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# **Christian Missions and Socio-Cultural Change: Baptists and the Polygamy Question among the Yoruba People of Southwestern Nigeria, 1850-2001**

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## **Abstract**

*The traditional Yoruba society in the south-western part of Nigeria is essentially polygamous. Even though oral traditions of the people indicate that in the earliest times, the Yoruba cherished monogamy, by the time of the advent of the Christian Missions in general, and Baptist Mission in particular, the social custom of polygamy had been well-rooted in the people's cultural life.*

*The impression is often carried that the Baptist denomination in Nigeria is less strict on certain Christian religious observances such as the prohibition of polygamy when compared with some of its counterpart Protestant Churches. The evidence at our disposal reveals that this is an erroneous impression. Even though polygamists do attend Baptist Churches, as is the case in many other Christian churches, the Baptists did try to insist on monogamy, yet polygamy remained a very hard nut to crack. At any rate, the insistence of the Mission on maintaining its stand on monogamy was to effect a chink in the armour of Baptist expansion and growth in the Yoruba country.*

## **Introduction**

Christian Missionary activities began in Yorubaland, Nigeria, in the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> The Baptists in particular arrived in the Yoruba country in 1850 to commence missionary work among a people with whom religion had held sway and had, in fact, permeated all aspects of their daily lives. "In all things, they are religious", says Professor Bolaji Idowu, in analysing the keynote of the life of the Yoruba people which, according to him, "is their religion."<sup>2</sup> The people's religious beliefs in the course of time became part of their social customs and regulated their actions by promise of reward or threat of punishment. One of the important traditional Yoruba customs which resulted from their religious beliefs and which was an embodiment of their patterns of culture was the polygamous system of marriage. It influenced the overall cultural pattern of the people and successfully served the time before the introduction of Christianity. Besides, it did pose a great challenge to Baptist missionary work, as it did to Christian missionary enterprise in general, as shall be demonstrated presently.

## **Polygamy in the Traditional Yoruba Society**

Polygamy has been defined as the "custom of having more than one wife at the same time".<sup>3</sup> By the time the Baptist missionaries arrived in Yorubaland, this social custom had been well rooted in the Yoruba cultural life. Oral tradition, however, indicates that in the earliest times, the Yoruba cherished

monogamy.<sup>4</sup> It so held that even *Obatala*,<sup>5</sup> one of the major divinities in the Yoruba pantheon, had *Yemoo* as his only wife. He thus sanctions monogamy since this ensures an uncomplicated, untroubled and undisturbed life. As a matter of fact, *Obatala* demands high morality since he is pure ritually and ethically. And as a peculiar principle, white is his overall symbol: white cloth, white chalk and white beads. And so the lives of worshippers must be clean and pure like water fetched from a brook early in the morning. It is as a result of this that *Orisa-nla* enforces monogamy on his priests because a polygamist, in dealing with several wives, cannot but stumble in word or in deed.<sup>6</sup> That apart, *Ifa* (the divination god of the Yoruba people) analyses the virtues of monogamy and the problems of polygamy. The Yoruba *Ifa* has an *Odu* recital that lends credence to this. According to that *Ifa* verse or *Odu* recital:

<p><i>Okan soso poro lobinrin</i> It is one and only one wife that  <i>dun mo lowo oko;</i>  <i>Bi won ba di meji,</i>  <i>Won a dojowu;</i>  <i>Bi won ba di meta,</i>  <i>Won a deta ntule;</i>  <i>Bi won ba di merin</i>  <i>Won a diwo lorin mi</i>  <i>ni mo rin o</i>  .....  .....  <i>Bi won ba di mewaa,</i>  <i>Won a di ile lokoo wa jokoo</i>    <i>Ni won n wa oko wa wa.</i><sup>7</sup></p>	<p>brings pleasure to any man;  When there are two wives,  They become rivals;  When they increase to three,  They destroy the home;  When they become four  They laugh one another to scorn  .....  .....  When they increase to ten,  They will say when their husband  Stays at home,  Women come in to visit him.</p>
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That a Yoruba *Ifa* poem analyses the virtues of monogamy is interesting indeed. This is more so against a background of the fact that the traditional Yoruba society is essentially polygamous. However, as Professor Wande Abimbola has rightly demonstrated, this poem is not a condemnation of polygamy *per se*, but rather an analysis of the problems involved in it, such as rivalry, fighting, wickedness and witchcraft.<sup>8</sup> Polygamy, it is stressed, creates a favourable atmosphere for these marital problems which, though not absent in a monogamous family situation, are nonetheless, comparatively minimal.

