

Chapter 1

Origins and overview

After years of childlessness, one of the most important biblical wives encouraged her husband to take another woman into his bed. In the Old Testament book of Genesis, Sarah, who was barren, suggested that her husband, Abraham, should take her maid, Hagar, as a second wife or concubine so that they could have a son. Abraham did, and Hagar bore Ishmael. Sarah then went on to bear a son, Isaac, with Abraham. The dynamics of this plural marriage became complicated, yet they also brought much-loved offspring, thus peopling the world. This situation has implied that polygamy could be, and indeed was, blessed. The tale has resonated for millennia as both a story of lived experience and an organizing mythology.

The ancient Israelite practice of polygamy echoes in other forms in various parts of the ancient and medieval world, from six continents. There were distinct iterations of polygamy in diverse political and social contexts. Overall, though, polygamy allowed for resource-building, diplomatic links, and the creation of significant networks. It was vital in numerous situations of royal power, linking the center with the regions under its control. It depended on the labor, and the endurance, of women, who were central to men's ability to mobilize people and resources. Moreover, it had implications for demographic growth, for the spacing of births by wives, and for the replacement of populations of men lost through war.

In large parts of the world in the ancient, medieval, and even modern eras, the state depended on personal power and in particular on the authority of (mostly) male rulers. In such systems, polygamy has made sense. It connected royal and aristocratic authority. It demonstrated royal masculine power, as well as augmenting it. It produced children who provided diplomatic linkages through their own relationships. It rewarded loyalty and service by high-ranking men. It established and cemented hierarchies of rank as well as gender. Linked to systems of slavery and conquest, women and their productive and reproductive labor underpinned diplomatic and political relations. For some plural wives, polygamy looked like slavery; for others, it looked like leadership.

A desire for fruitfulness in marriage propelled early practices of polygamy. The first written law code in the world, that of Hammurabi around 1780 BCE, allowed a man with a barren or diseased wife to take a second wife. At the same time, it mandated that the second wife should not be seen as equal to the first. In the biblical story in Genesis, too, polygamy stemmed from infertility. When Hagar conceived Ishmael with Abraham, “her mistress was despised in her eyes.” Fertility could upend rank hierarchies, but such inversions might not last. God promised Abraham and Sarah a son, even though they were very old. After they miraculously had Isaac, Sarah became determined to send Hagar and Ishmael away; Abraham agreed to this exile. A fragile domestic equilibrium was thus re-established. God later rewarded Abraham for obedience with the covenant of enduring fruitfulness for his people: “I will multiply thy seed as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which is upon the seashore.” Between God and polygamy, Abraham was assured not just of having sons but also of having generations of descendants multiplying over the earth (Gen. 16:3–4, 22:17).

Women and children were at the center of this Genesis tale, though the Hebrew Bible overall focuses on men. This unexpected



3. This sixteenth-century engraving represents the story told in Genesis in which Abraham, at the behest of his first wife, Sarah, sent his second wife, Hagar, and their son Ishmael away.

inclusion of Sarah and Hagar, as well as young Ishmael and Isaac, highlights the centrality of women and children in a society based on kinship. The agency of women mattered a great deal, even in patriarchal societies such as ancient Israel. At the same time, the strangeness of the story and its complicated lines remind us of the considerable difficulties of knowing how polygamy has worked across times and places. While this elaborate tale in Genesis gives oblique insight into the household practices of ancient Israelites,

it is shrouded in the mists of time. The practice was challenging for Sarah and Hagar, as well as Abraham, but in the end, it seems to have resolved certain problems, especially those around infertility. Given the lack of sources, though, there is much we do not know.

What we can know is that injunctions to “be fruitful and multiply” weighed most heavily on women. It was their tired and unwieldy bodies carrying pregnancies and enduring births, their breasts engorging with milk to nurse babies, their arms and backs most often carrying little ones through fields and villages. It was women who disproportionately bore the stigma and shame of childlessness and infertility. Women had an important role in the economic well-being of families. In ancient Israel, as in many other parts of the ancient and medieval world, women had an especially vital role in food processing and preparation. They did the work of grinding grain, and they baked the bread that sustained life.

