

Major Research Paper

**“THE MOTIVATIONS FOR  
POLYGYNY  
IN NIGERIA”**

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## **Executive Summary**

This paper explores the motivations of men and women who enter polygynous unions, using Nigeria as a case study. It looks at the different theories applied to polygyny such as socio-cultural evolution, socio-economic, demographic and gender and development theory. By examining these theories it becomes clear that our popular world view on polygyny is often out of context, and fails to capture the realities of polygynous societies and individuals' reasons for entering it. This paper examines marriage and polygyny patterns in Sub-Saharan Africa and Nigeria by using data from the Demographic and Health Survey. It concludes that polygynous marriage in many countries in Sub-Saharan Africa has been declining due to economic reasons rather than westernization. It also explores different types of motivations for polygyny such as socio-economic, reproduction and men's prestige.

## **Introduction**

Polygamous marriage means a marriage where one person is “married to more than one spouse at the same time”, in contrast to monogamy which means that a person is married to “only one spouse at a time”. There are three forms of polygamous marriages. These are: “polygyny” which refers to a man being married to more than one woman, “polyandry” signifies a woman married to more than one man and lastly, “group marriage” meaning several husbands are married to several wives for instance “a combination of polyandry and polygyny”(Zeitzen2008 ;3-9). There is also informal polygyny which is often referred to as ‘outside wives’ or ‘private polygyny’(Karanja 1994). Informal relations such as extra marital affairs and the phenomenon of “sugar daddies” (where women have temporary /casual sexual relations with older men and experience economic gain in return) are not official and are thus associated to informal polygyny (Smith2007; 2010;Meekers and Calves;1997).We have therefore concluded that informal polygyny refers to the situation in which a man can be legally married to a woman but at the same time form a domestic and sexual union with another woman (Karanja1994;198). Moreover, ‘outside wives’ often have stable financial support from their “husband”. However, outside wives are not to be confused with extra-marital affairs as they have a conjugal bond with their spouses but lack the legal status of a wife. ‘Outside wives’ are not considered as having the same status as legal wives within society .The type of polygamous marriage common in Sub-Saharan Africa is polygyny. Therefore, the polygamous marriage focused in this paper is polygyny and informal polygyny.

According to Tertilt (2005;523-530), in 28 countries within the Sub-Saharan Africa region the practice polygyny is over more than 10 percent of married women. The “polygamy belt”

extends between Senegal and Tanzania (Fenske2011). In the 1970s, polygynous marriage in this region was widespread; in Benin over 60 percent of women who were married were in polygynous unions and in 2006, 46 percent of women aged 15-49 were in polygynous union (DHS ,Benin 2006). Although polygyny is widely practice in Sub-Saharan Africa, recent literature on it is scarce. According to Mondain et Al (2007), Speizer and Yates (1998) and Agadjanian and Ezeh (2000), there is insufficient recent literature on polygyny in Sub-Saharan Africa. This will be evident in this paper as most of the literature available is from the 1960s-1990s. The topic of polygyny in Sub-Saharan Africa is constantly evolving therefore in order to capture the current picture of polygyny and its many dimensions, a pool of recent literature is necessary.

Throughout time explanations for polygyny have emerged from scholars such as, Brown (1981), Bledsoe and Pison (1994), Boserup (2007), Zeitzen(2008) or Fenske (2011). These scholars have introduced many aspects such as economic and demographic patterns to shed light on polygyny. It is undeniable that polygyny is reflecting the gender discrepancy. However, polygyny is part of complex marriage systems and shouldn't be viewed only through the lenses of gender asymmetry. In particular, as will be shown in this paper, marriage processes are in many cases part of family strategies and negotiations and as such individuals have limited control over spouse choice, the timing of marriage, etc.

Polygyny is part of these systems and responds to various motivations referring to economic and reproductive goals all embedded in cultural norms that contribute to shape individual behaviours. Therefore, it is important to look at polygyny through the Sub-Saharan African marriage system as it is a sub-set of marriage in this region. The diversity of marriage processes in this region is intertwined with different social aspects which influence individual's

motivations to enter polygyny. In Sub-Saharan Africa, many forms of polygamous marriages are practiced. For example, in South Africa the “Lovedu” custom allows important female figures to be “female husbands” which allows her to have many wives. These wives can also be married to important men and the “female husband” can be married to a man at the same time (Zeitzen 2008;9-11). There are also polyandrous practices in Sub-Sahara Africa. In Northern Nigeria, secondary marriage are practiced and a wife can get married and cohabit with another husband without having to divorce her current husband (Zeitzen 2008;9-11). Our main objective in this research paper is to shed light on the motivations to enter (for a woman) and start (for a man) a polygynous union in our contemporary globalized world. Although polygyny is generally considered as going against modernity and meant to disappear, polygyny is however still widely practiced even if its forms have evolved across time due to socioeconomic changes and modernisation which are all part of the globalization context. Therefore our core question is: to what extent is polygyny still practiced, under which forms and what are the contemporary motivations underlying the choice of polygynous unions? We will in a first chapter sum up the Main trends of Marriage and Polygyny in Sub-Saharan Africa .In chapter 2 we will address the theoretical approaches to Polygyny and finally, in chapter 3, we will examine in detail the factors which motivate individuals to enter polygyny in Nigeria, taken as a case study

## **Chapter 1: Marriage and Polygyny in Sub-Saharan Africa**

### **1.1: Main Trends of Marriage in Sub-Saharan Africa**

Sub-Saharan Africa is a region consisting of hundreds of ethnic groups, customs and languages (Stock 2013; 65). Subsequently, marriages in this region come with variations of customs and cultural practices. Marriage in sub-Saharan Africa cannot be seen as a single event

easy to locate on a precise time frame. Marriage in this context is rather a process with several steps which can last for a long period, sometimes years (Falola and Amponsah 2012; Mondain et Al 2007). In most cases across sub-Saharan Africa, these marriage processes include bride payment, family negotiations and different types of ceremonies (among which a “traditional” one is often considered as the most important) (Falola and Amponsah, 2012; Lesthaeghe et Al 1994). However despite these common trends, marriage processes in the region are diverse as they belong to various socio-cultural systems where power relationships between men and women and the generations take different forms. Polygyny is part of these processes in several African societies and has to be understood as the result of specific negotiations and family strategies. As such, marriage including polygynous unions are often said to be a family issue rather than an individual and couple issue. The range of polygynous practice in Sub-Saharan Africa is high. According to the Demographic and Health Survey (DHS Senegal 2011), in Senegal 35 percent of women in union are in polygynous unions and in Cameroon 25 percent of women in union are in polygynous unions ([www.measuredhs.com](http://www.measuredhs.com)).

Many scholars attempt to relate polygyny with gender discrepancy in the region. Gender inequality ranks high in Sub-Sahara Africa, as according to Frost and Nii-Amoo Doodoo(2010;42), “ Sub-Saharan African countries represent 32 out of the 33 most gender-unequal countries in the world”. This section addresses the marriage trends in Sub-Saharan Africa in detail on marital status, median age at first marriage and polygyny prevalence. The marriage trends in Sub-Saharan Africa are changing due to factors such as westernization and intra urban-rural migration but it is still impacted by traditional beliefs. Moreover, marriage trends in Sub-Saharan Africa are linked to the ingrained gender power structure within the society.

Such asymmetric gender social stratification is reflected in the marriage systems and enables polygyny to be a common marriage pattern.

Marriage in Sub-Saharan Africa was described as “early and nearly universal” (Van De Walle 1968 quoted in Dyson-Hudson and Meekers 1996; 301) and is a crucial step in an individual’s life transitions. Changes in society which influence marriage systems and polygyny, such as the increase in education for women, migration and Western ideals, have developed inconsistently in the different countries in the Sub-Saharan Africa region (Lesthaeghe et Al 1994; 25). The traditional agricultural practices in this region give productive and reproductive value to women. With traditional hoe farming, which is practice in the region, gender roles are distinct with men being involved in the preparation process and women in the farming process. Thus more wives and children can be equated to greater labour resources and production capacity for the family (Boserup 2007).

Marriage in this region comes with bride payment which legitimizes the passing on of the wife’s reproductive and productive value to the husband (Lesthaeghe et Al 1994;27). There is also the system of gerontocracy which, allowing older men to have control over reproductive means and resource production for younger men and women, is related to polygyny. Furthermore, necessary condition for polygyny is spousal age gaps, which allow older men to access a greater pool of women available for polygyny (Lesthaeghe et Al 1994; 40).

Economic expansion and westernization have influenced the changes in marriage patterns in Sub-Saharan African societies. These changes comes with greater female participation in jobs with higher wages and an increase of their participation in the workforce (Garenne 2004; Falola and Amponsah 2012;12). Factors which influence female positions in the Sub-Saharan African

society have influenced the practice of polygyny and its motivations. Thus, observation of polygyny's trends in Sub-Saharan Africa needs to be done by keeping this region's gender dynamics in mind.

This section is comprised of insights on marriage in Sub-Saharan Africa and the prevalence and trends of polygyny in Tanzania, Mali, Ghana and Kenya. These four countries are chosen in order to consider the diversity in the cultural, social and economical situations of the different countries to portray the trends of polygyny in Sub-Saharan Africa. To examine the trends in these countries, we will be referencing the Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) final reports (<http://www.measuredhs.com/>). Although marriages in Sub-Saharan Africa can take a variety of forms such as customary, religious, civil and informal form of marriage and polygyny, for the DHS report on marital status, the term 'married' signifies "legal or formal marriage" only and an informal marriage is categorized as "living together". Some of the earlier and current reports for Kenya did not have a "living together" category and women and men in informal unions were included in the "currently married" category (DHS Kenya 2008-09). In all reports on Mali, 'living together' and married are included in the same category as 'in union'. Surveys on polygyny in each country were done by inquiring all currently married female respondents about their age at first marriage, whether their husbands had other wives and the number of wives their husbands had. The male respondents were asked about their age at first marriage and the number of wives they had.

In all the marital categories from table 1 in appendix 1, the highest percentage of respondents belonged to the married category, for example, 79.2 percent of women are married in Mali (2006), 58.3 percent in Tanzania(2010) and 49 percent of men are married in Kenya. This suggests that marriage has become less "universal" in some countries (Tanzania and Kenya)

compared to other ones where it remains practiced among the vast majority of the population (Mali). This is a sign of change and certainly reflects the contemporary economic difficulties as well as the social changes among which the increase in women's educational attainment and greater access to the labour market certainly play a significant role. This table also shows that Mali has the highest percentage of married men and women compared to the rest of the countries included in the study, while Ghana has the lowest. The societal pressure for women to immediately make use of their reproductive capabilities post pubescence results in a high rate of polygyny and the quick remarrying of widows (Caldwell and Caldwell 1987; 411). Table 2 and 3 in Appendix 2 shows differences in median age at first marriage for men and women in all countries. Women marry earlier than men in all four countries; this trend is related to society's high regard for reproduction and polygyny. As mentioned, spousal age gaps are a necessary condition for polygyny (Lesthaeghe et Al 1994; 40).

However, marriage is not completely universal in this region, as the percentage of "never married" population is the second highest in all marital categories of all the four countries. For example, 32.4 percent of women and 42.5 percent of men in Ghana have never married (table 1; Appendix1). In Mali the percentage of 'never married' men and women had increased over the year but still significantly lower than other countries. For example, the percentage of never married women went from 4.4 in 1987 to 11.8 in 2006, however in the most recent DHS report for Kenya (DHS Kenya 2008-09) the percentage of never married women are 32.1 and in both Tanzania (DHS Tanzania2010) and Ghana (DHS Ghana 2008) the percentage of never married women are both higher than in Mali (see table 1 appendix1).The trend of a higher percentage of never married male respondents than women is seen in the four countries. This trends is related to bride wealth payment, (discusses in section 1.2.) and polygyny.

