

Acholi Polygamy

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Abstract

This paper seeks to provide economic rationale for the practice of polygamy in the Acholi people of modern Africa, and to provide a framework for future research on polygamic practices, both modern and historical. Specific emphasis is placed on the importance of securing commitment in underdeveloped labor markets with insecure property rights, and how polygamy proposes a solution to commitment issues in the Acholi culture of South Sudan and Northern Uganda. Further analysis is applied to the resettled Acholi residing in New Zealand, as their departure from polygamous norms in new conditions emphasizes their wealth-maximizing nature.

Keywords: *Polygamy, Polygyny, Acholi, Africa, Marriage*

JEL Codes: J4, L2, Z1, N9, F6

1. Introduction

The institution of polygamy has persisted for thousands of years, in countless cultures, and across the globe. Its adoption is largely spontaneous; that is, polygamy did not sprout in one area and spread elsewhere, as it occurred on separate sides of the Atlantic Ocean before the traversing of which is accepted to be possible (Westermarck 1921). Though it is common in popular culture to discount the practice as an ugly relic of an uncivilized past, any pattern of behavior that spawns so prevalently and spontaneously deserves better explanation and analysis. To that end, the Acholi of northern Uganda and South Sudan provide an excellent case study for analysis on polygamy, in that its customs are largely similar to that of many other polygamic cultures. The Acholi are further useful for one unique reason: their sizeable resettlement to New Zealand, which provides further clarity and context to the analysis at hand. The end of this paper is to provide economic rationale for the practice of polygamy in the Acholi people of Africa, but in doing so, also provide a framework for future research on polygamic practices, both modern and historical.

To begin, I will briefly examine past literature and evaluate the extent to which it is ultimately correct and/or applicable. In section three I lay a new framework for evaluating polygamy that considers commitment issues in undeveloped markets, and set pattern predictions in anticipation of its relevance for evaluating the Acholi people. Section four explains Acholi polygamous and marital customs. Then, in section five, I analyze how the Acholi fit my pattern predictions.

2. Applicability and Validity of Contemporary Literature

Western perceptions of polygamy have been largely derogatory, and treat the practice as barbaric and backwards (Nasimiyu-Wasike 2005) (Brooks 2009). In the past century, this view has been further propagated by academia. As such, most attempts in scholarly literature to explain the prevalence of polygamy provides little insight. Most relevant literature is written by anthropologists and sociologists, who provide little economic rationale. In the spirit of establishing the necessity for a new framework in explaining polygamy, I have grouped contemporary arguments in literature into three main arguments to be discussed and evaluated.

2.1. Polygamy Results From... Biology

A typical argument propagated in contemporary literature is that of polygamy resulting from instincts, sexual urges, and compulsions. “Society is based on two instincts which are as powerful in their operation in the animal kingdom as with mankind – the instinct of self-preservation, and the sexual instinct” (Wake 1967); this argument is common, and it rests on the assumption that western civilization only ended polygamy on the basis that their appetites were more aptly sequestered, either by some form of cultural advancement or inherent advantage in doing so.

There is a further argument that, while not entirely similar, rests upon the same assumptions as the prior: that polygamy arises simply because the wealthy can afford to do so. All individuals desire to have multiple sexual partners, and those that are able to financially support this desire, do so (Barber 2012) (Westermarck 1921). Authors of this contention explain

that instances of polygamy throughout history corroborate this narrative, in that many instances of polygamic practices involve one party being relatively wealthy.

Both aforementioned arguments contend that polygamy arises because of sexual urges and deviancy, but this is not a compelling argument. For one, why must marriage be arranged to conduct sexual activities? Why, as John Locke famously proposed, do we not conduct all the activities of marriage, outside of a marriage (such as intercourse, child-bearing, and household duties)? If polygamy were purely instinctive, it would stand to reason that one may bargain to have their urges met (as one does to satisfy the urge of hunger). Furthermore, the fact that polygamic actors are comparatively wealthier is not indicative of the *reason* for polygamy; should one expect to find a yacht in possession of a beggar? Likewise, one should not be surprised that individuals with more wives may have more material wealth. However, even this is not empirically the case, as the Acholi culture of northern Uganda and South Sudan practice polygamy regardless of wealth status.