As a matter of fact, it was socio-economic exigencies that forced the Yoruba into polygamy. The traditional economy of the Yoruba was purely agricultural. In the pre-1850 era, labour hardly attracted wages. Polygamy was thus an avenue to provide the much-needed labour force to till the ground and maximise production. In addition to this, in the absence of insurance facilities and governmental care, children rendered many invaluable services to their parents at old age.

Furthermore, the acquisition of wives and children enhanced the status of the man as this was a way of measuring a man's wealth and social prestige in the society. Besides, since children were of prime social significance, a husband could take a second wife if the first seemed infertile or if she delayed in producing male ones in whom the Yoruba attached greater premium.

Biologically too, polygamy provided for the sexual needs of the husband when one of his wives was nursing a baby. Since weaning often took two to three years and there was no knowledge of modern family planning methods, polygamy reduced the chances of unfaithfulness and prostitution. Complementing the above explanation is the view expressed by Professor Emmanuel Ayandele that in indigenous societies, polygamy was used as a check on sexual misbehaviour and as a way of dispensing social justice to women by providing husbands for all women.<sup>9</sup>

Besides, Islam encouraged polygamy. Thus, those who had been converted to Islam before the arrival of the Baptist Mission practised polygamy. For, Islamic tenets allow a Muslim who is economically viable to marry up to four wives provided he would be able to dispense justice among them equally.<sup>10</sup>

Moreover, few Yoruba men, as their counterparts in many other parts of Africa, out of sheer promiscuity and being emotionally incapable of bridling their insatiable lust for women, were liable to polygamy. Yet the fact remains that among the banes of polygamous marriage, as earlier stated above, are destructive tendencies like jealousy, envy, cut-throat rivalry that infest wives and children of such homes.<sup>11</sup>

Be that as it may, it is pertinent to stress that by the time of the advent of Baptist mission work in particular and Christian Missionary activities in general, the social custom of polygamy had been well-rooted in the socio-cultural life of the Yoruba.

### **Baptist Mission and the Polygamy Question**

The erroneous impression is often carried that the Baptist Church is less strict on certain Christian religious observances such as the prohibition of polygamy when compared with some of its counterpart Protestant churches. For instance, in 1935, a Sudan Interior Mission (S.I.M) group in Igbaja, in the present day Kwara State of Nigeria, seceded to form a Baptist Church. This action, it is suggested, was a result of the seceders' dislike and opposition to the S.I.M teaching on monogamy.<sup>12</sup> The analogy or inference one can draw from this is that Baptist condoned polygamy. This impression is false, misleading and unfair to the Baptist cause. It could be true that polygamists attended Baptist Churches all over Yorubaland (including Igbaja) during the period in question (as many still do today). This is indisputable and as a matter of fact, such is not peculiar to the Baptist Mission alone. Polygamists are found in Methodist, Anglican, C.A.C., Roman Catholic, and even Evangelical Church of West Africa (ECWA), or S.I.M. Churches. But then, is it not possible to keep one's family life hidden in a church even as a polygamist? Yet the fact remains

that the Baptist does not encourage polygamy. In fact, a one-time President of the Nigerian Baptist Convention succinctly described Baptist teaching as 'showing progressive stages in determining church membership'.<sup>13</sup> In March 1915, the Yoruba Baptist Association during its Second Annual Session in Lagos took and upheld the stand that the Association recognised monogamy as the ideal state of family life. This was again re-affirmed at the 22nd Annual Session of the Nigerian Baptist Convention held at Ogbomoso in April 1935 with minor modifications. There it was resolved that, "No known polygamists should be allowed to hold any office in the churches or act in capacity as a lay preacher. ... The question of polygamy should be handled, but with sympathy and love".<sup>14</sup> This was further restated and adopted at the 24<sup>th</sup> session of the Convention held at Ibadan in April 1937, when it was further ruled that a known polygamist should not be allowed to participate in baptism or the Lord's Supper.<sup>15</sup> This position was so maintained until quite recently. As a matter of fact, the Baptist Constitution and Bye-Laws is itself quite explicit on this seemingly controversial issue:

