

Polygamy among the Tanzanian Maasai and the Seventh-day Adventist Church: Reflections on a Missiological and Theological Problem

By Stefan Höschele

Since polygamy was a practice found in almost all African societies when they first met Christianity, it has been a matter of much theological and missiological discussion (see for example, the classic by Parrinder, 1950; four articles in *Africa Theological Journal*, no. 2, 1969; Hillman's influential work advocating accommodation, 1975; Blum's more restrictive response, 1989; and Maillu's defense of polygamy, 1988). Christian churches have always faced a double challenge: the question of the biblical and theological legitimacy of polygamy, as well as the missio-

logical reflection on appropriate ways of dealing with those who practice it.

One intricate problem is that the prevalence and function of this custom varies considerably among different groups. Thus, discussions about the phenomenon cannot be separated from the real life context of the people who practice it. It definitely makes a difference whether polygamy is a custom that is dying out in a given society, a common option, a traditional ideal, or a social obligation. Often polygamy decreased under the influence of Christianity, but there remain some communities among whom the system is so ingrained that traditional missionary approaches designed to uproot it failed almost completely.

The Maasai, cattle keeping people who belong to the Nilotic family, are a notable case of such a community with deeply entrenched polygamy. This paper describes problems related to polygamy that emerged in the interaction of Christianity with the Tanzanian Maasai in their context and investigates the po-



Stefan Höschele teaches theology at Theologische Hochschule Friedensau (Friedensau Adventist University), Germany. He served as a missionary to Algeria and Tanzania between 1993 and 2003.

sitions that have been taken by Seventh-day Adventists in dealing with these problems.

Polygamy and Divorce among the Maasai

For a long time, it has been recognized that polygamy among the Maasai is not merely a nuisance or a hindrance for missionary work to be overcome by simply enforcing the ideal of monogamy but is a deeply rooted custom which lies at the very heart of traditional Maasai culture (see Spear and Waller 1993, von Mitzlaff 1988, and Talle 1988). Maasai polygamy is different from many other African societies where polygamy was

my is its capacity for men to gain prestige in society. Any “elder,” i.e., a man who has “graduated” from the Moran (warrior) stage of life in his thirties, wants to be respected, which usually includes a sizeable household.

3. A third notable reason for polygamy (and there are probably other less obvious ones) is the function it has for women. An unmarried woman does not have a recognized status in society, but the danger of remaining single is reduced if she can be appended to an existing marriage union. It may even happen that a woman who has no husband approaches a wealthy polygamist in order to be added to his group

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or is an epiphenomenon; it does not seem to be a matter that can be eliminated in a single generation. Rather, the practice has several functions closely related to central values in most Maasai sub-groups.

1. Among cattle keeping peoples, polygamy is closely tied to economy. A man with one wife can never acquire the wealth and status associated with hundreds of cows, for it is the wives and children who take care of the cattle (see Herskovits 1926, “The Cattle Complex in East Africa”).

2. A social function of polygamy

of wives, which the rich man often gladly accepts. Moreover, it is a popular misconception that men alone make the decision to marry more than one wife. Among the Maasai, especially the first wife may suggest to her husband that he marry a second wife. She might tell him, “Why should I do all the work alone?” or “Why should you not become a man whose honor is visible in society?”

Divorce, however, is a phenomenon almost unheard of among the Maasai. It is a very shameful thing, especially for the

woman divorcee and her father; thus, the latter will do everything he can to ensure that his daughter remains with her husband. Even in a proven case of adultery by the wife, there is usually no divorce; rather, some fine will be imposed on the guilty male, and the wife's father may bring a cow and implore the husband to keep his daughter in order to avert the great embarrassment of her being divorced. This is considered full restoration and is almost universally preferred to breaking up the family unit. Divorce is so uncommon that it requires a meeting of elders to settle the issue, and because it implies the return of bridewealth, it may be an almost impossible thing for a not-so-well-off father-in-law as the bridewealth cows may not be available any more. If a divorce should nevertheless happen, the situation is very difficult indeed: re-marriage of a female divorcee is very hard to achieve, and it is common for her to be regarded like a prostitute, for there is no husband who would claim the honor of exclusive sexual access to her and to therefore defend her. (Special thanks to Pastor Godwin Lekundayo and to late Pastor Loitopuaki Lebabu for information included in this section.)