Building a population depended on sex and reproduction, and in the Old Testament, plural wives often underpinned this demographic growth. Keeping those populations going required the food processing and production performed by women. The Old Testament is filled with stories of kings who gained power through the reproductive and domestic labor of multiple wives. Saul had several wives, as did David. Rehoboam had eighteen wives and sixty concubines, while Solomon had no fewer than seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines. The power of these men was counted in wives and children. Yet even Solomon received no condemnation for marrying so often; his only domestic fault was that a number of his wives came from people with whom the Israelites were not supposed to intermarry. In such systems, however, power rarely accrued to the wives themselves, despite all they did; instead it was the royal mothers of kings who claimed the greatest feminine authority. The authority of wives was too dispersed. Among the ancient Israelites, a patrilocal

people, wives moved from their own communities and into those of their husbands, often ending up under the supervision of mothers-in-law and senior wives.

Senior women often had an important role in Chinese households, too, especially royal ones. In its long history, China has had a generally consistent system of formal monogamy, but with a range of concubines and “maids” allowed, even encouraged, for prosperous men. The emperor could take only one wife, but he was supposed to have multiple consorts. One second-century ruler, Sun Quan of the kingdom of Wu, was an impressive leader with a fatal flaw. He failed to distinguish between his wife and concubines; the resulting domestic chaos made him a laughingstock. Although Chinese emperors were expected to sire numerous offspring, they were not supposed to enjoy it too much; such self-indulgence was suspect in Confucian teachings. Keeping favorites, too, could be a problem. In the sixth century, the Chen emperor was supposedly so preoccupied with his favorite concubine, who sat on his lap during court business, that he lost his dynasty to attacking Sui warriors. In the sixteenth century, courtiers reminded Xianzong, the Ming emperor besotted with his favorite: “Having sons depends on there being many mothers.” An empress was expected to preside over these various mothers with grace and authority. In the third century, Jin Emperor Wu received concubines from conquests, but they were vetted by the empress herself. The ancient Mao commentary praised an empress who not only avoided jealousy but also created harmony among the concubines. Wives had formally recognized children with the emperor, but so did consorts. Consorts could come from a range of backgrounds, but they and their children could rise high. In fact, the mothers of the Yongzheng, Qianlong, and Jiaqing emperors had all been bondservants.

The politics of polygamy played out differently in other settings, but here, too, there were tight connections between royal power and polygamy. In Siam, in what is now Thailand, the ruler had the

authority to instigate polygamy for himself and others in the medieval and modern eras. Classic Thai Buddhist texts celebrated the potency of rulers and their plural wives, as in the *Trai Phum Phra Ruang*, a cosmology attributed to the fourteenth-century King Ruang. There was no word for polygamy in the Thai language, but the concept exists as “the principle of having many wives simultaneously.” The Family Code of 1361 enshrined this principle, recognizing four legal types of wives. The first group of wives, in marriages brokered by the king himself, had the highest rank. The next category of wives were those given by their parents in protracted negotiations that preserved their inheritance and rights in the event of death or marital breakdown. The third type were those married through personal choice, lacking the family protection of the second category. The fourth and lowest-ranking wives were enslaved ones, who had little by way of rights to inheritance or property or child custody in the event of any problems. These categories of wives mattered in terms of legal outcomes and in terms of the dynamics of these households, organizing hierarchies among the wives in these plural marriages. Enslaved wives were subject to the will and whim not only of the husband but also of other wives.

Such wifely hierarchies found their fullest expression in the Inner Palace, the household of the Thai king, where he demonstrated and augmented his power through his plural wives. Families in the provinces under the command of the ruler sent their daughters to the Inner Palace to curry favor and to ensure benevolent treatment. Such women tended to come from five categories of families. The first three categories included women from royal or politically important and office-holding families or who were related to women already there. The other two categories were wealthy families and ruling families in subordinate tribute-providing regions, seeking to prove their loyalty to the monarchy. These marriages linked the ruled to the ruler, connected the provinces to the center, and brought solidarity to the men of all of these families through their women.

Marital ties looped the state into local households in ongoing and profound ways, over decades. The children created by these unions were no less important. The sons from the Inner Palace became state officials and ensured the continuation of the monarchy. With the involvement of 176 of their wives, the first five kings of the Chakri dynasty produced 324 children, many of whom became high-ranking bureaucrats themselves.

