

**WOMEN'S PERCEPTIONS OF POLYGYNY
AMONG THE KAGURU OF TANZANIA**

by

**Dominique Meekers
Nadra Franklin**

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Abstract: This study examines women's perceptions of polygyny among the Kaguru of Tanzania. Using data from ethnographic interviews, the results show a widespread rejection of polygynous unions among Kaguru women. Rather than passively accept a co-wife, a Kaguru woman can threaten and sometimes leave her husband when he takes a second wife. In evaluating polygyny, Kaguru women are mainly concerned with the impact that a diversion of resources from the husband to the co-wife may have on their own welfare and that of their children. Despite the fact that Kaguru women have a substantially heavier workload than men, there are no indications that women perceive polygyny as a means to reduce that workload by sharing it with a co-wife.

About the Authors: Dominique Meekers is Research Director of Population Services International and an Associate in the Department of Population Dynamics, School of Hygiene and Public Health, Johns Hopkins University. His major research interests focus on changes in patterns of marriage and family formation in sub-Saharan Africa.

Nadra Franklin is currently a post-doctoral fellow at the Population Studies Center of the University of Michigan. Her research interests include the demography of African and African American women employing both quantitative and qualitative data.

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Introduction

In this paper, we discuss women's attitudes toward polygyny by analyzing ethnographic interviews among the Kaguru peoples of the Morogoro region of Tanzania. Among these women, we find that polygyny is discussed only in the most pessimistic of terms. Women are particularly concerned with the diversion of financial resources from them to another wife and from their own children to the children of a co-wife. Because of such concerns, a Kaguru woman may threaten to leave her husband if he contemplates taking another wife, or force her husband to leave her. In issuing such threats, a woman exercises agency by resisting and/or expressing her dissatisfaction with an unsatisfactory marital relationship rather than merely accepting the situation. In this manner, a woman indicates her bitterness towards this socially-sanctioned institution. Given the social constraints of avoiding polygyny, Kaguru women use these threats of separation and divorce to express their resentment of polygyny.

Literature Review

Despite the relatively widespread interest in African polygyny, little research has been done concerning women's attitudes towards polygyny. Much of the existing research in sub-Saharan Africa focuses on the socio-cultural and demographic correlates of polygyny (Boserup 1970; Goody 1976; Lesthaeghe et al. 1989, 1994), or on its demographic and economic implications (e.g. Garenne and van de Walle 1989; Pebley and Mbugua 1989; Grossbard-Shectman 1986; Sichona 1992). In addition, there has been considerable emphasis on the future frequency of and alternatives to polygyny (Clignet 1987; Goode 1970; Karanja 1987, 1994; Topouzis 1985; van de Walle and Kekovole 1984). Studies of African marriage, however, generally devote little attention to women's perceptions of polygyny as it affects their marriage and the well-being of their children.

Scattered studies on polygyny in sub-Saharan Africa suggest that women's attitudes toward polygyny vary both within and between societies (Dorjahn 1988; Potash 1989; White and Burton 1988). In some societies, women benefit from polygyny because co-wives cooperate in trade and economic affairs (Amadiume 1987; MacCormack 1983). In other societies, women benefit from polygyny because it provides them with labor assistance (Dorjahn 1988). Conversely, in other societies, women disapprove of polygynous unions. Such may be the case when cooperation between co-wives is limited due to jealousy. For example, among the Luo of Kenya, the Hausa and Yoruba of Nigeria, and the Bakgalagadi of Botswana, the term for a co-wife implies jealousy or rivalry (Potash 1989; Solway 1990; Ware 1979).

Polygyny is often associated with problems in the household, not only between co-wives, but also between a wife and her husband. In polygynous unions, household relationships are complicated by the presence of children, the husband's perceived favoritism of the children of one wife, and the efforts of each wife to secure more resources for her own children. Both men and women may manipulate marital strategies to their own advantage, and the interpersonal relations within polygynous families and households are highly variable (Dorjahn 1988).

