

## Disabled Polygamy and Nation Building in Nigeria

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### **Abstract**

*Polygamy remains a prevalent institution in Nigeria, profoundly influencing cultural norms and societal dynamics. This paper delves into the intricate relationship between the nation's polygamous antecedents and the nation-building challenges in the country. Through an examination of its historical and cultural dimensions, it explores the impact of disabled polygamy on different facets of nation-building, including social cohesion and gender relations. Drawing on a range of scholarly sources, the paper evaluates the complex interplay between polygamy and nation-building. By critically examining these issues, the paper contributes to a distinct understanding of the dynamics of polygamy within the Nigerian context and offers insights into the implications for nation-building.*

**Keywords:** *Polygamy, Polygamy in Africa, Polygamy in Nigeria, Disabled Polygamy, Nationbuilding*

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### **Introduction**

This paper is fundamentally framed on the thesis that the phenomenon of polygamy is a pristine and potent African ideology (Chitando, 2020). Invariably, polygamy has continued to stand as one of the oldest and still subsisting social institutions within Nigerian society, profoundly continuing to shape its familial structures, cultural norms and societal fabric. With a rich tapestry of ethnicities, languages, and traditions, Nigeria indeed represents a mosaic of diverse communities, each with its unique perspectives on the practice of polygamy. This complex phenomenon has additionally been interwoven into the very fabric of Nigerian life, influencing not only individual households but also possessing immense potentials for influencing broader socio-political landscapes (Nwoko, 2020).

Consequently, the significance of polygamy in Nigeria extends far beyond the confines of personal relationships. It is expected to resonate deeply with the nation's efforts towards building a cohesive and prosperous society (an allusion to nationbuilding). At its core therefore, nation-building in Nigeria encompasses the multifaceted process of forging a collective identity, fostering social cohesion and promoting economic development. In this context,

polygamy emerges as a potent force that both reflects and shapes the contours of nationhood, influencing the dynamics of inclusion and cultural expression.

To comprehend the envisaged intricate interplay between polygamy and nation-building in Nigeria, it is imperative to embark on a multidimensional exploration that traverses historical and cultural terrains. As a matter of fact, Nigeria's colonial legacy, marked by the imposition of Western values, has left an indelible imprint on the practice of polygamy, engendering debates over its compatibility with modern notions of gender mainstreaming and relevant governance (Daud, 2020; Ottuh, 2022; Whitehouse, 2023). Concurrently, Nigeria's diverse cultural landscape, encompassing myriad ethnic groups and religious affiliations, offers a kaleidoscope of perspectives on the institution of polygamy, ranging from staunch adherence to traditional practices to varying degrees of adaptation and reinterpretation.

The linkages and disarticulations between polygamy and nationbuilding in Nigeria accordingly warrant careful examination. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for discerning the broader implications of polygamy on nationbuilding in Nigeria. Hence, in the light of the embedded complexities, this paper embarks on an inquiry into the nexus of polygamy and nationbuilding in Nigeria. By synthesizing historical insights and cultural antecedents, it seeks to elucidate the different dynamics at play and their implications for Nigeria's ongoing quest for cohesive and sustainable nation-building. Through this endeavor, the paper seeks to contribute to scholarly discourse and inspire efforts aimed at fostering a more harmonious society in Nigeria.

### **Conceptual Explication: The Contours of Polygamy**

Polygamy, the practice of having multiple spouses (simultaneously) has a rich and multifaceted history, spanning across diverse cultures and civilizations. The Nigerian trajectory of polygamy is more appropriately denotable as polygyny, meaning simultaneous marriage to multiple wives or the custom of being married to more than one wife at the same time. But joining the orthodoxy, the paper uses purposively, the concept of polygamy. Invariably, throughout human civilization, polygamy has been both celebrated and condemned, embraced and prohibited, reflecting the complex interplay of religious, cultural, legal, and socio-economic factors. Its origins can be traced back to ancient civilizations, where it was often associated with notions of power, wealth, and social status (Ja'far et al, 2020). In ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece, and Rome, polygamy was prevalent among rulers, nobility, and elites as a means of consolidating political alliances, expanding familial networks, and ensuring dynastic continuity (Payne, 2016). Moreover, in many tribal societies across Africa, Asia, and the Americas, polygamy was deeply ingrained in cultural traditions and kinship systems, serving as a mechanism for strengthening social bonds, sharing labor, and enhancing economic security (Pearsall, 2022).

