

South Africa - Polygamy: A Freezing of Culture

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Some five years ago, the overwhelming majority of both rural and urban South Africans would have baulked at the idea of polygamy. However, it seems that polygamy has regained some legitimacy and currency. Together with President Zuma, celebrities such as the composer and playwright Mbongeni Ngema, a former ANC mayor of Nelspruit, an ANC municipal manager in northern KwaZulu Natal, the former CEO of Johannesburg City Power, and a handful of chiefs publicly are asserting their “right to have as many wives as culture allows”.

According to the long-standing historian Jeff Guy, this claim is an example of a more generalised tendency to assert the cultural aspects of marital institutions at the expense of their material foundations. Polygamy actually arose out of pre-colonial society’s mode of production which was based on the exchange of cattle against women’s capacity to produce and reproduce on the land, in the home, and for society.

Controlling women

The material foundations of *lobola* (bride price), polygamy and other marital practices became established culture. This culture justified and legitimised the patriarchal (male dominated) order that kept women from being economically independent.

Women’s labour and reproductive power were strictly ordered, controlled and contained. The male-led homestead was the main economic unit. Men were the head of the homestead and in control of livestock. Women were primarily responsible for social and agricultural production. The children were important. Sons could provide labour, expand the family’s productive base and carry the family name. Daughters too: through their labour and the *lobola* cattle obtained upon their marriage. Polygamy enabled wealth accumulation by the elite who had access to larger portions of land and who needed the labour of several woman. This is the main reason why polygamy existed primarily amongst the elite in the pre-colonial period.

Undermined by colonialism and apartheid

Thus, polygamy and other marital practices only reflected in culture how economic wealth was created, transmitted and regulated. But what happened when the pre-colonial socioeconomic systems were destroyed and when Christian monogamy was imposed?

Colonial and apartheid-era native administration appropriated pre-colonial customary law in ways that kept women in a subordinate position. With less land available for Africans, the codification of customary law reduced the amount of land available under women’s control.

Land came under the exclusive control of men, even if the labour was still primarily done by women and children.

Colonial imposition of Christian morality and land dispossession squeezed the space for polygamy. Rural African women also challenged the oppressive and exploitative foundations of marriage.

These pressures on polygamy deepened its character as a more overtly cultural institution. It thus became a matter of cultural pride for those who remained practicing it and a matter of religious scorn for the newly converted. The more it was characterised as a primarily cultural institution the more it became practiced by fewer and fewer men.

Thus Mahlathini's words "angekhe ngohlulwe ukondla abafazi bam" [I cannot fail in taking care of all my wives], in one of his lesser known songs. Mahlathini here represents a cultural pride in having many wives, which was one of the last vestiges of social prestige, essentially an assertion of African identity in the face of colonial and apartheid destruction.

Economically humiliated, the African man (particularly those who could afford the implied economic costs) held on to the cultural symbolism of polygamy. Zuma's prominent assertion of his cultural right to polygamy reinforces this ideology today. But in conditions where women have limited social, economic and political opportunities, the basic unequal and oppressive nature of such relationships remains.

Challenge conservatism

To criticise polygamy is not to argue for monogamous male-dominated relationships between men and women. Southern African societies did not just have heterosexual relationships. There is enough historical evidence to show how these societies tolerated lesbian relationships, whether amongst Sotho women in Lesotho, between female sangomas or the female wives of the enigmatic Lobedu rain queen.

We have to create a progressive basis for the position of women in relationships. In questioning the basis of polygamy cultural practices we must not be straight-jacketed into narrow conservative Christian or African traditionalism. Cultural practices are not static. They change with the changing socio-economic circumstances in which we live.

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P.S.

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