The rate of widowed, divorced and living together categories varies in different countries as seen in Table 1. In general the rates are low, confirming the fact that divorced and widowed women remarry quickly; also a clear difference can be seen between the Anglophone countries (Tanzania, Kenya, Ghana) and Mali where the rates are extremely low showing that marriage in this country definitely remains “universal”. Concluded from the trends mentioned above, the marriage process is changing in the countries mentioned; however these changes differ from country to country. Since the phenomenon of informal polygyny ,whereby wives live in separate compound, is increasing in Sub-Saharan Africa and inaccuracies in the DHS report have to be kept in mind.(Karanja1994;195).

The DHS report captures the trends of formal polygynous marriage but not the informal forms of polygyny. The tables in appendix 2 show that polygyny rates are highest in Mali and lowest in Kenya for both men and women. The percentage of polygynous marriages in all the countries vary by age groups, residential areas (rural or urban) and level of education..

Females marry earlier than males so that they may maximize their reproductive capacities (Hayase and Liaw 1997;295). Also, women who are “separated, divorced or widowed” are urged to remarry in order to prolong their reproductive capabilities. This is reflected in the median age of men and women who marry for the first time in Sub-Saharan Africa (see “median age at first marriage”appendix2 table 2 and 3). According to Garenne (2004), median age at first marriage for women in most countries in Sub-Sahara Africa ranges from 15-19 years of age. However there are variations, for instance in Rwanda, Burundi and Gabon the median age for marriage is from 19 years old and above while in Namibia, Botswana and South Africa, the median age for marriage is 24 years old.

Indeed, the ability of men and women to enter marriages is different and for men entering into marriage depends on their ability to have sufficient resources for bride wealth payment. For women it is their physical readiness for reproduction. As parents become older, young men have an additional responsibility to take care of them on top of the regular household chores (Bledsoe 1990; 116). Marriage signifies additional helping hands for the household. Among the Sereer in rural Senegal, the timing for marriage is connected to men's family economic status and "the composition of the compound" (Mondain et Al 2007). Because of these constraints, men's age at first marriage is higher than women's, as their desire to get married does not always coincide with their having enough resources for bride wealth payment.

The increase in median age at first marriage signifies that women enter marriage at a later age. For example table 2 (appendix 2) shows that the median age at first marriage for women in Kenya increased from 19.2 in 1993 to 20 in 2009. The same trend followed in other countries. Many factors influence the median age at first marriage for females and males in Sub-Saharan Africa such as "income and education, urbanism, polygyny and religion". The changes observed in this indicator are due in part to the increase in population, women's education, the intense urbanization movement and the economic crisis which often results in the delay of marriage.

The increase in the median age at first marriage for women affects the rate of polygyny in younger women. Women of the younger generation are marrying at older ages compared to previous generations and this may lead to lower rates of polygyny in younger women. Thus the lower rate of polygyny for younger women can be related to decreases in the rate of polygyny in Sub-Saharan Africa. As mentioned, the spousal age gap is a condition which allows polygyny to occur (Lesthaeghe et Al 1994), therefore if women get married at later age and caused the spousal age gap to decrease, the practice of polygyny may decrease. At the same

time, due to societal pressure for marriage and reproduction, later age at marriage can also mean that some women prefer to be in polygynous union rather than staying single and may enter a polygynous union immediately (Timaeus and Reynar 1998)

Throughout the years, as shown in the DHS reports, polygynous marriages were practiced more in rural than in urban regions as seen in Table 2 and 3 (appendix 2). The traditional agricultural system places high economic value in female labour, and more wives and children equate more production. Thus in rural areas where females are valued economically, there is a high rate of polygyny, quick remarriages for widows and practices of widow inheritance (Lesthaeghe et Al 1994;25). Moreover, polygyny is practiced more commonly among men and women with no education than with secondary and higher education. Later on in the years 2003-2010, the rates of women in polygynous marriages in all the countries mentioned declined.

Table 2 and 3 (appendix 2) showed that formal polygynous marriage is declining throughout time in the selected countries. Such trends coincide with Goode (Goode 1963 quoted in Karanja1994;195) predictions. Goode (1963) claimed that “Women’s increasing freedom of choice and the gradual shift from subsistence agricultural economy to a market or industrial one meant a steady decline in polygyny”. He also emphasised that the increase in pressure from a “religion and political leader” (Karanja1994;195) to support monogamous marriage had taken effect in Sub-Saharan Africa. Consequently, polygyny has been declining in urban industrialized areas and women in those areas are not subjected to a traditional economic setting. The formal polygyny or ‘public polygyny’ (Karanja1994;195) might have decreased in urban areas and is more practiced in rural areas. However the ‘private’ or informal polygyny in urban settings is taking the place of formal polygyny (Karanja1994;195). This suggests that in fact polygyny is decreasing due to economic constraints rather than to profound socio-cultural changes. In other

words, should the economic situation become better, more men would decide to start a polygynous union.

There are issues with the DHS data sets that can generate greater complexities during interpretation. Indeed, the DHS reports do not account for the trends of informal polygynous unions or the cases where the respondents were not accurately answering the questions. One reason for the inaccuracy from the DHS report could be the different interpretations of the questions in the survey. In Ghana, according to DHS report 2008, men and women from the survey might have different interpretations for the word 'wife'; women may refer to their husbands' mistresses and girlfriends as wives, while men may not report those women as wives.

### **1.2: Main socio-cultural patterns of marriage system**

In the Sub-Saharan African region, there are various marriage types such as civil, religious, customary. These could either be applied to monogamous or polygynous unions. The monotheist religions that are prominent in this region are Islam and Christianity. The two religions stress certain gender roles between men and women. Both religions value females to practice premarital chastity and marriage is highly encouraged (Garenne 2004). Marriage serves to reinforce reproduction as it is the main motivation for getting married. Since polygyny is a sub-set of marriage, the socio-economic changes and gender dynamics which influence marriage influence polygyny as well, but not necessarily in the same direction. Therefore, explanations for high rates of polygyny in this region can be traced to a culture's traditional marriage systems and gender dynamics. The marriage process in its traditional and modernized form needs to be discussed as it has direct effects on the changing patterns of polygyny in the society. This section explores marriage systems in Sub-Saharan Africa and outlines its main socio-cultural patterns. In

addition, understanding the marriage systems in Sub-Saharan Africa can give insights on the general changes in the society. For example, by examining marriage customs we can reflect on the way of life, family roles and gender dynamics in this region (Mensch et Al 2005).

The institution of marriage in Sub-Saharan African is diverse and reflects the various social arrangements within this society. One such social arrangement is the kinship systems which influence marriages choices, motivations and customs greatly. In Sub-Saharan Africa, marriage customs and gender dynamics are influenced by the cult of ancestry, kinship and lineage systems. As a result, marriage and gender systems revolve around reproduction. The cult of ancestry and kinship systems influence the society's value on children and fertility (Radcliffe-Brown and Forde, 1950; Falola and Amponsah, 2012). In the cult of ancestry, the supposed supernatural power of the ancestors are believed to be emphasized through lineage. Ancestors are able to be reborn in their own lineage as it expands (Caldwell 1987, 409-410).

Kinship signifies individuals who are related through common ancestors and alliances or individuals who descends from the same familial relations. The descent line can be traced back through patrilineal and matrilineal kinship systems (Lesthaeghe et Al1994). Through marriage and blood ties, patrilineal descent signifies that both men and women trace their descent through their paternal lineage. Thus through marriage, men pass on their lineage by reproduction and women become part of her husband's lineage. In matrilineal lineages, men and women's descent are passed through their maternal lineage and only females pass on their lineage by reproduction. In sub-Saharan Africa there are some societies that do not favor one type of descent system over another and place equal importance on both such as the Afikpo of Eastern Nigeria and the Birifor of Ghana-Ivory Coast Boarder (Toyin2010; 42).

Marital alliances reinforce kinship ties and give children a legitimate status in society. Children can be a source of labour for the family unit and marriage is encouraged as it brings about reproduction; for example, according to Bledsoe(1990), “Girls of five and over help with farm work, cooking, cleaning the house...and looking after smaller children” and “Boys are put to work also”. As an “institution for procreation” (Mair1969; 3), marriage is vital in the Sub-Saharan African communities. Even though traditional ways are still influential in Sub-Saharan African society, they are not the only way of life in the society; for example, the age at first marriage has increased over time.

Beyond the goal of maximizing the reproductive capabilities of both males and females, marriage is meant to ensure the continuation of the kinship descent. This can be seen in the encouragement of quick remarrying periods for widows, such as levirate marriages where a widow marries her deceased husband’s siblings and ghost marriages where a woman is married to a dead unwed man to carry on his lineage (Mair1969;3;Zeitzen2008).

Kinship systems enable kinsmen to have greater access to socio-economic networks such as political and business ties. In this perspective, polygyny allows individuals to increase kinship ties while monogamy does not. Patrilineal systems are associated with higher polygyny rates and matrilineal systems are associated with low polygyny rates in agricultural society. The “rights of children” in matrilineal systems are not passed on to the wife’s husband’s lineage. This leads to easier dissolution of unions for women and smaller bridewealth payments as the wives’ rights are not transferred. In matrilineal societies, matrilineal residence is often practiced. Matrilineality means daughters are to be living close to their mother’s house and after married, families live in close proximity to the wife’s parents (Peregrine2001). This made it more challenging for husbands to become polygynous as it can only happen when he marries his wife’s relatives

(Lesthaegae et Al 1994;30-32 ).While in patrilineal societies, patrilocal residence is practiced. In this system, married couples live close to the husband's parents (Ember and Ember 1971). In patrilocal residences, wives move in with their husbands and become a part of his lineage group; therefore polygyny is not as challenging as in matrilineal societies.

With the influences of the kinship system, the consent and opinion of families in the marriage are very important. Sub-Saharan African marriage is perceived to be a matter of interest and a symbol of alliances between the two families. Therefore spousal choices are highly influenced by their families and are rarely a matter of individual decisions. For example, in Logoli Tribe in Kenya, marriage is considered to be of “fundamental concern to more people than just the potential spouses” (Gwako 1998;334). The marriage customs reflect the female productive and reproductive value in the society. Females have an important role in traditional agricultural work as mentioned in section 1.1.Through polygyny men are able to maximize their own fertility by having several wives as well as the economic production capabilities as more wives and children equate more labour and production. Prior to marriages, rites of passages, such as puberty rites for individuals, serve as a preparation for marriage and a form of sexual education. For instance in Ghana, the Akan have a “menstrual celebration” which allows a girl to enter womanhood; this rite, in the past, allowed young men and women to have initial contact or to court prior to marriage ( Falola and Amponsah;2012;18). Moreover, the teaching on preparations for marriage such as marriage duties was taught to both men and woman. Marriage and entering into adulthood are connected and often parents pressured their children to get married.

Practices such as post-partum abstinence (sexual abstinence after birth delivery for sometimes long periods), polygyny, widows quickly remarried, etc., are practiced to maximize

reproduction and the chances of child survival (Caldwell1987:410). Although there is an increase in the cost of living in Sub-Saharan Africa due to the economic crisis and the cost of maintenance and education for children are increasing (Bledsoe 1990;116), high fertility is still valued. Postpartum abstinence is a common practice where sexual abstinence is practiced during the post pregnancy infant nursing period .The duration of postpartum abstinence varies between different ethnic groups in this region and can sometimes last as long as two years (Lesthaeghe 1989;14;Bledsoe 1990;117).This practice is a result of a belief that “male sexual fluids contaminates breast milk and harm nursing babies” (Bledsoe 1990;117) . Therefore practising post-partum abstinence is believed to increase a child’s chances of survival. In this perspective, polygyny is a way for men to have access to other wives while they practice sexual abstinence with their initial wife and thus maximizes his reproduction capacity (Lesthaeghe;1989;14).

Although parental consent is vital in individuals’ spousal choices, it does not signify that individuals are forced into marriage. For example, among the Baule of Ivory Coast, women have freedom to choose their own spouses (Falola and Ampnsab2012; 19). Forced marriages do exist but remain rare. A more common trend is “arranged marriages” which mean that the couple has accepted their respective families’ choices even if perhaps individually they would have preferred another spouse.

