Much has been written on the legitimacy and extent to which the gospel can challenge different cultures especially vis-à-vis the current growth of Islam. There are many who have chosen to live “incarnationally” within a culture while at the same time resisting its ungodliness. While there are different approaches that missiologists, Bible scholars, and theologians may take in respect to culture, they all agree that theology is not to be built in a cultural vacuum and culture can never be totally ignored.

This article will not engage in the existing debate on contextualization, but rather describes analytically how this “fight from within” has been attempted in a predominantly Muslim region of South East Asia. Hopefully this case study will shed some light on the current discussion on polygamy that so often has been framed largely in academic and theological terms.

A Case Study

There has been a dramatic awakening of Islam in this area of South East Asia even though Islam has been present since the seventh century. Since the 1970s, Islam has been on the rise, gaining political power and expanding its influence, but since the 1990s Islam has seen unprecedented growth in this region. Unfortunately, terrorist activities have also been on the rise with Al Qaeda and other homegrown terrorist groups joining hands to encourage the spread of Islam and to reestablish some of its influence that was lost to Christianity during the colonial era.

The following interaction took place as part of a weekly training which focused on strengthening families according to the guidance of Allah. During the convention, the Arab term Allah

**By GPP**

GPP and her husband have been involved in ministry with Muslims people in various countries for the past 12 years. They both share a strong passion for God’s people among Muslims and for the amazing God that is drawing Muslims to Himself in new ways.
was preferred, since this was shared by all the participants. Some of the translations of the Qur’an into native languages kept the term Allah (God in Arabic) while others used either the term for God used by the colonial masters of the past, or other alternative names. Allah was the most widely understood and unifying name. Close to 180 women attended the sessions seeking to understand what it meant to be a godly woman, desiring to know how to experience cleansing, forgiveness, and the presence of God in their lives. As part of the overall training, the local ministry leader, in one of the sessions, dealt with the highly sensitive issue of polygamy.

In this article I will describe that presentation to illustrate how destructive cultural practices can be challenged in positive ways when the gospel encounters them.

**Stage 1: Assessing the Local Situation**

The cultural practices surrounding polygamy vary greatly within this Muslim community comprised of more than ten tribes with a strong tribal identity. This became apparent from the very first day as the women introduced themselves in terms of belonging to their tribe first and only secondarily in terms of their male relatives and husbands.

Ustaya Shahina (names and locations have been changed to protect the identity of those involved) opened the discussion by first asking the women to identify what were the common problems women faced? Immediately the answer came: polygamy. So, she asked “What do you want to know about polygamy?”

At first, this might seem a rather irrelevant question, but it was not. Too often, leaders make assumptions about the worldview and felt needs of those being ministered to and therefore, they fail to reach beyond the level of information or belief they have.

For instance, among one of the tribes, it was believed that Allah had promised assurance of paradise to the women who would find a second wife for their husbands. Others believed that
in order for a man to go to paradise he must be polygamous.

"Is this what the Holy Books say?" They wanted to know.

This obviously has serious theological implications, for a God who requires such an action to open the doors to paradise reflects a picture of God that is distorted and needs to be challenged. Our fight is against the forces of evil that prevent people from relating to their creator.

For other ladies the issues were centered around how to live side by side with polygamy. It was interesting to note that none of the Muslim women, including some prominent female religious leaders, believed that there was room for actually challenging the institution of polygamy. Instead the women wished to know how to live with it or how to keep their husbands from taking another wife.

One woman actually shared that she chose the second wife for her husband. She later admitted that she knew he was attracted to her and she did not seem to mind getting extra help to deal with the household chores. This woman represented an isolated case, for most women repudiated polygamy because of the inherent problems of jealousy and the mistrust it creates.

Why was it that no one felt they could challenge the legitimacy of this practice? Perhaps, it was because they felt that it is not within a women’s prerogative or role to initiate or be a catalyst for social change.

In general there was a consensus among the women that their primary area of concern was to understand what their religion truly had to say about this matter based on what has been revealed in the Holy Books. Women wanted to learn how to live truly godly lives.

