

## **Types of Marriages and their Counselling in Bikita**

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### **Abstract**

*The types of marriage in Shona society before missionary influence as examined in this paper were: serial polygamy, polyandry, sororal polygamy, fraternal polygamy, and monogamy. The early missionaries, with all good intentions, brought a marriage template to the Shona people of Bikita that consisted of just two marriage categories: monogamy and polygamy. The latter was condemned as non-Christian and one of the early moral endeavours of the Church was to rid society of polygamy. Marriage in every society has existed as an inevitable institution for the purpose of the continuation of clans. In this paper the author examines the types of marriages that were common in Bikita district. Perhaps, unlike in other cultures, marriage in this district is more complex than is generally believed. While marriage has been serialised as being monogamous, polygamous, and other sub marital arrangements, it has hardly been questioned as to what led to such marriage arrangements. Polygamy in this paper is not taken as mere concupiscence of the flesh, but as a cultural and religious obligation for the Shona people of Bikita. The research design used in this paper is qualitative and inclusive of many views on marriage, its definition, process, and purpose in the community. To get the views of respondents, the interview method was used in addition to observation by the author. It was found that both the process as well as the marriage itself in Bikita was quite complex and took several shades. Marriage counselling therefore requires sensitivity to these differences.*

**Keywords:** Monogamy, Polygamy, Fraternal Polygamy, Paternal Polygamy, Religious Polygamy

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## **1.0 Introduction**

This paper examines the concept of marriage among the Shona people of Bikita district. It focuses on monogamous and polygamous unions and how they can influence marriage counselling. Bikita District is in the Province of Masvingo. It lies 100 km east of Masvingo along the Mutare –Masvingo Road. It is bounded by Zaka in the South, Manicaland in the East, and Gutu in North. The people of this district are mostly Shona under the paramountcy of Chief Mukanganwi of the Duma Clan. His sub chiefs are Charamba (now, 2022, headed by Rtd. Brigadier E.Rugeje), Mazungunye, Marozva, and Ziki. The History of the phenomenology of marriage in human development has not been as straight forward as it is claimed to be. The Church which, in many ways, was the custodian of the norms of marriage came up with two types of marriages; Monogamy and Polygamy. It was not until the 15<sup>th</sup> century that the same church and civil authorities had to contend with the reality of more than just two types of marriages.

### **1.1 Research questions**

What type of marriages exist in Bikita District?

Why were these practiced among the Shona of Bikita District?

What counselling methods can be used with these types of marriage?

## **2.0 Review of related literature**

The question of the existence of polygamy should be taken in terms of its dominance in a particular culture. Polygamy was placed under the binary 'monogamy and polygamy' framework as eliciting moral views that opposed each other. Later, the other types were considered as forms of marriage, although not accepted by the mainstream Christian Church. To understand the types of marriages discussed in this research, a review of literature on each type has been found necessary. These are presented and discussed in the following sections.

### **2.1 Monogamy**

This is a form of marriage accepted as one man marrying one woman at a time and the two stay together. In the description of preparations for marriage, Gelfand (1979) speaks of marriage between a boy and a girl which clearly shows that among the Shona people the concept of "monogamism" was the expected relationship between

husband and wife. This in Zimbabwe is generally considered a recognised marriage between a man and a woman.

The term monogamy in modern parlance refers to a registered marriage. This means a man and a woman make this kind of marriage as sanctioned by the law. This type of marriage in Zimbabwe was governed by chapter 37 of the Marriage Act of Zimbabwe. In terms of this act a wife or husband cannot contract another marriage. The missionaries who evangelized Africa recognized two types of marriages; the civil marriage which falls under civil marriage and the traditional marriage which was arranged by traditional leaders in villages. Civil marriage was predicated on the concept of one man one wife. The traditional marriage system did acknowledge this idea of one man one wife but a man who married more than one wife was not considered at tangent with the laws of the country. The church which was western in outlook preferred the idea of one man one wife.