The marriage process in Sub-Saharan Africa is an extensive process with elaborate preparations from both the bride’s and groom’s families (Mondain et Al 2007;10). Marriage processes in Sub-Saharan Africa can be described as a system of several transfers with much negotiation ( Karanja 1994:199). It often comes with three distinct stages which are engagement, bride wealth payments and marriage ceremonies. Through these stages there are many players involved from both families and the timing of each stage depends on the negotiations and

financial situations of both parties (Mondain et Al 2007; 12). Consequently, kinship ties, alliances between families and families' economic status are considered throughout the negotiation stage. Marriage in this region does not progress in a linear process. Cohabitation may occur before the finalization of marriage and vice versa. Bride wealth payment is the groom's payment in form of resources to the bride's family prior to marriage finalization. It is a transaction of resources between the groom and wife's family. Bridewealth negotiations occur prior to payments and a woman's productive and reproductive capabilities are taken into consideration (Karanja 1994:199).

In patrilineal societies, the bridewealth is a payment for the transfer of rights of the bride and future children from her family to her husband's family. This explains why in matrilineal societies, where women and their children's rights are not transferred to their husbands', the bride wealth is smaller than in patrilineal societies (Lesthaeghe et al; 1994; 31). In agricultural societies, where female labour is valued, the woman's family is losing labour while her husband is gaining. Therefore, bridewealth can be a compensation for that. Bridewealth payment transfers can also reinforce the relationship between the two families and officially recognize the kinship ties between them (Dekker and Hoogeveen 2002:1).

Men can use their own resources or seek help from their relatives in order to pay their bride wealth payments and any times the negotiation process takes into consideration the economic status of the groom and the price can be flexible (Mondain et Al 2007). Also, the higher the bride payment, the longer it might take for the groom to be able to pay. For instance, among the Sereer in Senegal, the increase of the bride price implies a delay in the conclusion of the bride wealth payment process; also because of high bride price levels, men can be in debt for many years and their household economic security can be shaken (Mondain et Al 2007;12). Due

to the high cost of bride wealth payments and the practice of polygyny, men enter marriage at an older age than women as they need to accumulate enough resources for bride wealth payment prior to getting married. This also explains the age gap between polygynous spouses, as seen in the tables in Appendix 2 as for every additional wife he takes, the man has to pay another bride price.

Traditional kinship systems and the cult of ancestry have greatly impacted marriage systems in the Sub-Saharan Africa region. However, at the same time, socio-economic transformations in the society are also influencing marriage such as the spread of western culture, new types of jobs available to women and greater flexibility in social mobility (Falola and Amponsah 2012).

### **1.3: Main changes in marriage and polygyny**

Economic expansion and westernization have led to changes in marriage patterns in Sub-Saharan African societies. Economic development comes with more female participation in jobs with higher pay and an increase in their participation in the workforce and intra urban-rural migration (Garenne 2004; Falola and Amponsah 2012; 12). In order to acquire higher paid jobs, education is needed in urban areas; therefore female marriage is delayed as they spend more time acquiring education. Intra urban-rural migration allows western culture to influence the rural demographics (Smith2010).

Sexuality in Sub-Saharan Africa is also increasingly influenced by Western culture. Traditionally, pregnancy occurs within marriage; however there is an increase in premarital pregnancies in this region. The increase in young girls and boys' education in urban areas generates greater control over their relationships which signifies a loss of control by their

families. This results in the increase in premarital pregnancies in contrast to the concept that reproduction should occur within marriage (Mensch et Al 2005). The influence of western values in this region may have some effect on the new generations' viewpoint of polygyny as an outdated marriage choice, but this does not mean that it will prevent them from entering polygynous marriages in their life course.

Moreover, the migration of younger generations to different regions contributes to their change in attitude regarding marriage and sexuality. Due to migration, married couples are removed from their kinsmen's control and practice greater independence. The increase in education, the use of contraception, exposure to western media and greater mobility between rural and urban areas is influencing marriage systems in this region. Specialized training often comes with new job opportunities and labours from all social status are needed to fulfill the workforce demands. Many times, individuals often migrate in order to obtain these new jobs and their related trainings (Little and Price 1967; 415; Bigombe and Khadiagala2003;2-9). Fosterage is often practice in Sub-Saharan Africa which refers to child fosterage, where children do not live with their parents and are being reared by other family members. Fosterage and kinship ties, allow individuals to have connections with their rural kinsmen in terms of remittances and children fosterage. This allows the rural population to be exposed to westernization, education and contraception methods (Bigombe and Khadiagala2003;2-9).

As mentioned, the traditional cult of ancestry is prominent in this region and it emphasises patriarchal seniority and privileges elders to influence their descendants' marriage decisions. However this does not mean individuals are forced into marriage nor does it means the notions of love and attraction for people in this region do not exist. According to Falola and Amponsah(2012), love among the Igbo of Nigeria existed long before westernization and among

the polygynists Kikuyu in Kenya, ‘traditional Kikuyu society ‘love’ was a strong motive in mate selection” (Bell 1995;154). Therefore, although marriage decisions are part of a process involving kinsmen, there is room for attraction and love to be considered as well (Falola and Amponsah 2012;17-19).

The western portrayals of romantic love in the media, which are presented in the Sub-Saharan African region, often portray polygyny as unfavorable and advocate monogamy where romantic love is expressed by “being cleaved to one wife or husband”(Bell1995;154). However it is unlikely that western media influences have high impact on the rate of polygyny in this region. As stated in section 1.1, polygyny occurs less in urban and more in rural areas. The lower rate of polygyny in urban areas is directly due to economic reasons. In urban areas, polygyny can be expensive and become economic constraints for husbands. With each marriage, husbands have to pay the bridepayment therefore more wives equate to the need for more money spent on marriage. High bride payment causes many men to have less desire for multiple marriages. Economic downturns in Sub-Saharan Africa has cause bride payment to increase in many countries such as “Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania” (Falola and Amponsah 2012;33) and has causes those countries’ governments to implement controls over bride payment prices.

Economic constraints not only cause bride payments to increase but economic hardship puts more pressure on men’s shoulders as providers for their families. The economic crisis has also impacted traditional family roles, where the man was usually the breadwinner in the family. Women are more involved in economic pursuits in order to increase the household income and men are no longer the sole providers of income. For instance, in Northern Nigeria, women in Hausa society engage in trading to bring income to the family (Falola and Amponsah 2012;34). As mentioned in section 1.1, women’s increase in median age at first marriage can be associated

with them spending more time obtaining higher educational levels. However, increase in education in women does not mean they will not enter into polygyny. Women with high education enter marriage market later in life and may favor monogamy, but their older age and level of education may be perceived as less desirable for men in the society. The difficulty in entering marriage for these women may probe them to enter polygynous unions.

According to Timaeus and Reynar (1998;16), western culture and education have expanded in this region but it has not decreased the rate of polygyny. In Kenya, education has little impact on men's decision to enter polygyny, as men's education impacts their economic status but does not decrease their chances and wishes to enter polygyny. Therefore, in the Sub-Saharan Africa region, despite the economic constraints present in urban areas, all men are "potentially polygamous" (Timaeus and Reynar 1998; 16).

### **Conclusion**

Cultural and ethnic diversity in the Sub-Saharan Africa region contributes to the wide variety of marriage customs and traditions. Marriage and family roles in this region are influenced by kinship systems, cults of ancestry as well as changes in contemporary society such as economic downturns, increase in education, the spread of western culture and intra urban-rural migration. The intra urban-rural migration means the younger generations live further from their family and are less subjected to the control and scrutiny from their kinsmen. This has allowed them to get closer to their peers but at the same time have less contact with older generations which has impacted their perceptions of sexuality. Despite that, kinship systems and reproduction still play large roles in marriage customs. The high societal pressure for reproduction, marriage and fixed sex roles is competing with the trend of an increase in

education for women and female independence. New generations found themselves torn in between the old and new ways of life, for example individuals may claim they favor monogamy but enter polygynous marriage. Throughout the changes in the society, polygyny is still a common marriage choice for individuals in this region and it is practiced at a high rate. Although the trend of polygyny discussed in section 1.1 has been decreasing, the rate of polygyny is still maintained at a high rate. Polygyny tends to be practice more in rural than urban areas as it is more costly in urban areas. Westernization does not cause polygyny to reduce to this region, but economic decline, which causes bride payment to increase, is a clear factor which influences the decrease in polygyny.

## **Chapter 2: Theoretical approaches to explain polygyny**

In an attempt to understand polygyny, different theories were applied to polygyny, such as the Evolutionist theory (Morgan 1877;1967), the Socio and Economic approach (Boserup1965;1970;2007), the Demographic approach (Caldwell1976) and gender theories (Nussbaum 1999;2000and Sen,1979). However, gender dynamics constitute a transversal issue and shape the socioeconomic hierarchy as well as the reproductive strategies. Moreover, despite the criticisms on the socio-evolutionist approach, this theory still implicitly influences our modern world view and thus the other theoretical approaches. This section will explore how these different theoretical approaches apply to polygyny while understanding that polygyny cannot be understood through a single theory.

### **2-1: The Evolutionist Theory**

Social evolutionist theory examined family and kinship systems as a basic social unit within a society. It also observed the arrangement and adaptation of social organizations as they

developed throughout different stages in time. Morgan (1974, quoted in Sanderson, 2007; 13) is a pioneer in socio-evolutionism and his theory looks at how culture and societies changed throughout time.

Morgan (1877; 1967) categorized the stages of human development into three main stages: savagery, barbarism and civilization. These three main stages are separated into lower, middle and upper stages and are distinguished by human technological improvements such as from fire, pottery and arrow to the emergence of affluence, family and political arrangements (Morgan1877;1967;9-13) (Zeitzen2008:41). In the lower savagery stage, the fundamental group of the society was a small nomadic group and resources were shared in such groupings. As humans went into the upper savagery stage, marriages between brother and sisters were restricted and the recognition of descent was through the matrilineal system. Passing on to the barbarism stage, the limitations on marriage choices were established, incest prevention was expanded to the female line and the fundamental groups of the society were clans and villages. The female line then changed to the male line in the upper barbarism stage and the matrilineal system shifted to one of patrilineal descent.

Following this, the change to patrilineal descent led to polygynous marriages, as this system allowed men to marry many women at the same time so as to expand the male lineage (Morgan1877;1967).The dawning of the civilization stage lead to a decline in polygyny and the domination of monogamous unions.The prominence of the social evolutionist theory began to decrease in the 19<sup>th</sup> century while its popularity stagnated in the 20th century. Despite that, it has continued to influence many intellectuals' world views. Many later theories were inspired by evolutionism such as functionalism, the theory of modernization (Rostow1960) and the Marx's theory of history (Sanderson 2007:35). Limitations for the classical socio-cultural evolutionist

theory have been voiced by many scholars such as Boas (1858-1942), Sanderson (2007), and Zeitzen (2008).

As indicated in section 1.2, through the work of Lestheaghe (1994), polygyny seems to occur more frequently in patrilineal societies and less in matrilineal societies. However, Morgan's theoretical perspective on polygyny focuses on the moral evolution of mankind and not its association with any particular lineage systems. It suggests that the peak of human moral evolution is the moral perfection of the Western civilization. Western morals have influenced this theory. Evolutionists' believe that the primal urges of humans, which included mating with multiple partners as is practiced in polygyny, are "immoral" (Zeitzen2008). On the other hand, monogamous marriage is seen as having the highest moral regard. Hence, polygyny from the evolutionists' view, is in a more advanced stage than mating promiscuously, although it is nevertheless still an "imperfect" form of human family development (Zeitzen2008) (Morgan1877;1967).

Therefore, according to this theory, the practice of polygyny in the Sub-Saharan African region would indicate that the region has not yet developed into the civilization stage but remains at the barbarism stage. According to this theory, as humans in the barbarism stage develop further, the practice of polygyny is a transition stage that will cease and humanity will eventually enter the civilization stage where monogamous unions dominate.