Religious scriptures and traditions have also played a significant role in shaping attitudes towards polygamy. In Islam, polygyny (a man having multiple wives) is permissible under certain conditions outlined in the Quran, although it is subject to varying interpretations and practices within different Muslim communities. In contrast, Christianity has generally condemned polygamy, with monogamy being upheld as the ideal marital norm, particularly within Western societies influenced by Judeo-Christian values. Hinduism, Buddhism, and other religious traditions also exhibit diverse perspectives on polygamy, with some permitting it under specific circumstances and others advocating monogamy. Invariably, the practice of polygamy manifests in diverse forms across cultures, with variations in norms, customs, and social expectations. In some societies, polygamy is patriarchal, with men having multiple wives while women typically have only one husband. In others, polyandry (a woman having multiple

husbands) is practiced, albeit less commonly. Additionally, polygamous unions may be formalized through religious or customary ceremonies, or they may exist informally within communities where legal recognition is absent. The prevalence and acceptance of polygamy therefore vary widely across regions, influenced by factors such as socio-economic development, gender dynamics, and cultural heritage (Charsley & Liversage, 2013; Nielsen & Cragun, 2010; Thobejane & Flora, 2014; Zeitzen, 2020).

The legal status of polygamy also varies significantly around the world, with some countries prohibiting it outright, others permitting it under specific conditions, and still others turning a blind eye to its practice. So, in many Western nations, polygamy is illegal and considered a criminal offense, primarily due to concerns related to gender equality, exploitation, and social cohesion. However, in certain African and Middle Eastern countries where Islamic law coexists with secular legal systems, polygamy may be legally sanctioned with provisions for registration, consent, and even financial support for multiple spouses. Nevertheless, even in contexts where polygamy is legal, challenges such as inheritance rights, child custody, and social stigma persist, highlighting the complexities of regulating polygamous unions within modern legal frameworks (Thobejane & Flora, 2014; Wirastri & Van Huis, 2021; Zeitzen, 2020).

Polygamy can have profound socio-economic ramifications, affecting individuals, families, and communities in multifaceted ways. From an economic perspective, polygamous households may experience both advantages and disadvantages, with multiple earners potentially enhancing household income but also increasing financial strain due to competing demands for resources. Moreover, polygamy can influence intra-household dynamics, power relations, and access to education, healthcare, and other essential services, particularly for women and children. Additionally, polygamous marriages may exacerbate inequalities and tensions within societies, particularly in contexts where gender norms are rigidly enforced and women have limited autonomy (Thobejane & Flora, 2014; Zeitzen, 2020).

By and large, the contours of polygamy are complex and multifaceted, shaped by historical legacies, cultural traditions, religious beliefs, legal frameworks, and socio-economic dynamics. Consequently, while polygamy continues to be practiced in various forms across different parts of the world, its acceptance, regulation, and implications remain subjects of ongoing debate and controversy. As societies grapple with issues of gender equality, human rights, and social justice, understanding the diverse dimensions of polygamy is essential for fostering informed dialogue and cultural sensitivity in addressing this age-old institution in the modern era.

### **Conceptual Interrogation: Explicating Nationbuilding**

Nationbuilding is a multifaceted process aimed at forging a cohesive national identity, fostering social cohesion and promoting political stability within a diverse society (Mylonas, 2017). It encompasses a range of initiatives, policies, and endeavors designed to strengthen bonds of citizenship, cultivate a sense of belonging, and overcome divisions based on ethnicity, religion, language, or other indices of identity (Kamau, 2023). The concept of nation-building has deep historical roots, dating back to the emergence of modern nation-states in the 19th and 20th centuries (Xi, 2010). As states sought to consolidate power and assert sovereignty over territory, efforts to create a sense of national unity and identity became increasingly important. These often involved linguistic, cultural, and educational initiatives aimed at standardizing language, promoting shared historical narratives and instilling patriotism among citizens. Notable examples include the French Revolution's emphasis on "citizenry," Germany's efforts at cultural unification under Bismarck, and the American melting pot ideal of assimilation

(Kamau, 2023; Mylonas, 2017; Xi, 2010). Nationbuilding therefore involves a range of interconnected components, each contributing to the construction of a cohesive national identity. These components include the following:

