



International Journal of Development and Sustainability

ISSN: 2186-8662 – www.isdsnet.com/ijds

Volume 7 Number 4 (2018): Pages 1544-1563

ISDS Article ID: IJDS17092101



The interplay between conflict and solidarity in co-wife family relationship: Experience from Africa

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Abstract

Social geographies of family relations and gender issues specifically remain understudied in Africa. This paper addresses the gap in research by evaluating the Interplay between Conflict and solidarity in co-wife's family relationship in Africa. This is accomplished by examining the offshoot of one of the most widely documented cultural practice in many cultures: polygamy. Drawing upon an extensive contemporary research by social scientists on polygamy in Africa as a value system, and relying on the theory of equality and opportunity, this qualitative study examines the implications of polygynous relationship in Africa and identifies ethical issues that relate to this form of affiliation. Findings however reveal that though polygynous family system is as sexually and emotionally satisfying as a monogamous one, co-wife conflict especially in the early years of marriage is pervasive, and often marked by outbursts of verbal or physical violence. Nevertheless, material, social, and emotional factors possess ambivalent characteristics to undermine or strengthen co-wife solidarity and bonds, as well as pave way for jealousy and conflict.

Keywords: Family Relationship; Conflict And Solidarity; Co-Wife, Polygamy; Polygyny

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Cite this article as: Essien, E.D. (2018), "The interplay between conflict and solidarity in co-wife family relationship: Experience from Africa", *International Journal of Development and Sustainability*, Vol. 7 No. 4, pp. X-X.

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1. Introduction

At the core of anthropological analysis of marital relationship in Africa is the distinction between polygynous and monogamous marriage institutions: the practice of having more than one wife or husband at a given time, and the tradition of marrying only one wife or husband. Indeed, Africa has witnessed the transformation of family relations since the period of settled agriculture and the emergence of early states (Ameh, 2007). Polygamy has been widely practised as a value system and a marriage custom shrouded in cultural practices, beliefs as well as individuals' choices through centuries of social development. It represents a specific cultural approach to marriage, family, and reproduction (Tertilt, 2006). As a cultural practice in Africa, there is tremendous variation in the prevalence of the practice both within and between countries (Falen, 2008).

As an outstanding trait in most communities in Africa, the settings in which polygyny is widespread tend to be economically, socially, and culturally distinct from those in which the practice is not pervasive (Falen, 2008). Currently, nearly seventy percent of the societies in Africa in particular and many other part of the world permit men to marry more than one wife. Although statistics of men with more than one wife in contemporary time is infinitesimal, the spirit of polygamy still remain very strong in Africa as the practice continues to reinvent itself in various forms in light of broad social changes in contemporary time (Ember, 2007). This is evident in the mutation of this behaviour into various forms of irregular sexual relationships and serial informal marriages and living arrangements in many African societies especially in the urban areas.

However, as a value system, polygamy has been highly resistant to the competition of the imported ideology of monogamy and to the impacts of various structural changes. This is where Christianized monogamous men do have more than one outside wives or girlfriends (Ember, 2007). Therefore, the hypothesis that polygamy is unsatisfactory for human growth and development is clearly culturally ethnocentric and has given new visibility and urgency to the need for response and empirical evaluation of the context of cultural norms, beliefs and choices of the practice in Africa. This lends credence to the fact that we have the potential capacity to change the social relations in which we live, including the social relations between polygynists and monogamists (Josephson, 2002). Nevertheless in many societies where polygyny is widespread, there is unequal gender relations and unions tend to be unstable, thus, giving rise to frequent divorce (though often quickly followed by re-marriage in some cases), violent conflict and quarrel and sometime death (Kilbride, 2003). This explains why marriage in Africa is bedevilled with so many problems that have not only continued to threaten it as an institution but also led to her breaking down irretrievably. This study therefore, attempt an exploration of the interplay between conflict and solidarity in co-wife family relationship in Africa.

2. Conceptual clarifications

2.1. Polygamy

Polygamy is a socio-cultural construct which consists in the maintaining of marital relationship with more than two persons. Practically speaking, when the result of such a relationship is primarily targeted at forming

a single matrimonial or family entity with the spouses, polygamy is said to have been instituted (Jankowiak, 2008). Polygamy presents a fascinating ethnographic and comparative problem that requires a thorough examination of the religio-cultural implications of the practice as well as the historical and ecological features (Jankowiak and Diderich, 2000). Historically, polygamy is not a new phenomenon in many societies especially in Africa. About 70 percent of the societies known to anthropology permit a man to be married to two or more women simultaneously (Hua, 2001).

Eventhough scholarship is replete with the idea of polygamy being a male-centered notion. It continues to be the "most distinctive feature of African marriage" (Korotayev and Bondarenko, 2000: 67) and traditional cultural practice. At the core of this culture are the values and customs that promotes reproduction. This is because, to the African, sterility is not acceptable and desirable but is regarded as evil and curse from the gods. Polygamy in Africa properly situates and exists under the platform of the cult of ancestorship and gerontocracy (Hua, 2001). The argument is that, having the ability to communicate with the deceased ancestors who is believed to possess the powers to reward good behaviour and punish bad behaviour, the old patriarch of a family has the authority over all of his descendants. This includes the arrangement and timing of their marriages.