Helen Ware (1979) remarked that in some societies social pressures to accept polygyny may be so strong that women may claim to be happy with a co-wife, even if such is not the case. In her study of women's attitudes toward polygyny among the Yoruba, Ware found that a majority of the women surveyed (60 percent) indicated they would be pleased to be in a polygynous relationship because they could then share the burdens of work and also have another woman with whom they could gossip and play. Those who would not be pleased to have a co-wife (23 percent), were unwilling to share resources, both sexual and material. Ware also found, as did others, that more traditional and less educated women are more likely to express positive views towards polygyny than are less traditional and more educated women (D'Hondt and Vandewiele 1980; Ferraro 1991; Okonjo 1992; Pool 1972).

The issue, however, may be more complex. Jacqueline Solway (1990) points out that polygyny is an institution which may evoke contradictory feelings in women. Personally, a woman may find that the lives of both herself and her children are enhanced because of polygyny; sharing the care of a husband across wives decreases a woman's workload and increases her leisure time. Yet, at the same time, a woman may also feel that polygyny creates a structural reality in which the increase in the number of domestic groups created by multiple wives detracts from her ability to command the household's economic resources.

In Solway's study (1990) of the Bakgalagadi of Botswana, many young wives stated that they would leave their husbands if they took second wives. Solway attributes this reaction to recent changes in women's expectations of the conjugal bond and to their increasing material investments in children and the household. Furthermore, it may not be polygyny itself that women are adverse to, but marriage per se. Some widowed and divorced women may be able to maintain their independence outside of a marital union. They thus may prefer not to remarry at all and this desire may be confused with a disdain for polygyny. In other words, some of the negative sentiment expressed by women toward polygyny may be connected to a growing negative attitude or indifference toward marriage itself. Ware (1979) also relates women's attitudes to the value of marriage but she contends, in contrast, that women may be more willing to share their husbands, rather than divorce them, when husbands are not valued very highly.

Our study of the Kaguru illustrates another facet of women's reactions to polygyny by raising the issue of cultural variation. Kaguru women face social pressure to accept polygyny, yet they believe that polygyny is detrimental to the well-being of themselves and their children. The typically mentioned benefits of polygyny are not apparent in Kaguru society. In fact, only one possible positive outcome of

having a co-wife was mentioned-- to have someone share in the misery of a bad marriage, a pessimistic appraisal indeed of polygyny.

The Kaguru

The Kaguru reside in a hilly area near the Itumba mountains in the Morogoro region of Tanzania (Beidelman 1983, 1986; Mluma 1990; Winter and Beidelman 1972). The large majority of Kaguru live in the plateau surrounding the mountains, where the rivers from the mountains form arable valleys. Those living in the river valleys cultivate every year; those living in the higher and dryer regions practice slash-and-burn cultivation. The Kaguru cultivate millet, sorghum, and maize, and supplement their grain-based diet with a variety of vegetables. In addition to cultivating grains and vegetables, most Kaguru keep chickens, goats, and sheep. During the rainy season most of the land is relatively fertile, but recurrent droughts and related problems (such as flooding and rodent infestations) often destroy the harvest, resulting in periodic food shortages (Beidelman 1986).

As in many other societies, Kaguru males benefit from polygynous unions. Although Kaguru women are responsible for household work, household food production, and child rearing, it is not uncommon for women to also assist their husbands in cash crop production (Meeker and Meekers 1994). If the first wife is barren, polygyny enables Kaguru men to still have children (Beidelman 1986: 23), and it provides men with a sexual outlet when a wife is nursing a child (Beidelman 1973: 262). More importantly, the nature of social relations accords polygynously married men with enhanced status. In Kaguru society, the main strategy for social advancement is to secure followers or dependents, rather than gain access to land, ritual knowledge, or livestock. While such resources are advantageous, they are only a means to increase the number of followers or dependents. For Kaguru males, polygyny increases their number of dependents by adding not only the new wife, but also her children, and perhaps eventually daughters-in-law (Beidelman 1986: 15-16).