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When the missionaries came to Zimbabwe, their message regarding marriage was clear each convert to the Christian religion was obliged to take one wife (Bourdillon 1998:196). At times the missionaries 'unmarried' people. If a man had two or more wives and he wanted to be a Christian, he was obliged to send the other wives away and remain with one. This created orphans and the missionaries started orphanages which gradually were filled up thereby creating social problems. In Zimbabwe every mission had an orphanage with children whose mothers had been sent away to allow the father to be a Christian. In African culture, when girls got married, they needed counselling from their aunts (*vanatete*), and boys needed advice from their uncles (*vanasekuru*). This became difficult to carry out within the mission orphanages. This was not out of ignorance of the importance of marriage, but out of zeal to convert. The importance of African marriage is outlined by a lay missionary. Aldwinckle, as early as 1965 says

“We have felt throughout all the years how important marriage is in the life of the African, and that unless we succeed to Christianize Marriages, will be in vain,” (*African Ecclesiastical Review* July; 1962 in *Guti*, 1965:20).

Here is an outline of what the priority in conversion was, and at times at the expense of African culture. The people of Bikita experienced this new demand and those who

tried to adhere to it did so for material gains; the children had access to education, when they became teachers, they had a nice house at the mission. Any convert who deviated from this teaching lost all the benefits that went with it. It was believed that many Shona would not accept this especially when there was no hope for divorce in case of not having children (Bourdillon 1998:196). The motive for a polygamous marriage was, therefore, to have more children, and more children meant more hands to work in the fields.

The new doctrine was not always accepted by the new states in Africa. Most states championed the rights of women but indirectly accepted the idea of Polygamy (Mwambene 2017:2). Polygamy has been observed among leaders in African States: in Kenya Akuku had 100 wives, a Kenyan President had two wives, King Mswati of Swaziland had 14 wives, Jacob Zuma had at least 3 wives. And some leaders like Omar Al Hassan of Sudan were known to champion polygamy (Mwambene 2017:6). Kuhn (2011) observes that polygamy had legal status in countries like Chad, Gabbon, Niger, Sudan, Tanzania and Zambia. In some of these countries' religious affiliation for example to Islam has sanctioned the existence of this marriage type. Religious Polygamous leaders like Samuel Mutendi, Joram Johnane Marange of the Apostolic Faith in Zimbabwe had 16 wives (Mwambene 2017 :8). These found more followers because they allowed this type of marriage more related to their African cultural traditions than did monogamy. Catholic Bethlehem missionaries (SMB) who evangelised most of Bikita district found it very difficulties to fight against the odds and ends of indigenous religious groups that allowed polygamy.

## **2.2 Polyandry**

Polyandry, found in many Asian communities is whereby a woman is married to more than one man was found in Bikita, but this was not respected by the local people because it was not considered a marriage but what they called "*mapoto*" where no lobola was paid. It was cohabitation. The woman could leave any time. The main objective of this marriage was to maintain land and property within the family. Polyandry is common among the Todas and Khasas in India. One could say polyandry is not really a type of marriage in Bikita.

Loosely speaking, each time people think of polygamy, especially those in the west, they imagined licentious African whose sexual appetite could not be satisfied by one woman. This has been an oversimplification of this type of marriage. “Strictly speaking Polygamy means more than once, thus, if a man married, and his wife dies and he marries again, this is called polygamy in the strict meaning of the term” (Lamburn,1975:89). Lamburn (1975) is of the opinion that the concept of polygamy at times has been overstated by missionaries. The missionaries moralised polygamy and connected it to faith adherence, therefore if a man had more than one wife, he had to send the other ones away in order for him to be baptised. Polygamy was taken as an impediment to becoming a baptised Christian because it was considered one of worst evils in Africa. Writing about polygamy and its evil Fr Mareconnes S.J said,

“An obstacle even more difficult to surmount  
might lead the missionary to despair, if he had not  
a boundless confidence in the all-powerful grace of him who send him  
Polygamy is practised universally and it appears difficult to eradicate”.