However, the central objective of the cult of ancestors is to have many descendants so that the family line is strengthened, and the deceased ancestors are given the opportunities for rebirth within the family (Madhavan, 2002). Polygamy therefore, serves as a means to maintain the endless line of births and rebirths and to strengthen the power of the family as well as the status of the old patriarch through the growth in family size and the expansion of conjugal linkages to the other clans. Nonetheless, scholars are of the opinion that less than two decades ago, an estimated 35% of all the men in traditional cultures in Africa still practice polygamy (Gibson, 2009). The resolve for intransience of this practice however, lends credence to some religion and religious beliefs background such as Judaism, Islam and the Mormon Christian community among others. According to biblical and Talmudic literature, several prominent men in the Bible especially the Old Testament are reputed to have practiced polygamy. Those that are well known include Abraham, Jacob, Esau, Saul, David, King Solomon and others, all had multiple wives. Indeed, Biblical literature has it that famous King Solomon who is credited as the wisest man that ever lived had 700 hundred wives and 300 hundred concubines, while David is alleged to have married up to a hundred wives (1 Kings 11:1-3).

Infact, on July 1, 1862, John Smith (the English explorer and soldier) was reported to have professed that the more wives a man had and the more children a woman had, is a good indication of how much they would be rewarded in heaven (Mason, 1982). Similarly, Previous kings in Africa are known to have had large number of wives as a mark of their exalted positions (Mason, 1982). Like King Solomon, King Sobhuza II of the Swazi was a generously endowed man. Although, accounts widely differ, it is estimated that he had married anything above 60 wives (Blanc and Gage, 2000). He left scores of children some accounts put at 600 at his death (Blanc and Gage, 2000). Legendary King Shaka of the Zulu in South Africa is believed to have also been keeping over hundred concubines and wives (Blanc and Gage, 2000). From the early years, polygamy existed throughout Africa as an integral feature of family life, with culture or religion or both as its basis. Hua's account of polygamy in contemporary Africa cites the prevalence of polygamy to be some 20 to 30

polygamists per 100 married men (Hua, 2001). In fact, it is said that sub-Saharan Africa is the only region in the world where polygamy remains very prevalent (Zeitzen, 2008).

However, the prevalence of polygamy in many societies is seen to be related with many factors, such as economical, sociocultural, political, and environmental, etc. Even though two kinds of the economic explanations for polygamy exist, one is based on household economics, while the second is based on the degree of agricultural intensifications (Omariba and Boyle, 2007). And although the global percentage of men with more than one wife is relatively microscopic, as many as one third of the world's population belongs to a community that allows polygamy. Therefore, if we consider the patriarchal characteristic of many societies especially in Africa, it would be protective to argue that there is a probable measure of unregulated power and authority for the male which has resulted in unequal and discriminative treatment of wives and children by their husbands in polygamous marriages. However, experiences of women in African polygamous families vary with the socio-cultural features of their surrounding tribe, community or region. Most, if not all, follow a patriarchal structure. However, the degree of authority held by the husband often depends on the cultural and social expectations for his behaviour (Madhavan, 2002). According to Madhavan (2002), the degree of co-operation or competition among a husband's co-wives depends on a number of factors, both internal and external to the family. Realistically, there is a conflict between the desire to protect African cultural traditions and increasing pressure to recognise women's rights especially with the pervasive influence of polygamous relationship (Sellen, 1999).

2.2. Marriage

Marriage is the key institution regulating human existence and sexuality. It can be rightly termed to constitute a vital variable that is pivotal for procreation. The Concept of Marriage is identified and defined variously in different culture and context. The various names which we use for marriage are quite informative dialectically and linguistically (Ezeh, 1997). For instance, in the religious circle, the word "matrimony" illustrates that the woman should be disposed to become a mother "from the fact that to a mother it belongs to conceive, bring forth and train her offspring" (Edlund, 2005). Similarly, the word "wedlock (conjugium in Latin) points to the union of two qualified people, "because a lawful wife is united to her husband, as it were, by a common yoke", and then there is the word "nuptials" as St. Ambrose witnesses "the bride veiled her face through modesty a custom which would also seem to imply that she was to be subject and obedient to her husband" (Edlund, 2005). And this complemented by a husband's duty to love, serve and protect his wife unto death.

Marriage can be perceived from dissimilar angle points: as an institution, a partnership, a lifecycle phase and/or a role. Viewed as an institution, marriage is confronted with the process of adapting to the process of modernization which intrinsically helps to mold contemporary marriage arrangement. However, traditionally, marriage in the African context is defined as a rite of passage that every individual is expected to undergo in his or her lifetime, and the integral purpose of this institution is to widen the kinship network of the individual through procreation (Ember, 2007). In this direction, affinal relationship which is relationship by marriage are acquired in addition to consanguineal kinship which is relationship by blood. In

Africa, families are made up of a wide network of members, including brothers, sisters, parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins, in-laws, unborn children, and deceased relatives. The wide network of family members functions as a social unit with norms and beliefs and as an economic unit for the purpose of survival and growth of its members such as the rites of passage in marriage.

2.3. Family system

Families have been a central aspect of African culture. Despite the influence of modernization, globalization, and urbanization, the family still remains a prominent nexus in the social life of a typical African (Ameh, 2007). One prominent feature that stand tall in Africa is that there is considerable importance attached to the respect for elders and ancestors. This value determines every other thing. Nonetheless, contrary to the contemporary value change, African communities are characterized by the prevalence of collectivism as opposed to individuality. This explains why the attributes of African family unit have been clearly highlighted to include that they are predominantly rural, mostly patriarchal and hierarchical, and above all polygamous and open to kinship networks, as well as attaching considerable significance to ancestry continuation (Kilbride, 2003). These characteristics plays an essential role in influencing the number of children a woman will give birth to when married.

