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## The Social Demographics and the Factors that Motivate Polygamous Marriages among the Tugen Community in Baringo County, Kenya

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### **Abstract:**

*When the first Christian missionaries arrived in Africa in the nineteenth century, they found little to praise and much to condemn. Various forms of marriage were practised among the Tugen. For instance, polygamy was seen as the most honourable form of marriage, although monogamy was still valued. Polygamy was mainly practised in order to have more children, prestige, wealth, and as a source of labour in the family. This paper examines the socio-demographic characteristics of the Tugen and the factors that motivate the practice of polygamy among the Tugen men. The study sought to find out how the teaching of the AIC affect the polygamous converts in the light of biblical teachings. The research adopted both historical and descriptive survey methods so as to explore the issue at hand in a biblical context. Data from the field was collected through interviews and self-administered questionnaires. However, random sampling was put into use when selecting the sample respondents. This was necessary so as to minimize bias and to give each sample respondent in the strata an equal chance. Data from the field therefore, were presented in percentages and put in tables and figures. The study's main finding was that the motive behind polygamy among the Tugen was the desire to have more sons than daughters and the possibility of increasing the labour force in the family. Economic reasons account mainly to explain the institution, for wives may perform productive labour, share in the tasks of maintaining a large household and serve as visible evidence of acquired wealth. The majority of the polygamous husbands had married two wives before they became Christians, while a few had married three wives.*

**Keywords:** Social demographics, factors, motivate polygamous marriages, Tugen community, Baringo county, Kenya

### **1. Introduction**

Polygamy was an honoured marital institution before and even since the advent of Christianity among the Tugen. The practice was embedded in Tugen culture and was accept as a normal and legitimate marital status in the society. The reasons for the practice of polygamy among the traditional Tugen are considered in this paper. Although there are many reasons, which might be named, the factors can be categorized into four main groups, namely social, political, economics and religious factors.

#### *1.1. Social Factors*

Social factors in Tugen society were very important. The higher mortality rate in the male population and chronological age gap between males and females at the time of marriage were possible causes of polygamy. "Men marry relatively late in life, while women marry relatively early.

This age difference or discrepancy, more than anything else, provides an adequate 'pool' of marriageable females" (Poulla, 1985). Moreover, it may be assumed that the percentage of women in the society was higher than that of men, and the acquisition of more wives helped in eradicating prostitution (ibid. p. 91). Various social mechanisms and traditional practices were at work in determining the marriage ability of men and women in a society.

The traditional Tugen cultural system provided social control to enable the younger men to behave themselves, work hard, and manifest a sense of responsibility before they could hope to obtain a wife and full acceptance into the adult community. Social control also implied various systems of sexual regulation.

The early age of the girls' betrothal and marriage is often due to traditional systems of sexual control as well as to the conventional sense of propriety, especially where an unwed mother is a disgrace to her family, and an illegitimate child is a threat to family harmony when questions of inheritance arise (Obler, 1985).

Because the village was a commune of people who cared for each other, worked together and aspired together, marriage among the traditional Tugen was not merely a personal matter between two individuals. It was always to be a mutually rewarding socio-economic affair with important implications for the whole community. Thus, the parents might wish to form marriage alliances with "good families".

Polygamy has been thought to be a restrainer to promiscuous sexual behaviour. The custom with regards to virginity was strict. If a

girl became pregnant and the man who made her pregnant declined to marry her, she was unlikely to marry a bachelor even if he was willing to marry her. Hence a married person who came along and proposed to marry such an unwed mother might be readily allowed to take her as a second or a third wife, as the case might be.

A married man or woman was not supposed to engage in sexual intercourse with any person outside marriage. The wife or wives enjoyed the sole right to coital relations with the husband. Through the marriage ceremony a man acquired the sole right to sexual intercourse with the woman or women he wedded. The traditional Tugen believed that if a married woman engaged in sexual relations with another man other than the husband, she might die during child birth, unless she confessed about those who have had sexual relations with her.

