

Polygyny and Christian Marriage in Africa: The Case of Benin

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Abstract: Since the arrival of European missionaries in Africa, there has been charged debate over people's marriage choices. This article outlines the major elements in the academic, theological, and popular discourses on marriage in Africa, focusing on two topics: the conceptual divide between monogamous Christian marriage and African polygyny, and the claim that women automatically prefer monogamy. By comparing the assumptions in the literature with ethnographic data from the Republic of Benin, this article demonstrates that marital choices cannot necessarily be predicted by a person's gender and rarely are characterized by a definitive conceptual divide. Instead, personal motives related to economics, prestige, and competition for power are the main factors in marriage choices.

Introduction

Wambui Wa Karanja has stated that "Africa is, par excellence, the home of polygyny" (1994:199). Although Karanja and others note that in many African societies polygyny is often practiced by only a minority of men (Beidelman 1982:39), the perception of Africans as fundamentally polygynous is echoed in the writings of Western scholars and missionaries as well as African writers. At a roundtable during the 2003 African Studies Association meeting in Boston, a number of scholars from Africa also noted that African men defend polygyny as part of their culture, while women are presumed to be more inclined toward monogamy. During fieldwork in southern Benin between 1998 and 2000, I heard some male informants claim that monogamy was acceptable for Europeans and Americans, but that as

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Africans they could not abide by a foreign marriage system. Considering that sub-Saharan Africa boasts the fastest growing Christian population in the world, one wonders how Western Christianity's monogamous ideal has been received by African people. Specifically, are scholars correct in saying that Africans reject monogamy for cultural and ideological reasons? Furthermore, are they correct that polygyny is a male goal, in comparison to women's desire for monogamy? If these claims are true, what would this mean for the future of Christianity on the continent?

The topic of Christian marriage is complex, and it has been debated throughout the history of African missions. Three main tensions arose in the confrontation between missionaries and African marriage practices. First, missionaries struggled with establishing the notions of romantic love and individualism in the face of what they perceived as the unromantic, duty-oriented style of African marriage (see Mann 1994; Phillips 1953). Second, many missionaries misunderstood African customs of marriage payments, viewing these transactions as the purchase of a bride (see Hastings 1967; Wilson 1950). Third, most missionaries felt they were in a constant battle to uphold monogamy and eradicate polygyny. Although these three issues are related, the strongest and most enduring point of tension has been the question of polygyny (Barrett 1968c; Hastings 1973, 1994), which speaks not only to the history of Christian missions, but also to perceptions of Africa and the identities of African people. Today it remains one of the most heated issues in African congregations. Although a number of scholars have discussed missionary conflicts over polygyny in the historical context, Christianity's relationship to polygyny is virtually untouched in contemporary ethnographic accounts.

In this article I review some of the anthropological, historical, popular, and theological discourses about Christian marriage in Africa with respect to two main claims presented in the literature. First, I discuss the perceived ideological contest between monogamy and polygyny. Second, I examine the notion that men and women have different marital goals. Finally, I use ethnographic data from the Republic of Benin, primarily collected among Fon people, to show that while these claims may accurately reflect the views of some Beninois, most people's actions and ideas cannot be predicted neatly. Although Christianity in Benin may have many ideological components, marriage choices tend to follow more personal and practical motives and are influenced by questions of economics, prestige, and power.

Polygyny versus Monogamy

Christian missionaries were among the first Europeans to settle and establish long-term residence in sub-Saharan Africa. Though they arrived soon after European exploration in the fifteenth century, it was not until the nineteenth century that missionaries, and later colonial officials, entered into more profound and sustained contact with African peoples. These visitors

brought with them new, and sometimes alien, cultural models. Coincident with what some call a “clash” of cultures (Kapenzi 1979; Clarke 1986:158; Webster 1968) and a “war” against African culture (Amanze 1998:52–3) was the emergence of conflict between Christian precepts and African customs (Allman & Tashjian 2000:205; Parkin & Nyamwaya 1987:11; Shank 1998). The most controversial issue was the indigenous tradition of polygynous marriage.

Polygyny refers to one type of polygamy in which men have multiple wives (cowives), as opposed to polyandrous polygamy, in which a woman has multiple husbands. Despite the fact that monogamy, polygyny, and cowife are often known by distinct terms in African languages, and that monogamy represents the majority of marriages, polygyny is seen as “the most distinctive feature of Sub-Saharan African marriage” (Karanja 1994). This view of marriage suggests a conceptual divide pitting traditional African marriage against modern Western (Christian) marriage. Although these essentialist categories of “African,” “Western,” “traditional,” and “modern” have little salience for contemporary social scientists, much of the discourse, as I will show, embraces these categories.

The discourse seems to have emerged when missionaries to Africa expanded their efforts in the nineteenth century. As one missionary put it in 1914, “Not only the most pressing, but the most puzzling, the most insistent, the most far-reaching of problems, is that of Christian marriage in the heathen world” (in Hastings 1973:5). The principal issue was polygyny (Amanze 1998:54; Hastings 1973, 1994:317; Webster 1968), described by other missionaries as one of the “chief obstacles” (Kitching 1935:35) and “strongest hindrances” (Nau 1945:279) to missionization in Africa. Many scholars have agreed that the desire for sustaining polygyny was a limiting factor in African conversion to “mainstream” Christianity (Ekechi 1972), especially in contrast to the success of Islam, which, in condoning polygyny, has been depicted as more harmonious with “traditional” culture (Antoine & Nanitelamio 1996:132; Avery 1980:114; Webster 1964:99).