*Recognising monogamy as the ideal state of family life according to the New Testament, this Convention places on record its adherence thereto. No known polygamist shall be allowed membership in our churches, to hold any office in the church, to act as a lay preacher, or to participate in the ordinances of Baptism and the Lord's Supper.<sup>16</sup>*

No one disputes the fact, however, that polygamists may attend Baptist Church services just as they do in many of the churches under the other Christian denominations. This might have given rise to the erroneous impression of laxity on polygamy in the Baptist Church. That apart, one is not denying that some Baptist members did, as some still do, oppose or abhor the prohibition of polygamy.<sup>17</sup> Such opposition is a different issue entirely and such is to be expected or bound to happen in any religious organisation or gathering entailing a large gathering of people from the African setting. The belief of such opponents of the prohibition of polygamists is that salvation or the gospel of Christ is for all people; that the Bible did not state anywhere in the Old or New Testament that polygamists must not be members of the church. What, as they contend, the Bible says, is that they should not be ordained into leadership positions in the church. At any rate, one's contention here is that Nigerian Baptists are no less strict on the issue of polygamy.

### **The Dilemma of the Early Missionaries on the Polygamy Issue**

The early missionaries brought great influence to bear on polygamy, against which a massive campaign was launched. That campaign, of course, received the blessing of the rising generation of educated elite in the growing Baptist fold. For, despite their great zeal and yearnings towards domesticating

Christianity and propagating the African personality, the educated elites opposed and even condemned the practice of polygamy. Foremost among such leaders was Mojola Agbebi who saw monogamy as the ideal, which also made for happiness and blessing.<sup>18</sup>

It would appear, however, that some of the Baptist missionaries while upholding monogamy, tolerated polygamy to a certain degree. While accommodating those who had contracted polygamy before their conversion, there was initially no form of discipline of the magnitude of excommunication for those who flouted the monogamous regulation other than disallowing them from holding any office in the church, to act as lay preachers, or to participate in the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper. Both categories were nonetheless allowed church membership. This laxity could be excused on one ground; that some polygamists had their marital lives hidden. In any case, even known polygamists were at the onset, not compelled to undertake marital 'restitution' of forsaking all other wives except the first. Thomas Jefferson Bowen's own stand on this is quite revealing: "It is true I have never baptized a polygamist, but I have never ventured to cause a divorce".<sup>19</sup> This is an epitome of the dilemma of the professional missionaries as they were confronted with the question of whether or not the marriage customs associated with polygamy were consistent with membership in the Christian community, especially in an African setting.

### **Effects of the Polygamy Stand**

It has been claimed that if only the early Southern Baptist missionaries who came to Nigeria had permitted polygamists to join the church, there would have been many more converts than there were during the formative stages of Christian missionary enterprise.<sup>20</sup> There is an extent to which this claim is valid. All along, this was a very knotty problem which the Mission had to contend with. In the words of Mojola Agbebi - one of the leaders of the Native Baptists, "... the pendulum of West African Christianity oscillated between monogamy and polygamy",<sup>21</sup> describing it as "... the great question of Africa's evangelisation".<sup>22</sup> As Thomas Jefferson Bowen, the pioneer Baptist Missionary to Nigeria himself confessed, "polygamy, interwoven as it is with the whole fabric of society, is one of the greatest difficulties with which the Gospel has to contend".<sup>23</sup>

As time went on, the Foreign Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention had to take an officially firm stand. Many Baptist missionaries thus came into conflict with the traditional society over the marriage system especially the question of polygamy. In the same vein, many converts were to find themselves in difficulties over this doctrine of 'one man one wife', because of the missionary teaching that marriage was an affair between two individuals. There was the interesting case of an informant who, as a student at the Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary, Ogbomoso in the 1940s, listened to his missionary teacher who taught that polygamists should divorce all their wives

except one. The student-Pastor himself, a product of the second wife of a polygamous marriage and then a Pastor-in-training inquired whether the Lord commanded him to go home and tell his father to put away his mother and her children including himself. The missionary-teacher hesitated and finally could not answer 'Yes', for he could not find the text to authorize so unqualified a reply.<sup>24</sup>

In any case, polygamy remained one of the hardest nuts to crack. Though the rules of the Baptist Mission do not allow known polygamists to enjoy full church membership, polygamy still prevailed among the Yoruba converts. It seems, therefore, that if anything, the missionaries' insistence on monogamy was for many, a big hurdle and led to confusion in social relationship among a people to whom marriage was a matter which deeply involved two families.