- **Education and Cultural Promotion:** Educational institutions play a crucial role in shaping collective identities and transmitting national values. Curriculum development, history textbooks, and cultural programs are in these regards used to instill pride in national heritage, promote understanding of shared experiences and foster a sense of belonging among diverse communities.
- **Language and Communication:** Language serves as a unifying force within a nation, facilitating communication, cultural expression, and political participation. Efforts to promote a common language, while respecting linguistic diversity, can enhance social cohesion and integration.
- **Political Institutions and Governance:** Effective governance structures are essential for nationbuilding, providing avenues for citizen participation, representation and accountability. Inclusive political systems that accommodate diverse interests and perspectives can help mitigate social tensions and foster a sense of ownership among citizens.
- **Infrastructure and Economic Development:** Investments in infrastructure, economic development and social welfare programs are integral to nationbuilding efforts. By improving living standards, creating employment opportunities and reducing disparities, governments can enhance social cohesion and promote a shared sense of progress and prosperity.
- **Civic Engagement and Social Cohesion:** Promoting civic engagement, volunteerism, and community involvement is essential for building social capital and fostering a sense of solidarity among citizens. Initiatives that bridge divides, promote dialogue, and celebrate cultural diversity can help build trust and cooperation within society (Bereketeab, 2020; Kamau, 2023; Kehinde, 2023; Kuo & Mylonas, 2022; Mylonas, 2017; Xi, 2010).

However, nation-building is an undoubtedly complex and ongoing process fraught with challenges and obstacles. Some of the key challenges and obstacles include the following:

- **Ethnic and Cultural Diversity:** Managing ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity poses significant challenges for nationbuilding efforts. Tensions arising from competing identities, historical grievances and unequal power dynamics can undermine efforts to foster national unity and cohesion.
- **Political Instability and Conflict:** Political instability, corruption, and conflict pose formidable obstacles to nationbuilding, as they undermine trust in government institutions, impede economic development, and exacerbate social divisions.
- **External Influences:** External influences (globalization) can both facilitate and hinder nationbuilding efforts. While increased connectivity and exposure to diverse cultures can enrich national identity, they can also pose challenges to traditional values and cultural norms.
- **Inequality and Social Exclusion:** Economic inequality, social exclusion, and marginalization can undermine efforts to build an inclusive and cohesive society. Addressing disparities in access to resources, opportunities, and political participation is essential for promoting social justice in a nation and fostering national unity (Kamau, 2023; Kehinde, 2023; Kuo & Mylonas, 2022; Mylonas, 2017).

It actually remains incontrovertible that in an increasingly interconnected and diverse world, the importance of nationbuilding cannot be overstated. For contemporary societies grappling with issues of identity, effective nation-building strategies are essential for promoting social cohesion and fostering inclusive citizenship.

### **How Polygamy Became Disabled in Nigeria**

It is obvious that polygamy has a long history in Nigeria, dating back to pre-colonial times when it was widely practiced among various ethnic groups as a symbol of wealth, status, and even fertility (Owoo et al; 2021). In traditional Nigerian societies, polygamous marriages were often a reflection of patriarchal norms, with men having multiple wives to expand family networks, increase labor capacity, and enhance social standing. Moreover, polygamy was sanctioned by customary laws and cultural traditions, with marriage practices varying across regions and ethnicities. However, the colonial period had a profound impact on Nigerian society, including its attitudes towards polygamy. British colonial authorities sought to impose Western norms of monogamy and Christian morality, viewing polygamy as backward and immoral. Consequently, colonial-era legislation such as the Marriage Ordinance of 1914 aimed to restrict and regulate polygamous unions, requiring civil registration and compliance with monogamous standards (Chianu, 2016). While customary and Islamic forms of marriage were recognized, they were subjected to increasing scrutiny.

In post-colonial Nigeria however, socio-cultural attitudes towards polygamy began to shift, influenced by urbanization, modernization, and changing gender dynamics. As Nigeria transitioned from agrarian economies to urban industrial centers, the practicalities of supporting multiple wives and large families became increasingly challenging. Moreover, with greater access to education, women began to assert their rights and challenge traditional gender roles, leading to a reevaluation of polygamous practices and their implications for gender equality and women's empowerment. Economic factors have also played a significant role in the decline of polygamy in Nigeria. With urbanization and modernization, the cost of maintaining multiple households, educating children, and providing healthcare became prohibitively expensive for many families. Moreover, as Nigeria's economy diversified, with increased opportunities in formal employment, entrepreneurship, and education, individuals had sought to improve their socio-economic status through avenues other than traditional polygamous marriages.