In terms of their practices and behavior, missionaries, as the historian and theologian Adrian Hastings (1994) demonstrates, may in fact have been somewhat more ambivalent about monogamy (Newing 1970; Sandgren 1999) than the above statements suggest. Even among early missionaries, there was no universal consensus about the definition of a proper marriage, and a heated debate often raged in the congregations (Comaroff & Comaroff 1986:1; Mobley 1970; Webster 1964) about particular issues, such as whether a woman could convert without her polygynous husband and whether she could remain married to him. Hastings notes that the Bible does not provide a firm foundation for limiting marriage to monogamy (1973:8), and converts and African religious scholars have occasionally pressed the issue. There are many examples of polygyny in the Old Testament, and in the New Testament (I Cor 7:12–16), Paul says that a Christian should not automatically discard a nonbelieving spouse (see Gil-

liland 1998:163). Paul (1 Tim 3:2) advises that church leaders must be the “husband of one wife” (see Glasscock 1983), but this injunction perhaps falls short of prohibiting polygyny among members of the congregation. This ambiguity has led converts and clergy to question whether Christianity truly demands monogamy or whether monogamy was merely a European cultural convention (Bradley & Weisner 1997; Kofon 1992; Molapisi 1990; Trobisch 1978)—and a convention, for that matter, whose moral inviolability was undermined by the robust European phenomenon of married men with mistresses (Amanze 1998:172; Ekechi 1972:21; Mobely 1970; Ositelu 2002:33).

This ideological ambiguity was matched, in terms of practice and behavior, with a great deal of variety and inconsistency among congregations. Some nineteenth-century missions to Congo and the Gold Coast accepted polygynists (Hastings 1994:319), and in colonial Lagos, of those men participating in Christian marriage ceremonies, 60 percent had multiple wives (Mann 1994: 172–73). Missionary attitudes were also variable across time: mild tolerance in the nineteenth century turned into staunch opposition at the turn of the twentieth century and then pronounced tolerance beginning in the mid-twentieth century (Hastings 1994:317–19). The Catholic Church in Uganda was always strict regarding marriage (Hastings 1967:166), but Protestant churches tended to be more tolerant; to be married as a Catholic meant having one true Church marriage, whereas Protestant churches would often legitimate customary marriages and the children born of them. In many missions, although the official policy denounced polygyny, multiple wives were recognized if the man had married them before he received his Christian calling (Groves 1948:220). Missionaries were also sometimes willing to bend the rules rather than expel a woman from a family. G. Hartmann, a Cape Province missionary, wrote, “I feel that by our narrow approach of the problem influenced by European theories, a tremendous harm is done to African people. I myself shall never ask a man to dismiss his wives. It is cruel, immoral and has nothing to do with Christ at all.... I have done it once in my life and never again (quoted in Helander 1958:15–16).

Despite these inconsistencies, however, early missionaries to Africa usually required or encouraged monogamy and fidelity, and this position has largely shaped the association of Christianity with monogamy. As Hastings (1967:171) writes, “If polygamy is not sinful, it is certainly un-Christian and expresses a view of society incompatible with the Christian way of life. Full conversion to Christianity *does* involve destruction—of beliefs, customs, a whole shape of society.” When missionaries encountered polygynous marriages, many tended to recognize only the first of a man’s partners; all others were dubbed “concubines” (R. Gray 1990:47). In many congregations, if a polygynous man wished to attend church, he would be forced to break up his family, separating himself from his so-called illegitimate wives and children (Hastings 1967:171; Simensen et al. 1986). Children of polygy-

nists could be labeled bastards (Hastings (1967:168), and churches could excommunicate polygynous men (Mann 1994:169). The prevailing missionary view contended that monogamy, as an imitation of the marriage between Christ and church, was indispensable to accepting God (Bediako 1995:184; Roussé-Grosseau 1992:238). Although Hastings (1973:79) advocated a “steadfast but compassionate monogamy, not an intolerant one,” he also wrote that

Christian society without Christian marriage and family life is unthinkable. We have pagan patterns of marriage including polygamy, the consideration of women as a possession rather than a person, wife-beating, divorce and so on, and we have a Christian pattern presenting fellowship, complementary mutual service, love, the mirror of Christ and his Church. The former provide the greatest abiding barrier to the growth of an effectively Christian society in mission lands. (1967:162)

In their advocacy of monogamy, Christian missions were not, of course, acting within a vacuum. Colonial governments often cooperated with missions in establishing legal codes pertaining to civil marriage and inheritance, all of which strongly favored or enforced monogamous Christian unions.¹ The Marriage Ordinance of 1884 in Lagos, Nigeria, established legal registration proceedings for Christian marriages, and it licensed churches to perform a state-recognized ceremony that demanded monogamy (Mann 1994:170). A similar law was passed in Ghana in 1909 (Vellenga 1983:150). More intrusive actions included a tax levied by the colonial government of Belgian Congo on a man who had more than one wife (Hunt 1991).