Up to the twentieth century, this vexing question remained unsolved. This, in the opinion of an informant, was because 'polygamy is part and parcel of our communal life'.<sup>25</sup> In all the various communities in Yorubaland where the Baptists established, marriage was never optional. Unless the adult was physically or mentally handicapped, he or she was expected to enter into marriage and so perpetuate the lineage. Since procreation was an essential part of marriage, a man could marry another wife if the first was barren or in the hope of having a son who might inherit him and perpetuate the lineage. In all cases, he knew he was fulfilling his social and religious obligation. That was why it was difficult to abolish polygamy.

This problem itself, as earlier indicated above, generated much anxiety and concern in the minds of the missionaries to such an extent that they had to write the Foreign Mission Board of the Southern Baptist convention in USA, regarding solution to the following knotty questions:

1. Should we require polygamists who have become such while still heathen to give up all their wives but one upon their entrance into church membership?
2. What wife should be retained, if all others are to be dismissed?
3. Should the wives who have been put away be taught to remain unmarried, or to marry another man?
4. Should the wives who have been put away be received for baptism and church membership?
5. If so, should they be allowed to re-marry again?<sup>26</sup>

Whatever reasons the missionaries had to have asked those questions, the instruction of the Foreign Mission Board was sharp and quick: "Polygamous marriage should be dissolved if the results were not likely to be harmful to the parties concerned. Otherwise, it might be regarded as necessary evil during the period of transition".<sup>27</sup> The instruction went on to say, however, that after a man had become a Christian he should not be allowed to marry a second or third wife. If he did he must be regarded as having committed adultery.



This stand of the Foreign Mission Board was re-echoed in 1938 by its then Executive Secretary, Dr. Charles E. Maddry, when he visited the Nigerian field. A meeting was convened with the American Baptist Mission, and a representative group of Pastors and members of Baptist Churches from all districts of the Nigerian Baptist Convention in the country at which the polygamy issue featured prominently in Dr. Maddry's proposals and recommendations.<sup>28</sup> In that recommendation, the Nigerian Baptist Convention was urged to adapt the new Constitution and Bye-laws of the Convention,<sup>29</sup> and to purge the membership roles at once, excluding from church membership all those who believed in and practised polygamy and in case such polygamists grouped together as a church, no Baptist Pastor must lead such a group.

As time went on, some of the ardent converts had to put away all their extra wives except the one who was considered to be the 'lawful wife' and had consented to be married in the Christian way. In Igosun, in present-day Oyun Local Government Area of Kwara State, there was one such case in the late 1930s when a convert, Pa Samuel Akintola, divorced his second wife, Deborah Ige, leaving only the first.<sup>30</sup> The odium that these set of converts incurred from their own as well as the other wives' families, let alone the confusion that arose with regard to the care of the children, could well be imagined. Of more significance was the fact that divorce on the principle of monogamy was introduced into the Yoruba country for the first time. The general confusion that this generated has not ended. When converts learned in the church that polygamy 'was contrary to the law of God' such a general fermentation was stirred up in the depths of society that husbands yielding to the requirements of a Christian life began to cleave to one wife, and the wives in like manner insisted upon divorce from their polygamist husband. Confusion could not have been made more profound. In such enforced separation, it was the women and children who suffered most. Adrian Hastings' picture of such a situation is very revealing:

*To end a polygamous marriage in the name of Christ who said nothing explicitly to condemn it, at the expense of effecting a divorce which Christ explicitly forbade, is to pay too high a price to achieve a theoretical conformity with one part of the Christian marriage pattern.<sup>31</sup>*

Trying to separate polygamists in the name of converting them thus had the effect of creating further and greater evils.