Influenced by Morgan's framework, Rostow's (1960 quoted in Coatsworth 1970; 1) theory of modernization focuses on economic development instead of human development. Rostow's economic development is separated into the five following stages, similar to the human development stages of Morgan: (1) the Traditional Society, ' "where primitive technology and

backward institutions prevent growth”; (2) the Preconditions for Take-Off, “which are built during a ‘period of transition’, with the introduction of technology and unsettling transformations of political and social structures”; (3) the Take off period (4) the Drive to maturity and (5) the Age of high mass consumption. These different stages are categorized along the lines of technological, political and social developments. In Rostow’s perspective, polygyny should progressively disappear as economic development and resource allocations increase, whereas for Morgan polygyny is challenged by the changes in individuals’ morals leading to relatively equal statuses between spouses (Rostow 1960 in Coatsworth 1970).

For Rostow, advanced economic development and success come with the extensive investment in capital pairing with specific economic conditions which is based on the European model of economic development. This model has influenced international development perspectives and policies, where economic changes in developing countries are perceived to occur in a linear fashion. Morgan’s approach claims that the Western style of monogamous marriage is the peak epitome of human development and polygyny is an inferior form of marriage. Thus, Morgan perceives polygyny as an inevitable stage prior to the final stage of human development and monogamous marriage.

Contrary to Morgan, Rostow believes economic development can only occur when human beings are “shocked out of their backwardness by an intrusive alien force” and backwardness in this case refers to the local traditions which are contradictory to the Western civilization model (Sahlins 2005; 47). In Rostow’s approach, polygyny is a hindrance to economic prosperity and not a stage prior to any superior level of civilization.

One main criticism to both the evolutionist theory and the modernization theory is that socio-cultural developments are seen to be progressing in a linear fashion (Sanderson, 2007; 40). Critics believe that evolutionists have over-generalized and extremely ethnocentric. Although there are similar characteristics of cultural development globally, evolutionists fail to grasp the nuances and variations in different human development stages that do not always develop in a linear fashion.

## **2-2: Social and Economic perspectives on Polygyny**

Boserup's theory has been the dominating theory and was used to explain the high rates of polygyny in Sub-Saharan Africa. As an economic theorist, Boserup (1965; 1970; 2007) explained the incidents of polygyny through the gendered division of labour in the traditional agricultural society found in Sub-Saharan Africa. In her perspective, the gendered division of labour in sub-Saharan Africa is as follows: the preparation of farming, with tasks such as tree felling, is done by men while the women's role is restricted to such tasks as "sowing or planting", "weeding of crops" and "harvesting...carrying crop for storing". A traditional agricultural society's main productive input is human capital or labour. Additional females and children in the household can increase labour resources thus encouraging polygynous unions (Boserup2007; 25).

Such an economic production system places value on the female's labour and reproductive capabilities. This applies to a pre-industrialized society where human capital is an economic necessity and where more family members equate to increased economic production. As Zeitzen(2008) mentioned ; "the larger the family the larger area can be cultivated, and the more it can hunt, the better it can rear cattle and increase food production". This can be linked to the

kinship systems' dynamics described in chapter one, where a larger family also signifies greater economic security.

Hence, the economic aspect in Boserup's approach coincides with gender dynamics and marriage in Sub-Saharan Africa as discussed in section 1.2. Polygyny allows men to gain direct benefit from acquiring additional wives as it equates to a greater labour force. Furthermore, the accumulation of wives relates to an increase in potential labour through reproduction. In this perspective polygyny appears as a more efficient form of marriage than monogamy. Therefore, in this approach, high rates of polygyny in Sub-Saharan Africa are linked to the agricultural system where polygynous marriages prove to be advantageous. Connections can be drawn between polygyny, gender dynamics and economic production in these societies. This theory seems to be applicable mostly to rural areas where traditional methods of agriculture are practiced as an increase in the number of wives translates to greater social and economic wellbeing for men. On the contrary in urban areas, more wives can be an economic burden.

Another approach is by the Marxist theorist Meillassoux (1981) for whom polygyny is related to the gerontocracy system in African societies. Gerontocracy is a system where selected elder men have power and authority over older women, younger men and young women. Older men have particularly greater control over the younger male population's economic, productive and reproductive means. Young men's marriages are controlled by older men in the society where a relation between women and the economic production exists. In Boserup's framework, men of all ages gain agricultural production by gaining additional labour through marriages. As the older men enter polygyny, they accumulate more labour and thus see their economic production increases. Since marriage is a means for reproduction and economic production for men, difficulties in acquiring wives means difficulties in acquiring independency and economic

means. Hence, in gerontocracy, older men have control over the younger male population's transition to adulthood and independence which lies in their ability to get married and to have access to means of economic production.

Through gerontocracy, men gain privileges by entering into "elderhood". This system divides the male population into "young bachelor males and older polygynists" and some men in such societies are reprimanded for remaining single for their whole lives. For example, in the semi-nomadic society in pastoral Samburu Kenya, a group of young men referred to as "morons" are socially isolated; living as bachelors, they are not allowed access to females even in their thirties and are often ridiculed in the society due to their inability to acquire the wisdom of elderhood (Spencer2003;279). Meillassoux(1981;58) states that through polygyny and lineage expansion older men are able to secure their position in the society as well as expand their economic production. Such a system creates societies where the preceding generation has more power and access to reproductive and economic means.

Meillassoux's and Boserup's perspectives show that women are important in the society as a form of bargaining chip and human capital respectively. For Meillassoux, women are used by older men to gain power in the society, whereas for Boserup, women are a valuable human capital for economic production. Meillassoux's approach concentrates on the power dynamics between the older and younger men within the society while Boserup's focuses on the gender dynamics in economic productivity. Both of these two approaches are interrelated as the power of older men through gerontocracy can be accumulated by marrying more women to increase their labour capacity. Moreover, Meillassoux states that polygynous systems create an imbalance ratio between the number of eligible women for marriage and the amount of eligible men. Hence, polygyny is a marital choice for individuals and its occurrence in Sub-Saharan Africa is not due

to an uneven gender ratio in the population. According to Zeitzen(2008), in the majority of polygynous societies there is a relatively balanced ratio of men and women in the population.

The main critics of the economic model state that the female farming system is predominant in East Africa, whereas the regions which have the highest rates of polygyny are actually in West Africa(Zeitzen2008;52). According to Zeitzen (2008;52), the economic theories do not include situations where men seclude their wives due to fear of infidelity and divorce. In particular, the economic approaches do not explain underage marriages where men marry “prepubescent girls” as these girls have little contribution to the economic production, labour and reproduction in the household. This can be refuted because initially prepubescent girls may not have a reproductive and productive value but as they mature this change

### **2-3: The Demographic Approach**

The demographic approach studies demographic trends as a way explain polygyny in Sub-Saharan Africa. It takes into account the socio-cultural norms and practices associated with specific demographic trends such as the socio-economic motivations for individuals regarding fertility. The demographic approach examines how fertility and marriage trends are related to urbanization. Caldwell (1976; 344) focuses on the fertility trends in relation to the directions of wealth flow between parents and their children and vice versa.

Caldwell, who mostly focused on the case of Nigeria, outlines two types of societies which are also present in other countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. These societies are labelled as primitive and traditional societies (Caldwell1976:340-344). Primitive societies are similar to tribal societies where the main social organization is in the form of families and extended families. In such a society, human survival is dependent on one’s family as there is no other

social organization or form of cooperation. Such social settings are inclined to have gerontocratic systems and kinship systems where larger family units are favoured over nuclear family units.

The traditional society functions in a similar fashion where large families and kinship systems prove to be economically advantageous compared to nuclear families. In the traditional society, the economic means are those of 'self sufficient agrarian communities' (Caldwell 1976:324). In such societies families are the main source of support and security. Thus, an individual's security is highly dependent on their family and an individual's role is to contribute economically to their family. For both the primary and traditional societies, women's roles are limited to be those of mother and wife. Like in the economic approach, women's economic value is linked to their reproductive capabilities (Caldwell 1976:324). High fertility is valued in both primitive and traditional societies due to its ability to increase labour and the security for the family unit. Polygyny is compatible with such a high value placed on fertility and the economic value placed on women. In order to fill in the gaps of social welfare that are not present in the society, aging parents rely on their children for their economic and future security throughout life's transitions. Therefore large families, like those of polygynous families, provide greater security over nuclear family units and coincide with the kinship system.

According to Caldwell, the wealth flow in primitive and traditional societies is direct from children to parents (Caldwell 1976; 343), as they work for their parents at a young age until adulthood. Children are the source of a parent's lineage endurance, economic gains and political affluences. In Sub-Saharan African contemporary societies, the rate of fertility is obstructed by delayed age at marriage as shown in chapter one as women's median age at first marriage has increased over time in several countries including Mali where polygyny remains highly prevalent. As the level of education in children and job opportunities for females increase, the

wealth flow from children to parents change direction from parents to children with the latter spending more money on their children's education. In fact nowadays this theory could be read differently within context of the most recent global economic crisis where children have difficulties to support their parents but parents have insufficient means to support their children.

Moreover, females no longer get married as soon as they are physically ready for reproduction. Due to the attainment of higher education or more available work, women's roles are no longer restricted to only mother and wife. The prior situation, where parents gain economically through their son's and daughter's contribution of labour, no longer applies in many cases. Many parents are hoping that their children will have better paying jobs due to their education so they invest more money on their children's education; however the economic crisis makes it increasingly difficult for young people to find well paying jobs and the unemployment rates have become extremely high.

In such a context, polygyny may decline as the desire for larger family decreases as parents lose hope of gaining economic security from their children. Demographers have used the economic rationale that having more children is an economic burden in urban areas and fewer children signifies financial accumulation. In this perspective polygyny, which encourages high fertility, would be a marriage choice proving to be economically irrational. However, through Caldwell's studies in the Nigeria Yoruba community, this is not always the case. In the case of the Yoruba society, the determinant of fertility is not strictly economic. Caldwell's findings show that economic rationality is not what determines an individual's fertility choices in society. High fertility still persists in Sub-Saharan African societies although the use of contraception is increasing, Western culture influences have become widespread and traditional agrarian occupations are decreasing (Caldwell 1976; 351).

While Caldwell focuses more in fertility trends, Goldman and Pebley(1994) explain polygyny with the increase in fertility and the marital status. Goldman and Pebley (1994;233) observed that the high fertility and the decrease in population mortality have led to population growth in Sub-Saharan Africa. They also predicted that eventually the fertility rate would decline significantly following the mortality rate patterns and that population growth would stall. In this case, the motivations to enter polygynous unions would end up decreasing as well.

Goldman and Pebley (1994; 233) posited that polygyny in Sub-Saharan Africa was related to the hasty remarrying of widows and the age gap between spouses. They also concluded that a decline in the fertility rates have minimal influences on the number of women available for polygynous marriage. In the demographic perspective, polygyny provides a greater opportunity for women who are at reproductive age to get married due to “no shortage of potential husbands” (Caldwell and Caldwell 1987;411) as well as allowing men to have more access to women.

#### **2-4: The gender Approach**

It is important to discuss gender and feminist approaches as it is often argued that polygyny exists in societies where gender dynamics are imbalanced. Moreover, the other explanatory approaches mentioned are connected with the gender systems in Sub-Saharan Africa. The gender and development approach (Sen1979;Nussbaum1999;2000;Momsen2003;) examines the inequality between men and women in developing countries and tries to diminish inequality through developmental means, while the feminist approach deems any socio-cultural practices which create inequality between men and women to be unacceptable and should be eradicated altogether.

The capability approach developed by Sen and Nussbaum (1999; 2000) could be applied to better understand polygyny. Sen(1979) has developed this approach for cases where inequality can be measured in the form of capabilities instead of utilitarian measurement, which are mostly based on income and basic needs fulfillment.