Not all church marriages resulted from government coercion, however, since Christianity (even in cases in which it may not have been a matter of genuine spiritual conviction) did carry a certain appeal and cultural cachet. In Igboland, slaves seeking a path to liberation were among the first converts (Ekechi 1972:48). Missionaries were long aware that women often embraced Christian marital ideals because they could use missions as a haven from arranged marriages or because monogamy meant an avoidance of sexual competition (Wilson 1950:138; Isichei 1995:240).² In other cases, people converted out of a desire for the material wealth, access to schools, and the political power that they recognized among Europeans (Ekechi 1972:48), and Christianity became closely linked to upper-class status (Avery 1980:108; R. Gray 1990:47; Mann 1994:171–72). Even today, some Africans are said to aspire to monogamy as a more sophisticated, evolved form of marriage (Dorjahn 1988; Mianda 2002; Sofola 1998). Karanja (1994) has found that many Nigerians associate polygyny with unsophisticated, traditional “bush” behavior. For some, then, the new religion represents progress and development.

Nevertheless, despite the often unreliable nature of census data in Africa, and the existence of some dissenters (see Dinan 1983:353; Hakansson

1997) about how to interpret these data, most scholars contend that polygynous marriage shows no clear signs of decline in Africa and is unlikely to disappear in the immediate future.³ In Nigeria, where in 1885 30 percent of married men were polygynous, recent figures show an increase despite high rates of conversion to Christianity (Caldwell, Caldwell, & Orubuloye 1992:389). Polygyny remains common in Senegal (Garenne & Van de Walle 1989:267) and Sierra Leone (Steady 1987:219). In Benin, 31 percent of married men were polygynous in 1979 and in 1992, although the 2002 census notes a decline to 27 percent (INSAE 1994a:37; INSAE 2003:18). Though scholars commonly link polygyny to rural traditional settings as opposed to modern urban life (Garenne & Van de Walle 1989:270), others point out that even urban areas exhibit high levels of plural marriage. In Ghana's metropolitan capital of Accra, polygyny reached a rate of 39 percent of married men, as compared with 26 percent for the nation (Goody 1990:129; see also Aryee 1978:369). Urban polygyny is also found in Niger (Cooper 1997:13–14) and Dakar (Antoine & Nanitelamio 1996:129).

If Christianity has encouraged monogamy among some devoted worshippers (Garenne & Van de Walle 1989:270; Lesthaeghe et al. 1994:33), overt polygyny continues to be found in high numbers, both among African independent churches (AICs) and practitioners of traditional religions, while clandestine polygyny remains common among mainstream Christians. In Benin, I have observed that even the Catholic Church is a common target of accusations that the clergy turn a blind eye toward hidden polygyny in order to increase church membership. According to Daneel (2000:1), there are seven to eight thousand African independent churches that were founded during the last century and are independent of Western missions. Some scholars claim these churches originated as part of the political opposition to colonial and missionary control (Ayegboyin & Ishola 1997:22; Clarke 1986:157), but others maintain that their acceptance of plural marriages has fueled their popularity (Barrett 1968a; Jules-Rosette 1978:125; Webster 1964). It is undeniable that Christianity's growth in Africa is concentrated in these churches (Hastings 1979). Barrett (1968a) even suggests that tolerance for polygyny may be a rationale (though perhaps an unconscious one) for the founding of the new churches, and this belief is echoed by other scholars (Isichei 1995; Mwaura 2003; Webster 1968) as well as missionaries (Hillman 1975:33).

Today, there are numerous Christian denominations in Africa, each with its own philosophy of marriage, and individual churches, priests, and pastors may enforce rules with varying rigor (Adeleru 1999). Many of these churches, both established and independent, do reject polygyny and criticize polygyny-permissive denominations (Hillman 1975:33; Turner 1966). Nevertheless, there are many examples of congregations that position themselves on the other side of the issue. The Musama Disco Christo Church of Ghana has stated in its articles of faith and declaration, "We believe that (as an African Church) polygamy is not a mortal sin" (Bediako 1995:67; see

also Opoku 1980). Statements defending polygyny are also made by Benin's Celestial Church of Christ, which openly accepts polygynists and demands no church marriage. According to the church's literature, "we accept into the heart of our religion both monogamous and polygamous individuals... because to claim that fidelity to the marriage vow is essential while most husbands commonly live in concubinage with other women, appears to us a hypocrisy" (ECC 1997:33). Other independent churches reported to accept polygyny include the three Nigerian churches of Zion Methodist Mission (Ekechi 1987), the United African Methodist Church (Isichei 1995; Webster 1968), and Church of the Lord (Turner 1967), as well as South Africa's Zion Apostolic Church in Zion (Pretorius 1991), Botswana's Africa Gospel Church (Amanze 1998), the Peace and Mercy Church in East Africa (Barrett 1968b), and Ghana's Church of the Twelve Apostles (Baëta 1962).