Besides the foregoing however, the disability of polygamy in the Nigerian context possesses other connotations. In pre-colonial Nigeria, polygamy actually possessed cohesive and developmental attributes. The head of the household was the rallying force of the polygamous family. He was a man of immense authority and invariably a personality with dignity and great organizational ability who knew how to deploy the human and material resources at his disposal to the greatest good of the polygamous group. All this changed with the arrival of the colonial masters. The colonial conquerors equally captured the people's culture. Particularly in the Southern parts of Nigeria and also in the other areas where the Christian influence worked simultaneously with colonialism to introduce dominion over the people, polygamy became a casualty. In the process, polygamy became acutely disabled and apparently seized to be a cohesive and development-oriented phenomenon.

The head of the polygamous family whose actions were previously sagacious and objective began to take some objectionable and prejudiced decisions. There arose in many instances a preference to the male-child against the girl-child with regards to sending children from the polygamous family to school. There was the additional issue of the children of which of the wives would be sent to school and the others that would be married off to willing suitors.

Divisiveness then became a prominent feature of the neo-polygamous family. Resentment, frustration and bitterness ensued in such situations. The girl-child seemed to have suffered more than the male-child in these matrixes of how the emergent version of polygamy operated in the country. While the male-child (in one way or the other) attracted the attention of the currently disordered head of the polygamous household, the female-child was apparently disfavored. She was expected to merely get married to another man at a tender age. This was actually the same age at which she was still needed in the farms as a member of large family in the previous dispensation. Under the prevailing scenarios, she is married into monogamy and usually even without basic educational preparation. Alternatively, having been ruled out of educational opportunities from her maiden polygamous family, the girl-child would begin to struggle to go to school from her new home. Invariably, disabled polygamy featured gender inequities.

### **Polygamy and Nationbuilding: Linkages and Nigerian Disarticulations**

Effectiveness in polygamy is akin to nationbuilding. Plurality of spouses is central to polygamy and the multiplicity of ethnicities and other groups is precursory to nationbuilding. Furthermore, leadership (effective leadership) is a prerequisite for purposefulness and progress in polygamy and nationbuilding. We further posit that the disabled polygamous state is a product of failed leadership. Nationbuilding failures are also functions of leadership backsliding at the national level of nation states. Then in the specific Nigerian context, prior to the total disablement of polygamy, it had some profound socio-economic trajectories, which in multifaceted ways positively affected individuals, families and communities. The individuals from pre-colonial polygamous families were arguably more united as families than their post-disablement counterparts. In other words, families of the pre-colonial polygamous families were arguably more united in action than their post-disablement others. Their united actions were principally focused on agricultural productivity. Different communities were better for it.

Disabled polygamy is accordingly reminiscent of the disunited Nigerian ethnic groups. It is the disunity of the ethnic groups that makes nationbuilding one of the most critical needs of the Nigerian state. Nationbuilding is simply and squarely, a multidimensional process of fostering social cohesion, forging a cohesive national identity and promoting political stability in a plural society (Kamau, 2023; Mylonas, 2017). It consequently begins to seem plausible to infer that if polygamy was not disabled in Nigeria, the composite ethnic groups would not have been as disunited as they have become in the country. In other words, pristine pluralities in families would have dovetailed into the tolerance of pluralities in the communities. Then deductively, such accommodation of multiplicities among the communities would have engendered forbearance and broadmindedness in the affairs of the new nation, leading to seamless nationbuilding. Polygamy and nationbuilding therefore remain disarticulated in the country.

### **Conclusion**

Polygamy, a practice deeply ingrained in many African cultures (including Nigeria) has often been viewed through a lens of controversy. However, a balanced understanding of polygamy reveals its potential to contribute positively to inclusive and sustainable nationbuilding endeavors. By promoting gender equality, enhancing social cohesion, and addressing socioeconomic disparities, using polygamous settings, Nigeria can harness the potential of polygamy to foster a more equitable and cohesive society. Through concerted efforts to overcome cultural barriers, enact policy reforms, and empower individuals within

polygamous unions, Nigeria can build a stronger foundation for inclusive and sustainable nationbuilding, reflective of its rich cultural heritage and diverse societal fabric.

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