Sen's concept of capability is a loosely defined philosophy which is not fixed and can be applied in many issues. It is a framework which is used to measure an individual's well being as an alternative to a cost-benefit analysis. Sen states that traditional utility based theories focus solely on utilities and fail to consider non-utility factors which play a part in an individual's welfare and "violates variation in between human beings" (Sen 1979; 197-202). While Sen does not state the basic capabilities each individual should entail, Nussbaum(2000) states ten central capabilities that each individual should possess. These ten central capabilities are: 1)Life, 2)Bodily health, 3)Bodily Integrity, 4)Senses, Imagination, and thoughts, 5)Emotions, 6)Practical Reason, 7)Affiliation, 8)Other Species, 9)Play and 10)Control over one's environment. This approach is concerned with opportunities available to each person and their means to fulfill their optimum capabilities. Additionally, it focuses on equality in people's ability to use their fullest capabilities, more specifically "what each person is able to do and to be" and what is needed in order to attain it (Nussbaum 2000; 20-33). This approach serves to highlight impediments to an individual's capabilities and social injustice. Furthermore, individual's capabilities must be endorsed by the government as their capabilities sustain their wellbeing. Therefore, the government must equally support and allow each individual's capability to flourish (Nussbaum 2000; 20-33). At the same time, an individual's autonomy and cultural diversity should be respected.

The capability approach views that polygyny itself does not condone female subjugation as plural marriage exists for both sexes (Nussbaum2000:229). Furthermore, if individuals in societies which practice both polygyny and polyandry are granted equal capabilities and choose plural marriage knowing the inequality it entails then they have the right to do so. Nevertheless, Nussbaum states that the practice of plural marriage is “often available only to males” (Nussbaum 2000:229). Moreover, when polygyny is associated with societies where women have unequal rights as men such as property rights, political rights and “rights of determination”, then it is deemed oppressive to women.

The capability approach allow us to look at polygyny without prejudice, as this approach respects cultural diversity and is accommodating to all cultures as long as they value an individual’s capabilities regardless of their gender. In order to determine if practices such as polygyny are valuing an individual’s capabilities or not, we must analyse if this practice impedes an individual’s basis capabilities. By doing this, it allows us to see many aspects surrounding an individual’s motivation to enter polygyny. The gender and development model allows us to look at the gender dynamic within a polygynous society. It put gender roles and underlying gender discrepancy into perspective and this allows us to see the different motivations for polygyny in men and women. Through the lens of the gender aspect we can start to unravel the ingrained inequality and clearly define gender roles within polygynous societies and provides insight on an individual’s motivation to enter into a polygynous union. Furthermore, this approach allows polygyny to be a marriage of choice for women, as long as the practice does not impede on their autonomy. Moreover the respect of the individual’s autonomy in this approach shows us that, just because a woman has autonomy does not signifies that she will not consider polygyny as a marriage choice and females who are empowerment may choose to enter polygyny. Women who

are empowered may choose polygyny for reasons such as society's pressure for marriage, social elevation and advantages such as the ability to share her household burdens with her co-wives. For some women, entering polygyny allow them to gain capabilities and expand their opportunities. It is important to note that many women choose marriage based on 'whom' they marry. Whether marrying a certain man means entering polygyny or not, she is getting married to an individual with a family background of her choice. Marriage may be a strategic choice for a woman, regardless of it being monogamous or polygynous. For example, marrying a particular man and entering into polygyny may lead her to economic stability, status elevation and certain freedoms where monogamous marriage wouldn't.

### **Conclusion**

As mentioned in chapter one, there are many dimensions of Sub-Saharan African societies which are related to polygyny such as gender dynamics, kinship system and the cult of ancestry. The approaches examined in this chapter looked at polygyny through different angles: economic, socio-cultural evolutionism, gender and development and demographic. Through these approaches, there are reoccurring themes when applied to polygyny which are the gender dynamics and influences from the evolutionist theory. Economic motivation for polygyny (Boserup 1965;1970;2007) may no longer apply in urban areas. The question as to whether wives in polygynous unions are economically valuable resources or an economic burden thus remains unsolved and this issue should be addressed.

The social development of polygynous marriages comprise many different aspects such as religion, society, culture and legal institutions, with each of these aspects of polygyny differing from country to country. Moreover, each of the countries that practice polygyny has their own

unique social and cultural history which contributes to the unique development of polygynous marriage.

The social evolutionist world vision is based on the traditional Western moral codes such as chastity, monogamy and Western supremacy (Zeitzen2008;42). It perceives polygyny as a practice associated with backwardness that is inferior to monogamy. Similarly, social activists and feminists such as Mugambe (2006;73-78), Onalaja and Onalaja (2004) and The Campaign Against Polygamy And Women Oppression International (CAPWOI) state that polygyny is a primitive practice which encourages female subjugation and diseases such as HIV and AIDS. Furthermore, the stereotype of polygyny as a primitive form of marriage is used to articulate social injustice such as female inequality, child brides and female exploitation in the society. Although the concept of Western supremacy is not explicit as in the colonial period, it is implied through the preconceptions that Western societies are ‘modern’ and developing societies such as those that practice polygyny are ‘traditional’ .This endorses the “West and the rest” mentality which is similar to the common perception during the colonial period (Kothari 2005;8). Such campaigns against polygyny are an example of how a ‘colonial legacy’ is present in the contemporary world’s notion of humanitarian development (Kothari 2005; 9).

This widespread condemnation of polygyny is often too simplistic as it only looks at polygyny through the lens of gender inequality. Such a view is often out of context and fails to capture the in-depth knowledge of the daily constraints people encounter in these societies and their reasons for entering polygyny, as will be shown in our case study on Nigeria.

It is important to bring awareness to issues such as violence against women however, claiming that polygyny leads to violence or that it condones domestic violence (if not between

spouses, it is between co-wives) is similar to the 19th century's view on polygyny as a 'barbaric' practice. Moreover, such a stereotypical view on polygyny is not always accurate, for example female violence in Ghana, which comprises 18 percent of women in polygynous unions (DHS report 2008), is lower than in Argentina where polygyny does not exist (SIGI 2012). According to the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada (2006) (2008), between 1998-2004 there were "11,335 cases of domestic violence "reported in Accra Ghana , while in Buenos Aires, Argentina; "70 percent of 911 calls, numbering between 9,000 and 11,000 calls per month, are related to gender violence (La Nación 3 Dec. 2007; El Siglo 29 Sept. 2007)" .

It is undeniable that polygyny reflects gender inequality in societies where it is widely practiced. However, polygyny is not a universal marriage institution that can be labelled as a stage of human development. Polygyny is a complex topic which can only be understood by considering many aspects.

### **Chapter 3: Main marriage and patterns of polygyny in Nigeria.**

#### **Introduction**

Several theoretical approaches have contributed to explain polygyny such as the economic, gender and development and demographic perspectives. These approaches often overlap in particular, polygyny is often explained by its socio-economic advantage for men in relation to gender roles in the society which practices it (Boserup 1970; 2007; Meillassoux 1981).

As seen in chapter one, the DHS reports (1990-2008) for Ghana, Mali, Kenya and Tanzania shows that polygyny is declining. In Nigeria; although the polygyny trend is declining, it is still practiced at a high rate. For example, in 2008, 33 percent of married women and 16 percent of married men were in polygynous marriages (DHS report Nigeria 2008). Authors such

as Rahman (2008), Hayase and Liaw (1997), outlined connections between individuals' motivations to enter polygyny and kinship systems as well as traditional agrarian farming.

New professions in contemporary society do not require additional labour or kinship ties and the socio-economic advantage of polygyny no longer applies in urban areas. Nevertheless polygyny is still practiced in both urban and rural areas in Nigeria. Since polygynous marriage can be considered to be an economic burden (for men) and a sign of asymmetry between genders (for women), then the question is: what motivates individuals to continue entering polygynous marriages? To answer this question, we will use Nigeria as a case study. First we outline the main socio-cultural and economic patterns in Nigeria in relation to marriage and thus polygyny, and then explore the main motivations of individuals in Nigeria entering polygyny.

### **3-1 Nigeria: Main marriage and patterns of polygyny**

Polygyny is practiced at a high rate in Nigeria with 33 percent of women in polygynous marriages (DHS Nigeria 2008; [www.measuredhs.com](http://www.measuredhs.com)). Nigeria is one of the most populated countries in Sub-Saharan Africa with a population of over 100 million and an annual growth rate of 2.96 percent. Contemporary Nigerian society is still influenced by traditional beliefs and ways of life, for instance, lineage and clan relations are still valued. At the same time, factors such as Globalization, increase in investment in education, improvement in the transportation systems and the oil boom strongly impact the society. The main professions in the southern provinces are “farming, crafts and fishing” and due to oil boom in the Niger Delta, an increasing number of professionals work in the mining industry. The Northern region is populated with ‘Hausa’, Fulani, Kanuri and many minority groups and the main professions are farming and pastoralism. Moreover, Nigeria is home to over 250 ethnic groups and languages. Therefore, it is a country rich in culture, customs and traditions (Toyin 2001:22)

The traditional patriarchal system dominates the Nigerian society and gender asymmetry is present in many forms such as defined sex roles and sex segregation (Asiyanbola 2005; 2). The patrilineal lineage system dominates in Nigeria and males have more social advantages than females. As mentioned in chapter 1, the members of the patrilineal lineage have common ancestors through their father's lineage and are associated with a higher rate of polygyny than in the matrilineal system. In a patrilineal community men are considered as the lineage successors and men are granted their role as the head of the household. Such gender dynamics signifies an imbalance of power between men and women in the private and public domain (Duze and Mohammad 2010:54). This has influenced the changes in the formal and informal polygynous marriages in Nigeria which will be discussed in detail in section 3.2.

Men's control over the household resource production, reproduction and sex segregation can be found in many aspects of the society. Sex segregation can be found in important events such as weddings and funerals. In such events, women and men interact separately in "same-sex tasks and activities" and sit in separate sections in Christian churches (Smith 2009:90). However, the patrilineal system is not the only lineage system practiced in Nigeria, the matrilineal system is practiced as well, for example in the Ilaro society where there is no significant segregation between male and female roles.

The defined sex roles place men at head of the family and females are associated with household chores and child rearing. Men and women in the society support each other in agricultural production; men are responsible of the preparation of the field while women are responsible for the planting and harvesting of crops. According to Asiyanbola( 2005: 199-201), these defined sex roles in the society are not influenced by an individual's social or economic status but by the traditional perception of sex roles.

Reproduction constitutes one of the main motivations for marriage in Nigeria. The pressure for high levels of reproduction is still strong in the society. Young females in the society who are married face the pressure of child bearing from their families and community, as it is believed women should procreate as soon as they are physically ready. For this reason early marriage is common in Nigeria. Infertility in the society is considered a misfortune which is often a source of shame for the individuals of both sexes (Denga1982). Men who have an infertile wife may seek additional wives in order to have children, rather than opt for divorce. There is a social stigma surrounding infertility in women. In the Ijaw society in Nigeria an infertile woman is perceived as “an unfortunate being” (Hollos2003;49). Men who are childless are perceived as irresponsible due to their role in lineage expansion .The traditional view which claims that a marriage’s purpose is for reproduction and kinship ties still persists. Individual partner choice can be based on social mobility and kinship ties gained from marriages (Barker and Rich 1992;201-207).

According to the 1990 DHS report, although Nigeria’s National Policy on Population claims that “Families shall be dissuaded from giving away their daughters in marriage before the age of 18 years”, early marriage in Nigeria is still common, with the average age of marriage being between 17 and 18 years old (table 4, appendix 2). In Nigerian urban areas the median age at first marriage is higher than in rural areas. Moreover, high median age at first marriage is found in women with higher education while women with no education have lower median age at first marriage. Higher wealth is associated with higher median age at first marriage, whereas lower wealth is associated with lower median age at first marriage (DHS Nigeria1990-2008). However this is to be expected as the more time women spend attaining an education the later they will get married.