When independent churches accept polygyny, this practice may allow parishioners to distance themselves from Europeans while retaining the prestige of the Christian religion. From this perspective, the process of "Africanizing" Christianity capitalizes on conflicting cultural identities. It is significant, in this regard, that the literature on these new denominations generally refers to them as *African* Independent Churches rather than simply as independent churches.⁴ As their name suggests, they are perceived as having grown out of typically African cultural traditions, and they frequently are presented as the African counterpart to Western Christianity.

Today cultural identity remains at the core of religious debates in Africa, and similar debates circulate in popular discourses, in which the question of polygyny is often situated as part of a larger debate about "modernity" versus "tradition." In Buchi Emecheta's novel *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979:119), a female character refers to monogamy as "the European way." A male character in Ama Ata Aidoo's novel *Changes: A Love Story* defends polygyny, claiming, "In our marriages a man has a choice—to have one or more wives" (1991:90). A Nigerian man quoted in a newspaper voiced a similar argument for the inappropriateness of imposing foreign monogamy on polygynous Africa (in Karanja 1984:20). And yet we must remember that most African men are monogamous, and monogamy is hardly a foreign concept. One has to conclude that in some ways the very prevalence of the incompatibility discourses helps explain the perceived dichotomy between monogamy and polygyny that persists. But few researchers have examined marriage choices systematically to see if, or to what extent, they are related to such ideological questions.

Marital Goals of Men and Women

Many academics and religious scholars have maintained that African women overwhelmingly prefer monogamy (Abraham 1962:190; Goody 1990:129; Reyburn 1967:79) and also that it is more attractive to women than to men, who prefer polygyny (Phillips 1953:xiv). Some scholars acknowledge advan-

tages to women in a polygynous situation, such as opportunities for sharing work and childcare (allowing more time for economic activities), for older wives to exercise authority over junior cowives, and for camaraderie (Ama-dieme 1987; Sofola 1998; Steady 1987; Ware 1979). Nevertheless, women in polygynous marriages have been portrayed most saliently as pawns in men's quest for prestige (Sheldon 2002:10), and the existence of multiple wives or girlfriends has been seen as a status symbol for men (Ekechi 1972:20; Karanja 1994:197; Mann 1994:172). During the colonial period, men argued that monogamy made the practice of postpartum abstinence difficult or could potentially bind a husband to a barren wife (Beidelman 1982:142; Mann 1994). In colonial East Africa some men were reportedly afraid that women would seek witchcraft or poison as the only way to end a lifelong Christian marriage (Isichei 1995:240). Men in the colonial period also claimed that monogamy effectively blocked the levirate system, leaving many widows destitute. Rather than become a cowife in her brother-in-law's polygynous household, a widow would be forced to fend for herself. Recent studies suggest that men may still be wary of the permanence demanded by Christian marriage, while Christianity is perceived as a liberating force for women because it grants them the choice of monogamy (Schuyler 1968:216). According to a study by Van der Vliet (1991), Xhosa women seek "modernity" through monogamy, fidelity, and an emotional conjugal bond, while men defend polygyny as part of "tradition." Kaguru women in Tanzania have also been portrayed as strong opponents of polygyny (Meekers & Franklin 1995).

It must be considered, however, that even aside from the religious or spiritual draw of Christianity, women may be attracted to Christianity as a marker of elite status, rather than for the purpose of entering a monogamous union. It is also true that women who become Christians with the goal of monogamy will find themselves greatly outnumbering their male counterparts (E. Gray 1956; Daneel 2000; Isichei 1995; Tall 1995; see also Hastings 1973:130) and therefore may opt for a union with a polygynous husband (E. Gray 1956:272). Other women, perhaps seeking financial support or themselves desirous of a more flexible arrangement than monogamy allows, often consent to informal unions with married men. These women become so-called outside wives (Dinan 1983; Karanja 1994; Lacombe 1987; Little 1979; Locoh 1994), a practice that emerged in late nineteenth-century Lagos at the same time that Christianity became established in Africa (Mann 1994:167,174). The existence of such extramarital liaisons creates enormous tension between the inside wives, who are generally educated, elite, Christian women who aspire to monogamy and the "Western concept of love, affection, companionship and fidelity" (Karanja 1984:8), and their husbands, who may embrace the elite status of Christianity but still are drawn to polygyny (Karanja 1994:204).

In general, therefore, the role of Christianity in man's and women's views of monogamy seems to have been insufficiently problematized. While

there is evidence that many women prefer monogamy, their motivations are not always clear. It is also not clear that Christian monogamy always satisfies their desire for marriage based on love and fidelity. Furthermore, many of the discourses ignore the possibility that women may choose a polygynous husband. The rest of this article examines these issues in the context of one West African country—the Republic of Benin.

Christianity in Benin

In visits to Benin in the late nineties, I heard men condemn monogamy as foreign. Based on some of the literature cited above, I was tempted to blame the West and Christianity for introducing new ideas and destabilizing “traditional” customs. Yet I also knew monogamous men (both Christian and non-Christian) who defied this all-too-neat view of polygynous “tradition,” and I also learned about independent Christian churches that allowed polygyny. These inconsistencies aroused my curiosity about Christianity’s influence on marriage in contemporary Benin. My main goal was to assess the notion that men and women have divergent opinions of polygyny and monogamy, and if so, whether this is reflected in church membership and marriage practices. My second goal was to determine, in the case of Benin, how accurately the discourses portray the conceptual divide between “African” and “Western” identity. Is the divide meaningful to Beninois people? Does it motivate their choice of religion or marriage?