Stage 2: Sifting Culture from Religion

Once the questions were out in the open, Ustaya Shahina invited representatives from each tribe to describe what the local practice among their people was. The spectrum was wide, ranging in one extreme from one tribe in which polygamy was not practiced at all to others in which polygamy was widespread. The woman from the first tribe described that neither her family (meaning her clan) nor her ancestors had practiced polygamy. She finished with a rather colorful remark as to what could happen if any man attempted to take a second wife. She motioned, taking a big stone, and indicating that it would be used to crush the man’s head.

Ustaya Shahina asked the women to describe those cases in which polygamy would be acceptable for each tribe. Several reasons were considered valid to justify this practice. In several tribes, the inability of a woman to have children or her inability to meet her husband’s...
sexual needs would justify him taking another wife. In some other cases polygamy was used to enhance the financial status of men in the eyes of the community. A man who could afford to provide for two wives could gain standing in his community.

In other cases no reason was needed. Polygamy was understood as a male right in which case, if a man liked another woman, it was legitimate for him to seek marriage with her to avoid adultery. This was especially prevalent in the case of older wives, who suddenly found themselves being pitted against much younger ones. This was also the most emotionally damaging cause of polygamy for the first wives.

In polygamy there is a clear hierarchy among wives. The first one has more authority than the second one. One tribe referred to the first wife as a princess and to the other wives as slaves. The affairs of the house rest on the first wife and she organizes how the household chores are to be distributed. Usually the new wife takes the bigger load, unless she can manage to get her husband to sympathize with her

but it accentuated the strong cultural basis for the practice and helped the women see that polygamy was not necessarily sanctioned by God.

The local leader explained to the ladies that that which they had been discussing was a very sensitive topic and needed to be treated with utmost respect. Some people would choose to preserve their cultural practices, and that was a choice they had. What was more important for them as godly women though was to know what the Holy Books had to say about the topic.
Stage 3: Sifting Religion from Revelation

The previous discussion generated a lot of anticipation. Underlying the interest was the natural question as to which tribe was right. Ustaya Shahina, had to build her answer by creating a clear frame of reference that could be understood by the women.

Unfortunately, most of the women’s understanding of the precepts of their faith comes mediated by the male religious leaders who do not make a distinction between the different sources of religious authority that makes up the Islamic way of life.

The Qur’an, sharia, hadith, tafsir, taqleed, and the cultural lenses that shape the personal views of the religious teachers are all presented as equal and at the same level. Ustaya Shahina’s task was to distinguish between the various sources of religious authority and reinstate the authoritative role of the Bible in understanding God’s revealed will.

“Sisters, in this convention we shall only refer to the word of Allah and not the words of men, even godly ones. We will avoid the use of the hadith [a book on the traditions and sayings of Muhammad] because we are not sure it has been preserved from error.”

 Providentially, that morning during a session of testimonies, a lady had shared a powerful life changing dream she had had. In it, she had seen her mother (who has been dead for years so she understood this to be a sign of great importance) entering her house and looking hurriedly for the hadith. The mother then asked her daughter if she had seen Jesus who was outside. While the daughter went outside the mother jumped through the window and went to hide the hadith. Outside, by the sea-shore she saw Jesus standing holding a Bible. As she woke up she understood that the Bible was an authentic revelation from God and that the hadith had no value. That morning she pleaded with the ladies to believe her account and take it seriously.

Ustaya Shahina explained how the hadith had been transmitted and pointed to a couple of incidents in which there had
been interference by the secretary recording the events in the life of Muhammad. She added how later on, learned men had come to interpret and arrive at conclusions based on the Qur’an and hadith, and these conclusions are recorded as tafsirs.

The previous day Ustaya Shahina had built a strong case for the legitimacy of the Bible based on what the Qur’an has to say and on other factual evidence. Now she was ready to open the Holy Books, and she started with what was familiar to them—the Qur’an.

Understanding God’s Plan for Marriage

In answer to the question, Does the Qur’an allow polygamy? Ustaya Shahina read:

*If you fear that you shall not be able to deal justly with the orphans, marry women of your choice, two, or three, or four; but if you fear that you shall not be able to deal justly with them, then (marry) only one.* (Al Nisa 4:3, emphasis mine).

