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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.38140/at.vi.7753>

ISSN: 1015-8758 (Print)

ISSN: 2309-9089 (Online)

**Acta Theologica 2023**

Supp 36:164-178

**Date received:**

17 February 2023

**Date accepted:**

25 October 2023

**Date published:**

30 November 2023

# Unsuspecting reception of Biblical discourse in Africa and its implications for polygamy

## ABSTRACT

*The Bible has been conceived and received as a neutral book, as the Word of God, or as containing the Word of God. This understanding and perception enabled missionaries to interpret the Bible in such a way that it disadvantaged and oppressed the “converts”. It should be clear that theology is a form of a rational discourse, with consequences for the recipient. As a result, the Bible has destroyed the sociocultural world of Africa. The article aims to narrow down the discussion and focus on the issue of polygamy in the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA). The Church Order is used as a point of argument to clarify the URCSA’s position. The article argues that the unsuspecting reception of the Bible in Africa and the “interpretation” by missionaries has created a cultural bipolarity for African Christians and demonised polygamy.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The point of departure stems from the reality of African life and, in this instance, the reality is contained in the Church Order of the General Synod of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA). Owusu (2007:192) correctly captures the first and second realities of contradiction:



Published by the UFS

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Kwame Bempa was not a Christian. He was married to Adwoa Bompmaa. They had no children. Adwoa was mocked by other women because she was barren. After some years, in accordance with the custom of their people, Adwoa's family suggested that he should marry Adwoa's sister Serwaa, so that she might bear children for him. Kwame and Adwoa both consented. Today he is living with both Adwoa and Serwaa. Adwoa still has no children, but Serwaa has eight. Kwame and his family have since become Christians. His children and first wife have all [been] baptized, but Kwame has been told by the church that he cannot be baptized or allowed to participate in communion until he divorces his second wife. He does not want to divorce the mother of his children and does not think [it] is right to do so.

The crisis created by this situation or by this church is that the family and the community had no problem with this marriage arrangement, and it was harmonious with the family and culture. However, the situation imposed by the church or its new religion led to disintegration, chaos, and cultural suicide. The expectation led to an automatic consequence of divorce and leaving children fatherless. In addition, the church or the new religion affected the tradition and culture of the community. The "God" of this religion and the "Christ" of this church became a problem for this family and the community, in general.

Compared to the Old Testament, this marriage or polygamous arrangement is similar to the story of Abram, with a few differences, of course:

1 Now Sarai Abram's wife bare him no children: and she had a handmaid, an Egyptian, whose name was Hagar.

2 And Sarai said unto Abram, Behold now, the Lord hath restrained me from bearing: I pray thee, go unto my maid; it may be that I may obtain children by her. And Abram hearkened to the voice of Sarai.

3 And Sarai Abram's wife took Hagar her maid the Egyptian, after Abram had dwelt ten years in the land of Canaan, and gave her to her husband Abram to be his wife.

4 And he went in unto Hagar, and she conceived... (Gen. 16:1-4)

The stories of Kwame Bempa, Adwoa Bompmaa and Serwaa, and that of Abram, Sarai and Hagar have similarities and dissimilarities. The biggest dissimilarity is that there was never a cause for divorce and parentlessness for Abram, Sarai and Hagar; yet the opposite was true for Kwame Bempa,

Adwoa Bompmaa and Serwaa. In fact, the story of Abram, Sarai and Hagar is treated as normal and as the will of God, and is glorified by some churches and believers.

In my attempt to address the questions and arguments, I will deliberate the following: the “innocence” of the Bible in Africa concerning polygamy, unsuspecting history, and polygamy and the Bible.

## 2. THE “INNOCENCE” OF THE BIBLE IN AFRICA CONCERNING POLYGAMY

The Bible in Africa has been received and accepted as an innocent book or as the Word of God or as containing the Word of God. The URCSA is not exonerated from this. The URCSA Church Order of the General Synod (2012:85) describes marriage as follows:

Marriage between one man and one woman (monogamy) is the valid one according to the Bible and, consequently the only form of marriage recognised by the church.