Although some information was collected during earlier fieldwork between September 1998 and August 2000, most of what follows is based on fifty-three semiformal interviews and numerous informal discussions conducted from May 25 to July 3, 2006. The interviews, most of which were recorded, were conducted by me either in French or Fon, with occasional interpreting assistance from Fon-speaking friends. Sixteen interviews took place in Benin’s largest city of Cotonou, while nineteen were conducted in the inland towns of Abomey and Bohicon and eighteen interviews were done in villages near Abomey. I interviewed twenty-six men and twenty-seven women, including a number of longtime friends and other individuals contacted through a snowball effect. I spoke with priests and pastors, merchants and teachers, farmers and government employees, Christians and non-Christians, married and single people, those who were monogamous and polygynous, old and young. In Abomey and Cotonou I attended services in the Catholic Church, the Celestial Church of Christ, and the Protestant Methodist Church of Benin.

In Benin, as elsewhere in Africa, there is a dizzying array of churches, some of which have precolonial roots in foreign missionary work, and others of which are recently established churches of local or foreign origin. In the former category is the Catholic Church, which is the oldest and largest Christian denomination in Benin, representing 27 percent of the population (INSAE 2003:26).⁵ The latter category represents the recent upsurge

in new, often Pentecostal, denominations (de Surgy 2001; Mayrargue 2001; Strandsbjerg 2005), part of a continentwide phenomenon of evangelism often emanating from abroad, especially the U.S. (Gifford 2001). These newer movements include many small churches which Catholics call “sects.” This pejorative label reveals the competition between Catholics and the newer denominations, which include numerous churches such as Union des Renaissances d’Homme en Christ, Eglise Evangélique de la Foi, Parole du Christ au Monde, Témoins de Jehova (Jehovah’s Witnesses), Union des Eglises Evangéliques du Bénin, Eglise Biblique de La Vie Profonde (Deeper Life Bible Church), Assemblées de Dieu, and the Eglise du Christianisme Céleste.⁶

This last denomination, known in English as the Celestial Church of Christ, was founded in 1947 by Samuel Oschoffa in Porto-Novo, Benin, and today, with 5 percent of the country’s population (INSAE 2003:26), is the largest non-Catholic denomination.⁷ It is one of the most visible denominations, with its ubiquitous blue signs marking church locations throughout Benin, and Celestial Church members are also easily recognized by their long white robes, women’s billowy white hats, and the fact that they do not wear shoes, especially when in church attire. It is also significant for its acceptance of polygynous unions.

Alongside the mainstream and newer churches, there are other spiritual and philosophical groups in Benin, such as Rose Croix and Eckankar. In addition, Cotonou’s stadium hosts religious revivals by U.S. and other foreign spiritual advisors, and religious material is sold in the market and shown on television. The popularity of these movements is indicative of a current trend among Beninois to take advantage of the new religiously tolerant political system in the country in seeking spiritual solutions to their problems and guidance for their lives (Mayrargue 2001:277). Most scholars of Benin note that these movements find fertile ground among people hoping to end their economic hardship, to combat illness and sorcery, and to be “modern” (Henry 2001; Sargent 1989; Tall 1995, 2005). Nearly everyone I spoke with acknowledged that the last decade has shown a veritable “explosion” of new churches.

Marriage Patterns in Benin

I have described Fon marriage patterns in detail elsewhere (Falen 2003), but here I provide a brief outline. In line with earlier anthropological accounts of African marriages (Radcliffe-Brown 1950), informants have described the ideal courtship and marriage procedure as a very formal process, involving the expectation of a bride’s virginity, a man’s bridewealth payment, a contract between families, and the guarantee of rights and responsibilities between spouses. The main elements of the contract are that the union guarantees a man the rights to children and sexual access to his wife, whereas a husband has the responsibility to provide his wife with hous-

ing and a regular allowance. Both families hold a stake in the marriage and intervene in times of dispute. The intervention of relatives is often the most effective means for a wife to seek redress of grievances against her husband. These rights and responsibilities are theoretically the same whether a man is polygynous (*asigègèṅṅō*) or monogamous (*asiḍokpónō*). Cowives (*àsisi*) are expected to take turns cooking for, and sleeping with, their husband, and he is supposed to treat them and their children equally. Though few women today seek out a polygynous man, some still encourage their husband to marry additional women.

Although these patterns still hold true for many marriages today, the patterns are in flux, particularly in urban areas. Today, older people complain that bridewealth payments are expensive and increasingly rare, although this trend may not be new (Quenum 1999[1936]:110–11). The ideal of love, along with urban mobility, has fostered an informal style of union, often beginning with sexual activity and resulting in cohabitation and the birth of a child. These informal “marriages” may be accompanied by customary obligations, but there is more flexibility for spouses to negotiate these responsibilities. Furthermore, polygynous men today often try to avoid cowife jealousy by housing wives in different places, sometimes in different towns. This creates more variability in the different relationships or may even result in the husband’s favoring one wife over another.