(Mareconnes, *Zambezi Mission Record* 1890:31)

Such evil would be removed by creating a one man one wife situation and this meant a man had to get rid of one of his wives. Fr Mareconnes goes on to say “In his multitude of wives the Kiffir sees the source of riches, it is defined as a “condition or practice of having more than one wife at one time.” In Zoology, it is “a mating pattern in which a male mates and lives with more than one female mate.” ([www.thefreedictionary.com/Polygyny](http://www.thefreedictionary.com/Polygyny)). It seems the word is similar to polygamy which means a person has more than one mate at a time. In some countries it is either a woman or a man who practiced this type of marriage. In some cultures, it was the man who was allowed to have as many wives as he could afford to support them. Under this type of marriage was also sororal polygamy, meaning marriage to a sister of the wife. The eldest sister got married to a very rich man and she would like to share the riches and the comfortable life with her sisters. The elder sister tried to get the girl married to her husband. It was not merely the sexual avid of the man but the influence of the wife, and so society did not frown about it or rehearse the moral implications in this marriage. The Christians with the idea of one man one wife condemned this type of marriage.

### **2.3 Religious Polygamy**

This is a marriage that was polygamous, but the women did not come from the same family. Sometimes this was based on religious affiliations. A man stated that he dreamt marrying a woman in the religious congregation and the woman takes it as a directive from the spirit or divine intervention and had no choice but to accept the marriage. This type of marriage was common in Bikita among the people of the apostolic faith. The wife was generally younger than the man but she believed the lord or spirits of the ancestors had given her to the man through a dream.

When the missionaries came, they established education centres especially teacher training institutions. They trained their own personnel to teach in their primary schools. These teachers were Christians and it was understood they would adhere to the teaching of *one man one wife for life*. Any teacher who married a second wife was removed from teaching. A teacher was a respected person in the village and his name was 'teacher'. It was, therefore clear that polygamy was for non-Christians. Bourdillion, (1976) mistakenly states that polygamous marriages have not been common under the heavy hand of the Church and he is writing for the satisfaction of Missionaries. He was looking at the Christian population in which conversion had taken place and not at the wider community. He looks at polygamy from a moral standpoint rather than from a social responsibility the individual had towards the dead and the living.

In 1969 the Rhodesian Government took over mission schools and did not have regulations against polygamy so the teachers found themselves marrying more than one wife. This became a type of marriage based on their wealth and image as a teacher. It was noticeable that some polygamous marriages were those of former Christian teachers. It is for this reason that it is said polygamy is not a simple behaviour but a system based on multiple reasons some of which are religious, social and political. It is straight forward polygamy and not sororal or non-sororal. At times it became sororal when a teacher married his sister in law he had sent to school it was, and is still widely accepted in Bikita.

Sororal polygamy was at times based on the sudden death of the wife and the in laws found it obligatory to give the man a younger woman to replace the wife. This

was *chimutsamapfihwa*. It was sororal polygamy of one kind and not one based on concupiscence of the flesh.

#### **2.4 Sororal Polygamy**

This type of polygamy could be called replacement of a dead wife as already indicated in this reflection. Among the Shona people, once a marriage is transacted, there is a permanent relationship between the family of the husband and that of his wife. It was believed that not even death could break the chains of this relationship. When a wife died her family felt obliged to find a replacement with no payment of lobola or other marriage transactions. Usually, it is the sister of the dead woman that replaces her elder sister. This in a way is sororal polygamy or serial polygamy, one feels more at home calling it sororal polygamy since it involves the sister of a dead woman belonging to the family. Since this involves a man, it was called fraternal polyandry because the man had his wife or wives already. In the Latin language *frateli* means brother hence brotherly marriage.