Moreover, the society encourages reproduction and favors multiple children. For example, according to Izugbara and Ezeh (2010;193), the fertility rate in Nigeria is 5.7 children per woman; it is 7.3 children in the Northwest region alone while teenage pregnancy is 8 percent in the Southern region and 45 percent in the Northwest region. Polygyny not only supports the economic production in the traditional agricultural sense but in modern business as well. Falola(2001) mentions that businessmen rely on their wives and children to help them with work in their companies. In addition to the increase of human capital, polygyny is also a source of social prestige.

The main religions which dominate Nigeria are Christianity and Islam. There is a regional distribution of religion with the majority of Muslims in the North and Christians in the Southern provinces. The educational distribution in the two regions are different for young girls; for example, only 4 percent of girls have secondary education in the northern region and “more than two thirds of 15–19 year old girls in Northern Nigeria are unable to read a sentence compared to less than 10% in the South” (British Council Nigeria 2012). Furthermore, the marriage customs and fertility patterns differ in those regions.

Girls in the northern region tend to marry early and thus most pregnancies are conceived within marriage. Additionally, limited opportunities for female education in the northern region contribute to early marriage (British Council Nigeria 2012). For example, in the Northern Kano State, “30,000 girls complete primary school each year, but government schools can only accommodate 3,000 of them in secondary schools” (Barker and Rich 1992). Consequently, girls who are not able to further their education marry early. Moreover, the majority of girls in the northern region of Nigeria are married by the age of 16 and “are expected to bear a child within the first year of marriage (British Council 2012). Islam influences a stricter control over female

premarital pregnancy in the northern region which also explains why pregnancy mainly occurs within marriage. In the southern urban area where Christianity predominates, there is a high prevalence of early pregnancy with highly unsafe sex practices which stimulates abortions (Barker and Rich 1992; 201-204). However, we cannot conclude that there is less control over female premarital pregnancy for Christians in Nigeria since Christianity also promotes chastity and pregnancy within marriage. Therefore, religion may not constitute the sole explanation for the differences found in the rates of early pregnancies and unsafe sex in the southern urban area in Nigeria.

As stated in Chapter 1, early marriage for women is associated with polygynous marriage and not surprisingly, the highest rate of polygynous marriage is found in the northern region of Nigeria. Islam allows a man to have up to four wives (Mansoori 2009; 283), given that he treats all his wives equally and that he gains his wives' consent. The DHS survey shows regional differences in the practice of polygyny in Nigeria, with "43 percent in North East, 42 percent in North West, and 37 percent in North Central." (DHS Nigeria;2008). The DHS report for Nigeria shows that, polygynous marriages are more prevalent in the rural rather than urban areas. However, as mentioned in chapter one, it does not shed light on the rate of informal polygyny in Nigeria. Furthermore, despite the trends of decline for polygyny, it is still practice at a high rate in Nigeria. This lead us to question what the motivations are for individuals to enter polygyny. Furthermore, the DHS reports (DHS report Nigeria1990-2008) shows a decline in polygynous marriages for women and men at all ages. This could be related to the general increase in women's median age at first marriage and the economic crisis in Sub-Saharan Africa. Although there are many international investors in Sub-Saharan Africa, as well as an increase in economic development, there has been an economic decline. The Global financial crisis in 2007 had

reached the Sub-Saharan African region (Macias and Massa 2009) and caused the region's economic growth to decrease.

Although the traditional perceptions of gender roles are still highly impacting the social relationships in the Nigerian society especially regarding marriage and sexuality, globalization and economic development herald changes within the Nigerian society in many ways through the increase in exposure to western media and ideals, the increase in women's education and intra rural and urban migration (Toyin, 2001;22; Smith, 2009). Western media including TV and radio programs, access to Internet, and other ICTs, centered on romance and more liberal sexual behaviours. It has also facilitated an increase in communication between individuals which has influenced Nigerian society. Young individual spousal choices are increasingly based on love and romance rather than exclusively on kinship ties or parental consent (Smith 2010; 124).

The intra rural-urban migration allows young women to have less control and scrutiny from their families. This allows sexual and romantic relationships to be easier to form for the new generation (Smith2010; 132). Along these lines, the link between reproduction and marriage seems to be less clear. According to Barker and Rich (1992;199-201), changes in the society caused a discord in communication between the adolescents and their elders especially regarding the control by the latter on their sexuality. This has resulted in a higher rate of premarital pregnancy among adolescents in modern Nigerian society. This contrasts with the traditional value where procreation is encouraged and "nearly always took place within marriage or consensual union" (Barker and Rich 1992;201).

Traditionally, the rites of passages and customs were controlled by the elders who ensured that adolescents of both sexes would be taught about reproduction and marriage roles. Because of the decrease in the elder generation's control over the youth combined with a lack of access to

effective contraceptive methods, young females in rural regions are at risks of adolescent premarital pregnancy. Nevertheless, intra urban-rural migration allows information in sexual education and health issues to be passed on in between regions.

Yet changes in perceptions of marriage choices in the society do not mean that the traditional way of life is no longer valued. Thus the new generations are faced with the contradiction between the traditional and the newly evolving way of life. Such a contradiction can be observed in their perception on polygynous and monogamous marriage. For example, individuals consider sexuality, the presence of romantic love and monogamy as “markers of being urban and educated” (Smith 2010; 132). However, they may enter polygyny throughout the course of their life. This shows that although there are changes in how marriage is viewed both at the individual and collective levels; the traditional ways of life, which values kinship ties and the importance of reproduction, remain dominant in Nigeria.

According to Smith (2010), the increase in the perception of love within marriage can be associated with the increase in female autonomy. As marriage in Nigeria is associated with gender asymmetry in the society, the inclusion of love in spousal choice serves to break up the “highly sex-segregated division of labour” in the society. According to this author, love signifies an increase in intimacy between the spouses and can thus lead women to have more bargaining power with their husbands due to the emotional ties between the two. However in Nigeria, women who adopt the modern view on female independence and the emancipation of female sexuality have some difficulties adjusting to marriage (Smith 2010; 124-129). Such perceptions which value female emancipation may not support polygyny, however women who enter the marriage market late may prefer polygyny rather than run the risk of remaining single.

Another marker of change related to the new ways of life relates to how young women perceive sexuality as a “positive resource, not as something that demeans them” (Smith, 2010). Women’s sexual autonomy can also be expressed by the means they mobilize to accomplish their personal socio-economic ambition. Young unmarried women can attain higher education, job opportunities and financial support from their “sugar-daddies” (Smith 2010; 124-129); which is a phenomenon where these young women have several lovers, usually kept secret from other men, which provides them with economic support. This is not to be confused with informal polygyny as young women and their ‘sugar daddies’ do not have a stable relationship, have no long term commitments and usually do not involve children.

Such female sexual autonomy such as having many lovers is contrasting with the traditional standards of female in the society. The new generations of modern women who value their sexuality as an asset desire to enter into their own marriage eventually. While these women might be having ‘sugar daddies’, they are actively searching for the right marital partner. However, the expectation of what a wife should be is contradicting with these modern women and their sexuality. For example, in Igbo society in Nigeria, the wife is supposed to be faithful to her spouse and be a devoted mother; however, a woman’s sexual independence is conflicting with the classic ideal wife for most men (Smith 2010; 124-129). Although female promiscuity is condemned in the society, extramarital sex among men is accepted and sometimes rewarded amongst their peers because it is viewed as a show of masculinity.

### **3.2: Polygyny in Nigeria: What are the main motivations?**

As mentioned, polygyny is a subset of marriage, thus the motivations for polygyny overlap with the motivations for one to marriage. According to Brown (1981;323), the main motivations for polygyny are reproduction, social prestige, socio-economic reasons and religion. However,

the motivations that will be discussed in the case of Nigeria are socio-economic, and related to reproduction and social prestige. The reasons underlying these motivations refer to the kinship systems and the gender dynamics in Nigeria. In the last sub-section we will examine the specific case of informal urban polygyny as it constitutes a good marker for the current social changes affecting the marriage system in contemporary Nigeria.

As mentioned in section 3.1, there is a gender discrepancy present in Nigerian society and there are clearly define sex roles within the society. We will see in this section that the reasons men and women are motivated to enter of polygynous unions are very much related to the gender dynamic found in Nigeria. The clearly defined sex roles in Nigeria relegate men as the financial providers of the household and restrict women roles as mothers and wives. This creates a situation where many women are heavily dependent on her husband for economic support. Moreover, women's social status and sex roles are lower than those of men in Nigeria. For instance, women in Nigeria have limited access to property and can have more access to land through marriage. Traditionally, men have influence over resource production and sex roles and polygynous marriage is a production of such a social organization. Long term perceptions of polygyny as a common and acceptable marriage choice, paired with the evident gender disparity, allows polygyny to survive.

### **3.2.1: Polygyny and the motivation for reproduction**

The main motivations for polygyny in Nigeria are socio-economic and are related to reproduction. These two motivations are interrelated with each other and can be explained by kinship systems and the economic gain possible through polygyny. As mentioned in Chapter 1, the kinship system relies heavily on the existing bonds between individuals in the family and it is

through these bonds that people are able to prosper economically, politically and achieve a higher social status. The roots of the kinship system are based on the notion that family members are to support each other in times of need. The existence of the kinship system is based on family bonds, networks and the expansion of family members. Kinship systems and the cult of ancestry are the roots of such high pressure for fertility in the Nigerian society. Therefore, they are influencing the motivations to enter polygynous marriage in Nigeria.

Polygyny coincides with the kinship system as large families are favored since it allows the male lineage to continue. In Nigeria, reproduction and economic expansion is related. In Nigeria, children are highly valued and the large family fits with the traditional kinship system in various ways. First, societal pressure on women's fertility, which is rooted from traditional beliefs, motivates women to enter polygyny. In the case that the wife is infertile, it would be socially advantageous for her to remain married rather than divorce. Thus a woman in a monogamous marriage would allow polygyny if she is infertile, and in the case of infertility even a Christian monogamous Nigerian woman would allow her husband to take additional wives (Denga 1982;799-802).

Infertile women are faced with social stigma, challenges in their marital lives and difficulties remarrying in Nigeria ( Okonofua et Al 1997;205-220). Thus children are perceived as a blessing, infertility is seen as a curse (Denga 1982;799).Among the Ekiti in Southwestern Nigeria, infertile women are excluded and treated as outcasts. Once they pass away, their bodies are buried on the outskirts of the town along with the demented. It is reported by Nigerian gynaecologists that "infertility cases constitute between 60 and 70 percent of their consultations in tertiary health institutions" (Okonofua et Al 1997;206-207). Consequently, when facing infertility, husbands and wives are willing to acquire "all necessary measures" to undo this curse,

such as religious ceremonies, consulting medical specialists (Denga 1982;799) and enter into polygynous unions. Polygyny is a better alternative for women in Nigeria compared to being divorced or allowing her husband to have mistresses.

### **3.2.2: Polygyny and the socio-economic motivations**

Gender discrepancy in Nigeria leads to different motivations to enter polygyny for men and women. Men`s economic motivation to enter polygyny is linked to female productive and reproductive value in the society. The resources a man can gain from his extended family in a kinship systems is beneficial for business transactions and economic prosperity (Isiugo-Abanihe1994; 149-161). Thus wives and children in polygynous unions signify present and future assistance in work and old age support for men.

Moreover, men`s economic motivation for polygyny is linked with the traditional agrarian system. Modern Nigeria still practices traditional farming in rural regions. In the Northern region the Fulani`s main professions are farming and pastoralism. In this region polygyny is practiced more than in other regions. Wives in the Nigerian culture have a domestic responsibility in the household. In households with an agrarian based occupation, women`s labour is crucial as their responsibility lies in domestic work as well as farming. Through polygyny men are able to maximize women`s economic and reproductive capabilities in the form of additional labour from wives and children.

