

## Forms of Polygamy

### *Polygyny*

*Polygyny* is a form of plural marriage in which a man is permitted more than one wife. Where co-wives are customarily sisters this is called *sororal polygyny*. The other main form is *non-sororal polygyny*, where co-wives are not related. Polygynous marriage is generally correlated with those economic and political systems where the most important resources are human resources. Polygyny allows a man to have more children, providing him with a broader productive base, as he controls the labour of his wives and children to a large extent. It also provides him with more affines,<sup>2</sup> permitting him to manipulate factional and/or kin group ties to his advantage. In some societies, polygyny may be the exclusive privilege of leaders or chiefs; an Amazonian Indian leader's multiple wives are both a sign of his power and an important element in building up and maintaining his power base, for example. Polygyny is often associated with age asymmetry in the marriage relationship, such that older men marry young girls, and younger men are obligated to remain celibate for extended periods, or alternatively marry widows of older men. Polygyny may in such cases be interpreted as part of the age-gender stratification, where older men control human resources and thus control the productive and reproductive resources in a society. Where resources such as land or other forms of private property predominate, like in Western societies, monogamous nuclear family forms tend to be the rule (Seymour-Smith 1986: 228). Polygyny does exist in Western capitalist societies, but then always as a result of religious doctrine. A contemporary example is American Mormons who practise Plural Marriage, a form of polygyny associated with the nineteenth-century Mormon Church and its present-day splinter groups (see Chapter 5).

An unusual variety of polygyny is practised among the Lovedu of Southern Africa. Within the Lovedu system of 'woman marriage', a woman can become a female polygamous 'husband'. High status females such as queens and other power-holders could sometimes use their wives and cattle as polygamous currency in the same way as male kings and chiefs. The Lovedu Rain Queen, for example, regularly received wives as tribute from all districts of her realm, and she had numerous wives. Some wives would later be reallocated to important men (Krige and Krige 1943: 165). It was politically significant who the fathers of a rain queen's wives' children were, especially as a Lovedu queen could be succeeded by a woman; it could be her own daughter or that of one of her wives (Kuper 1982: 59). These all-female Lovedu unions are polygamous, because the wives are all married to their female husband, but whether they are polygynous depends on whether gender is crucial in defining the common spouse. In principle, they might as well be called polyandrous, because the main spouse is a woman. However, as the Rain Queen

The *sororate* specifies that a widower should marry a sister of his deceased wife. The sororate is akin to the levirate, and fulfils the same function of maintaining relations between two families even after a spouse's death. They may be practised in the same societies. In essence, a family provides another spouse to take the place of the member who died, and both families usually encourage this remarriage because it continues the bond between them. Local kinship systems ensure that enough brothers and sisters are available by providing 'classificatory siblings' when there are no biological siblings available (Haviland 1983: 240). Among the Tonga of Zambia, for example, sororatic marriage is only allowed with classificatory sisters (Colson 1958). The sororate may also function without death being involved: if a wife is barren among the South African Zulu, her family may provide a sister to bear children in her name. The children are socially the children of the barren woman, just as children are socially the children of the dead husband in the levirate (Radcliffe-Brown 1950: 64).

### *Polyandry*

*Polyandry* is a form of plural marriage where a woman has more than one husband. Polyandrous marriage is relatively rare and is concentrated in the Himalayan areas of South Asia. It is sporadically found in Africa, Oceania, America and the Arctic. There are two main forms of polyandry: *fraternal* or *adelphic polyandry*, in which a group of brothers share a wife, and *non-fraternal polyandry*, in which a woman's husbands are not related. The commonest form is fraternal polyandry where joint husbands are brothers (real or classificatory). For example, Nyinba brothers (ethnic Tibetans now living in Nepal) live together in large households, sharing a common estate and domestic responsibilities, as well as a common wife with which each maintains a sexual relationship. Generally, each child of the marriage is acknowledged by, and develops a special relationship with, one of the possible fathers, even where biological paternity cannot be determined (Levine 1988).