According to Thomas Beidelman (1982), Kaguru woman's antipathy towards polygyny is at least partly due to the influence of the Church Missionary Society (CMS). The CMS is the Christian Church in Ukaguru. It represents a "low" Evangelical party in which formal theology is overshadowed by Bible reading and prayer (Beidelman 1982). As Beidelman (1982:140) emphatically states, "The CMS was unalterably opposed to polygyny," and it also condemned divorce. Thus, for members of the Church, both polygyny and divorce were prohibited. Because the CMS identified monogamy as a fundamental tenet of civilization, polygyny wrought havoc with the moral fabric of the community. CMS rules were at direct odds with the traditional Kaguru practice of polygyny, which enhanced the status of men by enlarging their kinship network.

The ethnographic literature indicates that Kaguru men appear to be reluctant to marry Christian girls, because the CMS condemns both polygyny and divorce. This implies that if a man's wife is barren he cannot divorce her, nor can he marry a second wife to bear children for him (Beidelman 1963: 87). Although men who contract a Christian marriage cannot legally become polygynous, they are able to initiate additional informal unions with "outside wives" (Clignet 1987), women with whom they have a relationship with both the obligations and rights of marriage but to whom they are not legally married.

According to data from the 1993 Tanzania Demographic and Health Survey (Ngallaba et al. 1993), 28 percent of married women are currently in polygynous unions (including informal unions); for the Morogoro region, in which the Kaguru live, the corresponding figure is 22.5 percent.

Finally, although socially sanctioned by Kaguru society, polygyny is banned for Christian marriages by the Tanzania Marriage Act of 1971. Legislation banning polygyny does not apply to civil, Islamic, and traditional unions (Meena 1992: 16) because only Christian marriages ban polygyny.

Methods and Data

Our information on Kaguru women's perceptions of polygyny is drawn from a set of semi-structured ethnographic interviews conducted during the summer of 1992 as part of a demographic study on women's lives and their desire for children (van de Walle et al. 1993). In these interviews, a small group of rural Kaguru women (43 cases) were asked to discuss their views on polygyny. As the precursor to a quantitative survey of 800 randomly selected women, these women were purposefully selected by the project anthropologist to represent the general life experiences of Kaguru women. All polygynously-married women were senior wives. The questions were open-ended; the questionnaire served merely as a guideline for the interview, and respondents were allowed to raise additional topics for discussion.

Women who were or had been in a polygynous union were asked if they were happy when their husband married another wife, and women who had never been in a polygynous union were asked how they would feel if their husband were to marry another wife. Thus, the reports on women's views about polygyny presented here are based on actual experience as well as on women's perceptions of the effects of polygyny. Additional information about women's reactions to polygyny was not specifically solicited, but was volunteered by the respondents during discussions about marriage procedures, their role in spousal selection, the teaching content of initiation ceremonies, the social position of women, and the reasons for divorce in Kaguru society. While unsolicited information about polygyny may not be representative because it may reflect the opinion of respondents who hold particularly strong views, such information is retained here for illustrative purposes.

All interviews were conducted in KiKaguru by a female interviewer. The interviewer was trained and supervised by Dr. Penina Mlama, an expert in the field of Kaguru traditional ceremonies and theater. The interviews were subsequently translated and transcribed, and analyzed with The Ethnograph, a computer program for analysis of text-based data.

The forty-three respondents are spread across three age groups; five are under age 30, 22 are aged 30-49, and 16 are aged 50 or older. Most respondents attended primary school, but only 12 had reached standard seven. Of the total, twelve women indicated that their husbands had other wives, which corresponds to the overall prevalence of polygyny in the Region.

Social Support for Polygyny

Considering the many advantages of polygyny to Kaguru males and elders, and the cultural norms in society supporting the institution, it is not surprising to find that polygyny is sustained through social mechanisms. The acceptance of polygyny as a way of life is reflected in the socialization process during adolescence. For Kaguru women, this is institutionalized in the form of initiation ceremonies, called *digubi* (Mlama 1990). During the *digubi* ceremonies, young girls are instructed by old women about the norms and values of Kaguru society, including the proper behavior for married women.¹ When asked to specify what they were taught during *digubi*, several respondents volunteered information indicating that polygyny is an aspect of life that may be hard to avoid. Not only are the young women taught to accept polygyny, they are warned that husbands are free to take outside wives if they decide that their wives do not care for them adequately. Whether in the form of a legal second wife, or an informal outside wife, women are instructed in *digubi* to accept this situation if it occurs:

[I was taught that] you should not be jealous of your husband, even when you see him or hear that he runs with other girls. Just leave him, when he comes home, just be happy (R41).

