**The Examination of Non-Monogamous Marriages in Igbo, Iranian and Sinhalese Cultures**

Rashana Weerasinghe

Anthropology 1000W

Professor Matthew Longcore

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Marriage is a cultural universal and evolutionary phenomenon. This means it takes place in every culture and evolves. However, there are different types of marriage systems. These include monogamy, polygamy and polyandry. Such types of marriages are rooted in cultural and traditional ideologies and values. Unlike marriage, these types of mating systems are not cultural universals. Looking closely at the Igbo (FF26), Iranian (MA01), and Sinhalese (AX04) cultures help demonstrate the differences between such systems, as well as the reasons behind such marriages.

Monogamy is when two people are exclusively dating each other. This means that they are intimate only with one partner. Many cultures today believe that intimately talking to someone other than one’s significant other is cheating. This is because a monogamous relationship is when two people are completely devoted to each other.

Similar to how many societies have stipulations in place regarding who they can marry, the number of people one marries can also depend on cultural regulations. In America, such regulations are that people marry one other person. This remains true for other developed societies as well. Since monogamy is usually connected to higher standards of living, it can be inferred that non-monogamous relationships occur in lesser developed societies.

Polygamy is when a male has multiple wives. This is the second most popular mating system. As surprising as it may seem, many cultures outside the Western world practice polygamy. As the mentioned by Ferraro and Andreatta, “approximately 70% of the world’s cultures practice polygamy is not to say that 70% of the world’s population practices polygamy” (Ferraro and Andreatta 218). It also is deemed the recommended form of marriage through Asia, Africa and the Middle East. According to George Murdock’s Ethnographic Atlas, “approximately seven out of every ten cultures of the world both permit and prefer the practice of polygyny” (Ferraro and Andreatta 219). While polygamy may be considered the preferred form of marriage, in most instances, it is not the usual form of marriage. In societies where polygamy is heavily ingrained in the culture, usually, about 35% of men have two or more wives (Ferraro and Andreatta 219). This indicates that more than half the population in these societies practice monogamy. Therefore, even in polygamous societies, where this is an accepted form of marriage, the majority of men choose to only have one wife.

In North America, the idea of sharing a spouse is unimaginable as everyone is accustomed to exclusive relationships. Monogamy is so ingrained in our culture that it is easy to oppose and have a negative view of cultures that are accepting of other systems. While polygamy is not considered socially accepted system today, non-monogamous relationships are practiced in America. Mormons introduced the practice of polygamy to American society. The early Mormons practiced it because they believed it was an order from god. This idea stems from the many references to polygamy in the Old Testament of the Bible. The Bible notes the biblical figures who practiced polygamy such as Abraham, Issac, Jacob and Moses (Brooks 109). The mention of these figures practicing polygamy prompted many American Mormons living in Utah to do the same. The Mormons are an example of polygamy that is present in modern America. Similar to America, many other countries today derive from populations that are polygamous. This is because polygamy was a historically popular marital system.

The change from non-monogamous to monogamous relationship are changes in responses to the environment. Human populations shifted to monogamy because civilizations were once in an age where many people were required to maintain landmasses and sustain one's family. The need to marry multiple partners decreased as the need to have large families declined. Therefore, as cultural expectations and standards change, so do the mating systems. This is because mating systems are evolutionary responses to different conditions, and change over time as living conditions evolve.

**Africa:**

Polygamy is common in Africa. The Igbos are an example of a culture in Africa that exhibit practices of polygamy. They are located in West Africa, specifically in south-central and southeastern Nigeria. In Nnobi society, they consider polygamy to be an integral part of the social economy. There is a correlation between the number of wives, wealth and authority one has (Amadiume 1987: 42). Polygamous relationships were seen as an indication of wealth because marrying multiple people would allow one’s household to gain more control of land and provide more labor. In Igbo culture, it is the goal of every man to become a polygamist. Having multiple wives is seen as an investment and can influence social standing and welfare (Basden 1966: 97). This view of polygamous marriages for the Igbo speaks volumes to how West Africans may view non-monogamous relationships.

Having multiple wives is favored, however, not all wives have the same level of authority in the household. In the Igbo culture, the first wife is given more rights and power. She is considered the legal wife, and is seen as superior to the other wives: “She {first wife} alone bears the title of “anasi” and, in virtue thereof, is accorded a measure of respect vastly superior to that given to any of the additional wives” (Basden 1966: 97). Basden continues to explain how the first wife can have a say in the husband's affairs with the other women. This illustrates how there can be a hierarchy between the wives in certain Nnobi polygamous households. It also unleashes other issues of jealousy and attention that may arise amongst the other wives, as they are seen as less powerful.