Polygamy permeated the political culture of early modern Siam. Notable literary representations, including the Thai epic, the *Khun Chang Khun Phaen*, celebrated "having many wives simultaneously" for heroic men whose status was enhanced by such women. By contrast, the heroines were expected simply to tolerate it. For men, the important quality of *barami* (or virtue) rested on wives, without which men were considered incomplete and politically impotent. Having multiple wives and children proved the *barami* of leaders. Even in the seventeenth century, one French traveler noted, "To have a great many wives is in this country rather magnificence than debauchery. Wherefore they are very surprised to hear that so great a King as ours [Louis XIV] has no more than one wife." In one later episode, a newspaper account of Siamese court polygamy infuriated King Mongkut. He was aggrieved, not that such practices were subject to public scrutiny, but that the authors had listed more wives for his brother than for him.

Royal power showed itself in polygamy in early modern Incan, or Cuzco, society, in what is now Peru as well. Wives had vital economic and reproductive roles. One Spanish Jesuit, Bernabé Cobo, declared that "the possession of many wives was a sign of greatness and wealth among them. Only the commoners make do with one wife." In a typical European claim, Cobo went on to note that "the wives serve their husbands like slaves. They do most of the work, because besides bringing up the children, they cook, make *chicha* [a fermented ceremonial drink] and all the clothing they, their husbands, and their children wear, and they even do more work in the fields than the men." Since such assertions

functioned as a way to criticize the gender and political regimes of indigenous people, it is important not to take them literally. Still, women's contributions were considerable.

These Native American plural wives had diplomatic and political significance as well. In one of the starkest connections of polygamy and political power, only the ruler of the Cuzco, the Inca himself, had the authority to confer secondary wives on a man. This royal privilege was grounded in the mythology of the empire, as origin stories conveyed that the first Inca, Maco Capac, had received secondary wives from all the nations he had invaded. In other words, polygamy could exist only where the state directly sanctioned and encouraged it, and it was often a form of tribute to the Inca.

The great power of the Inca, who controlled the distribution of wives, demonstrates the close connections between political authority and polygamy. This ability to distribute wives enhanced the power of the Inca himself, and it conferred privileges on Incan noblemen. They gave their daughters to the Inca to show their loyalty, and noblemen were rewarded with wives. Cobo noted that the Inca gave "noble and beautiful girls" to his "captains and kinsmen," concluding, "Receiving one of these virgins from the Inca personally was considered to be an extraordinary favor." Marriage intertwined with conquest because defeated peoples had to provide daughters to the Inca, for his use or to be distributed. Yet the daughters, transformed into secondary wives, kept the name of their province of origin so that the dominance of Cuzco over that region was made enduring over their lifetimes. As the rebel in one province fretted over their possible loss of sovereignty when the Inca invaded, "Foreign tyranny is at our gates.... If we yield to the Inca, we shall be obliged to give up our former freedom, our best land, our most beautiful women and girls, our customs, our laws."

Royal power in the early modern kingdom of Buganda in east Africa also increasingly intertwined with polygyny in this same era.

Here, as elsewhere, political power rested on wives. Kings linked themselves to multiple territories, including newly conquered ones, through polygamous marriages. People presented wives to the king as marks of respect or to accompany a request or to obtain forgiveness of a debt or transgression. Clans and family members established themselves by giving their women to the king's household, with a few to perform specific intimate tasks. So, the king's paternal grandmother was responsible for sending him one particular wife, the *nasaza*, responsible for cutting his hair and nails. The Otter clan had to supply another wife, the *mubugumya*, whose main duty was to warm the king's bed for him and another wife. As the kingdom expanded, wives came from raids and captivity in wars. Even high-status wives occasionally had their origins in captivity in tributary states or abduction.

This system, while enhancing masculine power, created a complicated and significant hierarchy among women. There were three main types of wives: elite wives, or ladies, who managed and organized the royal household; untitled wives; and wives from captivity or unimportant families who did much of the drudge work in the royal compounds. Wives were organized into sections, with one chief senior wife in charge of all the labor, discipline, and property distribution. These highest-ranking wives were often served themselves by their own chiefs and subchiefs who sent them tribute and taxes, thus affirming clan ties and allowing these wives to become high-ranking leaders in their own right. These plural wives were central players in state politics.