### **Implications on Baptist Expansion**

The insistence of the Mission on maintaining its stand on this order had certain implications and produced some effects on Baptist expansion and growth in Yorubaland. In the Baptist church, the first and one of the most prominent membership requirements is Baptism (by immersion). Any member

who becomes a polygamist regardless of being earlier baptised loses such membership. By implication, no polygamist whatever his charisma or spiritual acumen, can hold any office in the church since he is not a recognised member of that church. Similarly, he cannot vote on any decision. In terms of church growth, this position affected the Mission greatly because many members who could have used their talented gifts for the growth of the churches in particular and the Mission as a body were deprived of that privilege.<sup>32</sup> Thus, no sooner after the 1938 pronouncement, for instance, than a large membership of the Baptist body were lost from the denomination. In Shaki, many members there had to pull out of the Nigerian Baptist Convention. They formed their own independent church – the United African Baptist Church – with its Headquarters at Shaki.<sup>33</sup> At about this same time in Iree, in today's Boripe Local Government of Osun State, some others seceded and joined the African Church in that town.<sup>34</sup>

Given a situation in a Church especially in villages where all those capable of leading the congregation were polygamists as the case was in Alaari-Illaro in the Egbado South from the establishment of Baptist work in the town in 1932 to the Nigerianization years,<sup>35</sup> the effects of the stand on polygamy were devastating. Apart from retarding church growth, it reduced the population of Baptists drastically.

Moreover, the maintenance of the stand on polygamy had the effect that a considerable population of the society could not be reached by the Baptist influence. They included the Obas, Chiefs and the affluent men in the community. As such classes of people were essentially polygamists, Baptist influence could not reach them. Some of those people, as Professor J. F. Ade Ajayi has rightly demonstrated with respect to Christian Missions as a whole,<sup>36</sup> were later converted to Islam which allowed in polygamists. The Muslims, acting on the advantage offered by the Christian missionary stand, first converted the ruling classes through whom they made the people progressively Muslims.

### **Some Recurring Issues and Recent Developments**

It is significant to note that the polygamy question and the status of polygamists in the church remained a recurring issue during the Nigerianization era when the mantle of leadership fell on Nigerians. It has remained controversial ever since. Some Nigerian Christians, including a number of Baptists, in their clamour for polygamists to be granted the privilege of baptism, as long as they openly confess Christ as their Lord and Saviour, often hinge their argument on the fact that monogamy is alien to African culture, while it is emphasised that polygamy is part of African family life. One could admit that polygamy has become an integral part of African family life; yet, it would be an erroneous impression and a misleading generalization to state that monogamy is alien to African culture. As earlier indicated, oral traditions of the Yoruba people, among whom the Southern Baptists from North

America first worked for about a century, indicate that in the earliest times, the Yoruba actually cherished monogamy. It was socio-economic exigencies that later compelled them into polygamy, which in the course of time became part and parcel of their culture.

As earlier indicated, the social custom of polygamy successfully served the time in the pre-missionary days. Yet, the fact remains that among the banes of polygamous marriage, as stated elsewhere above, are disruptive tendencies like jealousy, envy, cut-throat rivalry that infest wives and children of such homes.<sup>37</sup>

At any rate, the polygamy question later became an issue that affected the work of the Baptists in particular and Christian Missions in general, in the Nigerian cultural setting. It was in the heat of this lingering controversy that the Ministerial Board of the Nigerian Baptist Convention, at its meeting of 22 July, 1999, set up a committee to re-study the polygamy issue and make recommendations on what should be the stand of the Convention on the matter. Going by the committee's findings, contained in the NBC's Book of Reports of 2001, each of the following would fall under the Convention's understanding of a polygamist:

1. *A man who is married to more than one wife at the same time;*
2. *A man who is divorced or separated from the first wife and married to another while his first wife is alive;*
3. *A woman who is separated or divorced from her husband and married to another while the first husband is still alive;*
4. *A woman who is married to a man who is already married and the wife is still alive.<sup>38</sup>*

The said document goes on to point out that: "... the word polygamy here is used for both male and females. Polyandry is usually used for females who are married to more than one man".<sup>39</sup>

It is significant to note the status of polygamists on the eve of the setting up of a committee to review the then status quo. Before 2001, they [polygamists] were not accepted into full membership of the local church. They were denied baptism and participation in the Lord's Supper. Besides, they were referred to as "friends" of the church which implied persons attending the church regularly but without membership privileges. Moreover, they were not elected into church leadership positions.<sup>40</sup>