I was told to live peacefully with my husband. You should serve him as usual. If you won't care about him he can find other women outside. That will be the beginning of problems, that is what they told me (R37).

After marriage, there is considerable social support (or even pressure) for males to marry additional wives. One respondent, who was the first wife of a headman, indicated that, because of her husband's position, he had experienced a lot of social pressure to marry a second wife:

People started talking that the headman is having only one wife, a headman should have two wives. [...] They tried very much to convince him, but I was refusing. [...] His bosses were against him having only one wife. One wife cannot cater for all the guests coming to the headman's house, a headman has many guests. [...] When they heard that I have got two babies, they said now it is a must that the headman should get another wife for himself (R30).

Despite her stated opposition to having a co-wife, this woman's husband was eventually pressured into marrying another wife during a trip out of town. This account illustrates the status that is associated with polygyny. For men, the enhanced social status afforded polygyny compels men who are financially able to marry again. For women, their relatively lower status in the community means that they lack the power to successfully resist having a co-wife.

Occasionally, men also defend polygyny by arguing that it reduces the wife's workload:

[My husband] claims that there are many duties for one wife, he wants to give me assistance (R42).

However, the respondents themselves never indicated that having a co-wife reduces a woman's work.

These examples illustrate the social support for polygyny in Kaguru society; starting in early adolescence, the socialization process is geared to inform women that it is common for a man to marry more than one wife and, that women have no recourse but to accept polygyny.

Women's Attitudes Toward Polygynous Unions

Kaguru women do not necessarily acquiesce to accept polygyny, despite both social support for and a general resignation to polygyny. When asked how they would react if their husband married another wife, many respondents expressed strong disapproval:

- I. Would you mind having a co-wife?
- R. [Having a] co-wife is not a good thing, I don't like it. If it happens I can't avoid it, but I would hate to have a co-wife (R12).
- R. I don't want a co-wife. I don't want my children to be married to co-wives. I hated this even before I got married. Unfortunately, I [ended up having] a co-wife, though not legally. It wasn't my will; I came to experience this, so I don't want my children to experience it (R8).

A few of the respondents, however, voiced approval of polygyny. They did so not because they perceived benefits accruing to them and their children, but rather because it would allow them to share the burden of an unsatisfactory marriage.

- R. I would like [to have a co-wife], because both of us would suffer the same (R21).
- I. Did you mind having a co-wife?
- R. I was happy, how can one be unhappy for such thing? I thought maybe I treated my husband in an abnormal way [...] I was happy in the sense that I faced a lot of problems. So I wanted to see if the new wife could tolerate [them] as I did. That was what made me happy (R22).

The latter response supports the argument that polygyny may or may not be beneficial depending on whether the husband is valued positively or negatively (Ware 1979: 190). In the above examples, women are willing to share their husbands only because they have unsatisfactory relationships with them.

Women provided several explanations for their aversion to polygynous unions. Despite the strong opposition of the CMS to polygyny, only one respondent noted that Christianity prohibits polygyny. On the other hand, many respondents mentioned that polygyny can cause problems in the household, either because the husband shows favoritism towards the youngest wife, or because he neglects his first wife.

- R. Men have many problems; it depends. When a man marries a second wife, he starts troubles in the house. If a woman tries to comment on what her husband does, he will simply answer that it is due to jealousy. Everyday there are a lot of problems. No more love between the two. In such a situation, a woman can demand a divorce (R25).
- R. If [a man] gets a co-wife, definitely one family will suffer. He won't manage to satisfy the needs of both women; as a result, he will favor the junior wife (R4).
- R. I wouldn't be happy [with a co-wife] since life would change. You know, if a husband has two wives or more there will be no balance in love and in most cases the elder wife is the one disadvantaged. Normally, the junior wife is more favored than the senior wife, that is, the junior wife becomes number one, while the senior wife becomes number two (R25).
- R. [When my husband married another wife] I was not happy because it distorted my life, also you are not confident about your completeness as a woman. The thought erodes your love for him (R14).
- R. Marriage is for two people, if the third joins [the marriage], love will automatically fade away (R16).