Women`s economic motivation for entering polygyny may be related to the gender dynamics where they have to take care of the household as well as farming. Through polygyny, women in an agrarian society in Nigeria may gain a form of autonomy. The entering of additional wives into the family unit signifies a sharing of responsibility and women are less burdened in their everyday lives. Ware (1979;188-190) mentions in her study that women in

polygynous unions state that the division of labour is the main advantage of polygyny and they benefit from more leisure time. Nomeyo (1967 in Ware1979;190) states that “for the wife, polygamy is a liberating force. Thanks to the presence of ‘co-wives’, wives are allowed to each have their own time out of the ‘chores of married life’”.

For women in Nigeria, polygyny may be a better alternative financially than their husbands having mistresses. Women would rather enter polygyny over their husbands having extramarital affairs and “three quarter of women in a survey would prefer additional wives rather than mistresses” (Ware1979; 189) as they claimed that mistresses were more difficult to control than wives. However, for women, additional wives and children signify that they have to share resources with each other whereas if they are in monogamous marriages, women will be able to accumulate more resources. Also if a wife in a polygynous union has more children than her co-wives she will have more access to the household resources than the others. In that sense women have economic gain through reproduction as well and this leads to intense competition and often conflicts between co-wives. In a society which respects seniority as in Nigeria, senior polygynous wives gain higher social and domestic status over junior wives.

Moreover, women`s social economic status in Nigerian society is dependent on that of their husband. Through marriage, be it polygynous or monogamous, a woman`s socio-economic status can be elevated (Rahman2008;18). This allows men to have high authority in the domestic sphere. Traditionally, husbands are referred to by their wives as “lord” or “master” and men are the ones who have the power to make major decisions in the household (Isiugo-Abanihe1994;149-161). Western education and ideals are increasingly popular in both urban and rural Nigeria. However, according to Isiugo-Abanihe in 1994, the constant intra urban-rural migration causes such a traditional gender organization to be influential even among the “most

westernized Nigerians (Isiugo-Abanihe1994;149-161). Today, this may have changed in Nigerian society. While an increasing number of women desire to marry for love, they also insist on characters such as “good providers, responsible fathers” and wealth (Smith 2010;134).

### **3.2.3: Polygyny and men’s social prestige**

In Nigeria, men are heads of the household and have power and authority over their wives and children. Through polygyny, men gain social prestige and economic help in the form of wives and children (Isiugo-Abanihe1994; 149-161). According to Isiugo-Abanihe(1994), regardless of a man’s financial status in Nigeria, children represent accomplishment and contentment and are fundamental for men to achieve a higher social status. Additional members in the form of children can signify added economic burden in the household, yet having many children is valued. The kinship system and patrilineal system in Nigeria are reflected in the gender imbalance which plays a part in making reproduction the motivation for polygyny.

The patriarchal system creates clearly defined sex roles in a society as mentioned in section 3.1. Womanhood is associated with the nurtured and nature of a mother and manhood is associated with leadership and being the head of the family; although there are widespread Western values which promote female independence, such traditional view on gender is embedded in the Nigerian society and is still influential.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, the bride wealth payment is negotiated in consideration of a woman’s economic and reproductive value and in a patrilineal system it is more costly because women’s reproductive and productive rights are transferred to the husband’s family. Such transactions occur in polygynous unions as well and formalize the marriage. The Nigerian culture values seniority and gerontocracy allows older men to have control over younger men’s

reproductive and economic productive means. In order to enter polygyny a man must have enough financial means to pay for the bride payments of his many wives as well as support them and his future children. Therefore through polygyny men gain prestige as it symbolizes wealth (Brown 1981;323;Isiugo-Abanihe1994;149-161).

With the spread of the Western ideal of love and romance in marriage, polygyny is associated with being backwards for the social elite and those who live in urban areas (Smith 2010). This Western influenced perception is similar to Morgan's social evolutionist perspective, where polygyny is associated with being uncivilized and is considered an outdated practice in comparison to monogamy (Morgan 1877;1967;Karanja1994).

However, polygyny is still practiced in urban areas in Nigeria. As in urban areas the economic conditions differ from the areas where traditional agriculture dominates because polygyny is not a source of economic gain for men. Therefore in urban areas, men's justification for polygyny is certainly more related to the social prestige associated to polygyny because a large family still signifies wealth.

While formal polygyny may be practiced more in rural than urban areas, informal polygyny is practiced in Nigerian urban areas (Karanja1994; Zeitzen 2008). As mentioned in the main introduction, the terms 'outside wives' or 'private polygyny' (Karanja 1994) is often used to refer to informal polygyny and outside wives are not to be confused with extra-marital affairs as they have conjugal bond with their spouses but without holding the legal status of a wife as they are openly known as wives in the society. Children born out of unofficial unions can only obtain a formal status if their father legitimizes their claim to their lineage. Often times women who are involved in informal polygynous unions have a lower social and economic status than their husband and his legitimate wife (Karanja1994;195).

A man's motivation to enter into an informal union is often to gain prestige while a woman's motivation is economic. Although the union may not be official; the informal relationship will still bring the man prestige amongst his peers. In Nigeria's urban areas, polygyny is a symbol of wealth and high status as only the wealthy can afford to enter into polygynous unions. Due to the financial constraints polygyny poses in urban areas, such as the high cost of marriage and maintaining wives and children, men might not be able to afford more than two wives. Therefore the practice of informal polygyny is convenient as the man may have one official wife and another 'outside wives' and therefore have more control over the sharing of his resources. As the outside wives are unofficial, he faces less public scrutiny if he does not distribute his wealth evenly.

Informal polygyny in urban areas shows the conflict between the old and new ways of life. Elite men are motivated to enter informal polygyny as it allows them to keep their public image of being modern and educated while at the same time allowing them to privately connect with their traditional values and practice polygyny (Karanja 1994; 197-198). The case of informal polygyny may be practiced less with Muslim Nigerians, it is still widely accepted and supported by the religion in their community. The traditional kinship system, where polygyny signifies affluence and power, still influences modern Nigerian men. Men are motivated to enter informal polygyny as they view such unions as a symbol of their power and wealth. As such, informal polygyny is connected with the image of masculinity in the Nigerian Society.

Furthermore, informal polygyny is economically driven for men as it does not come with economic burdens as high as formal polygynous marriages. For example in the informal polygynous union, bride wealth is not paid and the actual marriage ceremony itself does not take

place. Hence, if formal polygyny does not pose economic constraints for men, it is likely that most men would be formally polygynous

Women`s motivations to enter into informal polygynous unions are economic. Women do not gain prestige through informal polygyny because such informal unions are not legalized and thus no bride wealth is paid. Women who enter informal polygynous unions are often in the lower social status and are less wealthy than their husbands. Therefore, the majority of ‘outside wives’ are financially dependent on their husbands. According to Karanja (1994:201), women who are divorced and have many children to feed sometimes depend on the support of their informal husband for survival. Women’s motivations to enter polygynous marriages are connected to their social status and the gender discrepancy in Nigeria. Their motivation for entering informal polygyny may not have been reproduction as outside wives often has fewer children with their husbands, however, for men reproduction may be their motivation to enter informal polygyny.

The case of informal polygyny in Nigeria shows that there are other forms of marriage present in the Nigerian society due to conflicts between the old and new ways of life. Another example of informal plural marriage that exists in the Nigerian society is informal polyandry. In rural Western Nigerian society, informal polyandry through motherhood refers to a situation where a woman has a “co-parental ties with more than one father of their children” (Guyer 1994:232).

Similar to informal polygyny, informal polyandry is a result of gender discrepancy and social pressure for reproduction for women within Nigerian society. Women’s motivation to enter informal polyandry is economic and reproductive. Children allow women to stabilize ties

with men whom are the fathers of their children. According to Guyer (1994), women gain long term support from the children's fathers. Women who spend more time in education enter marriage at a later age but they are still faced with the societal pressure to reproduce.

In the case of polyandry, the rural areas of Nigeria offer few jobs for women who are educated while they still face the same pressure to procreate. Thus, many young women in this society are not formally married but their society demands them to have children. Women are therefore motivated to enter informal polyandry so they can fulfill their social obligation to have children and at the same time gain financial support, kinship ties and affluences through their many informal husbands.

In Nigeria, one should not assume that a woman's choice to enter a polygynous union would be her ideal marriage choice. However, due to the gender disparity in the Nigerian society which is based on traditional values, there are few alternatives for women. Women's socio-economic status is reliant on their husbands'. Many times, polygyny allows women to reach their goals in life, be it economic, reproductive or one of social elevation. While for men, economic, reproduction, prestige and traditional values are what motivate them to enter polygyny. For women, their main motivations for polygyny are economic and reproductive only. Informal polygyny in Nigeria has existed since the colonial period and is socially constructed (Mann 1994; 167) consequence of the imposing Western ideal to the traditional marriage practice of polygyny. Informal polygyny creates greater power gaps between the spouses as 'outside wives' do not have the same rights as the formal polygynous wives.

It is clear that all the motivations for polygyny such as socio-economic, men's prestige and reproduction overlap with each other. The economic motivations for men to enter polygyny can

be applied to many theories outlined in chapter two. Boserup's economic theory can be applied to men's motivation for polygyny in rural areas where traditional agriculture is still practiced and for women the gender and development theory can be applied as their economic motivation for polygyny is related to the gender discrepancy which leaves them reliant on men for economic advancement. This shows that the gender dynamic in Nigeria is transversal to both men and women's motivations to enter polygyny. Moreover, it can be concluded that different motivations are interrelated and one motivation cannot be look at without referring to another one.

### **Conclusion**

Chapter one shed light on the trends of marriages and polygyny in Sub-Saharan Africa. It shows that the kinship systems and the cult of ancestry, which are the main social organization in Sub-Saharan Africa, still strongly impact the society. Marriage in this region is not a single event in a specific time frame but is a process with many stages that can last for a long period of time. Although there are common trends in this region's marriage processes, it is also important to note that marriage systems in this region are diverse as there are varieties of different socio-cultural systems and gender dynamics in different societies. Polygyny is a common marriage choice in Sub-Saharan Africa and its decline in Nigeria and in other countries in Sub-Saharan Africa is not only due to westernization. A key factor which directly impacts polygynous marriage in this region is the economic crisis. This shows that the decline in polygyny is due to the global economic downturn but not development and the spread of western values.

In chapter two, we explored the different theories that can be applied to polygyny such as socio-evolutionist (Morgan 1877;1967), economic (Boserup 2007) ,gender and development (Sen1979;Nussbaum 1999;2000) and the demographic theory (Caldwell;1976). From looking at

all these theories, we can conclude that gender dynamics constitute a transversal issue and shape the socioeconomic hierarchy as well as reproductive strategies. Polygyny cannot be understood through a single theory and despite being considered outdated, the socio-evolutionist theory worldview still influences our modern world view on polygyny. This approach perceives polygyny as inferior to monogamy, outdated and a symbol of female subjugation.

Chapter three explores the patterns of marriage and polygyny in Nigeria as well as the main motivations for polygyny in Nigeria. In Nigeria, the gender dynamic places a man in a better social standing than women and contributes to the different motivations for men and women to enter polygyny. We conclude that the main motivations are socio-economic, reproductive and social prestige. The socio-economic motivation for men is associated with traditional agriculture practices and for women it is the gender dynamic. Reproduction as a motivation for polygyny is related to the cult of ancestry and kinship systems in Nigeria as well as the gender dynamic. Prestige as a motivation for polygyny does not apply to women but only men. Social prestige also motivates men to enter polygyny and can be explained by the gender asymmetry in Nigeria.

Additionally, regardless of the Western culture influences on Nigeria, the traditional culture still stands firm. In the case of Nigeria, such widespread assumptions on polygyny have created further inequality in marriages in Nigeria. This has taken the form of informal polygyny where the gap between a husband and wife's power and status widen. In such unions, the wives have no formal status, no legal benefits as wives and are in total financial dependency on the husband. Kinship systems, fixed sex roles and gender discrepancy are what create gender inequality in the society and polygyny is one product of such a society. Therefore polygyny cannot be explained

by a single theory or approach. It is a combination of different explanatory approaches within the society related to its economic, reproductive and gender dynamics.