While there may be lasting tension between the wives, there are also ways in which the wives can collaborate to better their standing in the marriage. This is an interesting aspect of polygamous marriages as it is related to how women can utilize their strengths to not become buried in the marriage. In lesser developed societies, such as in Igbo, the stigma of females being inferior to males still lingers today. However, a woman’s ability to cook does not go unnoticed. This elevates their position, as this skill is highly valued. It gives the females an edge over the male. As referred to by Basden, the ability to cook can be seen as a “vital weapon” (Basden 1966: 100). In the case that a wife and the husband do not get along, the wife will neglect to cook for her husband. This undoubtedly will negatively impact the husband, putting him in a position where he will not want to continue to disappoint his wife. In certain situations, all the Igbo wives can rally against the husband refusing to prepare him a meal if they feel that he has mistreated them. This is an example of how all the wives can unite and leverage their abilities to mark their presence in the relationship.

**Middle East:**

Polygamous relationships are also found in the Middle East. One specific country that practices this would be Iran. The main purpose of non-monogamous relationships in Iran is to offset the shortage of human resources and labor required for families. For example, in rural areas in Iran, carpet weaving, which is a female occupation, is how most families bring in income (Nassehi-Behnam 1985: 559). For this reason, it becomes clear that multiple women may be needed to take care of household tasks and responsibilities. This is because women are in charge of important responsibilities for the success of the household. It would be considered too heavy of a burden for one woman to handle such a responsibility by herself. Thus, having multiple wives will help the overall success of the household as each wife would assist separately to benefit the household as a whole.

  In Iran, the traditional family works as a unit. They operate based on male supremacy and in a patrilineal and patriarchal manner (Nassehi-Behnam 1985: 557). As mentioned in the *Cambridge Anthropology Encyclopedia*, this refers to the father’s line of descent. Families function as a cohesive group fighting to preserve their traditional family culture and hierarchy. Along with this, a polygamous marriage allows the family to have higher economic gain and improve social mobility. Iranian culture is similar to the Igbo culture in that sense. As in the Igbo culture, a polygamous relationship in Iran is a symbol of wealth (Nassehi-Behnam 1985: 557). Another similarity between the Iranians and Igbo would be that polygamy can benefit a family's social standing. For example, in the case that a woman from a lower class marries a man of higher stature, this will improve the child’s status. By doing so, the female moves up the social hierarchy and in turn, the child will be considered under the same kinship network as their father (Nassehi-Behnam 1985: 557).

In many of the polygamous relationships in Iran, the male is “under obligation to obtain the consent of his first wife before he can conclude a second marriage” (Haas 1946: 181). In addition to this, the husband must inform the prospective wife of his other wives. If not done as such, the male risks punishment most commonly in the form of jail time. This acknowledges the presence females have in polygamous relationships as many of the acts by a male need female verification. It can be assumed that this is to provide control and power to the wife as well. Allowing the wife to have some dominance can benefit the overall health of the household.

One concern that may arise during polygamous relationships would be lack of affection a wife may feel from their spouse. The mistreatment of wives can also come from an unequal distribution of gifts, money, children and the treatment of the woman's child. All this can lead to a toxic marriage. In Iran, many women turn to their family and friends to learn how to regain their husband's affection back. Since many of the other women have had their own experiences dealing with similar situations, women consult their close family and friends. In fact there is a charm, which is a large grey seed with a silver bar, that is used to help keep the husband continuously loving and faithful (Donaldson 1938: 51). Polygamous societies have implemented different types of structure to handle the problems that surface in such marriages. Reports reveal that sometimes co-wives have a harmonious and cooperative relationship with each other (Ferraro and Andreatta 220). It is said that they view each other as companions as opposed to rivals.

To suppress these concerns, there have been efforts to help domestic tranquility and lessen the friction between wives. First wives can partake in handpicking the next wife. This is why some wives prefer if their spouse marries the wife’s sister as there is less likely to be jealousy between the two sisters. Secondly, in most polygamous societies wives are given their living quarters separate from the other wives. (Ferraro and Andreatta 220). Thus, providing each wife with their personal space can help minimize issues of jealousy.

Cultures such as the Igbo and Iranians practice polygamy for there can be multiple advantages in implementing this type of a mating system. For one, polygamy is seen as a symbol of prestige and power. Having a polygamous marriage in both cultures increases that status ranking of the man when he becomes married to multiple women. Along with this, the ranking of a woman's prestige can increase as well when her husband marries multiple wives. This is because societies view wives as economic and political assets as they can provide children (Ferraro and Andreatta 220). In many cultures, children are seen as valuable assets and resources. Besides, with more wives, more work can be taken on which will raise productivity and create success for the household.

Along with advantages, there are drawbacks to polygamous relationships. Firstly, to be in a polygamy, approval and financial support from one’s family is required. In certain situations, this type of approval is not always easy to gain. Secondly, the status of a man and his family matter. In certain situations, it is seen as unlawful for a man of lower rank to acquire a wife from a higher rank. This would restrict such a type of male into a monogamous relationship. Lastly, polygamous relationships can be tough. They usually require a plethora of work, problem-solving and management skills. As the “man of the household '' there is a lot of pressure on the males to use proper and strong administrative skills to maintain a well-functioning household. For this reason, some men may believe that they cannot handle such a role and prefer to become involved in a monogamous relationship instead. Simply said, even in polygamous societies, some men choose not to maintain such a relationship for reasons such as not having familial approval, good societal ranking or social skills to achieve polygamy.