#### **2.5 Non fraternal Polyandry Marriage**

This is a type of marriage in which a woman marries many husbands which are not in any way related. This type of marriage is found mostly in the India, parts of Africa and the Himalayas. In India a woman can marry more than one husband. This type of marriage is not found in Bikita because of cultural reasons where lobola comes from the man and the prerogative of asking for marriage lies with the man and not the woman. These are types of marriages that existed among the Shona people in Bikita.

This the type of a polygamous marriage is entered into by taking a wife any time from society. Generally, the wife is younger than the husband. It is usually common among members of indigenous religions. Today it is still there, but young women now tend to reject it so the number of marriages in this area seem to be generally on the decrease.

Another factor that has affected the number of polygamous marriages in Bikita is health. Bikita has three hospitals and 18 health centres, and these have created an awareness of Aids as coming from multiple marriages and people have paid heed to the message and therefore the number of polygamous marriages has decreased. In the past it was an honour to be married in a polygamous family especially when a

person was well to do, but today it is considered risky behaviour. This has changed its social status to one of doubt and some women avoid taking the risk.

## **2.6 Education and Polygamy**

Polygamy has found disfavour among the young, educated Zimbabweans who feel that sharing a husband is socially unacceptable, and as a result the number of polygamous marriages has decreased. This also comes from the fact that these young people have embraced the Christian religion which rejects polygamy. It is cursorily noticed that legal polygamy now seems to be the practice of the less educated. There is a form of polygamy making the rounds in recent times that seems hidden from mainstream society. It is given names such as “small house.” Traditionally, polygamy was a way of expanding one’s land use because each one added meant extra land for the family. Today the money economy may see this type of marriage as an added liability and not an added asset. Below is the methodology used in this paper.

## **3.0 Methodology**

Methodology in research is related to the philosophical underpinnings of the study. Methodology is an approach used by the researcher to find a solution to problems concerned with the research (Kotthari 2003). This is called a paradigm, and in this study the paradigm was the qualitative approach which has been chosen because of its inclusive nature. At least all the people interviewed, and their views are considered. Creswell (2003) does not believe that a methodology is a solution to the problem in the research, but an analysis of the methods used in research. A methodology assists in the analysis of data gathered using various techniques. In other words, it is not a method of doing research but a way of analysing what was obtained using a method. The methodology controls the methods to be used. In this study data was collected through interviews (methods) this was then analysed using a qualitative paradigm (methodology).

In order to get the practice of various types of marriages in Bikita, some families were interviewed. The interview was meant to find out the merits and demerits of polygamy in traditional society. To find out what really lead to polygamy in Shona society. Is it a sexual desire or a responsibility? The answers to the questions needed a

questionnaire method and the analysis there entailed the methodology. One of the techniques used was the interview.

One of the people interviewed was chief Chabata who had experienced polygamy on personal level. And the views he gave on how one gets involved shows also his appreciation of the underlying factors in polygamy. To him polygamy was the result of one's riches and wives were given in exchange for material gains. The richer one was, the greater chances one had to be polygamous. Chief Chabata indicated that it was not without its advantages. All the riches of the polygamous family belonged to the husband. If a young man from another wife got married, the husband had the right to take animals paid in lobola even from the other wife's daughters. None of the wives from the polygamous marriage questioned the rationale of this.

#### **4.0 Findings and discussion on various types of marriages in Bikita.**

The husband was in most cases the one who went to the in-laws to say, "in my house the fire has been extinguished I need it to be relit." (Interview with Mr Chabata, Chief in Village 27, June 2020). The in-laws then provided a replacement. As already indicated marriage among the Shona people in the past was a permanent relationship and this was true when one of the partners passed on. If a husband passed on, one of the relatives was culturally expected to marry the woman left behind (*kugara nhaka*). The man would beget children with the inherited woman.

