relationship between co-wives is often characterized by disagreement and open conflict because of the unequal treatment they receive from their husband.

Polygamy causes unfair treatment of co-wives. Data collected from women who are married to polygamous men, local elders and key informants indicates that husbands often neglect their junior wives. This manifests in a lack of both material and emotional support. In Alle society, land is the basic economic asset, and when a man gets married to a second wife, he shares her piece of land so that she can grow her own food and manage her life. Thereafter, he is not concerned for her and her children. He does not visit them regularly and lives with his first wife.

The unequal treatment of co-wives is embedded in Alle custom. According to Alle tradition, the first wife is called *yayedhammoo* (first/senior wife)⁶ and all others are collectively called *yayelammo* (second/junior wife). Hence, it is customary for a husband to live with *yayedhammoo* and give her a special place. She is cared for and supported in every area of life; her husband extends both moral and material support to her. *Yayedhammoo* controls all the household assets: land, cattle and other basic properties. She also enjoys a privileged status in the public sphere. In the community, she is respected as first wife. Junior wives also respect the high status of *yaye dhammoo* because the local custom obligates them to do so.

Today, however, the situation of co-wives is changing. According to informants, some men are detaching themselves from existing custom and living according to their own order of preference. One factor influencing this change is a woman's appearance. When a woman is lovely and beautiful, her husband usually clings to her, whatever her rank. Such women enjoy both emotional and material support at the expense of the other wives. The age of a woman also influences her position these days. During fieldwork, we

5 Recently, female competition is believed to have caused the expansion of polygamy among the Alle.

6 For clan chiefs only the publically selected woman is the legitimate senior wife.

observed that some husbands adhered more to young wives than to the older ones. In such cases, senior wives are left behind and are sometimes overlooked and undermined by junior wives.

The following case clearly illustrates the recent change in the treatment of women among polygamous household.

Case 3: Ayelech is *yaye dhammoo*. She said even though she is the first wife, her husband does not love and support her. He is not concerned for her and their children. He lives with the second wife. Ayelech said he discriminates and harasses her, saying she is old and his later wife is young and beautiful.

The emerging change in the treatment of co-wives causes jealousy and animosity between senior and junior wives. They often quarrel with each other, and are sometimes involved in open conflict. Some junior wives divert the attention of their husbands, but such actions further aggravate competition and conflict between the wives. One woman whose husband's attention has shifted to a junior wife said, 'man is softy seeker and he lives for his stomach i.e. he leaves one and clings to other'.

Changing Patterns in the Practice of Polygamy

Among the Alle, polygamy is still widely practised. However, subtle changes are being observed, which are being brought about by legal and institutional measures, the expansion of Christianity and the spread of modern education.

Legal and institutional measures

Data collected from Alle Woreda's Department of Women and Children's Affairs indicates that the government has been trying to implement the legal and institutional provisions mentioned at the beginning of this paper since the establishment of Alle as a self-administrative woreda. The Department has begun raising awareness of gender equality and the basic rights of women provided in Ethiopia's revised family code. The Department has also condemned polygamy as a harmful custom, and women are encouraged to appeal to the office when their rights are violated. Many literate women appreciate the legal provision and some have even brought charges against their husband after they married other women or are in the process of doing so. In short, women have begun to reject male domination and the asymmetric power relations they have experienced for so long in the community.

Nevertheless, in practice the rights of woman are not maintained. Women are still under male domination because of the deep-rooted custom of polygamy in the community. According to Mariam Mamo, an educated Alle woman who at one time worked as professional in the Department of Women and Children's Affairs in Alle Woreda, there are two basic reasons that stop the Department from working effectively on the issues under discussion. The first is that, unlike women, male members of the community do not accept the legal provisions made for women because they believe that they are against their very custom. Second, the justice bodies and courts do not properly address the appeals women make to them. Regarding this, Mariam said that the justice body tries to solve the problems of women by using a 'double standard'. For example, if a woman accuses

her husband because of his involvement in another marriage, the court will not take legal measures, especially if his new wife has already given birth to a child. Often, with regard to the rights of the children, the court mediates between the two partners.

On the other hand, if a woman accuses her husband early – i.e. before his new wife gives birth to a child – the court punishes the husband and his second wife, sending them to prison for an average of eight months. However, when they are released from jail, the man often abandons his first wife because she accused him of involving in another marriage and then makes a life with the junior wife. The first wife and her children are ignored, not cared for or supported. In the meantime, the family of his second wife asks him for the bride price and this further damage the family's economy (the property owned by the man and his first wife). For example, Mariam explained that her brother married another woman and sold the land and other properties owned by him and his first wife to pay his new wife's family a bride price of 18,000 ETB.