2.2. Polygamy Results From... Institutional Enforcement

In his work *Socialism*, Mises is an early contributor to the discussion on polygamy (Mises 1981). He tries to describe the relation between men and women in a world of “violence”; that is, a world without evolved markets, in which private property rights are insecure. In this world, he argues, the strong dominate the weak through force. It is in this world, he argues, that polygamy exists. Men dominate women through force, and take multiple wives seemingly against their will. It is hard to disprove Mises on this point; polygamy (at times) may very well be the result of force, and not a byproduct of voluntary exchanges between wealth-maximizing actors. Such an example may be that of a theocracy imposing polygamic customs on women; or, a similar state stripping property rights from women.

There are many authors of contemporary literature (and elsewhere) that conclude polygamy to be the result of force, and usually these proponents declare polygyny's barbarity to be impossibly requested by a woman. Empirically, though, most polygamic cultures do not use force to "enforce" polygamy; it is evident that polygamy arises, in most cases, as a voluntary procedure. Mises is not wrong in his mention of polygamy, as it is not only conceivable but also true that actors may be forced into a non-monogamous marriage. However, this does not begin to explain the overwhelming prevalence of voluntary polygamy.

2.3. Polygamy Results From... Nothing

Richard Posner, in a 1980 paper, wrote that the family (in primitive society) existed as a firm, and that the point of this firm was to reduce risk (Posner 1980). The family, he argues, has the same role as a modern-day insurance company. Pooling together labor has the benefit of ensuring that no individual goes hungry if they, for whatever reason, must shirk for a period of time. Polygamy then, as he argues, is an example of mitigating uncertainty by equalizing the population of the family in terms of wealth. By having more children with more than one wife, the male is essentially forced to split his inheritance in many ways. Thus, the institution of polygamy is a method primitive society employs to equalize wealth and thus reduce risk and/or uncertainty. This explanation seems lackluster; it does not explain why there are incentives for individuals to engage in polygamy, other than that it is "for the benefit of the society". Is society paying individuals? If so, by what means of collective action? Individuals were likely not paid to engage in polygamy by a collective entity. Furthermore, Posner seems to conflate growth with insurance; while polygamy may increase prosperity by adding labor, this increase simply adds more to lose. To say polygamy acted as insurance in this context, is to say that the reason one expands wealth is to merely survive if one loses it. While true that it could act as a "buffer" of

sorts, it is clearly not the point of growth. If one needs insulin to live and thus manufactures it for himself, it is clear that a risk was “mitigated” but not in the sense that it exists as a buffer for the event that the insulin is taken away.

Gary Becker, in 1993, published *A Treatise on the Family*, a book in which he expounded upon his work on the family that won his Nobel Prize (Becker 1993, Pp. 80-105). Becker does an excellent job in explaining market behavior around marriages, however, he does not make any attempt to explain why some actors engage in polygamy, and others do not. He writes “The decline (of polygamy) is largely attributed to the spread of Christianity and the growth of women’s rights, but I am skeptical of these explanations”; this much we agree on. Though, the rest of his literature on polygamy fails to explain precisely *why* it occurs. He does try to prove why women may benefit from polygamy, but does not explain why marriage is specifically required for these benefits to be gained. His work does contribute much, in that he succinctly explains market behavior of polygamous individuals. To the end of establishing *why* polygamy occurs, his literature is not very useful.

Both Posner and Becker ultimately provide explanations that do not actually describe how polygamy arises. Posner’s analysis excludes any reference to individual behavior, and instead focuses on why it benefits society. Though possibly true, a wealth-maximizing norm does not exist for the benefit of society, but because individual actors perpetuating said norm gain from engaging in it (*ex ante*). Becker’s analysis, though useful, does not provide a reason for the prevalence of polygamy; specifically, why individuals must be married.

3. Polygamy in Markets

I propose an alternative explanation for some forms of polygamy, specifically in markets similar to that of modern Africa. I presuppose only the following: that securing commitment is an important element in transacting, and that lesser property rights means credible commitment is both more important and harder to obtain. In markets where property rights are less secure, trust is harder to come by. Securing a credible commitment must be accomplished by means other than a simple appealing to government courts. In such a market where property rights are insecure and trust harder to come by, it stands to reason that obtaining a network of trustworthy transactors is paramount in climbing out of a relative autarky imposed by a rational distrust of other actors in a market.

Oliver Williamson wrote of extralegal contractual enforcement, and specifically explained how commitment is ensured without court enforcements (Williamson 1983); in many contemporary underdeveloped markets, public courts are not accessible or trustworthy, and thus logically many market exchanges must be reliant upon private methods of securing commitment, such as those outlined in Williamson's work and otherwise.