Apparently, the social organization of the majority African families is entrenched in a patriarchal and hierarchical structure that prevents the possibility of women making any choice on the number of children they intend to have (Kilbride, 2003). This is why at marriage; women are likely to have lower standing than all the members of their husband's family. That the family system in Africa is traditionally patriarchal in nature points to the paternal lineage or descent as well as the idea of patrilocality of paternal residence (Edlund, 2005). This system clearly underlines the need for the groom or his family to pay dowry to the bride's family before marriage. Payment of dowry is usually in the form of money or in kind (exchange of good and/or property) and may be done a few days before the marriage or over a long period, from the time of birth to years after the marriage. Dowry serves to fulfill justice and legality in the eyes of the families involved (Gage-Brandon, 1992). With marriages breaking down in the modern society, this tradition is seen as a factor that links the society to the strong moral standards of earlier days because the woman feels worthwhile to her husband and may, hence, stay faithful to the marriage. In Africa, all social and cultural practices find their connection with a notion of family, either supporting or distorting it. Family plays a crucial role in Africa. That is why Mbiti says that "each person in African traditional life lives in or as a part of the family" (Mbiti, 1973)

2.4. Co-wife

The concept of co-wife simply put, refers to a woman in a group marriage who shares a spouse in common with at least one other woman in that group marriage. In this case, one who is the female spouse of someone who has one or more other female spouses? In Africa, co-wives may be perceived as direct and indirect sources of increased income and prestige. This explains why African customary law was viewed as possibly cooperative and consequently beneficial to women, especially to those women who would otherwise be

'unmarketable' in marriage (Jankowiak, 2008). In Hebrew, the legal term for the word co-wife is "tzarah", often translated as rival, but which also means pain, trouble or injury. It has the same root as the Yiddish word tzoros which means problems. In English, the word that best describe it might be 'fellow-wife' or possibly 'rival wife', co-bride, and wife-in-law.

2.5. Family size

It is worthy of mention that the family size discourse in Africa is reputed to be dominated by the concept of extended family, whereby a family is not made up only of a married couple and their children but also include uncles, aunties, grandparents, inlaws and others. Extended families still has quite a strong hold in Africa despite the advent of modernization and western values. The main reason for this has been linked to the role that extended family plays as social security role in the society (Tertilt, 2005)). The major point of most argument in traditional African societies revolves around the perception that large families were an asset especially in rural subsistence agricultural societies (Tertilt, 2005). This informs the findings of John Caldwell and Pat Caldwell (2002) that the ideal family size in Africa can be averaged on about 6 to 8 children. However, before now, there were no interests in reducing the family size beyond these numbers of births in rural communities. Limiting family sizes to four or five children was viewed to increase the potential of extinction in the face of high mortality rates. On the other hand, even a single woman in a monogamous family in Nigeria had the capacity to give birth to as many as eight to ten children (Caldwell and Caldwell, 2002). This type of family structure were so common such that John Caldwell and Pat Caldwell (2002) pointed out that , women in Africa were able to have as much as twelve children and still had the desire to give birth to more children.

3. Theoretical framework

The framework that underpins this study is the developmental framework that emphasizes the way that young people preparing to marry involves themselves in relationships that serve as developmental precursors, or a some sort of training ground, for marriage business and involvements (Bethmann and Michael, 2007). Early relationship experiences are seen as shaping an individual's view and approach to adult relationships and expectations, including marriage (Bethmann and Michael, 2007). This perspective suggests that there is likely to be a link between the higher rates of troubled marriage relationships seen among African polygamouse families. Marriage relationships are highly characterized by chronic discord, frustration, and disappointment that are likely to foster a more negative view of the costs and benefits of marriage. This suggests that understanding the causes of ambivalence toward polygamy and co-wife family relationships evident among many African requires identification of the factors that give rise to the conflict, antagonism, and solidarity that often characterizes their marriage relationships. In the present study therefore, we develop and test the proposition that co-wife phenomenon is characterised by exposure to status and gender-related disadvantages and stressful events such as discrimination, economic hardship, mental health problems, and harsh parenting which subsequently result in inequality, discrimination and uncontrolled authority and

power. Furthermore, we attempt to explore the view that polygamy and co-wife experience has the potential to foster less positive views of marriage, as well as some level of co-operative exchanges. In this regard, marriage formation irrespective of nature is analysed using the concept of the developmental cycle of the domestic groups. These assumptions are therefore in this study examined using the developmental framework.

4. The prevalence rate of polygamy and co-wife phenomenon in Africa

Although the reported cases of polygamy in Africa have decreased in recent years, it remains as a frequent family and household structure, especially in rural areas (Bove and Caleggia, 2008). More than 48% of children are brought up and still live in polygamous households in several countries in Africa such as Togo, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea etc. (Cox and Marcel, 2008). However, although polygamy and co-wife phenomenon is a traditional worldwide practice, this cultural practice is particularly prevalent in Africa, where approximately twenty-eight countries particularly in the sub-Saharan African communities are involved affecting an estimated 80 to 110 million women. The practice is carried out mainly in relation to social, cultural and religious reasons. Because the practice influences such a substantial amount of women in Africa, the rest of the world has focused its attention on the continent because marriage and the family in Africa tend to share features that distinguish them from equivalent institutions elsewhere. Despite the striking decline in the prevalence of polygamy in Africa over the last half century, polygyny lies at the heart of some cluster of interrelated practices that shape family life in Africa (Cox and Marcel, 2008).