Christian Attitudes towards a Dilemma

Dealing with such a difficult situation is not an easy matter. Christians have taken the whole range of possible positions

regarding polygamy and its acceptability among the Maasai. These theoretical positions include viewing the practice as (1) a sin similar to adultery (among Adventist authors, see du Preez 1993:289; he advocates this concept for all circumstances and concludes that throughout Scripture polygamy is "forbidden." May it suffice here to observe that this conclusion argues from silence), (2) an unacceptable inferior form of marriage, (3) a practice to be tolerated though not ideal, and (4) an acceptable alternative to monogamy (Hastings 1973:73).

Although all of these options existed, most missionary churches did not accept male polygamists in most societies for baptism during the colonial period (for an exception to this rule in Tanzania see Fiedler 1999:69-76). Among the Maasai, however, where a Christian missionary breakthrough only happened in the 1970s and 1980s, the picture was more diverse. The main Christian denominations that have been working among the Tanzanian Maasai have been Lutherans and Roman Catholics. Catholics have theoretically rejected polygamy but in practice tolerated it to a very large degree. It is characteristic that one of the most well-known missiological books on polygamy, *Polygamy Reconsidered*, was written by a Catholic missionary to the Maasai, Eugene Hillman.

Following Tanzanian independence Lutherans, after reject-

ing polygamy for decades, have worked with a policy specifically designed for the Maasai. Polygamists can be baptized, but have to promise not to marry any more wives after baptism. This policy had never been applied to other ethnic groups before, and even at present, it remains a regulation that is only applied among the Maasai (Mtaita 1998:211-231, especially 226). However, it has also been argued that this method was not always necessarily effective because the marriage process can start when the girl is still a small child, and thus there

A few Pentecostal denominations tolerate polygamy and insist on monogamous life only for their church leaders and pastors, but Pentecostals are not very widespread among the Tanzania Maasai, except in the south of the country. The majority, though, appears to be rejecting polygamy entirely.

Adventist Missions and Polygamy in Tanzania

In addition to considering the Christian environment in Tanzania, one can only appreciate the present difficulties

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have been a good number of cases where Lutheran polygamists added even more wives after baptism, which then leads to church discipline (Mtaita 1998:227 and Kiel 1996:319-326). Still more notable is the fact that even today most Lutheran Maasai churches consist of 80 percent or more women because men understand the church's insistence upon monogamy even if there are "loopholes" to get around it. On the other hand, the Lutheran policy has been helpful in cases of men who sincerely wished to become Christians together with their wives.

Adventists face in dealing with Maasai polygamy after reviewing the debate on the matter in the denomination's history (see Höschele 2005:225-241). The background of the 1941 ruling of the General Conference on polygamy, which is still in force, rules out the baptism of polygamous males (The official Adventist stand has changed several times: see Staples in this issue, and Maberly 1975). That action resulted because of a major controversy in Tanzania.

In Kenya, the missionary workforce strongly opposed the more lenient 1930 General

Conference action, which had opened the way for a probationary membership of polygamists, while in Tanzania the respective division leadership introduced the 1930 policy in 1939 (see Robison 1940). British missionaries in Kenya then complained that a change of direction in the neighboring country would certainly become known among Kenyan Adventists. They feared that thirty years “without making any concession to polygamists” could thus be invalidated and demanded that the Tanzanian side comply with their mode of handling the issue. This conflict finally led to the reversal in 1941.

matic solution to this intricate problem that was widespread in both classical missions and among faith missions to baptize polygamous women but not men (Fiedler 1994:258). Yet, while church polity was hotly debated in committees, the real polygamy drama took place in local communities and churches. In some areas such as Majita at Lake Victoria, there was but little social pressure towards the practice, and it was apparently not even very difficult for polygamous partners to be separated. However, in some areas such as the Pare Mountains, where Adventists had planted

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Thus, there was a very short period with a more lenient policy, yet all in all, the position of Adventist church leaders in East Africa and even in Tanzania was one of uncompromising rejection. Except for a few rather undecided voices in the pre-World War I period (Kotz 1910:92), no advocate for a moderate stance was ever heard until after independence (Campbell 1922:6, Pare Field Committee Minutes 1948, and Ministerial Association Exchange 1961:19).

