



The Values of Polygamy among the Langi People of Northern Uganda

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Abstract

We conducted an ethnographic study in six districts of the Langi people of northern Uganda. Participating in people's daily lives for three months; we watched everyday happenings, listened to the participants in their settings and collected whatever piece of information that could throw light on polygamy. Although Christianity and formal education have led to a reduction in the percentage of polygamy in the towns of Lira, Apac, Amolatar, Loro, Kamdini and Dokolo, the practice is still widespread in the rural environs. Male chauvinism, labour intensive farming activities and low levels of formal education are responsible for the persistence of polygamy. Each family requires more labour to farm the vast fertile land and Lango culture promotes patriarchy. The study recommends sustained sensitization of the population on the values of monogamy coupled with economic empowerment of women and rural families.

Keywords: Lango, Uganda, Polygamy, Bride wealth, Labour, Marriage

Introduction

Polygamy is derived from the Greek word *πολυγαμία*, *polygamia*, which means "state of marriage to many spouses" or "frequent marriage" (Babinotis, 2002). It is a marriage that includes more than two partners. When a man is married to more than one wife at a time, the relationship is called polygyny; and when a woman is married to more than one husband at a time, it is called polyandry. Among the Langi, polygamy exclusively takes the form of polygyny: one husband with multiple wives.

Polygynous marriages can be distinguished between *sororal polygyny*, in which the co-wives are sisters, and *non-sororal*, where the co-wives are not related. For men, the benefits of polygyny are that it allows them to have more children, may provide them with more productive workers (where workers are family), and allows them to establish politically useful ties with a greater number of kin groups. Polygyny is also associated with a greater age gap between husbands and wives, as men must marry younger girls for their second wives; this leaves younger men without wives for longer periods (Zeitzen, 2008).

Polygamous marriage is common in the Middle East, Africa, Asia, and the Pacific Islands, but is also known to occur in Europe, North America, and other Western societies (Broude, 1994). To our knowledge, accurate and current statistics on the prevalence of polygamy around the world are not available. In African countries, estimates range from 20% to 50% of all marriages, with higher rates reported among less educated husbands and wives, among Muslims, and among rural residents; however, in recent years, there has been an observed increase in the rates of polygamy among highly educated men who can afford a second wife (Veredslonim and Aleanal, 2006).

The literature surrounding the topic of plural marriage is very diverse. Much literature is concerned with moral or religious issues, while other works relate historical, sociological and economic analysis, and others refer directly to legal issues. This paper addresses polygamy from the cultural perspective of the Langi people of northern Uganda

Langi is plural form of Lango, one of the Nilotic ethnic identities in northern Uganda occupying the districts of Lira, Apac, Oyam, Kole, Dokolo, Alebtong, Otuke and Amolatar. Other ethnic identities like Madi, Iteso, Alur and Acholi are also living in those districts, known locally as Lango sub-region. Most of these are working as administrators, teachers and businessman. Similarly, some Langi people are also living and working in other districts and sub-regions of Uganda. The Langi people speak Luo although they are not Lwo people. The Langi are Plain Nilotic people closer in ethnicity to the Iteso, Kuman, and Karimojong people of eastern and north-eastern Uganda than their neighbor, the Acholi.

Methods

A three months' ethnographic study was conducted in six districts of the Langi people of northern Uganda. Participating in people's daily lives for three months; we watched everyday happenings, listened to the participants in their settings and collected whatever piece of information that could throw light on polygamy. 30 polygamous and an equal number of non-polygamous families were studied. The study took place in the Lango sub-region of northern Uganda particularly in Apac, Lira, Dokolo, Otuke, Oyam and Kole districts.

Stratified random sampling was used to select the monogamous families while snowballing helped to identify the polygamous families. The instruments that were used for collecting data during the study included interview techniques, observation techniques and focused group discussions with members of the families studied. In addition focus group discussions were held with 10 elders five of whom are clan heads while the rest were retired civil servants. The ten elders were asked about their experience in the community during the last 50 years. They expressed their opinion about the quality of life in the polygamous families relative to the monogamous ones. They were also asked about the origins and persistence of polygamy in Lango.

The pre-field study was conducted by the researchers together with the local councils of the respective villages in order to identify the respondents. After identifying the respondents, the researchers gave out programs to the respondents including the day and date they were going to collect data in each village. The researchers therefore went to the field to collect data following an agreed program. The data collected was then analyzed and interpreted. A total of 120 people were interviewed. Observations of the daily nuances of polygamous and non-polygamous families were made.