The implication of this stipulation is that only monogamy and heterosexuality are recognised as the form, supreme definition, and practice. Monogamy refers to the state or custom of marrying one person at a time and having a sexual relationship with one partner. Hermeneutically, the Greek phrase *mias gunaikos andra* is an unusual Greek construction that can be translated in many ways, including (but not limited) to “one-wife man” (prohibiting plural marriages); “a wife man” (requiring elders to be married), and “first wife man” (prohibiting divorces from ordination). Other interpretations include being faithful in relationships or restrained from chasing many women, so as to be characterised as one-woman man or one-man woman, and having been married only once (even if morally and legally released from the marriage bond by the death of the spouse). Some argue that “one-wife man” implies polygamy in the greater Christian culture.

The URCSA stipulation carries other implications and perhaps complications. The first fundamental implication is colonialism, African cultural amnesia, ignorance, and denial of African life or reality. The reality is that Africa has a world view on what constitutes marriage. Barker (1999:522) defines world view as the way in which a person tends to understand his or her relationship with social institutions, nature, objects, other people, and spirituality. Traditionally, the vast majority of African societies practise a custom of polygyny or polygamy. This custom allows a

man to have as many wives as he can. These wives are married according to local customs and legal in the understanding of the local world view and recently by the South African Constitution. Such practice is not considered evil or immoral/sinful until the Christian missionaries arrived in Africa. The second fundamental implication is a disruption of African life by breaking marriages, families, socio-economic structure, and so on. The expectation and instruction to divorce and/or not to have more than one wife have implications that are not considered or ignored.

I must confess, my experience of my world (not necessarily my direct experience) is like that of Kale (1942:220):

I have lived among polygamous people all my life, though my father happened to have only one wife, properly speaking. My reason for saying this is that he lived with one other woman either just before or immediately after my mother.

This is the reality of my continent; polygamy is real. I must confess that there has always been a double standard whereby African men have been both monogamous and polygamous. African men have been monogamous to suit the expectation of “the Christian and/or state”. Equally, African men have been polygamous to live according to his cultural norms and reality.

Now these other men who sent away some of their wives in order to be fit for church blessing soon recalled them after the blessing had been received (Kale 1942:220).

On the other hand, the issue of marriage between “one man and one woman” strictly refers to a heterosexual arrangement. However, I have lived among LGBTQIA+ people all my life. Anyone who has not come into contact with this world is an alien, and if not, he or she is dead to reality. Since I have come to terms with the reality of LGBTQIA+, it only “seems” natural because I have never lived without seeing and experiencing them. Kearney argues:

I didn't choose to be gay. Facing this reality was the most challenging thing I had to do in my life. I knew for the rest of my life I would face a world that thought I was wrong. My body works different than yours. My brain and my hormones work different. But I can't help or change that.

Whenever there is an attempt to talk about “Africanity and the church” or “African and Reformed”, this reality cannot be ignored or at least noted. I now discuss what is termed legal marriage in South Africa at present, without forgetting that we are in Africa.

Legally, there are three types of marriages in South Africa, namely civil or religious marriages; customary marriages, and civil partnerships. Civil or religious marriages are covered under the Marriage Act of 1961, which allows for the solemnisation of a civil or religious marriage between a man and a woman. Marriages under the Marriage Act and the Civil Union Act must be solemnised by a marriage officer in the presence of two witnesses. Magistrates are *ex officio* marriage officers, and civil servants (usually officials of the Department of Home Affairs) are appointed as marriage officers by the Minister of Home Affairs. The Minister may also appoint ministers of religion as marriage officers; they cannot solemnise marriages under the Civil Union Act, unless their denomination has applied to the Minister to be registered to do so. By reading the civil law marriage carefully, no one can dispute the fact that the URCSA definition of marriage sounds as or is similar to this specific law. If my conclusion is correct, it goes without saying that URCSA was contaminated by the laws of the land; the laws by implication had excluded Africans and LGBTQIA+ people. Under the new South African constitution, the customary marriages are covered under the Recognition of Customary Marriage Act of 1998, which allows for the registration of a marriage under African customary law to cater for African processes including polygamous marriages, and these are recognised under certain conditions. Civil or religious marriages or civil partnerships are covered under the “Civil Union Act of 2006”, which allows for the solemnisation of a civil partnership between two people, regardless of gender. The legal consequences under the Civil Union Act are similar to those of a marriage under the Marriage Act of 1961. These are currently the legal faces of marriage in (South) Africa. Since this article focuses on polygamy, Breckenridge (2004:10-11) defines polygamy as follows:

Polygamy takes various forms. One form is polygyny, in which a man has more than one wife at the same time. It is also called ‘simultaneous polygyny’. This is the definition usually meant when the term ‘polygamy’ is used. It is the type usually practiced in Africa. A second form is consecutive polygamy or serial monogamy, in which ‘one spouse after [is taken] in a sequence involving divorce and remarriage’. The third form, polyandry, is rare, and involves a woman marrying more than one husband at the same time. For the purposes of this paper, only the first form, simultaneous polygyny, is in view for the term ‘polygamy’.

This definition creates more problems for the URCSA’s stipulation, where the second form is not addressed or identified as a problem, thus creating an indirect privilege for others. Moreover, the question of polyandry remains another challenge for the URCSA.

### 3. UNSUSPICIOUS HISTORY

The point of departure is encouraged by Karl Marx's (1978:9) argument:

Men make their own history, but they do not make it just to as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living. And just as they seemed engaged in revolutionising themselves and things, in creating something that has never yet existed, precisely in such periods of revolutionary crisis they conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle cries and costumes in order to present the new scene of the world history in this time-honoured disguise and this borrowed language.

Groopman (1982:114) argues as follows about the preceding argument:

In part *The Brumaire* is an effort to illustrate and understand this paradox of man's self-enslavement to his past. It is in terms of tragedy and farce that Marx ultimately discovers the categories with which to describe and begin to solve the paradox.

The unsuspecting reception of biblical discourse in Africa is not accidental but an inheritance from the past that consequently becomes self-enslavement. The unsuspecting reception refers to a lack of awareness and ethic of interpretation or ignorance of a luggage that a writer and a reader bring with him or her to the text. It ties with the reformed tradition's lack of historical consciousness and viewing the text as an object without any subjectivity involved. A referral to unconscious reception of information is also a reference to unconscious thinking, and unconscious judgment. We hold this stance without realising, based on factors such as our background, experiences, and cultural norms. By implication and consequently, the spirit of the past through tradition overpowers and conquers.

Concerning the church, the Bible, and theology, Rostagno (1983:62) concludes:

Historically speaking, the church has always been a church of the bourgeoisie, even when it claimed to transcend class barriers or labored under the illusion that it pervaded all classes in the same way. Indeed it had been a truly bourgeois church, if the notion of interclassism is taken as part of the class which has identified itself with the history of the West, in which Christianity may have been considered to have been a major force. Only those members of the

working class who accepted this view of history attended church. But most of the working people never accepted this view and only gave the church the kind of formal allegiance subjects give to the claims of their rulers. They could not really belong to the church of another class.

Mosala (1987:7) adds that

[j]ust as that the church has always been the church of the bourgeoisie, theology and biblical exegesis have always represented bourgeois theological and exegetical interests.

Africans have inherited monogamy as part of colonialism, capitalism and missionary history. It is not by accident and by default that polygamy is demonised, disregarded, and undermined in other Christian churches in South Africa; the URCSA is not exonerated. I will now discuss when exactly polygamy became immoral, unethical, and/or illegal.