Adventists followed a prag-

their first mission, the problem persisted until the 1960s (Kisaka 1979:59), and in a few places so many men reverted to the old ways after having been baptized that the church lost most of its male leadership as happened in Kurialand near Lake Victoria where many of those converted in the 1930s and 1940s became polygamists in the 1950s.

The official policy of baptizing only the wives of polygamous husbands did not always reduce the problem among Tanzanian Adventists nor did it help those

who were thus excluded from institutional Christianity. Rather, at times it even caused several new classes of people to emerge among the communities where Adventists worked: (1) Male converts-turned-divorcees-by-policy. (2) Female divorcees, frequently baptized but often unhappy. (3) "Unbaptizable" men who sincerely desired full membership like the God-fearers of old who did not manage to abide with all the requirements of the Jewish faith. (4) Women in polygamous unions who were Christians while their husbands were not. (5) Backsliders (and their wives) who had converted to Christianity but could not understand why they should not live the way Abraham or Jacob had done or who continued valuing this traditional pattern of life (see Hastings 1994:321 "The effect of missionary dealings with polygamy was often less to deter conversion but to produce a long-term post-baptismal problem: that polygamy re-emerged among Christians;" and Kiel 1996:319, 320). (6) Hypocrites who did not wish to lose membership privileges but secretly upheld intimate relationships with their divorced partners or their clandestinely increased wives.

Of course, given the massive impact of Christianity in Tanzania and even of Adventism in some regions, the problems decreased over the decades. Yet among the Maasai, the situation continued to be most difficult due to the pervasiveness of the

polygamous lifestyle in their midst.

Adventist Missions among the Maasai and the Polygamy Problem

Because of the relatively large number of Maasai (more than 500,000 in Tanzania and 500,000 in Kenya) and their proximity to early Adventist missions, denominational leaders felt the need to take the gospel to them from the very outset. However, the first concrete attempts at reaching out to the Maasai were made only in the 1930s. Even then it took another generation until work for the Maasai became a concern that produced stable activities (1964), this time originating from the congregations among the Pare, a neighboring ethnic group where Adventists were already very strong. Under the leadership of John Aza Kisaka, then the director of the North East Tanzania Field youth department, lay evangelists were permanently stationed in several Maasai locations (Maasai Evangelism Committee 1966:50).

While these areas near Pare did not produce significant Adventist congregations, Mathayo Njake, the first Maasai pastor in the Tanzanian Seventh-day Adventist Church, established a large Adventist community among the Maasai at Kwedihala-we, about 100 miles away from Pare, in the 1980s and 1990s. Membership in the area reached about six hundred by the year 2000 whereas Maasai member-

ship in Kenya reached 5,000 that same year. At the same time, small congregations had sprung up at about a dozen other areas in the vast Maasai region. Some developed in connection with neighboring town churches that sponsored activities in the rural areas, others grew through efforts of individuals, and still others started in the little Maasai towns by Adventists migrating in from other areas. Thus, a beginning of missionary work among the Tanzanian Maasai has been made, but because they are scattered over almost one quarter of

he was strict in the rejection of adornment and thus appeared to be trustworthy to his non-Maasai Adventist pastoral colleagues who shared his rigid position, he silently tolerated polygamy among his members against the policy of the worldwide denomination.

This was a rather risky thing to do, for it could have resulted in Njake's expulsion from the pastoral ministry. Yet he instinctively knew that this move was of central importance. The Pare evangelists had produced temporary churches of women

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the country, Adventism is still in its infancy in most places.

Compared with the Pare missionaries' meager achievements, Njake's success can be attributed to several factors such as language ability, cultural reasons, the different time period of ministry, and Njake's virtual monopoly on interpreting the Adventist faith to the people of the Kwedihalawe area. Most notable, however, was Njake's subtle logic of differentiating acceptable and objectionable aspects of traditional culture. While

that remained without much influence on the decision-makers in society, i.e., the elders (see Stark and Bainbridge 1985:416. They argue that overrecruitment of females may indicate that a movement is not successful and usually implies that it enjoys a low status, for in most societies, women have a lower rank than men). Njake, in contrast, was able to attract a large body of respectable males to Adventist Christianity, which created a further pull on the non-Christian population. Some observers

criticize that the commitment of these Maasai Adventists does not readily translate in significant tithe returns, a fact that can be observed in most other rural African Adventist communities as well. Yet altogether it has to be admitted that they are firmly rooted in Seventh-day Adventist beliefs and practices.