Childlessness was often a reason for taking a second or third wife, as the case might be. There was a deep desire to have children. The greatest tragedy that could befall a family was barrenness. The Tugen woman saw her own self-fulfilment through child bearing, for children were considered "the glory of marriage". The man, on the other hand, saw children especially male children, as those who would perpetuate his name and be his heirs. In most cases, women would see barrenness as a curse upon them from the gods. In order to save herself from shame and the people's slander, a childless woman would welcome a second wife for her husband so that the second wife may bear children, as was the case of Sarah and Hagar in the Bible. The idea of adoption was not popular among the traditional Tugen beliefs. Even if he understood what it meant, he would still prefer to have a child of his own blood.

The Tugen man viewed divorce as a great insult to the relatives concerned. In order not to sever a link that had been established with another clan or family, a husband might decide to augment his barren wife with another woman from a different clan or family without having to undergo the pains of divorce. The other alternative to polygamy was the divorce of the barren wife by the husband. Such a wife would start living on her own and use other means such as either adoption or woman-woman marriage to acquire children. The traditional Tugen people allowed a childless woman to "marry" a young woman so that she could bear children for the barren wife by different men. These actions were taken secretly, but with the knowledge of the "marrying" woman (Hastings, 1973).

Compared with the above alternative, polygamy, provided better protection for childless women and handicapped girls who might otherwise get no husband at all (ibid. p. 53). It was considered socially prestigious to have more than one wife, and monogamy seemed unattractive to traditional Tugen men. A polygamous man by his wealth, usually symbolized in livestock, showed how reliable, hardworking, and sober he was and how responsible he was as a husband. In this respect, he was in a more favourable position to attract multiple wives than a monogamous man who was considered poor and unable to provide for his family. The bride wealth paid by a man to the parents or guardians of his bride was not only intended to be a support to the permanence of marriage and compensation to the family which gave away a member, but it was also a pledge of a man's ability to provide adequately for his wife and children. "This payment signifies, among other things, a man's willingness and ability to help his in-laws; and it shows that he loves his prospective wife more than his hard-earned possessions (Bohannon, 1968). It was a taboo among the traditional Tugen society for an unmarried woman to flirt with men.

Adultery was condemned as a grievous sin against the earth goddess. The Tugen, therefore, practised abstinence. Even within the marriage it was a custom to practise abstinence during the whole period of lactation, which could extend up to two years. During this time, the man had no access to his wife for sexual intercourse. Thus, it became necessary for a man to have another wife in order to satisfy his sexual desire during this period. According to this custom, then, there was a great incentive towards a plurality of wives. Whatever the arguments, whether pro or con, it can be clearly seen and agreed upon that the traditional Tugen social structure contained many strong reasons for polygamy (Obwa, 1973).

### *1.2. Political Factors*

Every family was expected to be able to protect its own interests, including the protection of the family from outside attack. To do this effectively and to command the respect of the tribe, it was necessary for every family to have a number of male children who could be called up-on for military purposes in times of crisis and alien aggression. Thus, a man would need to marry many wives, who would be able to give birth to many sons. This is even more of a necessity when the first wife only gives birth to females, or when she is barren.

The qualification for status of holding office in Tugen clans was based on the numerical strength of the family. It was held that if a man could control and manage effectively the affairs of a large family, he had excellent evidence that he would be able to care for the interests of the all village; the members of which he would treat with fatherly love and respect, as though all were part of his own family. Therefore, to qualify as a village head, a man would need to establish his authority according to the number of wives and children he had. Maintenance of law and order were in the hands of the age-graders (segments of the population which are of approximately the same age or are within a specified range of ages) and in the hands of different associations. The greater the number of males in the village, the easier it became for division of labour among the age-grades and associations. Since their load of labour had been made lighter, the village would be more easily and effectively controlled. Bands of young men would protect the village girls from potential unruly rapists from neighbouring villages.

According to Obwa:

These women could not be sexually assaulted by other young men from another clan. It is interesting to note in passing that a young girl's virginity was carefully guarded, since to lose virginity meant a disgrace to the whole family, especially the grand-mother and the brothers of the girl (AIC By-Law, 1981).