Whether or not the purpose of the family is known, it *is* known that family consists of trustworthy transactors. Investments have been made by each member of the family, whether it be by personally raising others, by investing time into gaining information about other family members, or otherwise. Whatever the investment be, it cannot be disputed that families are synonymous with trustworthy actors. The "hostage", if there were to be one, is simply the other actor; cutting ties with a family member means losing a trustworthy transactor; one that is not easily replaced in a market with signaling/commitment issues.

Basic economic theory tells us that the division of labor increases prosperity; that adding transactors to a market, *ceteris paribus*, can only increase the wealth of those in the market.

However, transaction costs impede market-participants from directly transacting with a newly added transactor. It behooves individuals to find ways to secure commitment with others, so as to increase one's potential at achieving their ends.

Enter Polygamy. I argue that polygamic practices are a solution to commitment issues, in that they secure trustworthy actors via marriage. This may be hard to understand for individuals from more developed markets, as trustworthiness between actors is not so hard to come by, because of both legal remedies and possibly better signaling from all market participants¹. However, as family members double as trustworthy transactors, it stands to reason that obtaining more family members is paramount to one's success in markets with commitment issues. While hiring an unknown worker now in the United States may lack much risk, there is considerable risk in doing so in underdeveloped markets, as seeking compensation for being defrauded (or worse, assaulted) is harder to obtain, if at all.

I argue that polygamy is a solution to commitment issues because it specially involves marriage, a ritual that (in many cultures) involves a hefty amount of signaling and trustworthiness to achieve. Simply finding a promiscuous cohort for the occasional romp does relatively nothing to procure a trustworthy transactor. It is the relationship-specific investment that marriage requires that specifically makes polygamy a solution to commitment issues.

Therefore, I posit that in undeveloped markets such as modern Africa, polygamy will be more common for its solution to commitment issues. Polygamy is a method for families to "hire" and breed new workers and/or actors to transact with, without undertaking the risk of hiring non-

¹ By this, I mean that it appears western market participants are able to signal more, with less effort. It is simple fact that as opposed to earlier periods of history, it is much easier in the United States today to assume an individual is not a bandit or brigand; items such as clothing, vehicles, and hygiene all signal much more than they could have in the past. Though, logically this may be the result of enforced property rights.

family members. For this to be the explanation for polygamy in Africa (and the Acholi specifically, which will be discussed in detail soon), the following conditions would be expected in areas with polygamy.

3.1. Minimal Private-Property Rights

Markets with lesser private property rights are indubitably more prone to commitment issues. Without the ability to appeal to established courts, recourse for bad behavior would be much harder to obtain. Securing credible commitment then is something parties must work harder for. If credible commitments are harder to obtain, *ceteris paribus*, one should expect more instances of polygamy, as in theory it is a proposed solution to contracting in markets with commitment/trust issues.

3.2. Marriage Practices Emphasizing Trust

If polygamy exists as a solution to commitment issues in markets, then one should expect to see some form of trust being built between a potential wife and her new family. If it is to be said that familial bond serves as a commitment mechanism for trustworthy transacting, then for an incoming spouse to be inducted into a family for the purpose of increasing labor (directly or via pregnancy), they must reach the level of trust required for family members to treat the new wife as family. Therefore, one should expect polygamous societies to include some form of marriage practice or ritual that includes one or more ways for a new spouse to gain trustworthiness in the eyes of her new family.

3.3. The Familial Network Benefits

What is a family, in this context, but a network of individuals that trust one another enough to transact? If polygamy solves the problem of adding labor to a family amongst a

market where commitment issues are prevalent, one should expect to see that the *family* benefits, rather than the simple presupposition that a spouse alone benefits. All members of the “network” would receive the same benefit that the individual being married receives: a new individual to transact with. If this familial network gains, then it may be observable in polygamous societies for an entire family to be involved in marriage proceedings. Furthermore, if marriage practices exist (such as discussed in section 2.2), one may expect to find that the family bears incidence for these practices and/or rituals, being that they benefit from its execution.

3.4. Incestuous Relationships Uncommon

Further, if the object of polygamous marriages is to add individuals to the familial network of trust, then it defeats the purpose if one were to marry members of one’s own family. One’s sister or cousin is already trustworthy by virtue of being a family member; thus, nothing is gained by marrying them if the point of marriage is to gain trustworthy contacts. To be fair, there are also genetic reasons to avoid incestuous relationships, so this indicator may be the lesser of the four; however, later it will be discussed how this indicator has relevance.