Potential conflicts between co-wives are another reason why many Kaguru women oppose polygyny. According to Beidelman, tensions between Kaguru co-wives sometimes culminate in witchcraft accusations. Some women are unwilling to let their children take food from a co-wife because of beliefs that a woman may cause sickness among her co-wives' children. They prefer to let their children eat with their clan sisters and mother (Beidelman 1963:88-90, 1986: 154). Although none of the respondents interviewed here mentioned such extreme reactions, many women expressed concerns about conflicts with co-wives.

- R. I would not be happy [with a co-wife]. I do not want to quarrel with a co-wife. If [my husband] marries another wife, I will divorce him (R26).
- R. [Having a co-wife] would pain me, since I would think that he has degraded me and loves the other wife more. I think that I would quarrel very much with my co-wife (R23).
- I. Would you mind having a co-wife?
- R. If my father was dead, okay. But because he is alive, I could have gone back home.
- I. Why?
- R. It is not jealousy, but polygamy has a lot of problems.
- I. Tell me one problem.

- R. The first wife will be killed by the other wife.
- I. So, the second wife is usually offensive?
- R. Yes (R29).
- R. What causes [divorce] is mostly scorn. Sometimes the husband scorns you. The other wife scorns you, and the husband sides with her and sees you as nothing. You must get angry! (R43).
- R. Having a co-wife is not good. It creates a lot of misunderstandings. You know if a junior wife comes in she can think that she is the most beloved and think that you (the first wife) are nothing (R5).

While Kaguru men have a tendency to think of all the women and children of a polygynous household as one large family, women in polygynous unions compete with co-wives for attention from their husband and for resources for both themselves and their children (Beidelman 1986: 16-20). When a woman's husband marries another wife, or has an outside wife, the resources available to her will decline because the husband's resources now need to be divided between the two women. In some cases, the husband will only support his new wife.

- R. ...when you become two it is not possible in fact to have an understanding. Also even the budget will be higher; how are you going to progress? [...] You don't progress. Do you think it is just paying bridewealth only! [...] The needs will increase. [...] You could buy one kilogram of meat and suffice, now you have to send for half a kilogram.
- I. Here half, and there half?
- R. I who came first have a family, the half kilogram what will it suffice? (R35).
- R. [Since my husband] married a second wife, I am now nothing; he no longer loves me. I don't lie about him. When I was sick he left me and went to another town with his junior wife. He did not mind about me being sick. He is now visiting me, but for one year when I was sick he was not visiting me (R41).

The reduced support also affects a woman's children. In many cases, Kaguru women indicated that husbands failed to provide for children after marrying another wife.

- I. When [your husband] married his second wife, did he continue to care for you?
- R. He never did, I was living with my children facing troubles. He was only taking care of his new wife, he forgot about me and my children (R22).

- R. When I got my sixth child my husband [got] an outside woman, and they had a child. They continued until they had three children. At this long period, I had a lot of problems of taking care of the family. If my children were sick I had to take care myself, for everything, I was mother and father (R8).
- I. When he married another wife, was he taking care of your children?
- R. He wasn't caring. He could leave on Friday to Mamboya village -his woman was there- while a child was sick. He would only give me some tablets for the child. He wouldn't come back until Monday (R14).
- R. After he had other women, he never worked in our farms, he never brought food in the house and he never bought clothes for the children. He didn't even mind when the children were sick (R25).

It is noteworthy that several women were upset over their husband's lack of economic support, particularly when their children were sick. Failure of a man to support his children, especially when they are sick, is unacceptable to these women respondents. Lack of material support is one of the main reasons why Kaguru women oppose polygynous unions.

Women's Reactions to Polygyny

Recent ethnographic studies have emphasized that African women should be treated as social actors in their own right, actors trying to achieve their own goals within certain constraints imposed upon them by society (Mbilyi 1992; United Nations 1992). This perspective suggests that Kaguru women's aversion to polygynous unions should be reflected in attempts to prevent their husbands from marrying additional wives, or, alternatively, in behavior geared at limiting the negative effects of such polygynous unions.