After an in-depth review of memoranda, literature and interviews throughout the nooks and crannies of the country, and among the various stakeholders, some of the findings were that: the then stance of the NBC had helped to keep polygamy in check, and that the status quo should be maintained; any change in the existing stance of the NBC in favour of accepting polygamists

into church membership would amount to encouraging polygamy and a moral pollution of the church; .... failure to accept polygamists into church membership had greatly hindered the spread of the Gospel in a country which generally accepted polygamy as a cultural preference. Moreover, certain informants were of the view that the then stance of the NBC was not based on biblical teaching but rather on the negative attitudes of the early missionaries who insisted on western cultural preference.<sup>41</sup> Members of the said committee came up with the following observations:

1. *For lack of knowledge of the local culture, the attitude of the early missionaries to Nigerians was generally towards monogamy;*
2. *Polygamy is sometimes necessitated by the Nigerian cultural leaning towards having male children;*
3. *Islam which permits polygamy is prevalent in Nigeria;*
4. *Polygamy has existed in almost all societies of the world at different times;*
5. *Today, the European and North American societies have significantly shifted towards monogamy as a cultural preference;*
6. *There is no direct Biblical teaching on polygamy. Any theological treatment of the subject has been purely from a cultural background.*
7. *Paul's injunction to the church leaders [Bishops and Deacons] in the Book of First Timothy Chapter Three to be monogamous was an attempt to make Christianity respectable in the Greco-Roman society which preferred monogamy;*
8. *The prohibition of polygamists from leadership positions is an indication that polygamists were accepted into church membership in the New Testament times;*
9. *The only New Testament requirement for baptism and church membership are repentance from sin and beliefs in Jesus Christ;*
10. *Enormous problems are associated with the insistence on monogamy as a prerequisite for church membership in a culture which accepts polygamy as legitimate form of marriage;*
11. *The practice of the church must take seriously the injunction of Jesus Christ that those who believe should be baptized. The question that every Nigerian Baptist should answer is, can a polygamist believe? If the answer is "Yes", then the polygamist has met the*

*Lord's requirements for baptism and the church is given no room to create a contrary alternative.<sup>42</sup>*

The NBC committee thereafter made the following recommendations for consideration and possible adoption by the Convention:

- 1. The need of newly-evangelised persons for the ordinances should take priority over marital status. Therefore, no person (including polygamists) who has believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, should be denied baptism; church membership, and participation in the Lord's Supper.*
- 2. Polygamists should be evangelised and accepted as they are, with the hope that the Gospel, like a leaven, will effect a general change in the culture, towards the Christian ideals. Therefore, those who are not yet polygamists should be forbidden from becoming polygamists;*
- 3. No member of the Baptist church who is a polygamist should hold a church office or position;*
- 4. Any office holder who becomes a polygamist should be relieved of such office with immediate effect without fear or favour;*
- 5. The church should think of other methods of upholding monogamy as the ideal without disobeying the express command of the Lord to baptize those who believe. For an example, pastors and church leaders should be encouraged to hold frequent marriage seminars and workshops to uphold the ideal of Christian marriage.<sup>43</sup>*

The above recommendations, after careful deliberations, were adopted by the NBC. The majority stand is that a polygamist who has repented of his sins and confessed Christ as Lord and Saviour could be baptized and allowed the privilege of participating in taking the Lord's Supper, if he so desires, even though he cannot lead nor hold a church office. One must add here, however, that though the controversy over the polygamy question has mellowed down, it has not died completely.

## Conclusion

The Baptist Mission began its activities in Yorubaland nearly one and a half centuries ago. During this period, the Mission brought great influence to bear on some of the social customs of the Yoruba, the most salient of which was on polygamy against which a massive campaign was launched. The campaign, of course, received the blessing of the rising generation of educated elites in the Mission, in spite of the latter's great zeal and yearnings towards domesticating Christianity and propagating the African personality. Prominent among such elites was Mojola Agbebi who saw monogamy as the ideal which also made for happiness and blessings.<sup>44</sup>

Perhaps, most early Baptist Missionaries like their counterparts in other Christian Missions never gave a second thought to the Africanness in Polygamy and its seemingly inherent advantages such as avoiding the singleness for potential wives. Similarly, the problems inherent in monogamy in the peculiar African circumstances such as having one wife but many mistresses seemed to have been lost sight of.

