

Polygamous Marriages in the Rural Sahel: Persistence and Change

By Nathalie Mondain and Thomas LeGrand

SHORT ABSTRACT (150 WORDS)

Despite longstanding predictions of its demise, polygamy remains common in sub-Saharan Africa. Women's age at first union is also rising across the region, while men's age is largely stable, causing the spousal age gap to fall. Insofar as polygamous marriages are characterized by large age gaps, this trend is surprising. Most studies of evolving marriage patterns in the region deal with urban areas; studies of changes in first marriages, polygamy and related socioeconomic variables in rural areas are rare. Using longitudinal data collected between 1983-99, and survey and qualitative data collected in 1999, this study examines changes in polygamous marriages in Niakhar (rural Senegal). Questions include: Is the prevalence of marriages with 3+ wives falling relative to bigamous unions, which could explain the reduced spousal age gap? For both men and women, what is the perceived value of polygamous versus monogamous unions, and how does this appear to be evolving?

LONG ABSTRACT (881 WORDS)

Significant changes in marriage patterns can often reflect fundamental transformations of the family, gender roles and ultimately fertility. In sub-Saharan Africa, since at least the 1970s, a number of researchers have predicted a decline in polygamy, due to economic development and the evolving – “modernizing” – social context. To a large extent this prediction has not come true, and polygamous marriages remain common in much of the region. Alternative types of polygamous unions (for example, informal unions between a man and his second “wife”) have been documented in some settings, mostly in urban areas. Little research on the resilience and change of polygamy has been done in recent years on rural areas.

Interestingly, women's age at first marriage appears to be rising over time throughout sub-Saharan Africa (Hertrich 2002). Men's age at that event, however, is more stable, leading to a decrease in the spousal age gap. High levels of polygamy (or more precisely polygyny—the practice of husbands having more than one wife) in a social context in which essentially all men and women become married over the course of their lives can exist only if there is a “surplus” of marriageable women relative to men. In Africa, this occurs mainly through significantly earlier women's ages at first marriage compared to men. This occurrence, in conjunction with the very young population age structures in the region gives rise to a larger number of married women than men (Goldman and Pebley, 1989). As women's age at first marriage increases and the spousal age gap falls over time, one would expect to witness a decrease in the prevalence of polygamy – a phenomenon that has not been observed in the region.

Data. This study examines changes in monogamous and polygamous unions in Niakhar, a rural area of Senegal with the local economy based largely on agricultural production and herding activities. Like much of rural Senegal, over the past quarter century this area has witnessed a

worsening agricultural recession and increased seasonal labor out-migration. Since the 1960s, the French research institution IRD has run a demographic surveillance system in Niakhar that collects information on basic demographic events (births, deaths, marriages...); these data are available for computer-based research for the period 1983-1999 (Delaunay, 1994). In addition, a detailed retrospective survey was fielded in the area in 1999 to collect data focusing on reproduction, including marriage. Finally, Nathalie Mondain (the first author of this study) spent a full year in Senegal also in 1999, where she used in-depth interviews and focus groups to collect information on the marriage and fertility attitudes, aspirations and behaviors of residents of the Niakhar area.

In this study, we use data from these three sources first to document basic parameters and trends in marriage patterns in the zone, and second, to examine men's and women's views of the value and disadvantages of polygamous unions, and how these appear to be changing over time. More precisely, the longitudinal and survey data will be used to document men's and women's ages at first union, the prevalence of bigamous and higher order polygamous marriages by age of the spouses, and trends over time. We will attempt to resolve the apparent contradiction between the stable prevalence of polygamy in the zone and the falling spousal age gap over time. One possible explanation is that, while the frequency of polygamous unions on the whole has been relatively constant over time, there may nonetheless have been a decline in the prevalence of "large" polygamous unions (with 3 or more wives) and inversely a growing proportion of bigamous unions. As a result, the average number of wives per union would fall, which at the macro-demographic level of analysis would allow the spousal age gap to fall. Too, if the third and fourth wives in a marriage are especially young compared to their husbands, this change could help explain trends in spousal ages. A preliminary (ongoing) analysis of the data supports these contentions.

The qualitative data collected in 1999 from men and women of different ages will be used to study their distinct perceptions of the advantages and disadvantages of polygamous versus monogamous unions, and how these appear to be changing over time. The economic crisis in the area, combined with increased labor mobility and a greater linkage of the area into the larger Senegalese society, has had significant effects on economic and reproductive aspirations, strategies and behaviors in Niakhar. While the prevalence of polygamous unions appears to be stable, views of its value and justifications for men's second (or third+) marriages are changing over time. This study will document precisely how attitudes are changing and how polygamy is now being rationalized, in the context of evolving economic roles for women and children, etc. We expect to show that, as the traditional economic grounds for polygamous unions in Africa are weakening, other justifications are taking their place and there is little reason to expect the institution to disappear rapidly from rural Senegal in upcoming years.

This study is the final chapter of Ms. Mondain's PhD thesis in Demography at the University of Montreal that examines marriage and adolescent reproductive behavior in rural Senegal. The qualitative data are already coded and largely analyzed, and the quantitative analysis is well under way. We anticipate that the study will be completed during autumn 2003.

References

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