Table 1. Estimated prevalence rate of polygamous family structure per country in Africa

Country	Year	Estimated prevalence of polygamy relationship among women 15 – 49 years (%)
Benin	2001	16.8
Burkina Faso	2005	74.5
Cameroon	2004	1.4
Central African Republic	2005	25.7
Chad	2004	44.9
Côte d'Ivoire	2005	41.7
Djibouti	2006	93.1
Egypt	2005	95.8
Eritrea	2002	88.7
Ethiopia	2005	74.3
Gambia	2005	79.3
Ghana	2005	5.8
Guinea	2005	95.6
Guinea-Bissau	2005	44.5
Kenya	2003	32.2
Liberia*		45

Mali	2001	91.6
Mauritania	2001	72.3
Niger	2006	4.2
Nigeria	2003	19
Senegal	2005	28.2
Sierra Leone	2005	94
Somalia	2005	97.9
Sudan, northern (approximately 80% of total population surveyed)	2000	90
Togo	2005	5.8
Uganda	2006	0.6
United Republic of Tanzania	2004	14.6
Yemen	1997	22.6

This estimate is derived from a variety of local and sub-national studies (Yoder and Khan, 2007)

The prevalence rate of polygamous relationship is seen to be substantial on the overall but varied substantially between countries. As indicated in the Table 1, Benin, Senegal, Burkina Faso and Guinea, prevalence rates for multiple wife relationship were 94%, 79%, 74% and 72%, respectively. In contrast, fewer than 6% of families had polygamous relationship in Ghana, Niger and Togo. Gambia and Mauritania had the highest percentage of multiple wife relationship (64%) and Togo, Ghana and Niger had the lowest (1%). In three countries, more than half of the men believed that the practice of polygamy should continue (Sierra Leone, 88%, Gambia, 77% and Mauritania, 59%). The lowest percentages of respondents believing the practice should continue were found in countries with the lowest reported rates of polygamy: Ghana (4%) and Niger (7%). However, prevalence estimates excluding respondents who had never involve in polygamous relationship remained largely unchanged. In general, being older, having less education, and being currently or formerly married as opposed to never married were all associated with increased odds of having experienced polygamous relationship.

5. Methodology and data presentation

The study employed the survey research design of an ex-post facto type. The independent variable in this study is the institution of polygamy as a religio-cultural practice in Africa, while the dependent variable is the interplay between conflict and solidarity in co-wife relationship orchestrated by cultural dynamics of women's social status, communal rights and cultural self-determination. The strategy adopted for this study involved a multiplicity of ethnographic methods such as individual in-depth interviews, focus group discussions and informal discussion sessions. The study population comprises of married women in the reproductive age group (15–49 years) and married men 15 years and above. Based on the principles of informed consent and confidentiality, information was voluntarily and successfully abstracted from a total of 348 respondents comprising of: 65 male, 157 females, 20 NGO activists, 45 polygamists, 41 modern health care providers, and 20 religious leaders.

This was complemented with the examination of available secondary data from various sources such as educational institutions, government, advocacy groups and different NGO offices. Field notes and tape recording went on simultaneously, while interviews were transcribed, anonymized and coded accordingly. Sample of 348 subjects were purposively selected from the population. The population was divided into six clusters representing six countries: Nigeria, Ghana, Cameroon, Sierra Leone, Ethiopia, and Kenya. Each cluster consisted of 58 respondents. The respondents were selected accidentally from each cluster and target group. Data collection was entirely based on self-report and no inspection of polygamous family and/or co-wife relationship was performed to assess the consistency between self-report and observed behaviour in the relationship. Data were collected from the respondents by six (three females and three males) research assistants. The interviewers were residents of the study area who knew the culture and language of the people.

Table I. Sample and Population of Study

S/N	Location/Cluster	Sample	Classification	Percentage
1	Nigeria	58	Male and Female	16.5%
2	Ghana	58	Male and Female	16.5%
3	Cameroon	58	Male and Female	16.5%
4	Sierra Leone	58	Male and Female	16.5%
5	Ethiopia	58	Male and Female	16.5%
6	Kenya	58	Male and Female	16.5%
	Total	348		100% approx.

Sources: Field survey, 2016

Table 2. Sex Distribution of Respondents

Sex	Nigeria	Ghana	Cameroon	Sierra Leone	Ethiopia	Kenya	Frequency	Percentage
Male	15 (26%)	21 (36%)	18 (31.1%)	12 (20.6%)	25 (43.1%)	20 (34.5%)	111	31.9%
Female	43 (74%)	37 (64%)	40 (68.9%)	46 (79.4%)	33 (56.9%)	38 (65.5%)	237	68.1%
Total	58	58	58	58	58	58	348	100.00%

Source: Field Survey, 2016

The Current study aims at studying the interplay between conflict and solidarity in co-wife family relationship orchestrated by the institution of polygamy as a religio-cultural phenomenon in Africa and collecting data in a large quantity to examine the development, so it enjoys extensive qualitative methods respectively. In order to fulfil the goal of this study, a survey which embrace In-depth interview (IDI), which was qualitative in technique was adopted to verify the findings of the survey method with open questions administered. The open questions were asked in face-to-face interviews. Every individual was asked to answer the questions after contemplating about the existence and practice of polygamous relationship in

their community and what is responsible for its prevalence. Another method utilized for the study is the Focus Group Discussion (FGD), which is also a qualitative technique adopted to verify the findings of the survey method. Six FGDs were conducted, each per a location and cluster. Each FGD comprised of eight participants from elderly male, young and elderly female, activists, traditional polygamists, modern health care providers, and religious leaders.