In any case, even known polygamists were not in all cases compelled to undertake marital 'restitution' of forsaking all other wives except the first. Revd Thomas Jefferson Bowen, the pioneer Baptist missionary's own stand on this, earlier cited elsewhere above, is revealing: "It is true I have never baptized a polygamist, but I have never ventured to cause a divorce".<sup>45</sup> This is an epitome of the dilemma of some of the professional missionaries as they were confronted with the question of whether or not the marriage customs associated with polygamy were consistent with membership in the Christian church.

Be that as it may, the marital trend among the Yoruba today, as the case is with many African peoples, is fast tilting towards monogamy. Several factors, other than the influence of the church or Mission are adding an impetus to this trend. The emancipation as well as the increasing education of women play a substantial role. In this era of campaign for liberation of women, there is an aggressive emphasis on the intimacy of marriage union which monogamy can better provide.

Besides the above, societal values and outlook have changed in favour of monogamy. Gone were the days when a man's affluence was measured in terms of the size of his harem. Modern science has also added a new fillip to the present drift from polygamy to monogamy. In modern times, fairly reliable methods of family planning are at the ready disposal of spouses. This allows for the satisfaction of sexual needs of the marriage while sticking to the one-man-one-woman ideology.

Economic factors also play a very crucial role in the current monogamic drive. Polygamy today is very expensive and economically suicidal. The days are over when a harem of wives plus a wagon of children were economic assets to the family. As they now constitute awful economic liabilities especially to the man, the option has been to cut ones 'marital coat' according to one's 'economic cloth'.

In the light of all the above, it might be apt to conclude that many Yoruba (and indeed Nigerians) now embrace monogamy in spite of, and not necessarily because of the church pronouncement on this.

### Notes and References

1. The first sets of Christian missionaries to arrive in Yorubaland were from the Methodist and CMS Missions. For details, see J.F. Ade Ajayi, *Christian Missions in Nigeria, 1841-1891: The Making of New Elite*. (London: Longman, 1965) pp. 31-32.
2. E. Bolaji Idowu, *Olodumare, God in Yoruba Belief*: London: Longman, 1962) p. 5.
3. A.S. Hornby et al, *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English*, (Oxford University Press, 1974) p. 645.
4. Pa Faniran Idowu, an Ifa Priest and herbalist, Ile Babaegbe, Isale-Ofa, Iragbiji. Oral information, April 1989.
5. He is also called *Oosa-nla* or *Orisa-nla*.
6. E. Bolaji Idowu, *Olodumare, op. cit.* p. 73ff. The Deity does not however enjoin monogamy on all his worshippers.
7. Wande Abimbola, *Sixteen Great Poems of Ifa*, (UNESCO, 1975) pp. 112-113.
8. *Ibid.*, pp. 105-106.
9. E. A. Ayandele, *The Missionary Impact on Modern Nigeria, 1842-1914: A Social and Political Analysis* (London: Longman, 1966) pp. 336-336.
10. See *The Holy Quran Chapter 4 verse 3*.
11. S.W.F. Aylward, *African Culture and the Christian Church*, (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1976) p. 174.
12. Omotayo Igbayiloye, 'Christian Missionary Work in Igbominaland, 1910-1970' (B.A. Long Essay, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, 1973) p. 42.
13. Minutes of the 59<sup>th</sup> Annual Session of the Nigerian Baptist Convention, 1972. See the Presidential address by the Revd E. O. Akingbala, p. 18
14. *Ibid.* Minutes.
15. *Ibid.*
16. See the Constitution and Bye-Laws of the Nigerian Baptist Convention, Article III Sub-session (6). The Constitution was first drawn in 1914, though periodically revised from time to time as the need arose. The latest revision was approved at Port-Harcourt, River State on April 30, 1987.
17. A cross-session of informants interviewed on this subject, some of whom are officials of the Nigerian Baptist Convention but who will prefer anonymity here, did not see any thing wrong in admitting polygamists who had become such before conversion, into full Church