### *1.3. Economic Factors*

The need to expand one's labour force for the vocation of farming was another factor that led to polygamy. The more wives a man had,

the more children he would have, and the bigger farm and labour force he would be able to command. A man's success in business and in other economic pursuits depended largely on the number of wives and children he had. The wives and children would carry the man's produce to market, where the goods were sold, and they also traveled to neighbouring towns and villages to negotiate for foreign goods which would be marketable at the home base. Multiple wives provided more hands in gathering food and doing household chores, and thus provided more freedom for each other collectively. In some cases, it was the first wife who would persuade the husband to marry a second wife, for the second wife would help the first in household affairs, as well as helping to find riches for the family.

Unlike the Western world, where all kinds of insurance and welfare programs abound for the aged, the world of the traditional Tugen had only one way of providing for its aged people: through their children. A common saying among the Tugen is "*Lakwet ne ribei sigikiik komie kotun koribei ak ine lagokjik*". This means that a child who takes care of his parents will also be taken care of by his children. Thus children, especially sons, were needed to support their parents in the latter age. When parents grew old, their children would house and feed them. Their children would take care of the parents until they die. In this sense, a polygamous man with many children stood a better chance of finding out support in old age than a monogamous man who might have fewer children.

#### 1.4. Religious Factors

Religion governed almost every aspect of the traditional Tugen man's life. Religion was important to him in life and in death. When a man died, especially an elderly person who would become an ancestral spirit, it was required that he be given a grand burial so that he would be welcomed into the land of the spirits as a man who had lived a good life on earth. Such prestigious burials required wives, children and other relatives who would mourn and wail at his grave. Moreover, if the man had many sons-in-law, they would contribute money, clothes, wine, and other burial requirements to perform rituals at his graveside. A man who was well buried and had become a good ancestral spirit was sure to reincarnate into many children in the family. This belief prevailed not only in the traditional Tugen society, but also in other sub-tribes in Kalenjin tribe of the Rift Valley Province of Kenya.

It can be seen, therefore, that the polygamous system of marriage as a whole was at the heart of the social, political, economic and religious life of the traditional Tugen people. It asserted a continual range of moral responsibilities towards both the next of kin and many other people. It promoted happiness, as well as sound order, emotional release, and security, and provided for the education of the young and the maintenance of the elderly.

## 2. Materials and Methods

The historical method and descriptive survey method were used in the study. The historical method was used as the scholarly approach to the study of polygamy, especially in a biblical context. Historical method was used to obtain data on polygamy in Old and New Testaments of the Holy Bible. The descriptive survey method was used to study the impact of polygamy among the Tugen of Baringo County. For this method data was generated using survey questionnaires and interviews.

Primary data from the field was collected using the descriptive survey method. The survey was not based on census but on a representative sample. This method was used for studying the polygamous converts within AIC. Data from the respondents was collected through interviews with key informants and self-administered questionnaires.

Respondents included the AIC pastors, AIM missionaries, polygamous converts, first wives of the polygamous converts and abandoned wives of the polygamous converts. These various groups were considered to be aware of the prevailing conditions in the AIC and they are also supposed to know the doctrinal position of their denomination regarding polygamy.

The author visited various libraries to find documented materials relevant to the area of the research. University libraries included those of Moi, Kenyatta and Nairobi universities. Other libraries included those of various colleges and institutions of higher learning such as Pastoral Institute (GABA), Daystar University, Catholic University, Nairobi Evangelical Graduate School of Theology, Nairobi International School of Theology, Pan Africa Christian College and the National archives in Nairobi.

The survey instruments used were self-administered questionnaires which were also modified for use in oral interviews. The key informants comprised mainly the AIC pastors, AIM missionaries, polygamous converts, first wives of the polygamous converts, and abandoned wives of polygamous converts. The Africa Inland Church, Kenya has a structure of councils as follows:

1. Central Church Council
2. Regional Church Council
3. District Church Council
4. Branch Church Council

In Baringo County, there is one Regional Church Council which is divided into five District Church Councils as follows:

1. North Baringo District Church Council
2. Kerio District Church Council
3. Kabarnet District Church Council
4. Tenges District Church Council
5. East Baringo District Church Council (The Africa Inland Church By-Laws, 1981).