In 1885, in a document titled, "Memorandum regarding native marriages in the various provinces and the effect of such in relation to property", there was already a clear discrimination against African marriages:

Before proceeding to deal with each Province separately, it may be stated generally that only in the Province of Natal, Bechuanaland and the Transkeian Territories is marriage by native customs recognized in the courts. In other parts of the Union such alliances are regarded as illicit. In the Transvaal, the Orange Free State and the Cape Province proper, natives actually do in the vast majority of cases contract customary unions, but, such not being recognized as valid and binding in the eyes of the law, the parties have no legal redress in matters arising the reform.

The colonisers always had a negative attitude to discriminate against the African world view and lifestyle as barbaric, uncivilised, and a sin. Marriages by the Native Custom in Section 2 of Transvaal Law No. 4 of 1885 declared and undermined African marriages as uncivilised, stating:

The laws, habits and customs hitherto observed among the natives shall continue to remain in force in this Republic as long as they have not appeared to be inconsistent with general principles of civilization recognized in the civilized world (Memorandum CA:3).

For a coloniser, civilisation would mean conformity to the European world view. Civilisation was likened to a culture of Europe that is rooted in art, architecture, film, different types of music, literature, and philosophy. This European culture is often disguised or camouflaged as *common heritage*.

In fact, this implied cultural hierarchy and enduring Western civilisation. Bekemans (2012:5-6) argues:

On the cultural side, Europeans believed in the universal value and superiority of their civilization. It was seen as a process leading towards a virtuous and ideal state and finally eternal peace. The highest expression of civilization was represented by the nation-state which was to be legitimised in the context of 'methodological nationalism'. The idea of different and equally valuable forms of society was not taken into consideration so that other populations were labelled as 'barbarians' who needed to be civilized, imposing them as European values.

This process of civilisation led to a forced civil marriage to an extent that divorce, parentlessness and deceit became a consequence. It must be emphasised that divorce, parentlessness and deceit were forced onto an African. An African could only have one extra wife or a different wife after divorce. The Memorandum (CA:3) states:

It is quiet open to a native in the Transvaal to contract a marriage according to Christian rites during the subsistence of customary union, for, though article eleven of law 3 of 1897 lays down that a coloured person who contracts a marriage before a previous marriage entered into by him has been dissolved shall be punished by imprisonment with hard labour for a period not exceeding five years, yet a customary union not being recognised by the courts would not be regarded as a marriage within the meaning of that article.

The law discouraged polygamy but encouraged deceit. The Memorandum (CA:3) further states:

It is competent for a native to marry Christian rites a woman with whom he has previously been cohabiting under a customary union, provided, of course, no Christian marriage subsists between him and some other woman.

There is, of course, no question about the existence or legitimacy of an African customary marriage.

Marriage according to native custom in Zululand, that is under Code of 1878. The essentials to a marriage by native rites under the Native Code of 1878 are:

Payment of lobola by bridegroom to father or guardian of bride.

Consent of both parties and of the bride's father or guardian.

A marriage feast attended by the husband or his duly appointed representative, the bride and official witness.

The official witness must make public enquiry of the bride at any early part of the ceremony whether the marriage is of her own free will and consent.

The bride must be handed over by or on for the husband. It is the duty of the chief to see that no marriage takes place within his tribe unless attended by the official witness (Memorandum CA:7).

Of course, marriages in Transkei, Bechuanaland, and so on were treated differently:

The Native Appeal Court, in the case 'Lutsatsi vs Ben' went fully into the questions of polygamous unions contracted by the natives according to native forms. All rights of property in respect of such unions would of course be governed by native customs (Memorandum CA:16).

It must, however, be clarified that the recognition by or through the courts of law and memorandums did not mean acceptance, bearing in mind that the British established permanent control over the Cape Colony and that, in 1843, they annexed Transvaal. This context helps us understand the laws of that period:

In 1888, at an international conference of the Anglican Church in England, a resolution that reaffirmed monogamy as a requirement for baptism was passed. This decision was quickly communicated into the field and thus encouraged missionaries to continue their strict stance on the issue (Becker 2022: 31).