Discussion of Findings

Being a cultural and traditional practice, polygamy among the Langi people carries with it some cultural, social, political, religious and economics values which continue to make it relevant among some people. This study investigated some of the values attached to polygamy among the Langi and findings are presented in the table below.

Table 4.1 Showing values of polygamy among the Langi

Values	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Clan expansion	16	13
Bareness of first wife	8	6
Respect/ status in community	18	15
Sexual satisfaction	9	8
Love for children	12	10
Source of labour force	20	17
Girls children are source of wealth	14	12
Land acquisition	12	10
Migrant workers interest	5	4
Religion	6	5
Total	120	100

Source: Field data, 2014.

Agricultural production has for long formed the backbone of the Lango economy. Polygamy has therefore been viewed not only as a means but a source of additional labour force in the family for both agricultural and domestic activities. This was backed by the enormous (20) 17% of the responses obtained. According to them, polygamy is the source of labour because more women or wives can do more work within a short period of time. For example Mr Ogwang Robert among other respondents said that “*Nyomo Mon apol konyo polere wok itic me poto aporere, doyo cem ipoto, kayo cem ipoto, pyeto kede yero nyig cem bala Kal, Nino, Oranga, kede Nywagi iyi akina en okene*”. This means “polygamy is meant to supply enough labour on the familyland because many women are required for weeding, harvesting and transporting crops”. Other respondents who supported this during the interviews were businessmen. One said “*Mon ngeo cato wil ka iporo kede coo, pien gin ngeo jolo owil iduki gii kede yom cwiny*” meaning “women are good salespersons because they are naturally courteous”. Other views are however, that although it is good to have many women as source of labour, co-wives cannot successfully run a business because most of them can, out of jealousy, misappropriate a lot of money which would be used to expand the business for personal gains. This is the major cause of losses in many businesses run by co-wives.

Instead of engaging in adultery and fornication, polygamy has been valued as the only means of fully satisfying sexual needs of a traditional Lango man. This was advanced by 8% of the respondents in the study. On the other hand, women are known to have outnumbered men in physical count and polygamy has been one way of meeting the sexual needs of the excess number of women as well.

However, the women in polygamous marriage believe that though high sexual satisfaction is derived in polygamous marriages, it is not good because having regular sexual intercourse makes a man weak and therefore age up very fast because sexual intercourse takes up a lot of man’s energy. This is worsened when a man is subjected to poor feeding in which he depends on less nutritious and energy giving food as such a man may end up becoming sick and very weak. Some believe that although polygamy curbs the adulterous conduct of men, it’s the reverse for women. The married woman aggrieved about being denied sex by her husband in preference for co-wives is likely to seek sexual pleasure outside marriage.

Winning respect in the community was discovered by the researchers as one of the values that the Langi people attach to polygamy. This was supported by three (18) respondents. According to them, “*jo woro coo ame tye imon apol, kede oneno gi bala coo atek iyi akina paco*”. Meaning, “The strength of a man is seen in how many women he commands in his household”. This is because managing many women and at times with many children is only possible when a Man is financially stable and physically strong. They continued that men with many women are given a lot of respect especially during local council meetings, at any social gathering and in politics. During elections for local council posts, polygamous men are sure of the votes of their wives and mature children who also campaign for the patriarch. This allows polygamous men to sail through in most local council elections in Lango.

In the study conducted, 16 respondents said that, polygamy promoted clan expansion and this makes polygamy a valuable practice to Langi people. According to them clans that encourage polygamy for instance “Okarowok wii-byeacel, Arak Ocola Eyamiyam, Inomo, Oyima, Arak Ococ puri iwor” among others, are wide with many members compared to those clans such as “Atek, Banya, Lakii, Apac okwero ngec okwero ayita, among others, that cherish monogamy. Grandparents are happy to pay dowry for more women because they want their clan to expand quite fast. Related to above, these people said that clan expansion is possible in polygamous marriage since it brings many women into the clan and this increases the clan members. The married women produce many children as clan members and in case the children are boys they, in turn, bring more women into the clan and as the scenario continues, it expands the clan.