The Nayar of India practised a form of non-fraternal polyandry in which several men were simultaneously the 'husbands' of one wife. Usually only the first husband underwent a ritual marriage with the woman before she entered puberty. He was then given a special position as a 'ritual' father of all the woman's subsequent children, who like their mother had to observe the customs connected with his death. Any of the men with whom a Nayar woman engaged in sexual relations and had children could be called upon to acknowledge (potential) paternity, however; this was usually done by giving a gift to the woman and paying midwives' expenses. The central Nayar domestic unit consisted of a mother, her daughters and their children; husbands and wife did not set up house together. Descent was reckoned exclusively through women, and children derived their group affiliations and claimed their inheritance through their mothers (Lienhardt 1964: 93–4).

The Nayar case illustrates that the dividing line between true polyandry and a woman's extension of sexual services to men other than her legal husband is not always clear. Generally the label polyandry is used for those systems in which paternity is assigned to more than one man, which is most clearly the case in adelphic polyandry. But as the definition of polyandry depends on the definition of marriage itself, the Nayar case makes it difficult to formulate an all-inclusive definition of marriage. This impasse creates a typological continuum of polyandrous societies, from those where people practise 'pure' polyandry in which one woman is officially married to several husbands, to doubtful cases involving no marriages that can no longer be called polyandry but may share certain familial patterns. In between those two extremes one may find societies where polyandrous practices do not necessarily involve formal marriage but rather one woman having sexual relations with more than one man in a regular and lasting fashion, societies which allow passing connections between one woman and more than one man, as well as societies where people live in *conjoint* marriages, containing both polygynous and polyandrous arrangements. The definitional challenges relating to the Nayars will be revisited in Chapter 7.

In *serial marriage*, a man or woman either marries or lives with a series of partners in succession. Researchers coined the term to describe the marriage patterns of West Indians and lower-class urban Blacks in Western societies. Here, women often lived in female-headed households in which a series of men fathered children, who remained with their mother. The grandmother was typically the head of the household; she cared for all children while her daughters worked to support the whole group. An adult man's loyalties might thus be to his own mother, his kin and friends, rather than to his present wife or partner (Haviland 1983: 240; Stack 1975). Serial marriage may not be polygamy in an anthropological sense, because the multiple matings tend to sequential rather than simultaneous, and may not involve formal marriage. If a man (or woman) maintains several simultaneous relationships with women (or men), one of which was in the form of formal marriage, it could be said to approximate *de facto* polygamy. In contemporary America, some African American activists have indeed been calling for the legalization of polygamy to accommodate the lifestyle and circumstances of urban Blacks (see Chapter 9).

### *Group Marriage*

*Group marriage* is a polygamous marriage form in which several men and women have sexual access to one another and consider themselves married to all other members of the group. Group marriage is sometimes termed circle marriage or *polygynandry*, from a combination of the words polygyny and polyandry. Group marriage may exist in a number of forms, but typically consists of more than one man and more than one woman who together form a single family unit, with all

members of the marriage sharing parental responsibility for any children arising from marriage. Group marriage must be contrasted with polyfamilies, which is similar to group marriage but where some members may not be considered themselves married to all other members. Group marriage appears to have been rare in traditional societies: the Kaingang people of Brazil practised group marriage most frequently, but even among them, only 8 per cent of the unions were group marriages (Murdock 1949: 24).

In the West, a long-lived example of group marriage was the Oneida Community founded by the Congregationalist minister John Humphreys Noyes in 1848. Noyes believed that he and his followers had undergone sanctification, making it impossible for them to sin; for the sanctified, marriage and private property were abolished as expressions of jealousy and exclusiveness. The Oneida commune practised sexual communalism and shared parental responsibilities, and in effect functioned as a large group marriage until around 1880. Communal groups of the late twentieth century, among people seeking alternatives to traditional Western marriage forms, have also tried out group marriage. The Keriste Commune, for example, practised group marriage in San Francisco from 1971 to 1991 (Haviland 1983: 240). It is difficult to estimate the actual number of people practising group marriage in modern societies, as this form of marriage is not officially recognized anywhere; it is probably a very limited practice today because of the inherent strains among its members.