Three Case Studies

I worked in Tanzania for six and a half years, and from late 1997, I was involved in a church planting project among the Maasai which led to the establishment of four congregations. It has been my privilege to meet all the Tanzanian Maasai workers in our church at the time—five pastors and several lay evangelists—and to closely cooperate with most of them. In the areas that we were involved with in our project, we did not baptize polygamists, for we wanted to abide by the church policies in spite of the fact that this barred the way into the church for a significant number of elders who were willing to be baptized but could not be admitted to church membership.

At the same time, the lay evangelists with whom we cooperated never advised husbands to divorce their wives because of the tragic consequences of such an action. We discussed the polygamy issue quite a number of times and always came to the conclusion that we could not recommend the separation of marriages. There are, however,

several cases that show the impact of an actual insistence upon divorcing all wives except one. Three conspicuous examples come from Mwakikonge near Tanga at the coast, as narrated to me by Pastor Loitopuaki Lebabu. The three stories come from his home area, and the first person mentioned is his father. Pastor Njake had no influence in this area, and church planters on our team also worked in a different area.

Mepong'ori Lebabu

Lebabu, the first Adventist in the area, had two wives when he asked for baptism in 1986. The Seventh-day Adventist pastor at Tanga, Imani Yohana, a Pare, suggested that he separate from one. Thus, he separated from his oldest wife, which is quite common since younger wives often have children to care for (usually the younger or youngest wife does not yet have grown-up children to care for her). Lebabu was baptized together with one other monogamous man. Many others had been interested in the Adventist message, but when it came to the conditions of baptism, no one except Lebabu accepted this step. Even Lebabu finally did not fully and officially divorce his older wife but remained in a separated condition because the common feeling among the people was that “Adventists have good teachings but destroy family unity.” This stumbling block of evangelization has remained until now.

Lendakuya Lairumbe

Lairumbe had four wives in the late 1990s when he asked for baptism. Upon being advised to divorce all but one, he used a traditional way of geographical separation (but not divorce) to satisfy these demands: when a wife has a grown-up son, the son can be instructed to take care of his mother in his kraal, although the old man will still visit his wife. This is what he did for his elder wives, but the reaction of society was still rather negative; they felt if Adventism insists upon such procedures, it is not a denomination to join.

tian.” He was actually told that a polygamist is not allowed to do any activity in the church, “not even sweeping the floor.” Ladaru is a serious man; the same year he gave eighty cattle as tithe, and before his baptism he had built a Lutheran church which, however, became a Seventh-day Adventist church upon his conversion. Because of his seriousness, he informed his wives that he wanted to divorce all but one. They did not accept the proposition. How, they argued, can four of them live in shame and grief and one remains and lives in self-gratification? All the wives’

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Abraham Ladaru

Ladaru is a rich man who owns more than 800 cows. He was converted at the first Maasai camp meeting in 1999 and was baptized the same year in spite of the fact that he had five wives; apparently the district pastor ignored the denominational policy on polygamy. In 2002, church elders who originate from the Pare Mountains advised him that he had to divorce four of his wives in order to be a “perfect Chris-

parents were not willing to leave one wife with him while all the others were divorced, and thus all the wives went away. This caused such a stir in the area that it became a common opinion that “the Sabbath [religion] kills the kraal” [that is, the family]. Out of the formerly 50 Adventist church members at Mwakikonge proper, only 20 have remained after this event.

Adventist Positions

Obviously Maasai polygamy has been a rather difficult issue to deal with for Adventists. One factor that makes the issue so problematic is that several ethnic groups among whom Seventh-day Adventism has been strongly established—the Pare, Jita, Nyakyusa, and Ha—have not experienced major difficulties with polygamy, at least not during the last three decades. Thus, it is not easy for representatives from such groups to empathize and support what they believe to be a “heathen” practice. Among others, however, such as the cattle-keeping Sukuma and Kuria who practice polygamy to a much larger degree than the other groups mentioned, the issue was more difficult, even though church policies have been strictly applied.

At the same time, there is another Nilotic ethnic group related to the Maasai who are the Maasai’s traditional archenemies: the Datooga. Among these cattle keepers who are nomads like the traditional Maasai, the church has just recently made a beginning of church work. Adventist members number fewer than 50, while the total of all Datooga is around 200,000, with less than 10 percent being Christians of any denomination. Among the Datooga, polygamy is as strongly entrenched as among the Maasai, causing the Adventist church planting team I worked with from 2000 onward to wonder how the work will proceed in view of this obstacle.