The exchange of women tied kings and their wives to lower-ranking chiefs, thus increasing centralized state power and class stratification in the early modern era. Polygyny separated well-heeled men from commoners, who could rarely afford to keep several wives. The king himself then could distribute these women as he wished to favorites, to chiefs, or to warriors. One especially colorful account of this process involved the eighteenth-century King Kamaanya, who became known for his cruelty. The king

“used...to uncover his men and look at their genitals. If he saw a small man, he would scornfully comment on his size that he could never find women to love him. He would then give him about ten women to take to wife. To a huge man he would give about twenty women and again scornfully comment on his size, that he would never find enough women...to satisfy him.” To be teased so intimately by a king was a mark of status and a way to secure homosocial bonds, although perhaps humiliating for individual men.

Men's relations in systems of polygamy could often have this rivalrous air. In Buganda, the king had the right to take even the wives of chiefs as his own if he so desired. Other settings similarly highlight masculine conflicts over wives and the imperial ambitions of polygamous rulers. Early seventeenth-century English observers in the land they called Virginia noted repeatedly that high-ranking local Algonkian men, especially the ambitious leader, Powhatan (or Wahunsenaca), had multiple wives. One English observer, William Strachey, was amazed at “how such a barbarous and uncivill Prince” should have “a forme and ostentacion of such Maiestie...which oftentimes strykes awe and wonder into our people.” Such “ostentacion” allegedly included more than one hundred wives “according to the order and customes of sensuall Hethenisme.” Another Englishman noted that this ruler lived with multiple “queens” in a house protected by one hundred armed guards.

With his marriages, Powhatan demonstrated his power in a situation of political conflict in a tense moment of imperial realignments. There had already been considerable political shifts because of long-standing enmities exacerbated by European contact and diseases. Powhatan's polygamy may have been especially “ostentatious” in order to demonstrate his authority and to forge peaceful links with tribute areas. When Powhatan received visitors, his wives flanked him, and they brought him food, water with which to wash his hands, and feathers with which to dry them. Strachey contended that a dozen women were the

ruler's favorites and that they had a ranking dependent on their closeness to him. Powhatan reportedly had more than thirty children, including one of the most well-known Native American women, Pocahontas. Such children also bolstered the prestige of a ruling family; there were tight bonds between siblings. When one local leader had the audacity to abduct one of his brother's wives, Powhatan went to war and deposed him. As elsewhere, war and captivity formed a context for the abduction of women. Yet at the same time, it could support positive relations between allies. Supposedly, when Powhatan grew "weary" of certain wives, "he bestowes them on those that best deserve them." As in other contexts, the gift of wives from a ruler affirmed bonds and high rank. Others reported that Powhatan's wives from distant regions who had borne children sometimes then returned to their homelands, thus strengthening the connections between these regions and the center.

Plural marriages also established rule in more modern times among indigenous people in the Pacific Islands, including what is now Australia, New Zealand, and Papua New Guinea. One nineteenth-century missionary in New Guinea observed that "a man may have as many wives as he can afford," with headmen having up to six. This missionary lamented what he saw as the lack of harmony in polygynous families, recounting tales of conflict connected with jealousy over a favored wife. These problems threatened the whole social order: "nine-tenths of the quarrels in New Britain arise from jealousy of the women...[and] conjugal mistrust." Imperial authors blamed indigenous polygamy and domestic rivalries for wider violence, conveniently ignoring their own settler colonialism and missionary activities. Even among European observers, though, there were accounts emphasizing domestic tranquility. Another British observer of the Māori in New Zealand was more positive, claiming that polygamy increased the power of rulers, but that all the spouses lived together in harmony. He conceded that "the *sudden* bringing home of a new wife, which sometimes happened (perhaps a slave,

or from a distance) . . . made quite a sensation among the old wives, but it was only temporary. Often the old wives themselves encouraged their husband to take another, and aided efficiently in doing so." This statement suggests that wives could come from various backgrounds, including war, captivity, and diplomacy, a pattern found in numerous settings. It implies, too, that women had agency in the choosing of new wives and that they did not necessarily see them as a threat or simply a source of jealousy.