Assessing the prevalence of group marriage is mostly a definitional problem. Researchers tend to lean on Lewis Henry Morgan's nineteenth-century definition of group marriage, which must contain all ten basic kinship relations: wife, co-wife, husband, co-husband, mother, father, daughter, son, brother, sister (see Chapter 2). In addition, all children born to the group marriage must be acknowledged by all men and by all women. The problem arises because several unions may contain most of these characteristics, but may fail on one account, which then disqualifies them as group marriage. As will be discussed in Chapter 6, polyandry suffers from a similar definitional straitjacket, which makes some proclaim polyandry or group marriage to be very rare, while others consider them more widely practised, albeit with modifications. Following a wider definition, the marriage practices followed by some Pahari peoples in the Central Himalayas of India (see Chapter 6) may be called group marriage. The dominant Pahari marriage form is fraternal polyandry, in which a woman marries the eldest of a group of brothers, all of whom are then the woman's husbands. Pahari marriage is fluid, however, and within the same village one might find monogamy, polygyny and polyandry, and within the same family all three forms might exist at some stage or even simultaneously. Researchers working among Pahari people have coined the term polygynandry to accommodate the fluid nature of local marital arrangements. Many of the family forms grouped under polygynandry approximate group marriage, as they contain all ten basic kinship relations of Morgan's group marriage. However, whereas all men acknowledge all children in a Pahari marriage, all women do not acknowledge them. The paternity of

children is shared by all ‘fathers’, while the biological mother of each child is known and socially recognized within the family, even if this child refers to all its father’s wives as ‘mother’ (Berreman 1975). This last point disqualifies Pahari marriage as group marriage for some.

*Poly relationship* (from polygamy, polyamory, etc.) refers to forms of interpersonal relations in which some or all participants have multiple marital, sexual and/or romantic partners. Such relationships are also termed non-monogamous. One variant is polyamory, which refers to romantic or sexual relationships involving multiple partners, regardless of whether they involve marriage. Any polygamous relationship is polyamorous, and some polyamorous relationships involve multiple spouses. Polygamy is usually used to refer to multiple marriages, while polyamory implies relationships defined by negotiation between its members rather than marriage. Polyamory can be contrasted with polyfidelity, where participants have multiple partners but restrict sexual activity to within a certain group. Open relationships involve one or both members of a couple who are sexually active with other partners, sometimes in the form of an *open marriage*. The terms referring to marriage forms involving several spouses or partners (polygyny, polyandry, polyamory, group marriage, etc.) are by nature flexible and difficult to define, not least because practitioners themselves might disagree as to what their relationships entail and where their boundaries are. The term ‘poly relationship’ is generally used only where all participants acknowledge the relationship as non-monogamous, and not applied where one person has multiple partners due to infidelity.

## **Defining Polygamy**

### *Polygamy as Matrimony*

In G.P. Murdock’s *Ethnographic Atlas* (1967), an overwhelming 85 per cent of recorded societies were polygamous. It is a percentage which reflects ideals not realities, however, for most of the societies in Murdock’s survey are listed as polygamous because they allow for and prefer polygamy, but in fact the majority of marriages in those societies are monogamous. The resources necessary to be able to marry more than one spouse make polygamy unaffordable to most people. It is usually only rich or powerful men in polygamous societies who can marry several wives, just like rich men in monogamous societies marry one wife and may have one or more mistresses; poor men are monogamists all over the world. Humans are nowhere strictly monogamic, but while polygamous societies practise permissive polygyny and actual monogamy, monogamous societies only allow monogamy. It has been argued that, from an evolutionary perspective, the optimal strategy for humans is monogamy when necessary, and polygamy when possible. Polygamy is mostly advantageous to human males, whereas females may opt for monogamy; ‘infidelity’