Educated and wealthy Beninois for the most part see Christianity and monogamy as modern and desirable. Yet for male farmers, having multiple wives may have the functional advantage of producing a greater labor force. More significantly, the ability to support many wives and children is a matter of prestige, and men also receive respect for acquiring multiple sexual relationships. Thus, there are three different and competing avenues to male prestige: open polygyny, Christianity and monogamy, and multiple sexual unions. Depending on a man’s background and priorities, these three strategies may play themselves out in a variety of relationships. Some men are strictly monogamous, while others are monogamous with extramarital affairs. Some are openly polygynous, while others are outwardly monogamous with additional hidden wives and families.

For women, financial concerns are important in their marriage strategy. Many women, especially educated Christians, strongly prefer monogamy, but some accept becoming a cowife for financial security. Other women agree to be the outside wife, although this arrangement may come with the same financial obligations as a formal marriage, depending on how the couple negotiates the terms. In such cases, the families may or may not be inclined to intervene on behalf of one of the spouses. Some women avoid marriage, preferring to engage in sexual unions (sometimes with multiple men) in exchange for financial support. Increasingly, whether or not a marriage is Christian, contracted with bridewealth, or publicly recognized, the application of customary duties and responsibilities is largely dependent on negotiations between the couple. People can be married according to

a customary bridewealth marriage, in a civil ceremony, and/or in religious ceremony (with none of these mutually exclusive). With such a variety of options, it is interesting to see how choices are made and what roles are played by Christianity and ideological concerns.

Marriage and Identity among Beninois Men

In interviews, the people most likely to attach ideological importance to marriage were men, although there was a range of opinions. Most men I interviewed claimed to be opposed to polygyny, including a number of men who were polygynists themselves. Their rationale was that polygyny invites too many quarrels and expenses. I did consider the possibility that if these men saw monogamy as a Western tradition, they may have felt uncomfortable expressing their preference for polygyny to this American researcher. Indeed, on further questioning more of their ambivalence was sometimes revealed. For example, one polygynous man explained that polygyny is undesirable but went on to say that “an African man must have at least two wives.” A young single man also said that polygyny is part of the African “heritage,” as compared with “modern” monogamy. An older man called polygyny a “croyance ancienne” (ancient belief), claiming that monogamy is a new way of thinking learned from Europeans. This same man explained that “en Afrique là, nous continuons d’avoir dans notre sang là, l’élan de la polygamie” (In Africa, we continue to have the spirit of polygyny in our blood). Although this man was monogamous, and made no personal statement about his preference for polygyny, I learned from another informant that he recently had tried to marry an additional, younger wife. On other occasions men hid their girlfriends or outside wives from me, although I learned about their existence from others.

Some men condemn the government’s new official Code of the Family (Rep. of Benin 2002) for meddling with spousal relationships. Most people are probably unfamiliar with the details of the code, but they are aware generally that it declares monogamy to be the only civil marriage recognized by the state, and guarantees the equal division of communal property after divorce. One man stated that he saw it as an importation of white people’s legal principles in attempting to make women equal to men, which he claims is foreign to Africa.⁸ In essence, this man argued that laws do not necessarily reflect public opinion, and he offered a cultural relativist position that Western feminist women’s rights may not be universal (Renteln 1990).⁹ In the face of contemporary women’s more public and political roles in Africa, it is not unusual for men to resist legal reforms that undermine their authority over matters of marriage and women (Hodgson 2001), and my respondent’s resentment demonstrated this argument about gender roles.

Although a number of men similarly defended, or made reference to, polygyny as a “custom” or “tradition,” most men did not see marital choice as a question of ideology or identity. Instead, they claimed that polygyny was

a practical solution to a man's desire for cheap labor in the form of a large family and numerous children—a widely recognized rationale, as we have seen, for polygyny in Africa as a whole (Forde 1950:290; Kuper 1950:89; Sheldon 2002:10–12; White 1984:59). Many farmers continue to believe in the economic advantages of multiple wives and children, even in the face of population increases and soil depletion that have placed the land under stress and have made this, in practical terms, a less important motivation for polygyny.

Obviously, since there are also teachers and businessmen with multiple wives, there are reasons other than agricultural labor to favor polygyny. For example, some men value polygyny as a means for controlling a wife. Urban salaried men I spoke with believed that a sole wife may become demanding and stubborn because she knows that her husband depends on her alone. Some men with multiple wives claimed to benefit from the competition among the wives for their attention and resources. The other enduring justification for polygyny is that having many wives and children is a sign of prestige. People told me that a man with enough money for multiple wives can hardly resist polygyny since it inspires considerable respect. Several people explained that being monogamous is nearly as demeaning as being single. A Fon expression emphasizes the pride of polygyny: “*n̄ñnu ðokpo no ji t̄vi ǎ*” (A man's children are not born of only one woman).