The case study of polygyny in Nigeria sheds light on men and women's motivations to enter polygyny. It shows that, traditional values are deeply rooted in the Nigerian society but at the same time modernization and the increase in education also impact individuals' decisions regarding their marital choices. As mentioned in chapter 1 and 3, in Nigerian urban areas the economic gains are no longer a justification for polygyny; however men practice polygyny for prestige even though, due to economic reason, men have fewer wives which lead them to start informal unions in addition to their formal marriage. The case study of Nigeria shows that, despite western cultural influences, all men are potentially polygynous. Moreover, men and women may claim they value monogamy but still practice polygyny.

As the main characteristic of the social organization in Sub-Saharan Africa, kinship systems and the cult of ancestry still strongly impact the Nigerian society. In the contemporary society, individuals in Nigeria are often caught between newly evolving and traditional values. Due to such conflicting values, new trends of fertility and marriages emerge such as informal polygyny, the increase in premarital pregnancy and informal polyandry. The conflict between Western ideals and local values is not restricted to only the Nigerian society. These conflicts are also present in the changes in the marriage trends in Sub-Saharan African countries in general.

Changes in the perception of gender roles are increasing and the younger generation expresses more desire for romantic love within marriage. Parallel to this, fertility and traditional roles are still imposed upon individuals in rural areas. Hence traditional ways of life and economic constraints have impacted individual's marriage choices yet at the same time, new ways of life are also influencing individual's marital decisions.

As mentioned in the introduction, recent literature on polygyny in Sub-Saharan Africa is scarce and this issue should be addressed. As polygyny is a topic which is constantly changing, there are varieties of developments in polygynous marriages in different times and places. This paper contributes to the limited pool of recent literature on polygyny and shows us that the stereotypical perception of polygyny, which dates back to the colonial period, is still widespread and influential. Such a simplistic view of polygyny focuses on the outer layer of the practice of polygyny without examining the root causes and not respecting an individual's autonomy or decision to enter polygyny. For example, as mentioned in chapter two, women may gain capabilities through entering polygynous marriage and being an autonomous and modern woman does not always mean that she will not choose polygyny as a marriage choice. A woman may not be entirely happy in polygynous marriage, but she may still choose it if it solves her immediate economic problems.

This paper provides guidelines for future research in the analysis of different motivations for polygyny in various time frames and regions. It also shows that polygyny in Sub-Saharan Africa varies from culture to culture and in different countries. Hence Sub-Saharan Africa is not to be observed as a region with homogeneity but versatility instead. For example, economic constraints highly impacted polygyny in urban and rural areas in different ways. In urban areas, informal polygyny thrives due to economic constraints, while in rural areas where agriculture is the main profession; polygyny allows men with economic constraints to have economic gain and additional labour in the form of wives and children. Thus it is important to remember that because polygyny is a part of the marriage system, is a multifaceted topic and there should be more current research on the topic of informal polygynous marriage.

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## Appendix 1

Table 1: Marital Status for Women and Men in Tanzania, Mali, Ghana and Kenya in percentage: Data from the DHS Final report

Countries and Year of report	Current Marital status					
	Never Married	Married	Living together	Widowed	Divorced	Not Living Together
Women age 15-49						
Tanzania						
DHS : 1991-2	24.5	47.4	18	2.9	7.3	n/a
DHS : 1996	23.2	59.9	6.7	3.1	4.9	2.1
DHS : 2004	23	58.5	8.8	2.6	4.1	n/a
DHS :2010	25.1	58.3	5	2.9	5.3	n/a
Ghana						
DHS :1993	19.5	58.7	11.6	1.7	5.6	2.9
DHS :1998	23.7	51.9	12.7	1.8	4.6	5.3
DHS :2003	28.4	54.2	8.1	1.9	3.3	n/a
DHS :2008	32.4	45.4	13.1	2.1	3.2	n/a
Kenya						
DHS : 1993	30.2	58.3	3.1	3.1	2.7	2.6
DHS :1998	30.1	58.8	2.6	3.7	1.8	3.1
DHS :2003	29.3	54.5	5.6	4.2	1.6	n/a
DHS :2008-9	31.2	54.2	4.1	4.4	1.3	n/a
Mali						
		In Union(Married and Living together)				
DHS :1987	4.4	92.1		1.8	1.6	n/a
DHS :1995-6	12.8	84.8		1.2	1.2(separate/divorce)	n/a
DHS : 2001	13.5	83.5		1.3	0.7	n/a
DHS :2006	11.8	79.2(Married),5.6(living together)		1.5	0.8	n/a

(Continued)Table 1: Marital Status for Women and Men in Tanzania, Mali, Ghana and Kenya in percentage: Data from the DHS Final report

Countries and Year of report	Current Marital status					
	Never Married	Married	Living together	Widowed	Divorced	Not Living Together
Men						
Tanzania						
DHS : 1991-2 (age15-59)	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
DHS : 1996 (age15-59)	37.5	53	4.1	0.9	1.8	2.5
DHS : 2004 (age15-49)	41.7	48	5.2	0.4	0.7	n/a
DHS :2010 (age 15-49)	41.4	48.6	3.5	1	1.4	n/a
Ghana						
DHS :1993 (age 15-59)	35.6	49.4	8.1	0.8	3.8	2.4
DHS :1998 (age15-59)	40.9	43	9.8	0.6	2.2	3.4
DHS :2003 (age 15-59)	40.7	48.6	4.6	0.6	2	n/a
DHS :2008 (age 15-59)	42.5	47.4	5.3	0.6	2.2	n/a

(Continued)Table 1: Marital Status for Women and Men in Tanzania, Mali, Ghana and Kenya in percentage: Data from the DHS Final report

Countries and Year of report	Current Marital status					
	Never Married	Married	Living together	Widowed	Divorced	Not Living Together
Kenya						
DHS : 1993	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
DHS :1998 (age 15-54)	43.7	51.5	1	0.6	0.6	2.5
DHS :2003 (age 15-54)	45	49.9	0.9	0.7	1.3	n/a
DHS :2008-9 (age 15-54)	44	49	2.3	0.9	0.8	n/a
Mali		In Union(Married and Living together)				
DHS : 1987	20.2	78.8		0.4	0.5(divorced/separated)	n/a
DHS : 1995-6	31.7	66.4		0.4	1.4(divorced/separated)	n/a
DHS : 2001	n/a	n/a		n/a	n/a	n/a
DHS:2006	31.2	58.5(married),6.6(living together)		0.4	0.4	n/a

## Appendix 2

Table 2: Age at first Marriage and Polygyny Prevalence for women in Tanzania, Mali, Ghana and Kenya, Data from the DHS reports.

Countries and Year	Median age at First Marriage for women	Polygyny Prevalence for women age 15-49						
		urban	rural	No education	Primary education	Secondary education	Higher than secondary education	total
Tanzania								
DHS :year 1991-2:Age 20-49	17.9	12.4(Dar es Salaam) 24.1 (other Urban)	29.4	35.4	19.4	14.2(some secondary education)	N/A	27.5
DHS :year 1996:Age 20-49	18.4	20.4	31	38.9	28.6(incomplete) 21.9(completed)	N/A	N/A	28.8
DHS :year 2004:Age 20-49	18.6	13.4	25.8	29.6	19.4	10.8	10.8	22.9
DHS : year 2010:Age 20-29	18.9	12	24.1	28.3	18.4	N/A	13.5	21.2
Ghana								
						(Medium/JSS)		
DHS report :1993 :Age 20-49	18.9	21.5	30.7	35.7	23.5	22	17.5	27.7
DHS report :1998:Age 20-49	19.1	15.7	25.7	31.5	22.9	16.3	12.8	22.5
DHS report :2003:Age20-49	19.6	16.4	26.8	36.4	18.5	12.8	9.1	22.6
DHS report :2008:Age 25-49	19.8	11.9	22.8	31.1	19.1	11.7	4.1	18.2
Kenya								
DHS report : 1993:Age 20-49	19.2	13.7	20.5	33.3	13	N/A	11.4	19.5
DHS report :1998:Age 20-49	19.5	11	17.3	29.3	12	N/A	10.5	16
DHS report :2003 :Age 20-49	19.7	11.7	17.8	36.2	9.9	N/A	8	16.4
DHS report :2008-9 :Age 25-49	20	7.2	15.2	33.3	7.8	N/A	7.5	13.3

(Continued)Table 2: Age at first Marriage and Polygyny Prevalence for women in Tanzania, Mali, Ghana and Kenya, Data from the DHS reports

Countries and Year	Median age at First Marriage for women	Polygyny Prevalence for women age 15-49						
		urban	rural	No education	Primary education	Secondary education	Higher than secondary education	total
Mali								
DHS report :1987: Age15-49	15.7	37.4	47.7	46.4	37.3	32	n/a	45.1
DHS report :1995-96:Age15-45	16	36	47.2	45.6	39.2	n/a	31.6	44.3
DHS report :2001	16.5	33.4	45.3	43.8	38.8	n/a	25(Secondary and more)	40.3
DHS report :2006 :age 20-49	16.6	26.7	44.8	42.2	30.3	n/a	18(Secondary and more)	39.2

Table 3: Age at first marriage and Polygyny Prevalence for men in Ghana, Mali, Tanzania and Kenya.

Countries and Year	Age at First Marriage for men	Polygyny Prevalence for men age 15-49						
		urban	rural	No education	Primary education	Secondary Education	Higher than secondary education	total
Tanzania								
DHS report year 1991-2	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
DHS report year 1996: Age 25-59	24.7	12.7	15.4	20	17.1(incomplete) 12.5(Completed)	N/A	N/A	15
DHS report year 2004:Age 25-49	24.2	2.8	12.1	11.7	9.6	6.1(Secondary+)	N/A	10
DHS report year 2010:Age 25-49	24.3	7.6	10.4	12	9.9	N/A	8.1	9.7
Ghana						(Medium/JSS)		
DHS report year 1993:Age30-59	25.5	7.6	18.4	25	9.2	13.3	6.7	14.8
DHS report year 1998: Age 30-59	25.6	6.6	15.6	21.9	16.6	10.9	5.8	13
DHS report year 2003:Age 25-59	24.8	8.1	15.9	28			6.5	12.8
DHS report year 2008	N/A	4.1	12.2	18.7	11.3	6.1	3.9	8.8

(Continued) Table 3: Age at first marriage and Polygyny Prevalence for men in Ghana, Mali, Tanzania and Kenya.

Countries and Year	Age at First Marriage for men	Polygyny Prevalence for men age 15-49						
		urban	rural	No education	Primary education	Secondary Education	Higher than secondary education	total
Kenya								
DHS report year 1993	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
DHS report year 1998 :Age 25-54	24.8	6.7	11	20.6	9.6	N/A	7.6(Secondary+)	9.8
DHS report year 2003:Age 30-54	25.1	7.6	10.6	29.5	8.1	N/A	6	9.8
DHS report year 2008-09:Age 30-54	25.1	3.5	8.4	25.4	7.6	N/A	4.1	7.4(age 15-54)
Mali								
DHS report :1987:	N/A	17.1	27.4	27.3	18.2	9.7(secondary and more)		24.6
DHS report :1995-96:Age 30-59	25.8	23.2	28.8	30	18.2	20.0 (secondary and more)		27.3
DHS report :2001	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A		N/A
DHS report :2006:Age 30-59	25.8	22.1	26.5	26.7	24.3	18.1(secondary and more)		27.9

Table 4: Median Age at first marriage among women in Nigeria by age groups

Year Of Survey	Current Age						Women Age 20-49	Women Age 25-49
	20-24	25-29	30-34	35-39	40-44	45-49		
1990	17.8	17.2	16.3	17.3	16.8	17.3	17.1	16.9
1999	19.6	18.6	17.7	17.6	17.2	18.1	18.3	17.9
2003	19.1	18.5	16.5	16.0	15.7	15.5	17.2	16.6
2008	19.8	19.3	18.4	18.2	17.5	17.3	18.6	18.3