Harmonious and in fact helpful relations between wives have sometimes been the norm among indigenous people in the Pacific world, as more recent examples suggest. The Martu of Australia's Western Desert have long practiced polygyny, though there, as elsewhere, it is difficult to ascertain much about its roots. Marriages could be arranged, often at or shortly after birth, with family and kin networks paramount in marital decisions. Polygyny could be sororal, so that a man married multiple sisters. At least at times, wives seem to have been consulted about bringing in additional wives, and they may have instigated polygyny themselves. Some wives welcomed help with domestic work as well as the birth spacing that polygyny afforded. Older wives could help to teach younger wives, and these younger women took on menial tasks such as collecting wood and water. As one Martu woman recounted, "My sister and I were both married to the same man. . . . We got along very well. . . . Sometimes we would hunt together, or one of us would go out with our husband to get meat while the other would stay with the children and get seed or fruit." Sororal polygyny could mean that the mother of the wives lived as part of the household, thus enhancing intergenerational female links, as well as mentorship and assistance.

By contrast, European practices of polygamy, rarely involving sisters, seem to have been less friendly. Although it is often forgotten, polygamy was a long-standing practice of powerful

European kings. The ancient Roman commentator Tacitus claimed that a few Germanic kings took multiple wives not because of "lust" but because of their need for political alliances and as a way to enhance their power. The lines between wife, secondary wife, and concubine could be thin, with certain kinds of unions receiving more formal recognition. The sagas of Old Norse kings suggest that the practices of polygamy and concubinage were connected here, as elsewhere, with systems of slavery. Scholars have debated how polygamous the Merovingian kings were, but most agree that they were anything but monogamous, keeping wives and concubines as it seemed best for policy or personal ambitions. In a few instances, such rulers had children with enslaved concubines and subsequently freed and married them, so there are accounts of Merovingian queens of humble origins, much to the dismay of hierarchical, monogamy-focused commentators such as Gregory of Tours.

Medieval Irish kings, too, could have plural wives. By the eighth century, there were debates in legal texts about whether it was acceptable for Irish Christians to "live in plurality of unions," with citations of the Old Testament polygamy of Solomon, David, and Jacob. These references imply long-standing Irish traditions of polygamy. There was clear endorsement in certain circles of a man taking a second wife if his first could not have children; moreover, there seems to have been political polygamy to knit together various kingdoms and communities. Other legal texts distinguished between two major types of wives: a primary wife, who ran the household, and a "betrothed" or secondary wife, who was her subordinate. One such tract distinguished further: between a primary wife with sons (the highest status), a primary wife without sons, a betrothed (or secondary) wife, the "acknowledged woman" not betrothed (a concubine), and, finally, a "woman who has been abducted."

This reference to abduction of women as a route to marriage, a custom that continued for centuries, reminds us of the violence

that could underpin domestic regimes in early medieval Ireland. Relations between these wives, too, were not necessarily peaceful. Legal codes acknowledged the “lawful jealousy” of the primary wife and its sometimes brutal consequences. Indeed, the law enshrined the right of the primary wife to be “completely free from liability for anything she may do during the first three nights” after the arrival of the secondary wife—short of killing her. For her part, the secondary wife had “the right to inflict damage with her finger-nails and to utter insults and scratchings and hair-tearings and small injuries in general.” Polygamy could be a brawl between women, at least according to these legal texts.

In Ireland, polygamy could be fraught among offspring as well as wives. While the son of the primary wife was preferred for succession, he could be bested by the son of the secondary wife if the latter seemed better qualified to rule. The twelfth-century king of Connacht, Ruaidrí Ua Conchobair, had several wives and children. The pope supposedly offered to let him keep his six wives and still be recognized as the king of Ireland if he would agree to renounce any further wives. However, he would not accept these terms, and so, as the annals conclude, “God took the rule and sovereignty from his seed for ever, in punishment for his sin.” Even a few European kings were loath to give up polygamy.

Yet, as this story of the Irish king suggests, the practice of polygamy never won the approval of the Catholic Church, no matter how powerful a few of its practitioners were. Numerous societies allowed both polygamy and monogamy as forms of union; usually, the former was the practice of the wealthy and powerful. Increasingly, the systems allowing both kinds of unions would come into contact with those in which monogamy was considered the only acceptable option. To understand the complexities of these encounters, it is useful to turn to the history of polygamy in the three great monotheistic religions: Christianity, Judaism, and Islam.