At the same time, I met a number of men who claimed that plural marriage is sometimes imposed upon them. One rare example is levirate marriage, but perhaps the most common route to unintentional polygyny is a man's infidelity that leads to a surprise pregnancy. One informant friend told me that he was happily monogamous, but his wife was unable to conceive, and her family blamed him. To prove his fertility to them and himself, he started having sex with other women, intending to marry the first one who became pregnant. To his surprise two women became pregnant at the same time, and he ended up with three wives. Other men seek additional unions when their wife is observing postpartum sexual taboos, or when she simply refuses to have sex.

For most men that I spoke with, informal polygynous marriage was a product of the search for multiple sexual partners, a phenomenon that occurs among men of all religions. Most men admitted that they have sex outside of their relationships. One young man justified his behavior by saying simply “*N n̄i s̄unú*” (I am a man). Among Christians, seeking extramarital sex leads to the prevalence of outside wives, known in Benin as “*deuxième bureaux*” (second office). In some cases, these women are publicly recognized, but I know two men who have secret girlfriends, one of whom has also had children. In such cases, the first meeting between a man's two families may take place at his funeral, at which time they may dispute the inheritance. Somewhat paradoxically, then, while the search for prestige and sexual access largely motivates the multiple unions, the desire, especially on the part of Christians, for another kind of prestige—the appear-

ance of modernity—leads to the unofficial status of extramarital wives and girlfriends.

Marriage and Identity among Beninois Women

In keeping with previous reports in the scholarly literature, most women I spoke with vehemently opposed polygyny, generally on the grounds that it leads to jealousy and competition over a man's resources. Although some women identified monogamy as originating with white people, this had no obvious effect on monogamy's appeal. Women stated that children of polygynous families do not get along, and their schooling may be neglected when the father's resources are stretched too thin. Some said a man can truly love only one woman, and Christians added that the Bible teaches monogamy. Though not all referred to specific passages in scripture, they often mentioned that God wants a couple to unite "as one flesh." Christian leaders cited the Old Testament in this regard (Gen 2:24). Yet despite their hopes for faithful, monogamous husbands, women commonly estimated that between 90 and 99 percent of men are promiscuous. And some women, despite their general ideological opposition to polygyny, accept it in practice, or condemn it but refuse to leave their polygynous marriage for the sake of their children, for financial security, and/or out of fear of their family's anger.

It is possible, of course, that women may have been disguising their true attitudes toward polygyny on the assumption that I would find it objectionable. Indeed in my 2006 fieldwork only one of my twenty-seven formal female interviewees told me that she favors polygyny because of the opportunity to work with cowives. But in two previous surveys of rural women conducted in 2000 by my research assistant, Nani Deguenon, forty-four of sixty-six women said polygyny was preferable, mainly for assistance with domestic labor. In more informal discussions during the later fieldwork, two other women claimed that they were thrilled to have other wives and children in one happy family, and the younger woman, about age 40, said she was currently trying to find a fourth wife for her husband. On other occasions, I heard about women who prefer polygyny because they crave rivalry as a way to spice up their lives.

In concurrence with the general data for Africa, nearly all my interviewees agreed that Christian women outnumber their male counterparts. In two Celestial Church of Christ congregations, leaders provided me with attendance figures. Based on tallies of two services in a Cotonou church, women represented 56 percent of a congregation of around six hundred people. In Abomey, women made up 58 percent of 241 attendees during a 2002 service. In a Protestant Methodist church in Cotonou, the pastor estimated that women make up 75 percent of his congregation of around twelve hundred people.

According to both the Christian women and the pastors, women for the most part do not become Christian in the hope of finding a monogamous husband (and indeed the existence of fewer men in the Christian congregations would support this claim). Instead, women said that they go to church out of a genuine spiritual commitment and, especially in the newer churches, a search for solutions to problems such as infertility, illness, and threats of sorcery. In fact, as others have found, sorcery seems to be the most powerful factor in conversion (Tall 1995, 2005). This is especially true for the Celestial Church of Christ, which specializes in fighting sorcery. Although some interviewees credited Christianity with introducing monogamy, most people know so many Christians who are polygynous, either overtly or covertly, that women know they are unlikely to expect faithful monogamy even from a Christian husband. Though many women complained about men's indiscretions, most look the other way, as long as their husband hides these activities.

Christian Marriage in Benin

Despite the attitudes expressed above, there is some degree of intolerance among Beninois Christians for adultery and polygyny. For many mainstream Christians, monogamous marriage is viewed by both men and women as a better, more "*évolué*" practice. Among married Catholics, only those who are monogamous are allowed to take communion, a significant privilege that is on public display. In fact, at least officially, polygyny has declined among Christians. The number of married Christian men who are polygynous ranges from 24.5 percent to 27.5 percent, depending on their denominations, compared with 34.4 percent among those practicing traditional religions (INSAE 1994b:139).¹⁰

Even some unmarried men are respectful enough of Christianity and monogamy that they are reluctant to enter into a religious marriage because it demands fidelity. Some married men, for their part, see religious marriage as a renunciation of male power; by withholding the prize of a Christian marriage, they keep their wives in line. Time and again, people told me of couples who had been together for years and then divorced within months of their religious wedding, apparently over questions of power and fidelity. Members of the Celestial Church of Christ said that fear of the dire consequences of infidelity often keeps people from having a church wedding. In one Celestial Church, people can recall only one marriage, and in another church there has never been a wedding since its founding in 1977. Even though the church accepts polygyny and does not demand a church marriage, marrying in the Celestial Church, according to members, brings more severe insistence on faithful monogamy than in other churches. Church literature cites scripture in stating that God does not require vows to be made, but once made, he expects them to be respected (Deut. 23:22-

23).¹¹ Members told me repeatedly that unfaithfulness is strictly punished by God himself, and that a spouse who fails to respect the marriage vow can be struck down by paralysis, insanity, or death.