#### **4.1 Monogamy and Polygamy.**

Of the ten families that were interviewed the phenomenology of monogamy and polygamy is discussed as follows.

In Bikita, a woman has not power over the land, so this type of marriage was found non-existent (0%). Respondents spoke of another type of marriage in society called serial monogamy. It is more of a friendship than a permanent commitment to one another. This was not found among the Shona people of Bikita. For them anyone who practiced this type of marriage was not married because it was considered cheating. In Bikita monogamous marriage was the most common. It was observed in this study that today this type of marriage accounts for 50% of marriages considered under monogamy (Figure 1).

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**Table 1. Types of Monogamy**

<b>Monogamy</b>	
Straight monogamy	<b>5 (50%)</b>
Serial monogamy	3 (30%)
Non-Serial monogamy	<b>2 (20%)</b>
	<b>10 (100%)</b>

**Table 2. Types of polygamy as found in 10 families**

**Polygamy**

Straight Polygamy	2 (20%)
Polyandry	0 (0%)
Sororal Polygamy	3 (30%)
Non-sororal	0 (0%)
Fraternal Polygamy	3 (30%)
Non-fraternal Polyandry	2 (20%)
	<b>10 (100%)</b>

The generally expected marriage in Bikita is monogamy shown in Table 1. As can be seen in Table 2, polygamy is a generic term that includes various types of marriages involving more than two people. It is difficult to think of polygamy as a system that merely involves multi-partners. Polygamy in Shona tradition was based on the responsibility of the man towards the woman and the entire clan.

**4.2 Implications on Counselling and Counselling Methods**

**4.2.1 Milan model of marriage counselling**

The Milan Model of marriage Counselling does not cater for polygamous marriages. It is based on the presumption that a family consists of a husband and wife, and not husbands and wives. The model at times is or was used outside its parameters of

cultural values. It says that there is no one culture, no one worldview or reality, and no one 'correct' model of psychology. This presumes the user (counsellor) is aware of this concept of *epoche* but often the counsellor may use the method indiscriminately. It is a model that needs to be used relative to the culture and types of marriage among the people. Becvar & Becvar who are prominent supporters of the model say that it should be born in mind that the underlying propositions of the culture in which one has been socialised have a fundamental influence on one's view of reality, on one's thought processes, perceptions, and intellectual functioning. In other words, to write a truly meaningful critical evaluation of the Milan approach to family therapy, it is not possible to stand outside the theory and merely observe (Becvar & Becvar 1998: 63).

Polygamous marriage is a culture and as such it needs its own method related to its "cultureness". The challenge in Bikita is that regardless of the origins of the type of a polygamous marriage, it is difficult to apply the conventional methods of marriage counselling.

Probably one of the family and marriage system on which marriage counselling is predicated is the Bowenian family therapy (1982).

Bowen sees the family system and for that matter family marriage as "an approach to counselling which looks at the problem a client is having as a symptom of dysfunction in the entire family" (Bowen 1982)

In a polygamous family there are as many individuals as there are wives and children and the counsellor finds it very difficult to deal with each case separately. In Bikita how does one counsel a religious leader who has seventeen wives?

The method presumes that in marriage the family members have been interacting with each other. This is not so in a polygamous family where at times families don't even stay together.

Marriage counselling as brought to the Shona people by missionaries included divorce counselling. This aspect involved the separation of husband and wife. Traditionally this was done through consultation with aunts and uncles who had negotiated the marriage procedures. One to one counselling was not put into consideration. After divorce, one of the couples could get married into a serial polygamous system and no counselling was needed.

The process of marriage counselling is an attempt to assist couples to deal with those aspects of their lives that might have been lost in a marital conflict. Polygamy may need a separate approach. It appears that when methods of marriage

counselling were designed and considered, they were meant for people who were involved in monogamous marriages or one on one relationships. Generally, models of marriage counselling are designed predicated on monogamous marriages.

