

POLYGAMY: A REGULAR IRREGULARITY IN SOME AFRICAN SOCIETIES



By

Dr. NOMA ELOUNDOU Damien,

*Development Anthropologist, Associated
Lecturer / Universities of Yaoundé 1 and
Ebolowa*

May 28, 2026

AGENDA

❑ GENERAL INTRODUCTION

❑ STATEMENT

I- POLYGAMY IN AFRICA: BETWEEN TRADITION AND
CONTEMPORARY REALITIES

II- POLYGAMY AS A DYNAMIC AND EVOLVING SOCIAL
INSTITUTION AND

III- POLYGAMY, RELIGIONS, AND AFRICAN
SOCIETIES EVOLVING

IV- BIBLICAL ROOTS AND HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF
MARRIAGE

❑ GENERAL CONCLUSION

❑ BIBLIOGRAPHY

General Introduction

Polygamy, social fact and marital norm, is not universal, but **culturally constructed**.

In anthropology, two main forms of polygamous marriage :

- ❑ Polygyny, which refers (one man with several women);
- ❑ Polyandry, (woman with several men)

While Cardinal Ratzinger is decisive on specific aspects, Pope Francis says “**Faithful to the teachings of Christ, we look at the reality of the family today in all its complexity, with its lights and its shadows (...)**” (Pope Francis, 2016).

Statement

Polygamy means person is married to several spouses.

Questions (3):

- ☐ How can Catholic Church reconcile its universal teaching on marriage with African cultural realities where polygamy remains socially accepted and sometimes legally recognized?
- ☐ What pastoral and social mechanisms can be put in place to support polygamous faithful without excluding them from church life?
- ☐ To what extent does the Church's attitude toward polygamy influence social cohesion and family dynamics in Africa?

I- POLYGAMY IN AFRICA: BETWEEN TRADITION AND CONTEMPORARY REALITIES

1-Senegal

Polygamy is a significant social and legal reality in Senegal even though monogamy is on the rise in urban areas. The 1972 Senegalese Family Code allows a man, upon entering into a civil marriage, to choose one of the following regimes: Monogamy; Polygamy limited to two wives; Polygamy extended to up to four wives.

2. Cameroon

Law of June 29, 1981, on organization of civil status, stipulates that spouses must specify their matrimonial regime (monogamy or polygamy).

- In many cameroonian communities, polygamy was a normal form of family organization before the arrival of Christianity and colonization.
- In several traditions, polygamous family is based on a hierarchical structure: the first wife often enjoys a special status; Each wife generally has her own domestic space; husband is responsible for ensuring a distribution of time, resources, and family authority.

II- POLYGAMY AS A DYNAMIC AND EVOLVING SOCIAL INSTITUTION

Polygamy is :

- ✓ An institution framed by kinship systems
- ✓ A hierarchical organization
- ✓ A Changing Institution

❑ Anthropological Perspectives

III-POLYGAMY, RELIGIONS, AND AFRICAN SOCIETIES

1. On the Dynamics Between Polygamy and Religions

When Catholic missionaries arrived in Africa in the 19th and 20th centuries, they encountered societies where polygyny was deeply entrenched. **Position of Catholic Church has given rise to numerous cultural tensions in certain African societies.**

2. On the Influence of Religions and Contemporary Evolution

- ✓ Catholic Church and several Protestant churches encourage monogamy.
- ✓ Social transformations are altering urbanization, women's education, the high cost of living, and the evolution of family values.
- ✓ Researchers analyze confrontation between Christian doctrine and the persistence of polygamy, **highlighting the tensions between religious norms and cultural practices**, as well as the adaptation strategies of the Church and the faithful (Bongajum D. L. et al., 2025).

IV- BIBLICAL ROOTS AND HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF MARRIAGE

1- Matrimonial Regimes and Biblical Roots

- ❑ Old Testament, several important figures practiced polygamy, notably Abraham, Jacob, David, and Solomon.
- ❑ New Testament, Jesus Christ recalls the original model of marriage: “A man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh” (Genesis 2:24; Matthew 19:5).

IV- BIBLICAL ROOTS AND HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF MARRIAGE

2- The Current Position of the Catholic Church in the World Today

- ❑ Cardinal Ratzinger approach revolves around three main axes: the rejection of denaturing 'inculturation,' the refusal of baptism without conversion, and polygamy as a « **structure of sin** ».
- ❑ Pope Francis believed that “(...) cultural trends that seem to impose boundless emotionality [...] a narcissistic, unstable, and changeable emotionality that does not always help individuals reach greater maturity.” Then, “couples are sometimes uncertain, hesitant, and struggle to find ways to mature. Many tend to remain in the primary stages of emotional and sexual life.”

GENERAL CONCLUSION

Christian monogamy and African polygamy two ideological and socio-cultural systems.

❑ Rigorous research in religious anthropology and social sciences continue. Furthermore, research, including comparative studies and the evolution of civilizations, could guide Church leaders on the appropriateness of marriage choices according to different cultural eras.

❑ How can the Church integrate **inculturation** within the matrimonial perspectives and cultural ecology in the whole catholic doctrine?