It is argued though that clan expansion through polygamy is not good because it brings into the clan different categories of women from various clans with different practices which lead to multi-cultural practices into the clan and this erodes the clan's culture and traditions. This is because in Lango culture, men are not supposed to marry from the same clan because clan members are relatives. This means a man is supposed to marry from different clans bringing multi-cultural practices in such clan. The cost here is that one may unknowingly from a family that practices witchcraft and has health problems.

Mr. Oyuru Thomas, Oleng Jimmy, Eper Michael, Egir Fred and (4) other respondents valued polygamy because it is the source of children and the only way a man with a barren woman could be able to get children. To them, more women produce more children at different time and of different sex. To them this can be achieved because when one woman is pregnant, one may be breastfeeding while others are on the process of conceiving and this keep rotating among the different wives leading to the production of many children. In Lango tradition it's a curse to divorce a woman on the basis of her bareness. A man in such an unfortunate situation is only required to marry other wives to produce many children and compensate for the one who is barren.

Closely related to this value is the fact that polygamists believe by having many women, they could have high chances of producing girls who would then be a source of wealth for the man and the clan in terms of bride price that would be paid when they get married and this was put forward by Mr. Opor Chistopher, Okino Nicholas, Apok Jimmy and four other respondents. Mr Apok said "Nywalo Anyira apol kelo lonyo ipaco ka Anyira ni onyomo ducu". This is, "All the daughters will be married and this is income for the family". They all supported this by view by referring to the recent bylaw that was made by the Lango clan leaders in the conference headed by "Won Nyaci" (The Lango Paramount Chief). This bylaw states that the least number of cows that should be accepted when marrying any Langi lady is six. Anything below that should not be accepted by the girl's parents even if they are marrying men from outside Lango.

These people said that girls are source of wealth through the customary requirements which is given to lady's parents or relatives during the traditional marriage such requirements included cows, goats, chicken, money, food stuffs and other materials depending on a given society. They said that in Lango society bride price serve as a certificate for marriage to take place since without the payment of bride price, marriage is considered unconfirmed by parents and could break down any time. This therefore makes the girl's parents rich compared to the boy's parents. However this result in to unhappy marriage as some men expect their wives to do and obey them without questioning since they are regarded as property of a man. It can also cause early and forced marriage especially to the rich men due to the need to get bride wealth. At times, the girl's parents also over charge the boys' and this makes the couples to start their marriage life in an economic crisis thus making the marriage of young people more of a burden than a blessing.

Prevalence/ Popularity of Polygamy in Lango Sub-Region

Although polygamy is a widely accepted practice among the Langi, in the modern times, its popularity in terms of real figures is contested. No precise statistics exist on the prevalence of the practice as it is not a stable practice. Findings have shown that men marry but also lose the married women in the course of time due to various reasons. However, anecdotal figures derived from estimates by parish chiefs of Inomo, Ajok, Abedmot, Agwiciri and Bunya parishes indicate that the prevalence of polygamy among men stands 35%. This figure varies by parish as some parishes have larger Muslim population than others. Additional evidence came from Focused Group Discussions where respondents said that the practice is very common. 'Polygamy is very common in my area though some few of them have broken out due to some difficulties' (Peter Ogwang). 'It is very common in my area due to inheritance culture in my area as the death rate has increased' (Okello Martin). 'It is very common due to Islamic religious influence in my area. Most of the people in my area are Muslims and they are allowed to marry a maximum of four women' (Moro Abdullah).

Problems Associated with Polygamy among the Langi

Although polygamy is valued on several grounds as discussed in the previous section, it also has problems. This study attempted to establish the different problems that polygamists face in their families. Such problems are statistically represented in the table below.

Table 4.3 Showing problems associated with polygamous marriage

Problems	Frequency	Percentage
Shortage of land	05	14
Meeting basic needs of the family	08	22
Domestic violence	15	42
Expensive to maintain	02	05
Occurrence of adultery	05	14
Total	35	100

Source: primary data, 2014.

The most common problem n= 31 (32%) in polygamous marriages according to results is the problem of domestic violence. Jealousy and competition due to inadequacies in different areas underpin the domestic violence. Polygamous men have also confessed to the challenge that it is very expensive to run and maintain several women. 25% responses confirmed this problem in polygamous marriage. In most cases the polygamists elaborated on this problem by expressing how stressful it is to fend equally for all the women. One Paul from Abedmot parish lamented: 'it is very hard to maintain many women because it needs a lot of resources'.