Table 2 reveals that 111 respondents were males, representing 31.9%, while 237 representing 68.1% were females. This was contrary to a widely held belief that males are more eager to establish polygamous relationship than the female. Observations during the survey were that males were relatively unwilling to neither accept the survey instrument nor participate in the FGD, than female.

Table 3: Educational qualification of Respondents

Educational Status	Nigeria	Ghana	Cameroon	Sierra Leone	Ethiopia	Kenya	Frequency	Percentage
Non-Formal	11 (18.9%)	10 (17.2%)	7 (12.1%)	7 (12.1%)	11 (18.9%)	12 (20.6%)	58	16.8%
FSLC	19 (32.7%)	20 (34.4%)	20 (34.4%)	19 (32.7%)	20 (34.4%)	16 (27.5%)	114	33.8%
SSCE	10 (17.2%)	7 (12.1%)	15 (27.5%)	15 (27.5%)	13 (22.4%)	15 (27.5%)	75	21.5%
ND/NCE	5 (8.6%)	7 (12.1%)	8 (13.7%)	7 (12.1%)	8 (13.7%)	6 (10.3%)	41	11.8%
HND	9 (15.5%)	10 (17.2%)	4 (6.8%)	7 (12.1%)	3 (5.1%)	7 (12.1%)	40	11.5%
BA/BSc	4 (6.8)	4 (6.8)	4 (6.8)	3 (5.1)	2 (3.4)	2 (3.4%)	19	05.5%
MA/MSc	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil
Total	58	58	58	58	58	58	348	100.0%

Source: Field Survey, 2016

Table 3 shows that majority of the respondents were literate and understood the social status and communal rights to cultural self-determination of their people and community. This is evident in 51.7% of the respondents in Nigeria, 51.7% in Ghana, 46.5% in Cameroon, 44.6% in Sierra Leone, 53.4% in Ethiopia, and 48.2% in Kenya who have acquired the first and the second level of education. They adhere strictly to the tradition because the institution of polygamy constitutes a group value and a source of social identity. It also shows that those that are involved in this institution approves of the people's sense of community. The data further show that the respondents were knowledgeable enough to understand the cultural context of the practice of multiple wife in marriage. Similarly, respondents based on their educational attainment were conversant with the instrument of data collection used for this study.

Table 4. Qualitative Research Table

Focus Group Discussion / Demographic Table									
Cluster		Nigeria	Ghana	Cameroon	Sierra Leone	Ethiopia	Kenya	Frequency	Percentage
Sex	Female	6 (10.3%)	5 (8.6%)	6 (10.3%)	7(12.1%)	8(13.7%)	6 (10.3%)	38	65.5%
	Male	3(5.2%)	2(3.4%)	3(5.2%)	3(5.2%)	2(3.4%)	3(5.2%)	16	27.5%
Education	Non-Formal	3(5.2%)	2 (3.4%)	4 (6.8%)	5(8.6%)	3(5.2%)	4 (6.8%)	21	36.2%
	FSLC	4(6.8%)	5(8.6%)	4(6.8%)	3(5.2%)	3(5.2%)	2(3.4%)	21	36.2%
	SSCE	2(3.4%)	2(3.4%)	1(1.7%)	1(1.7%)	3(5.2%)	3(5.2)	12	20.6%
Occupation	Farming	3 (5.2%)	2(3.4%)	2 (3.4%)	3 (5.2%)	3 (5.2%)	3 (5.2%)	16	27.5%
	Self-employed	4(6.8%)	5(8.6)	6(10.3%)	5(8.6%)	6(10.3%)	4(6.8%)	30	51.7%
	Unemployed	2(3.4%)	2(3.4%)	1(1.7%)	1(1.7%)	Nil	2(3.4%)	8	13.7%
In-depth Interview									
Cluster		Nigeria	Ghana	Cameroon	Sierra Leone	Ethiopia	Kenya	Frequency	Percentage
Sex	Male	18 (31.0%)	12 (20.6%)	14 (24.1%)	20 (34.4%)	15 (25.8%)	19 (32.7%)	98	28.1%
	Female	40(68.9%)	46(79.3%)	44(75.8%)	38(65.5%)	43(74.1%)	39(67.2%)	250	71.8%
Education Level	Non-Formal	8(13.7%)	7(12.0%)	5(8.6%)	10(17.2%)	10(17.2%)	9(15.5%)	49	84.4%
	FSLC	30(51.7%)	30(51.7%)	35(60.3%)	28(48.2%)	24(41.3%)	26(44.8%)	173	49.7%
	SSCE	20(34.4%)	21(36.2%)	15(25.8%)	20(34.4%)	24(41.3%)	20(34.4%)	120	34.4%
Occupation	Farming	21(36.2%)	23(39.6%)	23(39.6%)	33(56.8%)	37(63.7%)	34(58.6%)	171	49.1%
	Self-employed	28(48.2%)	31(53.4%)	32(55.1%)	20(34.4%)	18(31.0%)	19(32.7%)	148	52.5%
	Unemployed	9(15.5%)	4(6.8%)	3(5.1%)	5(8.6%)	3(5.1%)	5(8.6%)	29	08.3%

Source: Field Survey FGD/IDI, 2016

Table 4 shows that participants in FGD and IDI were all knowledgeable about the subject matter and could discern the import of the questions asked. In the six FGD with 9 participants each, with a total of 54 participants in all, male were 16 (29.6) and female 38 (70.4). In the survey, it is apparent that majority of the respondents that gave their responses were female signifying that they are more involved and affected in the practice of polygamy both as wives and victims of any outcome in the relationship.