From a global and anthropological perspective, polygamy is a legitimate and accepted form of marriage. While it is harder to grasp the idea of having multiple spouses in certain cultures, many do not find anything inherently wrong with this practice.

**Sri Lanka**

Polyandry is a reflection of polygamy in which females can marry more than one man. In comparison to polygamy, polyandry is a rarer in practice. It is found in less than one percent of societies in the world (Ferraro and Andreatta 221). Similar to polygamy, polyandry can be fraternal or non-fraternal “By marrying one woman, two or more brothers can preserve the family resources'' (Ferraro and Andreatta 221). If each brother entered their monogamous relationships, the resources of the family would have to be split up among the sons. Therefore, polyandrous households help prevent fragmentation of family land. This also helps to keep traditions and inheritance aligned in the family. It becomes apparent that such types of households occur for reasons below surface level. Various economic, political and traditional factors play a role in the choices people make in entering such types of relationships. In most situations, polyandrous relationships take place for economic purposes.

Polyandry exists in societies where there is a need for strength. Sri Lanka, an island off the coast of India, is known for its large plantations and farmland. For this reason, there is a heavy reliance on agriculture cultivation. Owning large pieces of land can become very laborious and intensive. Many females feel that they cannot depend solely on one male to maintain order in such areas. Hence, they marry multiple husbands to implement the order and assist with other strength inducing activities.

In the Sinhalese culture, historic evidence proves that polyandry existed especially in the Kandyan civilizations. Similar to Kandyan provinces, polyandrous marriages were often found in traditional and remote areas (MacDougall 1974: 568). It can be assumed that it took place in such areas as compared to cities in Sri Lanka, such as Colombo and Dehwiala, as rural areas require more male power. This led to females marrying more men in order to manage

large plantations. The living situation in Sri Lanka calls for dependence on man strength due to the reliance on farming. This explains why females choose to marry multiple men. As mentioned in an article by Stanley Tambiah, polyandry allowed the family to perform as an economic unit (Tambiah 1965: 160). While the female would take care of the house, the males would perform laborious tasks cultivating land and selling agricultural and food products. This benefited the household in many ways as more income was being brought in, leading to more financially stable families. This is the main reason as to why polyandrous marriages occurred in Sri Lanka; it was seen as a smart move for the wealth and prosperity of families.

Even in Sinhalese civilizations, polyandry is infrequently practiced. Many believe polyandry to be exceptional yet acceptable (Tambiah 1965: 269). There were 27 reported cases of polyandry in Laggala, Sri Lanka, however, the number of polyandrists in Sri Lanka on average is decreasing. (Tambiah 1965: 160). This can be due to the countless legislative acts that were put in effort to remove such types of marriages. Many of the efforts to remove polyandry came from the colonists.

 It has not been recorded how many husbands were involved in such relationships. There have been reports of two husbands to as many as seven in Sinhalese polyandrous marriages (MacDougall 1974: 567). Similar to the Igbo and Iranian cultures, caste and social ranking influences who one can marry in Sri Lanka as well. In many South Asian countries, caste equality in marriage is important. This holds true even for polyandrous marriages. In Sri Lankan marriages, a woman would marry a man” of equal or higher status within the caste” (Pfaffenberger 1997: 5). Therefore, many females marry two males who are brothers. This is because they are from the same caste and it makes the process of approving the marriage smoother. In most Sri Lankan marriages, the females move over to the male’s property. By marrying brothers, the property will not have to be divided amongst the brothers as they share the same wife. (Pfaffenberger 1997: 5). Many women chose to marry siblings because it would be easier for the husbands to get along and can result in an easier marriage.

The husbands play a crucial role in the fluidity of the marriage. If the husbands cooperate, the household is in good standing (Yalman 1971: 109). If husbands start disputes with each other, the household starts to fall apart. However, the few polyandrous households that existed in Sri Lankan were considered happy families.

As seen in Igbo, Iranian and Sinhalese cultures, non-monogamous relationships occur for various reasons. The different cultures call for different circumstances. Learning how to adapt to these situations and alter what may be considered the norm to fit one’s own society is how different mating systems came about. For the most part, such mating systems help civilians engage with their culture and better equip them to handle the cultural specific challenges they face. When analyzing the types of marriages in cultures, it is important to recognize a culture's own traditional beliefs as well as cultural situations.

Further analysis of polygamous and polyandrous relationships in different cultures, it becomes clear these are complex mating systems. Delving into parts of Africa, Asia and the Middle East reveals that other types of marriage exist and are practiced. While the amount of polygamous and polyandrous relationships is on the decline, they are still present in societies. Thus, even though marriage is a cultural universal, the number of spouses one has is not. This proves that monogamy is not a cultural universal. Despite monogamy being more widely accepted, it is not the only marriage system prevalent in every culture. Monogamy is culturally more popular, but not a cultural universal.

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