18% of the respondents identified the problem of meeting the basic needs of the family as highly common in polygamous marriages. From paying schools fees, through clothing, food to meeting medical expenses of the women and

the children, most polygamous men feel the heat and pressure. This probably forms the bulk of stress factor in this marriage.

Shortage of land for the women to cultivate and the children to live in when they grow up was equally identified by 18% of the respondents. With the current high population pressure in the country, possession of many women and children only worsens the situation of the non-expanding land.

Whereas, polygamy is thought to reduce the case of adultery for men, this study has found that there is strong problem of adultery in polygamous marriages especially from the side of women. This was advanced by up to 10% of the participants in this study.

Polygamy is highly practiced among the Langi people and this is due to some of the values that the Langi attach to polygamous marriage. This practice of polygamy among the Langi people was adopted from the traditional people like the clan leaders most of whom have many wives. Traditionally, the Langi people practice polygamy and attach considerable importance to bride wealth and child bearing in each and every family.

According to Kihangira (1957), Langi people are naturally inclined towards polygamy since the time they migrated closer to Lake Kyoga when women were more than men in numbers. This writing points out that polygamy is valuable in Lango sub-region because women are more than men. Though he did not point out clearly whether all polygamists involve in polygamous marriage due to imbalanced numbers of men and women. Therefore the researcher found out from the polygamists that she interacted with in the field whether they got involved in polygamous marriage due to imbalanced numbers of men and women or due to other factors and included in her work.

To Pinkmych (2011), polygamy is probably very helpful for women to raise their children together and share the responsibilities since women who engage in polygamy probably help each other all the time where they can share the child care responsibilities and household duties. The writer however did not point out some of the problems resulting from raising children together by the co-wives depending on their emotions and the researcher got the problem resulting from the raising of children together by the co-wives and included in her work.

The duration of time the respondents have taken in a polygamous relationship was another issue of interest in the study. Findings reveal that 43% of the respondents have stayed in a polygamous marriage for between 1-5 years. 29% of the respondents have stayed in polygamous marriage for between 5-10 years. Those who have stayed in such a relationship for 10-15 years constituted 17% of the respondents. Meanwhile those with 16 years or more years' experience in polygamous marriage were only 11% of the total number of respondents.

From the findings above, it can be seen that the longer the years, the less chances of a polygamist sustaining the marriage with all the women. It is therefore likely that some of the additional women leave or opt out of marriage- a fact that needs to be further investigated as it was not the main subject of investigation of this study.

Conclusion

The standard of debate over the permissibility of polygamy has been characteristically poor. Thus, for example, some proponents of polygamy argue that it is acceptable, in part, on the grounds that many in Western societies also cohabit with multiple partners, such as married men forming relationships with mistresses. Proponents argue that such persons form relationships that involve "emotional commitments" that are "not easily terminated," not unlike polygamy. Therefore, in essence, a married man and his mistress are engaged in a polygamous relationship, and this does not appear to generate much hostility in the West (Zeitzen, 2008).

Polygamy is still a common practice and is likely to continue in the foreseeable future. It is still widely accepted for men of all categories irrespective of their economic status. Because of this, most polygamous men in Lango face enormous challenges in sustaining their large families in terms of provision of food, medical treatment as well as meeting the school requirements of the many children. Accordingly, polygamy is viewed by most as being a stressful thing that does not necessarily meet its expectation of earning respect and fame to an individual.

Many men however continue to marry additional women for various reasons, some of them social and others economic. In the absence of legal provisions either restricting or legally allowing the practice, polygamy is likely to continue being practiced for more generations. This is indeed a reality given the fact that the population of women greatly outstrips that of men.

It is recommended that Lango cultural institution through its different structures that permeate all the communities in the Lango region should make a deliberate effort to sensitize the men to understand that polygamy does not necessarily make one great. This is because almost 99% of the polygamists surveyed in this study advised that men with only one wife should never venture into polygamy because of its enormous challenges:

The government of Uganda and other development agencies should intensify efforts to modernize agriculture with emphasis on more mechanized farming as opposed to rudimentary methods that require enormous amount of labour. With the use of mechanized methods such as ox-plough and tractors, men will not require to amass several women under the pretext of adding up labour force for agriculture. Women economic and social empowerment programme should be widened. This will enable women become more economically productive thereby easing the economic burden posed by large family sizes on the polygamists.

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