In Bikita, in some cases this western based approach has not always worked because the polygamous marriage involves more than one wife. It was rare to see the husband with problems with one wife and not with the other. If the wives had problems with the husband, the problems were different and needed different methods of counselling. Each wife was found to be a culture on her own because the aunts had counselled her differently. Traditionally the wives were counselled by their aunts who used different approaches. The professional counsellor used models that were not relevant to the culture. If these women referred their Marital problems to the aunts, then it became difficult for these aunts to give the same counselling to all the women involved. If there were five women, it meant five different family backgrounds and the professional counsellor found it difficult to carry out marriage counselling in such a situation.

This problem was experienced in dealing with sororal type of marriages, where a man married a young sister of his wife, and the marriage was polygamous. The younger wife in some cases indicated sexual dysfunction from the husband and she needed some counselling, but the elder wife did not see any problem and the professional counsellor found it difficult to carry on some counselling and the only method that seemed to work was the traditional one where the young wife had to go back to traditional counselling.

In some cases, a young man married his father's wife, and she became problematic then there was counselling needed which the professional could not do.

One cannot over emphasize problems of marriage counselling coming from polygamous marriages in Bikita. Out of the 10 married people interviewed 50% were monogamous. This suggested that the professional counsellor could carry out some counselling but needed cultural competency and exercise bracketing their own methods and cultural views.

## **5.0 Conclusion**

For one to condescendingly call people polygamous is incorrect because this marriage phenomenon is more complex than the Christians and Sociologists generally see. One needs to look at the rationale for such type of marriages to come up with a marriage counselling template to people with a different culture. With all the good intentions of missionaries and colonial administrators the idea of bringing a marriage template to different cultures has been at times tragic. Defining polygamy as a mere collection of many wives could be a gross misunderstanding of the people's cultures. Polygamy is not out of mere licentiousness. It is a cultural, ethical, and traditional religious value system that people at times feel obligated to fulfil. Among the Shona people of Bikita, if a man does not take his dead brother's wife to himself, then he is considered negligent of his duties of progeny to the deceased and clan spirits. A chief is expected to have more wives because this shows his powers and ability to enlarge his jurisdiction. Even leaders of some churches are expected to have two or more wives to expand their domains or even popularity.

Probably there has been some definitional difficulties between morality and cultural values, therefore polygamy has been taken to be grossly immoral and taken off tangent of the social and cultural requirement. Today polygamy is more of a liability than an asset owing to changing socio economic patterns.

## **6.0 Recommendations**

After this reflection a few observations come to light. It is hoped that some methods and methodology of counselling people in polygamy of whatever type could be designed.

1. There is need to look at how to counsel people in polygamous marriages. The counsellor needs to be aware that each wife in a polygamous marriage is culture and should be counselled on an individual basis. The woman comes with her own culture and the Bowenian concept of high and low differentiation needs to be taken seriously (Bowen 1982). This woman may still have strong ties with her family of origin.
2. There is need to redefine polygamy in relation to how it is taken by the local people. Polygamy, especially fraternal, paternal and sororal polygamy are not merely licentious actions but responsibilities a person accepts over a woman.

When a man takes over his father or brother's wife for a wife, it means full responsibility on their behalf and that of the community. It is essential that the counsellor exercise some "epoche" and looks at the local culture. The practice of sending away of other wives to become Christian, did not always work, because men still proceeded to bear children with those women because lobola had been paid. The professional counsellor needs to put this into consideration.

3. Marriage counselling must recognise that polygamy is not a mere desire to fulfil the concupiscence of the flesh, but a responsibility towards the dead relative and the clan without ignoring contemporary economic situations. Moralising the issues raised during counselling could only make the woman guilty thereby complicating the counselling process.
4. Marriage counselling must include the distinctive historical roots, which require unique skills, and special training. Here one should know what type of polygamy one is dealing with to understand the client's issues.

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