Some Kaguru respondents expressed a fatalistic point of view, suggesting that women have little bargaining power to stop their husband from marrying another wife.

- I. If you tell [your husband] not to marry the second wife, would he listen to you?
- R. Never, he will never listen to you. We women are considered as children, whatever the man says we have to tolerate (R22).
- I. Would you mind having a co-wife?
- R. That depends on the man himself. If he decides to marry, he marries.
- I. Yes, if he decides to marry he marries, but in your heart would you like that or would you not

like it?

- R. That is his own decision. A woman cannot decide for him not to marry (R33).
- I. If he married another woman and you don't like it, why can't you leave him and get married to another man?
- R. You as the woman, you are married, you haven't married the man, how can you decide to quit?
- I. So, you try to tolerate; even when you have problems you don't want to divorce. You bear and bring up your children in that situation?
- R. Yes, there is no other way (R24).

Other women, however, are less passive in accepting or tolerating polygyny. One strategy available to a Kaguru woman is to threaten to divorce her husband should he become interested in marrying another wife (Beidelman 1982). Similarly, a polygynously-married woman may use the threat of returning to her brothers or parents when reacting to a husband's stinginess or mistreatment. The strategy of threatening divorce is particularly important for Kaguru women in resisting polygynous unions, since here each wife tends to be set at odds against co-wives and their children (Beidelman 1986: 20). Thus, to prevent this from occurring, a woman will threaten divorce in the hope that this threat will prevent a second marriage.

- R. I wouldn't be happy [if my husband married another wife]. I would have told him to send me back home before getting another wife (R15).
- I. Would you mind having a co-wife?
- R. I wouldn't be happy. I don't want to quarrel with a co-wife. If he marries another wife, I will divorce him (R26).
- R. [My husband] had another woman.
- I. He had a woman in this same village?
- R. He was mistreating me and therefore I told him to divorce me.
- I. What did he say?
- R. He didn't [want] to send me back home.
- I. Did he care for you in all aspects as he did before he got the other woman?
- R. Yes, then the elder people tried to warn him about his affair with the outside

woman, so he decided to leave her. Then our life returned to normal.

I. Did he marry that woman or were they only friends?

R. He didn't marry her, they were friends (R13).

Such threats of divorce do not generally lead to actual attempts at divorce, but rather to efforts to resolve problems without dissolving the union. Indeed, it is probably no coincidence that two of the respondents quoted above (cases 15 and 13) indicated, not that they would initiate a divorce, but rather that they would or did tell their husbands to divorce them. Chances are that a Kaguru husband will refuse to initiate a divorce because his bridewealth will not be returned if he initiates a divorce without valid reason. Demands for divorce are probably most effective when the woman has a strong support network, as may be the case when the couple lives with the wife's kin because the husband was unable to pay a large bridewealth (Beidelman 1963, 1986). From our interviews, it appears that although threats of divorce are not uncommon, only a few women actually left their husbands, and returned to their parental home.

R. An evil spirit has entered [my husband], and he took up another wife. That is why I am resting here at [my parents'] home.

I. So you have decided to rest here at home.

R. I packed ready to go and stay. What happened with my husband made me come back [to my parents], without a choice.

I. You yourself decided to come back?

R. I had to come back.

I. So, your life [was] nice before that?

R. Yes, it was a happy life.

I. But when it came toward the end?

R. Difficult. But he has asked me to go back [to his house]; he has already divorced that other woman.

I. He has divorced her?

R. Yes, he has divorced her, but I haven't made up my mind to go back (R28).

To some extent, the infrequency of women divorcing their husbands may be related to the fact that women lack better marital alternatives, thus implying that remarriage may not be an improvement. Furthermore, a Kaguru woman is not generally supported by her family members when she seeks a divorce, in large part because of their responsibility to return the bridewealth.

- I. Did you ever consider leaving your husband?
- R. It was not possible; my father objected. He said my husband having another wife is not good enough a reason for us to separate. Men are like elephants, they never eat from one tree! So, I tolerated it (R14).