Among Tanzanian Adventist leaders, there are but few voices that would advocate a change of the present position. The problem is far from their thoughts since most leaders are involved in city evangelism, institutional development, and different departments, and only a few see the challenge lying in what many consider a “primitive” group such as the Maasai.

Still, there are exceptions to this rule. A most notable case is John Kisaka, the first Tanzanian Adventist to receive a doctorate in the field of theology. Dr. Kisaka is a Pare who had been the driving force among the Adventist pioneer missionaries to the Maasai in the 1960s. Later he served as the Union Lay Activities Director, and is now retired. He wrote his Doctor of Ministry dissertation about “The Adventist Church’s Position and Response to Socio-Cultural Issues in Africa,” one of them being polygamy. Kisaka explicitly advocates a policy that resembles the Lutherans’ position. His reasoning can be summarized as follows (Kisaka 1979:23-32, 90).

1. Polygamy does not exist only in Africa. A Western variant is “consecutive polygamy” or “serial polygamy,” i.e., the process of divorce and remarriage common in present-day Europe and America.

2. The Bible does not forbid polygamy and actually endorses it for the levirate institution.

3. Problems experienced in polygamous marriages, such as

envy, impersonal relationships, or dividing love between different parties, all occur in monogamous marriages as well.

4. Traditionally, polygamy ensures offspring, helps avoid immorality, and is an economic asset. Therefore, it should not simply be dismissed as an adulterous condition.

5. Most importantly, although polygamy is not the ideal, there “is no direct order from God that a polygamous husband . . . ‘shall upon conversion be required to change his status by putting away all his wives save one, before he shall be considered eligible for baptism and church

agree with his conclusion regarding admitting sincerely believing polygamous converts to baptism. Among the outspoken advocates to reconsider the policy are the former Global Mission Director of the North-East Tanzania Conference, Godwin Lekundayo, who is now pursuing a Ph.D. in missiology at the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies and with whom I worked together in the Maasai church planting project, and the late Loitopuaki Lebabu. Touched by the plight of their fellow Maasai, they would argue that theology is a product of a missionary God and should never be divorced from life in the real

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membership” (Kisaka 1979:30, 31) as is required by present Adventist policy.

6. Polygamous husbands should be baptized into membership of the Seventh-day Adventist Church since “there is no Biblical prohibition or theological hindrance” for doing so (1979:90), but should not hold church office such as that of an elder or a deacon

Although some would not agree with all of these details, the majority of the leading Maasai in the church whom I know and with whom I discussed the issue—pastors and lay evangelists—do

world. Pastoral and missiological courses of action, especially regarding baptismal requirements, cannot simply be derived from abstract ideals or concepts which lack ultimate biblical commands. Although such a decision must not be determined by some cultural situation alone, the course of action taken by the church must relate to people and the way they live in the light of clear biblical requirements and God’s love for humankind.

Conclusion

Several insights can be derived from the above. I would like

to present them as concluding theses.

1. Polygamy is a deeply entrenched custom among the Maasai. Although it is not a social obligation, it is also not merely an option but the traditional ideal.

2. Divorce is perceived by the Maasai as shameful and unacceptable and leads to many pathetic situations. That Christians would advocate the divorce of polygamous unions is incomprehensible to the Maasai.

3. Adventism has spread among Maasai who were accepted in their polygamous state (against the policies) in spite of the fact that the Maasai pastor in the area was strict on other issues.

4. In areas where no separation of polygamists was demanded but polygamists were not baptized growth was inhibited to some extent.

5. In areas where separations occurred growth was stifled and actual decline took place.

6. The issue was never brought up as a matter of discussion among church leaders because it was not a major issue among the ethnic groups dominating the church. Furthermore, present policies are unequivocal.

7. An alternative way of dealing with the issue may be the Lutheran practice which, however, also has to be administered with care.

8. To facilitate the proclamation of the gospel among peoples with deeply entrenched polyg-

amy, the 1941 General Conference policy on polygamy should be revised.

9. Such a revision should imply that a responsible church committee designate such societies in which families experience intractable difficulty in an immediate transition from institutionalized polygamy to monogamy.

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