4. Africa

Africa provides an interesting modern context for polygamy², in that the practice is well-documented therein. Much of Africa is still rural, largely tribal, and relies on the familial networks (clans and/or tribes) for labor within their respective regions (Amone 2019). Interestingly, the King of Eswasi (formerly Swaziland) has fifteen wives. There are only eleven

² Africa almost exclusively practices *polygyny*, a subclassification of polygamy that is specifically when a male takes more than one female spouse. For the purposes of this paper, the term polygamy will be used synonymously.

ethnic groups in the entirety of Africa that exclusively practice monogamy; though, these are largely the result of forced incursions from outside influences (Amone 2019).

In the regional, tribal areas of Africa, there are many shared features of marriage, regardless of the major differences in cultures. Marriage is not individualistic in any way in Africa; a marriage between two individuals is really a marriage between two families. Once a bride is courted by a groom, it is the groom's clan that pays a dowry to the bride's; this is custom in every single polygamic culture in Africa. Furthermore, if the husband dies before the wife, the marriage is in no way dissolved; the wife is generally still considered part of the husband's clan, not her former (Kahiga 2013). Additionally, brides are considered to have much inherent value aside from birthing capabilities. A popular argument of native Africans is that "to marry one wife is like being one-eyed, while having two wives is like having two eyes and therefore capable of seeing far and wide" (Kahiga 2013).

4.1 The Acholi of Uganda/South Sudan

The Acholi are a specific cultural group in Uganda and South Sudan, a substrata of the Lwo people; their specific polygamic practices have been recorded in detail (Amone 2019). Courtship begins when a man approaches a woman in a social gathering, and usually a close relative assists the man as a "wingman". It is clear that this wingman is not a "wingman" in the western sense of the word; by accompanying their relative, they are showing their initial approval of the intended target for courtship. While in western culture it may be cowardly to have a "wingman" in courtship, in the Acholi culture, it is an insult to the target of courtship if no wingman is present.

After several social gatherings, both families begin to conduct background checks on the other, and meetings are held between members of both families to assess etiquette and congenial traits. A man will not, under any circumstance, marry a woman that his family disapproves of; the same is true for the potential bride. If both families consented to the other family's marriage candidate, a "bride-price" is negotiated. This bride-price is paid by the male's family; this is interesting because it is the male's side that pays the female's, and also because it is the family that pays more so than the male marriage candidate. Incestuous relationships in the Acholi are also generally not allowed by clans, but do occur rarely (Girling 1960).

Furthermore, after a female joins a male's family in the Acholi, she is a member of his family for life. If her husband is to die at any point after their union, her status as a member of his family is unquestioned, and she is in no way pressured into further marriage into his family. Marriage is between families, and marriage is for life in the Acholi.

4.2. Acholi After Resettlement

There is further literature describing not just the customs of the Acholi in Africa, but their customs that persist after resettlement in New Zealand. Uganda suffers from constant warfare and strife; a massive, decade-long civil war ended in 1994, and was preceded by an eight-year genocide (Adelman and Suhrke 2000). Of the thousands of resettled Acholi, some literature describes the struggles they endure to maintain their culture; namely, their marriage customs. Many Acholi in New Zealand speak of how marriage customs allow for a sense of "belonging" within a newfound family (O'Byrne 2021). Ryan O'Byrne recently wrote that "reproducing customary SSA (South Sudanese Acholi) marriage practices was valued for several reasons. Marriage transactions cemented kinship and social networks and created and maintained Acholi-

specific identities”. For reference, South Sudan borders Uganda, and the Acholi are not bound by political borders.

Additionally, O’Byrne’s work details the struggle the Acholi in New Zealand have with maintaining their polygamous culture. Families became less close (in a familial, not geographic sense), which made it hard for certain individuals to maintain the family-based traditions they felt so inclined to continue. The payment of bride-prices became a topic of contention, as many Acholi began to abandon the practice, while some insisted on continuing it as a way of maintaining identity and culture (O’Byrne 2021).

5. The Acholi: Fitting the Template

Sections 2.1 to 2.4 described certain conditions in which one may expect polygamy to be practiced more prevalently. These conditions, if matched empirically, would emphasize the viability of this commitment-centered approach to the occurrence of polygamy. The Acholi observably fit each one of the four.

Firstly, the Acholi indeed live in a region with minimal property rights (Rugadya 2020) (Shanmugaratnam 2008). This is due to the (until very recently) unrelenting warfare and genocide, corruption, and a general withdrawal of the Acholi from centralized state affairs. Furthermore, crime is rampant in regions that the Acholi inhabit, and often is the state that encourages or directly engages in it (Porter 2015) (Rhoads and Sutton 2020). Therefore, it can be stated without a doubt that the Acholi fit this first condition.