- Membership. Their argument was that this has nothing to do with their salvation as Christ Himself never mentioned such. Interestingly too, when this same issue came up at the 1990 Annual Baptist Ministers' Conference held at the Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary in Ogbomoso from 10-14 September, 1990, it was observed that delegates to that Conference were sharply divided. The Nigerian Baptist Convention itself has over the years, set up Committees to make appropriate recommendations on the controversial issue.
18. D.B. Vincent (Mojola Agbebi), Lecture on "Does the Introduction of European Custom and Marriage into this country promote Spiritual Growth of the Church?" in *Africa and the Gospel*, (Africana Library, University of Ibadan), p.8.
  19. T.J. Bowen, Correspondence to the Editor of the *Christian Index*, published in the June 16, 1858 edition of the *Christian Index*; See also, Bowen Papers, Vol II, (available at the NBTS, Ogbomoso Library) p. 396.
  20. Interview with Deacon J. K. Osatoba, First Baptist Church, Ekinrin Adde via Kabba, August 28 1990.
  21. The Debate on "The European Marriage Custom" held on Friday 2<sup>nd</sup> of November, 1888 at the Breadfruit School room, Lagos, at the call of "The Young Men's Christian Association" in Mojola Agbebi, *Africa and the Gospel* (A Collection of Agbebi sermons, lectures and debates copies available at the Africans Section, Kenneth Dike Library, University of Ibadan) See p. 18.
  22. *Ibid.*
  23. E. A. Ayandele (ed). *T. J. Bowen Central Africa: Adventures and Missionary Labours in Several Countries in the Interior of Africa from 1849 to 1856* (London: Frank Cass, 1968) p. 342. The Book was first published in 1857.
  24. Interview with Revd J. O. Omirinde, Alaafia-Oluwa Baptist Church, Ilorin, 18 September, 1989.
  25. Deacon J. K. Osatoba, already cited, oral information.
  26. Eubank Papers: Correspondence of Rev. P. A. Eubank to the Foreign Mission Board, Southern Baptist Convention, Richmond Virginia. July 23, 1885.
  27. Fragments of a letter from the Executive Secretary, F.M.B. to missionaries of the Yoruba field. (n.d.).
  28. "Important Notice to Every Baptist Church in Nigeria, 1938" in Vertical File 2248, Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary, Ogbomoso. Cf C.E. Maddry, "Recommendations pertaining to Nigerian Baptist Convention, 1948" (N.B.T.S. Library, Ogbomoso). Those recommendations were adopted by the meeting.
  29. The new Constitution was adopted at the 24<sup>th</sup> Session of the Nigerian Baptist Convention held in Ibadan in April, 1937.



30. Deacon (Chief) S. A. Sayomi, the Asiwaju of Igosun c/o First Baptist Church, Igosun-Offa, Oral evidence, 19<sup>th</sup> October, 1990.
31. A. Hastings, *Christian Marriage in Africa* (London: SPCK, 1973).
32. Interview with Chief (Dr.) S. O. Omotoso, c/o Sanders' Baptist Church, Iree 5<sup>th</sup> October, 1990.
33. S. O. Bada, Founder of United African Baptist Church, Shaki Letter to Dr. T. O. High (One-time Librarian, N.B.T.S. Ogbomosho) July 5, 1965.
34. Chief (Dr.) S. O. Omotoso, already cited, Oral Information.
35. Pa Emmanuel Akanbi (76), First Baptist Church, Alaari-Ilaro Egbado South. Oral evidence, Nov. 1, 1990.
36. J. F. Ade Ajayi, *Christian Missions*, p. 103.
37. S.W.F. Aylward, *African Culture and the Christian Church* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1976) p. 174.
38. See, Nigerian Baptist Convention, *Book of Reports for the 88<sup>th</sup> Annual Session*, April 21-26, 2001, p.218.
39. *Ibid.*
40. *Ibid.*
41. *Ibid.*, pp. 218-219.
42. *Ibid.*, p. 219.
43. *Ibid.*, p. 220.
44. D. B. Vincent (Mojola Agbebi), Lecture on "Does the introduction of European Custom and marriage into this country promote spiritual growth of the church?" "In *African and the Gospel*, (Africana Library, University of Ibadan), p. 18.
45. T. J. Bowen, correspondence to the Editor of the *Christian Index* published in the June 16, 1858 edition of the *Christian Index*. See also Bowen Papers Vol. II, p. 396 (copies available in the Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary Library Ogbomosho).