The expansion of Christianity

In the 1950s Orthodox Christianity was introduced to Alle society. Today, there are about seven Orthodox churches. According to older informants, Orthodox Christianity has not discouraged the local customs and practices and, in fact, it exists in conformity with their customs. Orthodox clergymen and priests did not condemn and override the practice of polygamy.

Protestants (Mekane Yesus and Ethiopian Kale Hewot Church), on the other hand, have been radical in their approach, promoting monogamy as divinely ordered marriage and condemning polygamy. Polygamous men who embrace Protestantism are thought to divorce their junior wives and retain only their senior one. An evangelist from Kale Hewot Church indicated that young Protestants were more inclined towards the new order of life than toward the local customs. In addition, those who marry in a Protestant church live in accordance with the new religion's precepts.

Thus, the Protestants have achieved some changes to the practice of polygamy. However, the Church has been unable to make further transformations. According to Protestant informants, there are several reasons for this. First, many converts were already polygamous (having two or more wives) when they embraced the new religion and did not want to divorce their junior wives; they do not consider marrying extra wives adulterous, as the Protestants teach, but as a normal way of life. Second, some married Protestants who were involved in another marriage left the Church and returned to their former lives when faced with the Church's condemnation. Third, issues such as whether polygamous men can be baptised, making them full members of the Church, involved in the Lord's Supper and allowed to become ministers and leaders, became and remain a matter of conflict and disagreement among leaders and members of the Protestant Church. Finally, more than anything, the involvement of some leaders in polygamy weakened the Church's impact on the local culture. The following case clearly illustrates the situation.

Case 4: Antisa together with his wife and their four male children live in Kolango, administrative centre of Alle Woreda. They have been member of Mekane Yesus Church for many years, and Antisa serves in the church in leadership and in other departments too. He is a well-known and respected person. However, he wanted

to marry another woman and always insists his wife by claiming that he wanted female children. In the end he married the woman, and for the time being the church excluded him from the leadership, and later he was returned to his position. Today they (he and his wives) are serving in the church.

Participants had different perspectives on the case. Those from Protestant churches, especially monogamous men, argued that this man shamed the Church and its role in the community. Non-Protestants, on the other hand, claimed that it was right to marry other women and have as many children as possible. But the case clearly shows that local custom is more powerful than the imposed religion among the study community.

Modern education

According to the data obtained from Alle Woreda's Education Office, modern education is rapidly expanding among the Alle. Before Alle became a self-administrative district in 2011, when its lands were divided between Derashe and Konso special districts, there were only ten schools. Today, there are fifteen elementary and junior schools, one high school and one preparatory school. In the curricula of various subjects, polygamy is labelled as a harmful tradition, and consequently younger generations have begun to overlook the local custom.⁷ However, during fieldwork, we came across some educated men – educated to degree and diploma levels – involved in polygamy; their attitude towards the local custom has not been transformed.

Conclusion

Among the Alle, marriage is understood as a reproductive strategy and a tool for creating social bonds. The study has shown that the reasons for polygamy are fundamentally embedded in the essence of marriage. However, the explanations presented are more male-biased and the role of women in polygamy is less represented.

Today, some changes have been observed in the various forms of marriage seen in Alle. While traditionally *bottolungo* was the most common form of marriage, today *marsee* is preferred. Similarly, certain transformations in the situation of co-wives in polygamous households have been observed. Although local custom acknowledges that the first wife is senior and that husbands should live with them, in practice, some men have detached themselves from tradition and begun to live according to their choice and order of preference.

The changes to the practice of polygamy, on the other hand, are subtle. Despite legal and institutional provisions, the expansion of Christianity and the growth of modern education, polygamy is persistently practised. This persistence is surely related to the benefit the Alle community obtains from polygamy. As Grey concluded some years ago:

The logical conclusion must be that the incentives for polygyny retain considerable vigour even in contemporary sub-Saharan Africa, so that the institution perseveres in the face of rapid, ostensibly antipathetic, socio-economic change' (Grey 2008:7).

⁷ A fourth grade student from Kolango said that, 'it is better to be orphan than to grow up in a polygamous household'. His father has three wives and he was born from the third wife. The student explains that his siblings and their mother are not cared for, they are marginalized and ignored. The entire burden rests on their mother. Considering all this, he claims that polygamy is a bad custom.

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