Table 5. Respondents' approaches about polygamy and co-wife phenomenon in Africa

S/No	Items	Percentage of Agreement		
		Agree	Disagree	Neutral
1	In your opinion, is polygamy a popular institution in Africa?	80.4	17.4	2.2
2	Is the idea of multiple wife in marriage practiced as a cultural imperative?	78.1	21.9	Nil
3	Would you consider or approve of a young lady being a co-wife in a marriage relationship?	70.2	22.8	7.0
4.	Are you of the opinion that internalization of marriage values through polygamy can be provided by women who are co-wives?	57.4	42.6	Nil
5	Is it proper to allocate how to share the husband between the co-wives and work load between the wives (cleaning, cooking, taking care of children?)	79.2	15.5	5.0
6	Does co-wife serve as a psychological mechanism aimed at transmitting the basic personality traits of a "standard" married woman, a moral check and a mechanism for keeping women in matrimonial service.	64.2	35.8	Nil
7	Is it true that the maintenance of tradition specifically cultural identity is the strongest reason for polygynous union?	60.8	39.2	Nil
8	In Africa, is the general perception of your community members toward polygamy overwhelmingly positive or acceptable?	75.4	24.6	Nil
9	Would you encourage any young woman to marry as a co-wife?	78.1	21.9	Nil
10	Is there anything that constitute attraction which keeps some women married as co-wives and still wants to continue despite challenges?	65.5	32.0	2.5
11	Is it true that there are solutions to co-wives acrimony?	75.3	20.0	4.7
12	Do you think the culture of polygamy is beneficial for women or not?	66.8	33.2	Nil
13	Do you think your life would be better or worse if you were not in polygamy marriage?	72.1	27.9	Nil
14	As a polygamous husband, did you consult your first wife before you marry the second wife?	59.4	33.2	7.4
15	Do you approve of your wives living separately or co-wives in polygamous marriage living separately?	55.5	40.2	4.3

Source: Field Survey IDI, 2016

Based on the findings of Table 5, there are significant relationships among the different variables indicating the propensity for understanding and reconciliation the co-wife phenomenon. It is apparent that rooms for accommodation of views and obliteration of ignorance are not foreclosed. Findings also show that the listed variables are in the main responsible for the unprecedented misunderstanding about polygamy and co-wife phenomenon. In fact, it is safe to argue that 80.4% of the respondent agrees that polygamy is a very popular institution in Africa. Also, supporters of the polygamy institution as well as co-wife phenomenon are willing to shift grounds if thoughtful decision process tailored toward functional development and empowerment goals and objectives that can present direction and sense of accomplishment for those involved are provided.

6. Discussion of finding

The study indicates a significant correlation between the religio-cultural context of polygamy in Africa, human rights and the social status of the people regarding communal rights to cultural self determination. This study found out that co-wife phenomenon possesses ambivalent structure of conflict and solidarity in marriage relationship. Also, polygamy institution is a very popular practice and have elicited worldwide reaction from scholars, policy-makers, administrators, and human rights groups, leading to the adoption of a monolithic platform calling for the extirpation of this practice by labelling it harmful cultural practice. The study reveals that this effort have produced mixed results because of failure to take cognizance of the complex nature of the issue involving politics, culture, rights and history of the people and institution. This is in spite of the fact that this attempt facades as a rescue enterprise for the 'victims', against local knowledge systems by framing polygamy in human security terms as "harmful traditional practice," thus rejecting the agency of the practitioners. This study further discovers that by failing to recognize the very dynamism of the concept of African culture, a dilemma is created by turning campaign against polygamy based on right based approach and harmful traditional practices paradigm into a fight against culture. Therefore, the dichotomy and conflict between tradition and modernity represented in human rights, constitutes a masks complex patterns of cultural behaviour. However, evidence from the field suggests that polygamy was permitted in some culture in order to solve certain problems that serious and anti-people and society and existence. According to Mmama Basse Antia, the high numbers of unmarried girls today are the reason why we have high level of prostitution in our society.

Religiously speaking, the study also discovered that in Africa, the maintenance of certain tradition and, by extension, a specific cultural identity such as polygamous marriage is strong enough a reason for co-wife solidarity and bonds in family relationship. This explains why polygamy serves as the main goal of the cult of ancestors in the spiritual world which is to have many descendants and as a means to maintain the endless line of births and rebirths and to strengthen the power of the family as well as the status of the old patriarch through growth in family size and expansion of conjugal linkages to other clans and communities. This behaviour when critically evaluated suggests a link with the people's traditional religion. From the responses

of most respondents, the study reveals that the standard African woman prefers to keep her polygamous marriage and is happy to live as a co-wife than to remain unmarried.

In the FGD for instance, it was gathered that the co-wives were proud of their status being polygamously married and despite challenges were also eager to maintain it as they were not in any way prepared to abandon their marriage. They insisted that the institution was not only a cultural prescription but a religious rite of passage. This research study found out that women in Africa believe that co-wife phenomenon makes them more feminine and thus more culturally and socially compliance. The study also established that respondents are of the opinion that co-wife raises the social status for the family and generate income when their daughter gets married and the dowry is paid. Similarly, the study discloses that the practice of polygamy and co-wife in African societies varies widely in how it is practiced most importantly as it concern sexual access and emotional intimacy. This is because the institution is undergoing changes in some societies as evident in less prevalence rate in the more educated families and younger generations than the older ones.