In every District Church Council there were six branch church council member Churches, with each branch being made up of ten local churches. The average number of the church members in each local church was forty. The researcher managed to contact four out of five District Church Councils as follows:

1. North Baringo District Church Council

2. Kabarnet District Church Council
3. Tenges District Church Council
4. East Baringo District Church Council

The author contacted the Pastors of the four District Church Councils in their offices to give the list of local churches. The visits to the relevant district church council offices were done mainly on Sundays. The list of two hundred and forty local churches was collected. Letters were sent to seventy-two (72) local churches to give the list of polygamous converts. This represented 30% of the two hundred and forty local churches. All the lists were received. The questionnaires were prepared in English language and translated into Tugen Language. Those who could read were sent the questionnaires and the views of those who could not read were collected through interviews.

The total number of members in the selected churches was 2551. According to Krecjie and Morgan (1990), the sample size to represent such a target population is 218. The target population was distributed under the five groups mentioned above. In selecting members for the sample size, the author worked out the percentage in the selected churches and included a proportionate number so as to make the sample as representative as possible.

This necessitated getting a list of all the elements in the target population which was not easy. Random numbers were then used to select sample elements. This helped to minimize bias from the sampling frame and gave each element in the strata an equal chance of being selected into the sample. However, a problem arose in that some of those selected did not regularly attend the church services and so necessitated a fresh selection of elements. In some instance, the list of membership given was an old one and some of the members no longer attended the particular churches. For this reason, new elements had to be selected.

### 3. Results and Discussion

#### 3.1. Demographic Analysis

Table 1 below documents the demographic characteristics of the respondents of the study.

Age and gender	No. of people contacted	No. of respondents	% of respondents
Up to 40 years			
a) Males	40	35	19% }
b) Females	55	51	46% }
41-75 years			
a) Males	50	45	27% }
b) Females	50	35	43% }
Above 75 years			
a) Males	7	6	3% }
b) Females	16	15	11% }
<b>Total</b>	<b>218</b>	<b>187</b>	<b>100%</b>

Table 1: Distribution of Respondents by Age and Gender

From the results in Table 1 above, the youngest age group (up to 40 years) of the polygamous converts in the AIC shows that 46% of the total respondents was higher than the middle age (41-75years) which shows 43%. The old-age group (above 75years) shows 11% and this is the minority age group. This does not mean polygamy increased in the modern times than old times, but these were the new converts who had married before they became Christians.

During my research the youngest and middle age group of polygamous converts in the A.I.C were the majority while the old- age group was the minority in the church. Pertaining to age and gender, there was uneven number of respondents of those put into various categories. Females were slightly more than males. Random numbers were used in choosing the elements. The reason for inquiring about age was to help determine whether attitudes and practice of polygamy differ with age and gender. However, the study revealed no significant difference.

What is significant, however, is that a higher percentage 27% of the respondents in the 40 yrs category was females. In the 41-75 years category, it was seen that the males constituted a higher figure of 24%. Looked at from a general perspective, the majority of the respondents interviewed fell within the 40-75 years age bracket. As it can be seen from Table 1, most of the respondents were adult (40-75 years) thus, it is hoped that their views experiences will shade more light on the study.

#### 3.2. Factors Motivating Polygamy

According to the findings (see Table 2 below), 70% of the AIC pastors indicated that polygamous husbands were motivated by the desire for more sons while 20% indicated that it was the need for the increase in labour force. Only 10% indicated that it was the request from the first wife of the polygamous husbands.

Of the AIM missionaries, 60% indicated that polygamy was motivated by the desire for more sons while 40% of the missionaries

indicated that the increase in labour force was another motivation of polygamy.