The colonised had to accept the colonisers' conditions of "Christianisation" and "civilisation". But a simple, obvious, and silly question is: Was there never polygamy in the Bible?

#### 4. POLYGAMY AND THE BIBLE

The question of polygamy is interesting in that, nowadays, the vast majority of people view polygamy as immoral, while the Bible nowhere explicitly condemns it. My point of contestation is that, in the Old Testament, Lamech was the first polygamist with two wives (Gen. 4:19); Abraham had two wives (Gen. 16:3); Esau had three wives (Gen. 26:33; 28:9); Jacob had four wives (Gen. 29:31; 30:3, 9); Gideon had many wives (70 sons) (Judges 8:30); Elkanah had two wives (1 Sam. 1:2); David had eight wives (1 Sam.

18:17; 2 Sam. 3:2-5); Solomon had 300 wives and 700 concubines (1 Kg. 3:1; 11:3); Rehoboam had eighteen wives (2 Chron. 11:12); Abijah had fourteen wives (2 Chron. 13:21), and Joash had two wives (2 Chron. 24:3).

From these passages, one can gather some general teaching on the practice. Polygamy is portrayed as a normal way of life in the Old Testament. Moreover, the Old Testament stops far short of condemning the practice, much less forbidding it. From what the Bible explicitly states concerning the issue of polygamy, there is no clear condemnation, “there are no Old Testament laws against polygamy” (Breckenridge 2004:26).

In the time of Jesus’ birth, polygamy (also called bigamy or digamy in texts) was understood as a man having had several spouses consecutively, as evidenced, for example, in Tertullian’s work *De exhortatione castitatis*. St Paul answered this problem by allowing widows to remarry (1 Cor. vii. 39; 1 Tim. 5:11-16). According to Paul, only *women* older than 60 years of age can make the list of Christian widows, but younger widows should remarry to avoid sin. Some conclude that leaders of the Church required *one-woman men*. St Paul excluded remarried widowers from having an influence. This would have been a stricter understanding of monogamy than Roman law codified, and would have been a new and unusual demand on men. On this subject, Luck (2009:14) writes:

Thus it is most probable that the qualifications list sees the ‘husband of one wife’ as a condemnation of porneia – unlawful sex, though doubtless the clause also prohibited adultery – sex with someone else’s wife, polygyny was out of sight and mind. The issue is not the number of covenant relations the man had – he would only have had one at a time, since the empire was monogamous – but his womanizing. This of course does not eliminate the grievous sin of marrying and divorcing in order to have sexual relations with a number of women. But that too is not the issue in polygyny.

In his article titled, *African polygamy: Past and present*, Fenske (2015) argues that, traditionally, most of the Catholic and Protestant missions in Africa condemned polygyny as irreconcilable with Christian doctrine and principles and even a basis of abuse against women. The occurrence of polygyny nowadays is indeed rather lower in areas where Christian missions were present the longest.

This became acceptable by converts in Africa and elsewhere. However, it should also be noted that, in some or other Christian denominations, polygyny became accepted. The two realities of the acceptance and rejection of polygamy in Christian communities in Africa have led to a

debate. Our point of contestation as African Christians should be based on what Mbiti (1978:278) argues:

Conversion to the Gospel takes place within a cultural framework. The Gospel has been, and should continue to be, proclaimed within the melodies of our African culture – through words of our times of our ten thousand musical instruments, through the joyous rhythm of our bodies and the solemn symbols of our artists. It is within our culture that we have to propagate the Gospel of our Lord.

In addition, I share the view of Makoka and Shomag (2003:1) on the incarnation of Christ:

In becoming human, Christ identifies himself with us in all but sin (Phil 2:5-11). Humans have thereby permanently been invited to share divine life with God. The Christ event in becoming human is therefore, a reciprocal process between divinity and humanity. At play is the power of God's kenotic love in and through Jesus Christ empowering humans to become fully human. The reciprocity between divinities in reaching out for human kind, underlines what we here understand by the term inculturation par excellence or contextualization.