The lack of support for divorce from a woman's kin members is not surprising considering that a Kaguru marriage is based on bridewealth payments. Since a woman's kin members are her bridewealth recipients, they would be expected to return the bridewealth when the woman initiated the divorce. Given the constraints which prevent women from divorcing, their best strategy is to force their husband to initiate the divorce instead. In this way, the woman's kin would not be required to return the bridewealth payment and she would be accepted freely at her father's home. Thus, Kaguru women have found that the threat of divorce--which itself is an implicit demand for the man to initiate the divorce--is their most viable option to act in their own best interest.

Discussion

Through their own words, we examine Kaguru women's perceptions of the impact of polygyny on their lives and the lives of their children. Despite institutionalized social support for polygyny, most Kaguru women do not favor it. Women who have not experienced polygyny are wary of the institution and the effect it may have on their lives, and those who have had a co-wife have only negative remarks about polygyny. Our respondents did not provide much information about outside wives, but from the available information it is evident that opinions about such unofficial polygynous unions are at least equally stern (see also Ware 1979).

Although many Kaguru women reject polygyny outright, their opinions about the effects of polygyny vary. While some Kaguru women stated that polygyny was undesirable because it disturbed their own lives and happiness, others were much more concerned about the deleterious effects a co-wife may have on their children. Unlike other studies (e.g., Amadiume 1987; Dorjahn 1988; MacCormack 1983), Kaguru women failed to mention potential positive results of having a co-wife, such as the reduction of one's workload or the friendship of a co-wife with whom one can bond and share gossip (Ware 1979). The one exception to this occurs when a woman states that she would like a co-wife to share in the misery of marriage.

While it is not unusual to encounter such strong opposition to polygyny among educated and urban women in many African societies (e.g., D'Hondt and Vandewiele 1980; Ferraro 1991; Okonjo 1992; Pool 1972; Ware 1979), in a more traditional setting, such as that of the Kaguru, a more tolerant

attitude may be expected, at least among some of the women. The findings from this study support Beidelman's (1986) argument that Kaguru women in polygynous unions compete with co-wives over resources for themselves and for their children. Material support for a wife and her children frequently declines when the husband marries another wife. Considering that resources are scarce in Kaguru society, it is in women's best interest to oppose their husbands' marriage to another wife. Women may have limited power in actually preventing their husbands from marrying another wife, or taking an outside wife, but it is not uncommon for a Kaguru woman to use the threat of divorce whenever the continued material support for herself and her children is at stake. It remains unclear whether these threats result in divorce or the prevention of polygyny, but they do provide an outlet for women to express their displeasure with the social institution of polygyny. Such a threat may result in the dissolution of an informal union when the woman engages her family in this crisis. By drawing her family's attention to the man's behavior and the necessary repayment of the bridewealth if he asks for a divorce, a woman brings public attention to her displeasure and the husband is encouraged to accede to the woman's wishes.

An understanding and appreciation of the cultural variation in responses to polygyny in Africa can shed light on women's roles within society and expose their efforts to mediate between social norms and their own well-being when the two are at odds. Many studies, particularly from West Africa (e.g. Ware 1979) have elaborated on the feeling of camaraderie and kinship among co-wives; this appears absent among the Kaguru who spoke only bitterly about polygyny. The concerns of Kaguru women when discussing the possible effects of polygyny on their lives focused primarily on two areas: 1) the intrusion in their marriage and its effects on their relationship with their husband; and 2) the competition for economic resources a co-wife would present for the woman and her children.

What appears most strikingly different for the Kaguru is the inability of the women to provide a single possible benefit to polygyny in terms of either sharing their workload or developing a friendship. The only remarks made which indicated some type of allowance for polygyny were made by women who had an unsatisfactory relationship with their husband, and who were confident that the new wife would be treated equally poorly by the husband.

Kaguru women are socialized from adolescence to accept polygyny. Because of the competition for support a co-wife presents, however, most Kaguru women express a preference for monogamy. While women must simultaneously live with the prospect of polygyny because of their low social status, they attempt to pre-empt polygyny with the threat of separation or divorce.

Notes

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1. This instruction is provided by women from alternate generations, i.e. girls are instructed by women from the generation of their grandmothers (Beidelman, 1986).

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