7. The interplay between conflict and solidarity in co-wife family relationship in Africa

There is no doubt that the extent of polygamy and co-wife phenomenon across the world is vast. Polygamy in Africa is not only a type of marriage but also a value system. It has its roots in both the traditional cult of ancestorship and the economic aspects of power balance (Omariba and Boyle, 2007). This explains why wealthy men exploited the practice to have higher propensity for mating with multiple wives. However, different African countries, including Senegal, Tanzania, Ethiopia, Benin, Guinea etc. practice polygamy. But the rate of polygamy is an average of 1.5 wives to each married man in African countries. A very good example is in Kenya where we have an average of 1.21 wives to each married man, Tanzania has 1.25, Uganda 1.18, Ghana 1.35 and Coted'Ivoire 1.40. etc. even though the rates are much more lower in urban areas as compared to rural African societies (Bove and Caleggia, 2008). It is common to note that scholars have put forward several theories in an attempt to explain why polygamy was, and is still a desirable feature of many societies especially in Africa. This include: high mortality rate for the male during wars, prestige, post-partum sex taboos, exclusive control of access to women by older men, for women to gain reproductive advantage in high-pathogen areas and most importantly, because of the cheap labour offered by wives and children (Ember, 2007).

Conversely, studies by scholars in different countries have shown that polygamy is not exclusively advantageous as it can lead to some level of unhappiness, loneliness, and lack of intimacy for the women involved in it (Falen, 2008). Evidently, it has been established by some research findings that polygamy is susceptible to unhealthy qualities like co-wife jealousy, rivalry, unwholesome competition, and unequal distribution of household and emotional resources (Jankowiak, 2008). No doubt, this unconstructiveness has been shown to heighten acrimony between co-wives and their children. Additionally, polygamy has been associated with rise in sexually transmitted infections due to multiple sexual partners and reduced contraceptive use. Given this level of pessimism therefore, it is obvious that the degree to which a woman is materially dependent on her polygamous husband determines her willingness to co-operate or compete with

a co-wife over material resources and reproductive consideration. It follows that the greater a wife's material dependence on her husband, the more frequent and intense will be her conflicts level with a co-wife.

If co-wife conflicts arise more from structural factors, there may be instances where they are either muted or absent. But this study is privileged to argue that reduced conflict arises less from a woman's decreased material dependence on a husband than from her sexual and emotional satisfaction. This is so because in polygamous marriage relationship, majority of young women reacts to the arrival of a new co-wife with feelings of fear, anger, sadness, and loss because of the fear to loose a portion or part of the resources that would accrue to them (Chapais, 2008). This sentiment is expressed through a variety of culturally acknowledged and resented behaviors such as, witchcraft accusations, statements of concern for the welfare of children, accusations of favoritism, demands of greater access to the husband, complaints of being sexually ignored, outbreaks of physical or verbal abuse, and expressing an intention to divorce or actually doing so.

8. Co-wife and Conflicts in polygamous family

Co-wife conflict in polygamous families in Africa with its patriarchal framework and a male -centered system of cultural practice is highly pervasive in the early years of marriage, and often marked by outbursts of verbal abuse, accusation and counter-accusation, harassment, and/or physical violence (Jankowiak, 2008). The conflict status between the principal wife and secondary wives, as well as the co-wives of a polygynous marriage in Africa and elsewhere is without reservation. This is because in any polygamous marriage, the hierarchy of wives is indisputable and the inferiority of the secondary wives is beyond any argument. This is also in line with the value of respecting seniority in African culture.

Therefore, the socio-sexual role of polygamous wives in societies where it is practiced is wide-ranging, so far as the principal wife always controls a dominating position (Jankowiak et al., 2005). In the main, co-wife conflicts in polygamous marriages are ubiquitous due particularly to the distribution of resources and sexual privilege between the co-wives. In most cases, to protect, preserve, maintain and secure a co-wife's position, all sort of nefarious activities are carried out ranging from: dangerous love medicine, poisoning, sorcery, witchcraft, and outright murder. These reasons are also responsible to the husband-wives confrontations, bitterness, and jealousy in polygamous relationships, thereby resulting in tension and unhappiness in the polygynous homes (Jankowiak et al., 2005). Socially speaking, within the household, the social backgrounds of the secondary wives are always inferior to the standing of the first wife, and the right and authority of the latter are unquestionable in the hierarchy of secondary wives within the family. This explains why co-wife relationships are generally characterized by deep-seated contempt, manifested routinely in acts of physical and/or verbal aggression. It is a general phenomenon in many polygynous societies that when a husband procures another wife, or gives more sexual privileges to the new wife, a deep sense of anguish, loss of honour and mental disturbances of being humiliated etc, will ensue (Jankowiak et al., 2005).

This is because the older wife and other wives will not be comfortable with the newly added wife because of the fear of competition over material resources. There are however other reasons for co-wife conflict such as the desire to monopolize a husband's attention or sexual services. Ironically, though a principal wife

exclusively enjoys a social privilege over her fellow co-wives, it is not the case in the sexual domain where the newly married and younger wife and sometime more prettier hold the ace. Little wonder why conflict, enmity, and diabolical antics is a common place. In this case, the husband in many societies devise a strategy of handling the problem such as categorization of planned rotational period of sexual contact with the husband, or division of days of visitation in a sharing formula among the wives (who should have the husband and when) (Shackelford et al, 2004).