Secondly, a condition I identify is that of marriage practices emphasizing trust. If polygamy solves the issue of commitment in untrustworthy markets, then an incoming spouse must be trusted as much as a family member. The Acholi have extensive courtship norms that

require the entirety of both families to get involved. Extensive background checks are performed, many meetings are held between family members of each family, and every family member must agree to every marriage in the standard Acholi family. It is evident then that the Acholi has marriage practices that facilitate trust between incoming spouses.

Next, it must be clear that the whole family benefits in the acquisition of a new spouse. With the bride-price being paid by the *clan*, better evidence cannot be found. Since a male's family members bear the incidence of paying for the bride to join their family, one may deduce that the family benefits from the bride's arrival. The only alternative explanation one may give is that this is simply "custom"; though, that is not an adequate argument in explaining wealth-maximizing behavior.

Finally, the Acholi do not generally encourage incestuous relationships. However, it is noteworthy that incestuous relationships *do* occur. They (incestuous marriages) are not taboo as westerners think of it, just discouraged (Amone 2019). If incestuous relationships were outright banned, one could argue that it is taboo for the same genetic reasons westerners may consider it to be. But the vague discouragement of it among the Acholi suggest that they discourage it not because of taboo, but possibly because it is simply not as beneficial for the familial network.

5.1. Resettlement: Testing the Conditions Again

When thousands of Acholi were resettled in New Zealand, interesting changes in their culture emerged. Bride-prices became a point of contention, polygamy became less prevalent, and familial bonds began to fade. What happened? The conditions that incentivized the very practices described earlier were altered. Earlier it was stated that insecure property rights would precipitate commitment issues in markets that polygamic practices would partly solve. New

Zealand, however, has a long history of strongly enforced property rights and comparatively low crime (Boast 2013). By changing this seemingly small condition, the framework crafted in this paper would suggest that polygamy as an institution would decline; it would have (*ceteris paribus*) lesser wealth-maximizing purpose. Such is what occurred in New Zealand; the institution began to fade.

An interesting note, however, is that some Acholi lamented this change. They felt their culture and identity was dissipating. Perhaps it is the case that polygamy is so inherently wealth-maximizing for the Acholi that its persistence became recognized as identity more than for its benefits as a way of self-enforcing and/or self-perpetuating³. This is reminiscent of literature from other cultures, such as Leeson's work on Gypsies (Leeson 2013). Further research on this topic might prove fruitful.

6. Conclusion

In western culture, it is all too common that academics and laymen alike accuse polygamy of being a vile disruption to natural order; that it is one of the "twin relics of barbarism", the other relic being slavery (Sigman 2006). However, when inspected with an economic lense, it becomes apparent that some polygamy is nothing more than an extension of the fact that man is wealth-maximizing, and will make do with the conditions he faces to achieve his ends.

³ Interestingly, the early colonial administrators in Uganda taxed the Acholi's polygyny heavily, while missionaries worked in unison to end it. To this day, most Acholi are Roman Catholic (and a minority protestant), though the practice of polygyny was unscathed; this seemingly illogical defiance seems to further illustrate the probable wealth-maximizing benefits of such a practice, in that it was worth more to the Acholi than the "hut tax". In other similar African cultures, polygyny was so resistant to missionaries that entire branches of religions were formed. To this day, a large branch of Anglicanism exists in Africa that supports polygamy. For further reading, consult the Amone and Kahiga literature.

In this paper I laid a framework for explaining the prevalence of polygamy as a solution to commitment issues in markets with little property rights. I laid several specific conditions that one would expect to see if this framework were true; upon analysis of the Acholi people, it is evident that they fit every single condition I proposed. Additionally, when a fundamental condition changed, the Acholi unsurprisingly quit many of their practices in large numbers. Leeson, in his paper on human sacrifice in India, had a similar conclusion: when property rights were more enforced, the seemingly nonsensical practice was abandoned (Leeson 2014); there is precedent for barbaric practices being abandoned at the establishment of property rights. In conclusion, it would appear that the framework proposed in this paper is most apt in explaining polygamic tendencies among the Acholi. Many other African cultures, and primitive cultures from around the world have similar conditions, and further research may be required to ascertain whether this paper's framework explains the prevalence of polygamy in those cultures as well.

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