According to this surah, which is the only one that deals openly with the subject of polygamy, polygamy is neither mandatory nor encouraged, but merely permitted. The permission to practice polygamy is not associated with male lust but allowed because of “compassion toward widows and orphans,” a matter that becomes clear once the ashab al nuzul (reason for the revelation) or context of this ayat (verse) is understood.

Surah 4:3 came after the battle of Uhud. At Uhud the newly born Muslim community received a major blow at the hands of the pagans from Mecca. The wives of those Muslims who died could not seek the support of their families back in Mecca after they had emigrated to Medina to escape persecution. In this time of war, this verse came to protect the widows who could come under the household protection of a man who would most likely have been already married.

Looking at this surah, it is possible to say that a Muslim man can legally have up to four wives. When this surah first appeared, it was meant to restrict the number of wives by limiting the number to four. And yet, for this to happen, certain conditions needed to be met. The same ayat that allows polygamy, adds “but if you fear that you shall not be able to deal justly with them), then (marry) only one” (Al Nisa 4:3).

Dealing justly with one’s wives is an obligation. This applies to housing, food, clothing, kind treatment, etc., for which the husband is fully responsible. The wife also needs to be taken into account before a man decides to marry another wife. Wives are clothing for their husbands, and husbands are clothing for their wives (see Al Baqara 2:187). They have rights over each other. The believing man and the believing woman are allies of each other (AtTawbah 9:71).
But the Qur'an itself makes it clear that this reciprocity is not possible in polygamous homes.

And you will never be able to be equal between wives, even if you strive, so do not incline completely towards one and leave another hanging (Al Nisa 4:129).

“Allah has given man only one heart, so that he could look after one wife.” Ustaya Shahina went on to explain that “this means that if you give one wife a dress, the other one should receive one. A husband has to distribute an equal amount of money to each wife, something that could perhaps be possible, but how can you divide your love equally? Only Allah can do this.”

“According to what has been found in the Holy Books polygamy is legal but is morally sinful. Men are allowed to have more than one wife if they can treat them justly, but according to this ayat, that is not possible, even if they try hard. Can you see the wisdom of Allah in this? When God created man, he created one mate for him,” explained Ustaya Shahina.

O mankind! Fear your Lord, who created you from one soul and created from it its mate and dispersed from both of them many men and women” (Al Nisa 4:1).

Sister Shahina insisted, “If your husbands do not want to be sinners, they should not take more than one wife. If you do not want your husbands to sin do not help them to find wives.”

Ustaya Shahina expressed her disapproval to those women who had participated in searching for additional wives for their husbands. “Sisters, the day you entered into the marriage contract, you accepted a sacred responsibility for life. How can some of you have relinquished your duties and sought help by bringing other women to ease your lot? Are you tired? Have you forgotten why you married? What you did is disapproved in the eyes of Allah. In our community, we say to a man, if you wish to join us you cannot marry more than one wife, or we shall remove you from our group.”

Just in case the ladies were not aware of the teaching, she reminded them that according to Shari’a law, the first wife...
has to give her consent for a second marriage to be allowed, and if she refuses to agree, her husband should not proceed with taking an additional wife. Ustaya Shahina challenged the women present to learn how to communicate with their husbands and leave these matters ultimately in the hands of Allah. She reminded the women that “many women do not know how to communicate with their husbands, and this is the big problem.”

**Final Considerations**

“What about the Prophet of Islam?” someone asked. Ustaya Shahina explained that “in times of peace, the Prophet Muhammad had only one wife, Khadija, with whom he had his only surviving children. For fifteen years he lived with her until she died. But after her death and during a time of war and for political reasons he married many wives. Today the circumstances have changed, a man can hardly sustain one wife and they are not taking extra wives to protect them during a time of war.”

“In the *kitab* Allah’s intention for marriage is clear that a man and a woman were to come together and become one (one flesh). Furthermore, spiritual leaders were expected to be the husband of one wife.”

By now the picture was clear; polygamy was not Allah’s ideal for righteous believers. Those who wish to keep themselves pure should stay away from it even when it is legal or when it is the norm in certain tribes. This is a clear case in which the will of God rebukes cultural practices on the basis of moral rights.

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