Similarly, another measure of curbing conflict among co-wives is in the area of maintenance and establishment of separate houses for each wife. Experience has shown that when some or all the wives live separately in different houses in different locations, the degree of incidence of conflict is highly reduced than when they were living in the same compound. Nevertheless, without compromising the African value for seniority, the advantages of a principal wife introduce an inequality dimension into the polygamous family (Ameh, 2007). This is because the first wife or the principal wife exercise a superior authority image over the secondary wives within the polygynous infrastructure. This include both sexual and reproductive rights, as well as the right of the principal wife's children in inheritance with a legal status among others. This explains the aggressiveness of the first wife who would not like any sort of compromise to her full privilege of socio-sexual share in the family.

9. Solidarity among co-wives in polygamous marriage

Ideally spaeaking and in the spirit of African communalism, co-wives relationship ought to engender spirit of solidarity and concern. Depending on the ethnic group, the co-wife relationship could be more collaborative than competitive (Chapais, 2008). This is because a woman who found herself in a polygamous relationship will certainly wants her co-wife to help with domestic chores and to be a loving mother to her children. Oftentime, co-wives provide "mothering insurance" for each other in difficult circumstances. It becomes necessary if one of the wife die, the other co-wives would take responsibility for raising her children (Amey, 2002). Interestingly though, when co-wives do not have a good relationship with each other, there is much anxiety about the fate of a child or children.

In a typical traditional African setting where values are uphold and adhered to, co-wife relationships were expected to be supportive, affectionate, and free of conflict, with the culture classified as harmonious (Gibson, 2009). In this regard, the effect of the institution waqs expected to depend upon the rules governing behavior within the institution. It was also the responsibility of the husband to maintain peace cordial relationship in the family. In this case, everything that needs to be given to the wives will be shared equitably to the wives. There is also the expectation of exchanges and minor team spirit such as giving food or water to a co-wife's children or borrowing or lending incidental food stuffs would be part of the pragmatics of daily living in the same household or in separate but relatively nearby households which may likely be within the same compound or within eyesight (Gibson, 2009).

Nonetheless, the status of being a co-wife in a polygynous marriage necessitates solidarity. The reason is that deep awareness of the pains, shortcomings, dissatisfaction, and dismemberment in a patrirchial

polygamous relationship triggers some sense of empathy among co-wives (Amey, 2002). The understanding and maturity of what it takes to live as a co-wife encourages co-wives to forged a sister or close friend bond. In this regard, solidarity will encourage the co-wives to join forces and ideas to have the best “girl and women talk” and also discuss mutual challenges in relation to their marriage. This however, suggests that women's sexual, emotional, and material interests have the capacity to structure co-wife interaction. An alternative explanation is that even though close co-operation in relationship among co-wives are seldom the norm, most co-wives prefer to maintain a respectful distance and try to live their live separately from each other (Bove and Caleggia, 2008). The fact that many cannot do so necessitates that women work to develop a tolerance for, and in some instances a preference for, life and peace in the polygynous family.

10. Conclusion

There have been mixed opinions over the institution of polygamy and co-wife phenomenon across African countries. This is because the practice has been observed by Africans to be a religio-cultural tradition whereas others view it to be a harmful cultural practice that has infringe upon the rights of those married. To the African, this type of thinking is not necessary since having large families and extended families is a sign of success in different African communities, and this obsession can be achieved in the practice of polygamy (Zeitzen, 2008). Clearly speaking, although anthropological record and social scientists have given various theoretical explanations for the practice of polygamy, and have also argued that the practice is widespread in many areas of the world though varying from culture to culture, most research tends to ignore the co-wife phenomenon component of polygamy which is one serious dimension with multiple implications on African marriage institution.

Therefore understanding how the dimensions of co-wife life experience are structured and realizing its diverse nature is necessary for tackling the phenomenon (Beckerman and Valantine, 2007). This study therefore, mirrored expressly on the interplay between solidarity and conflict between co-wives in African polygamous marriage institution. It noted that there is an ambivalent structure of relationship involving conflict and solidarity among co-wives in all polygamous marriage institutions anywhere it is practiced. The study tried to establish that though co-wife conflict in the early years of marriage is like a norm and pervasive, and often marked by outbursts of verbal or physical violence, majority of co-wives in a polygynous family would have preferred solidarity with one another while maintaining a respectful distance. The paper surveys the limited evidence of the extent to which co-wives’ life and relationship in polygamous institution in Africa manifests and models women status and marriage institution. The paper acknowledges that solidarity and conflicts among co-wives are in the main developed to agitate for an inclusive marriage system.

The first step toward a functional marriage relationship in the polygamous institution of African patriarchal society should be that of appropriate inclusive policies and guidelines but experience has shown that this is not enough. This is due to the fact that certain aspects of the co-wives experience revolves around African belief system and are culturally entrenched thus difficult to erase (Essien, 2013). Given that polygamy and the co-wife phenomenon is associated with a variety of macro-level factors such as kinship

groups where women undertake most of the subsistence agriculture; where a large family provides both labour and physical security; where women engage extensively in trade; and in societies where traditional belief systems rather than formal religion are overriding. The most imperative question therefore is that, our human behavior must take into account the concerns of the other member of the local community whose feelings, emotions and well-being have been negatively affected. In this regard, the caveat is that we have an obligation to help ensure an urgent transformation of the marriage regime with negative social, economic, and health effect on the wife, child and society, to an establishment that serve as a strong dimension to social change.

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