For Celestial Christians, though the danger of violating marital vows is viewed through reference to the Bible, there is also a plausible cultural continuity with indigenous Fon religious and totemic taboos. Thus on some level it is possible that the great appeal of the Celestial Church is its status as a denomination that is more consistent with indigenous culture. Such apparent cultural continuities have led some to view independent churches as syncretistic or traditional (e.g., Lesthaeghe et al. 1994:33; West 1975), although Ranger (1987) and Engelke (2004) rightly caution against overlooking the churches' powerful messages of Christian identity and breaking with the past (Mayrargue 2001). Catholics often characterize Celestial Christians as syncretistic for their use of offerings and the maintenance of polygyny, and also are quick to accuse them of hypocrisy for promoting marriages that they rarely perform. These accusations highlight the churches' differing positions on polygyny, but they also suggest that these differences are less meaningful for people's marital choices than they are for ideological debates, especially between competing church leaders.

Conclusion

This article reviews two claims found in writing on marriage and African Christianity. One suggests that African culture is fundamentally inhospitable to Christian-inspired monogamy, and another claims that women inherently prefer monogamy to polygyny. In Benin, there may be an active tension between what people label "African" and "European," "traditional" and "modern," but marital choices more often reflect the power struggles, economic conditions, and personal commitments of individual actors. The claim that marriage practices reveal an incompatibility between Western and African values may be true for a few people, but it tends to mask individual motivations and to reduce choices to knee-jerk identity claims. And while monogamy may hold a greater appeal for most women, evidence from Benin demonstrates that this is not the primary motivation for becoming Christian.

For Christians in Africa, polygyny will remain a topic of debate. Although elites adhere to monogamous values, overt and disguised polygyny continues, and women in many cases end up seeking or justifying it. Even Christian women may be the tacit or unwitting wives of polygynous men.¹² Churches like the popular Celestial Church of Christ offer a model to other denominations, suggesting that filling the seats on Sunday requires more leniency on the issue of polygyny. Even though individuals see marriage as a personal issue, churches may accept, and use, the discourses that polygyny is an inextricable part of African culture. If polygyny-permissive churches continue to grow, this trend may fundamentally change the Christian land-

scape in Africa, also making polygynous marriage a more prominent factor in how Christianity develops elsewhere in the world.

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Notes

1. See Phillips (1953) and Pitshandenge (1994) for detailed accounts of marriage legislation. See also Clarke (1980:55), Mann (1994:170), and Vellenga (1983:150).
2. For example, the biographer of missionary Daniel Lindley reports the story of a young girl who, resisting her father's arrangement for her to marry a polygynist, ran away to Lindley's mission and asked to convert to Christianity (Smith 1949:365–56).
3. Some discrepancies in the data may result from the ambiguous and varied definitions of marriage in some parts of Africa, which may include a range of monogamous or polygynous unions with informal "outside wives," customary wives, and religiously married wives.
4. AIC can also stand for African Indigenous/Instituted Churches or African Initiatives in Christianity (Ayegboyin & Ishola 1997; Pobeë & Ositelu 1998).
5. For the history of the Catholic Church in Benin, see Clément (1996), Alladaye (2003), and Bonfils (1999).
6. For more on the newer evangelical movements in Benin, see Alokpo (1996) and de Surgy (1996).
7. There are also Celestial Churches in other African countries, Europe, and the United States, and its renown has attracted numerous scholars. See Adogame (1998); Ayegboyin and Ishola (1997); Henry (2001); Mary (2002, 2005); Obafemi (1986); Tade (1980); Tall (1995).
8. In some ways, this man accurately characterizes some gender equality movements, which largely originate from foreign NGOs and governments (Skard 2003) and may identify patriarchy as an impediment to female status (Egbo 2000).
9. Throughout Africa, legal reforms are also frequently explicitly opposed to "customary practices" (Gopal 1999:vii), and recent years have seen concerted political reform to offer women a more equal voice (Cooper 2001; Hassim 2006; Stoeltje 2002).
10. But the 2002 census acknowledges that unofficial "deuxième bureaux" are not calculated, potentially distorting the figures (INSAE 2003:22).
11. In general, the Church prides itself on its strict interpretation of scripture, and I attended one Celestial Church service in which the pastor spent over an hour reciting passages from memory.

12. These phenomena have important health implications since polygyny has been linked to higher child mortality (Strassman 1997). Although polygyny does not necessarily increase AIDS mortality (Gregson et al. 1999), premarital or extramarital sex are significant AIDS risk factors (Garner 2000; Van de Walle 1990).