The majority of polygamous husbands 95% indicated that the desire for more sons was the leading motivation of polygamy while 85% indicated the need of increase in labour force. Only 15% showed that it was the request from the first wife of the polygamous husbands.

The first wives of the polygamous husbands had the lowest percentage of response. Twenty per cent indicated that the desire for more sons was one of the things for motivation to polygamy while 15% showed that the increase in labour force was another motivation to polygamy. Only 5% showed the request from the first wife.

Type of Respondents	Desire for more sons	Increase in labour force	Request from first wives
AIC Pastors	70%	20%	10%
AIM Missionaries	60%	40%	0%
Polygamous Husbands	95%	85%	15%
First Wives	20%	15%	5%
Abandoned Wives	50%	60%	30%

Table 2: Factors Motivating Polygamy

When it came to the abandoned wives, 50% showed that the desire for more sons was one of the motivation to polygamy while 60% was the need of the increase in labour force and 30% indicated the request from the first wife.

The majority of respondents indicated that motivation of polygamy was the desire for more sons. The Tugen people believe that without more sons in a family it was not a complete home and that it had no future. A son was and still seen as a symbol of continuity of both family and the clan. And therefore this was one of the reasons for marrying many wives.

The increase in labour force was another strong motivation as the family needed people to engage in the economic activity. The Tugen people are both sedentary farmers and pastoralists. Those economic activities need much labour more so, given the topographical terrain of their land-hilly and expansive, thus the need for more labour is crucial. The request from the first wife was not predominant among the Tugen people. The minority of the first wives responded that they requested their husbands for another wife so that she can be of help when she became sick and when she gives birth. The first and the second wives were to help one another.

### 3.3. The Number of Wives Married by Polygamous Husbands

Table 3 demonstrates that the majority (90%) of the polygamous husbands among the Tugen had two wives when they accepted Christ as their personal saviour while 10% indicated that the polygamous husbands had three wives. Eighty per cent of the AIM missionaries showed that polygamous husbands had two wives before they became Christians. According to these missionaries 20% indicated that the polygamous husbands had three wives, 90% of the polygamous husbands admitted that they had two wives before they became Christians. Only 10% agreed that they had three wives.

Ninety per cent of the first wives of the polygamous husbands acknowledged that their husbands had two wives before they became Christians while 10% said their husbands had three wives before they were converted.

Type of Respondents	Two wives	Three Wives
AIC Pastors	90%	10%
AIM Missionaries	80%	20%
Polygamous Husbands	90%	10%
First Wives	90%	10%
Abandoned Wives	95%	5%

Table 3: The Number of Wives Married by Polygamous Husbands

When it came to the abandoned wives, 95% indicated that their husbands had two wives before they (husbands) became Christians; 5% admitted that their husbands had three wives.

According to the findings, the majority of the polygamous husbands had married two wives before they became Christians while a few married three wives. This could have been as a result of poor approach undertaken by the Missionaries or Evangelist in spreading the Christian message or lack of interest to embrace Christian teachings among the Tugen men.

Type of Respondents	YES	NO	NO COMMENT
AIC Pastors	84	6	10
AIM Missionaries	60	20	20

Table 4: Familiarity of AIC Work among Polygamous Converts

## 4. Conclusion and Recommendations

Polygamy has been a prevalent form of marriage on the continent of Africa and in other societies. In most societies, the system of polygamy is mainly occasioned by a surplus of women. Economic reasons account mainly to explain the institution, for wives may perform productive labour, share in the tasks of maintaining a large household and serve as visible evidence of acquired wealth.

The main reason polygamy was practiced was that the motivation to have more sons than daughters and increase labour force. The majority of the polygamous husbands had married two wives before they became Christians, while a few had married three wives. A minority of the respondents acknowledged the visits by polygamous husbands to their abandoned wives. Most of the respondents reacted to the visits with disapproval. The AIC should review her constitution to allow polygamous converts to be full members of the church. The Church should also seek assistance in understanding the socio-demographic issues that motivate the practice of polygamy from other evangelical churches such as the Full Gospel Church of Kenya Pentecostal Assemblies of God.

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