But we must acknowledge that the colonisers and missionaries have always disregarded the African world view to a point of imposing the foreign cultural norm of monogamy, thus leading to a sin of divorce, leaving children parentless, and leading divorced wives to remarry. Turner (1966:314) questions this argument:

What have we done to the Africans in the name of Christianity? Polygamy which Christ does not forbid, we have fought against as the greatest of all evils, but divorce and remarriage which he does forbid, we have introduced. We have truly managed to Europeanize them. Mission theory should teach us to preach the gospel but not our own national traditions.

Beyond divorce, this led to deceit and death. Many polygamists lied that they are divorced or will divorce or that they are monogamous. The action that led to divorce, remarriage and parentlessness was deliberate. However, Turner (1966:313-314) wanted to turn this systematic and deliberate action into or blame ignorance, arguing:

Nineteenth century missionaries to Africa were probably not conscious of the distinction between monogamous marriage as an institution in Western culture and monogamy as the Christian norm for the marriage relationship; and they sought to replace

polygamy found in African cultures by the Western institutions as a basic necessity in a Christian church....In the judgement of most missionaries those key points were represented by what was known as 'medicine', or 'fetish', or the whole realm of magic and the native practitioner, together with African Customs or institutions of which polygamy was the most important.

The abolishing and disregard of polygamy does have consequences that cannot be ignored. Barth (1968:203) argues:

Situations can and do arise in which immediate abolition of polygamy as an institution (for example, the discharge of all but one man's existing wives) would bring about not only a cruel but an ethically irresponsible confusion and dissolution of social relationships which may be highly problematical, yet are guarantees of law and order and security and protection, and can no longer be so if there is an abrupt transition to monogamy.

The confusion also involves the possibility for both Christian men and women to commit infidelity or fornication rather than to have more than one wife or to become the second or third wife. Above everything and the worst, this constitutes cultural and spiritual homicide. This is in relation to or limited to indigenous African societies, especially pre-colonial societies. Homicide leaves societies destitute and suffering misfortune and generally the penalty for such behaviour is death. Death is unavoidable since African marriage is spiritual and relates to ancestral spirits. Disregard for the ancestral way and divorce have serious consequences. Of course, I am now entering another problematic terrain that I shall address in my future publication.

## 5. CONCLUSION

We must always understand that the Bible has its own context but that our reception of the biblical discourse in Africa should and must always be treated with suspicion, not only because there is something wrong, but also to verify and complement. We must at least agree from our history of oppression and exploitation using the Bible that:

It is no longer sufficient to claim biblical foundation for this or that theology. One must always go beyond the theologian's claim of faithfulness to scripture and discover the all-encompassing mode which explains the system proposed. One's hermeneutics always rests on a prior allegiance or worldview....The question remains: how faithfully does theology reflect the biblical message for the times and situations it addresses? For if biblical truths are unchanging

and unchangeable, the theologian's task is to explain and actualize the Bible's message in such a way that it communicates without being unfaithful. In order to do this, one must rid oneself, as much as possible, of any pre-understanding and take Scripture as it is in all its simplicity and complexity (Tienou 1983:91).

It is crucial to make use of *Hermeneutics of suspicion* when reading and applying biblical texts. The benefit of doing that is that texts are read with scepticisms in order to expose their purported repressed or hidden meanings. We would then be able to distinguish between two forms of hermeneutics: hermeneutics of faith which aims to restore meaning to text, and hermeneutics of suspicion which attempts to decode meanings that are disguised. The hermeneutics of faith and the hermeneutics of suspicion work not only hand in hand but also separately, depending on the circumstances and motives. This exchange and interchange is helpful in translation and interpretation. The strengths and weaknesses of both provide an opportunity to be both faithful and suspicious.

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*Keywords*

*Trefwoorde*

Africa

Afrika

Biblical discourse

Bybelse diskoers

Polygamy

Poligamie