On the Relevance of Having Two Husbands:
Contribution to the Study of Polygynous/
Polyandrous Marital Forms of the
Jos Plateau

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Anthropologists have created many sorts of models and diagrams to clarify the social relationships involved in marriages which in effect are unions between two groups, a wife-giving group and a wife-taking group. In doing so they base their generalizations upon the fact that normatively speaking the unions last for life. Divorce for these model builders is an irritating problem best ignored for two very good reasons. First, their models are abstractions which attempt to present marriage systems as simply as possible; thus they are not designed to take into account anomalies such as divorce and subsequent remarriage into another group which logically demand the addition of a few more groups than the minimal number implied by a formal model or schematic diagram. Second, not one of the formal marriage models devised by anthropologists to date has been designed to reflect the fact that a woman might have simultaneously two husbands in two different groups. Such a consideration, indeed, may appear ridiculous because it is not confirmed by the usually cited ethnographic data. The aim of this article will be to show that, in spite of standard notions, this consideration is sound and demanded by analysis of several African systems of marriage.

First we shall review the nature of current widely held marriage system conceptualizations. Then for the major portion of this paper we shall consider several Central Nigerian African systems in order to demonstrate the need for augmentation of these standard marriage models.

If one examines the ethnographic literature concerning marriage one may be led to conclude that the concept of marriage linking two groups has particular virtue because it seems to be applicable everywhere. Even apparently anomalous cases like the Nayar can be explained in this way. A Nayar woman is married first to one man and then either divorces or stays married to him for life. This first marriage enables her to pursue later on what are, in the Indian context, practices which are the negation of marriage. The Nayar may be said merely to have systematized the use of an anomaly, a variant, or exception utilized in a

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few other societies only rarely by a few individuals. Clearly the relations that a woman can have simultaneously with several men from different groups are not marriages according to the Indian conceptual model which remains that of the classical scheme of dyadic relations between two groups linked through one woman (Dumont 1961). The same seems to apply to polyandry proper; the insistence upon its adelphic character makes the marriage of a woman to several brothers a relation between two groups. A review of the literature leaves one with the impression that the only case in the ethnographic record of normative non-adelphic polyandry is the Marquesan (Otterbein 1963), but whether some of the unions described for them there should not better be described as instances of cicisbeism rather than polyandry still remains to be explored, if indeed these interesting practices are still operative.

On the face of all this usually considered evidence it could legitimately be held that, in all societies, marriage links two groups through a woman, or rarely, through several in cases of sororal polygyny; and in all instances the relations remains dyadic since only two groups are involved in each contract. Thus marriage has come to be regarded as an integrative device linking two groups with the use of one woman. The various patterns that can be worked out through the circulation of women appear to have an influence upon the social organization of a society, and this led Lévi-Strauss (1949) to elaborate a typology of theoretical marriage models. On the one hand we have the elementary structures of marriage between the various cross-cousins, i.e., (1) bilateral, (2) matrilateral and (3) patrilateral together with their derivations; on the other hand we have the complex structures which can be properly analyzed only when treated statistically since these systems only define prohibited alliances and not prescriptive ones.

The aim of Lévi-Strauss's classification of elementary structures is to show which of three structures generates the best possible integration for the benefit of the society as a whole; 1) can only link two groups or multiples of two, 2) demands at least three groups to operate minimally but it can extend in continuous chains of indefinite length thus making it better than the first; whereas 3) is a mere juxtaposition of small closed systems which in itself could not posses an ongoing structure.

The conceptual basis of complex structures can be summed up by saying that by giving one's sister to a group of similar nature to one's own a man receives a bridewealth which enables him to obtain a spouse from any other similar group. The global marital structure thus would consist of a set of cycles which could be discovered only with the help of a statistical treatment of the data (Lévi-Strauss 1949, 1966; Cuisenier et al. 1970). It is quite clear that the group of complex structures so defined does not take into account:

(a) societies allowing several kinds of marriages but limiting any particular woman to only one kind of marriage. Among these societies are those where two kinds of unions coincide: a marriage allocating the children to the line or
On the Relevance of Having Two Husbands

(b) societies, which seem to be even less common, permitting a woman to enter two successive unions which affect the jural position of the children. A woman can then have some of her children belonging to her brother's line and some to that of her husband (Rehfisch 1960).

(c) societies, very rare, which ask that a woman be linked, during her life, to more than one group. The Sano of Upper-Volta are a good example of this. The woman must have, before her marriage, a lover who cannot become her husband. One of the consequences of such a system is a larger social integration within the society (Izard 1967:134-140). These examples, however, exhaust neither the logical possibilities nor the ethnographic evidence for other marital subtypes that can be subsumed within this general typology of complex marriage structures. For instance, in all the preceding examples women serve as a link between only two groups at one time since they are neither obliged nor permitted to have two husbands simultaneously in different groups. It is here in particular that this typology of marital relations needs to be enriched in light of current ethnographic evidence from Central Nigeria. Now we shall review this data and proceed to amplify the typology of complex marriage structures.

The Nigerian material on what is called "secondary marriage" in the literature shows the existence of a more subtle kind of matrimonial integration than the one usually utilized by other societies. If most societies conform to a structural model which merely uses a woman as a link between two groups only at the same time, namely a wife-giving group and a wife-taking group, the model which can be drawn from the Nigerian data differs radically from the former in its conceptual essence. The basic principle of these Nigerian system is to allow or even to oblige a woman to be simultaneously the wife of two or more husbands belonging to differing groups. Then the circulation of women does not link two groups only; rather it links at least three groups through a single woman.

With such a system, it is important to differentiate between "primary marriage", the first marriage of a girl, and "secondary marriage", the subsequent marriage(s) of this woman without divorce from the previous husband(s). There is no refund of bridewealth by the new husband in a secondary marriage, the woman always remaining married to her already married husband(s). She can return to any of them to stay the minimal time she is supposed to spend when she returns or takes a new husband, this minimal time varying with each particular tribe. The children belong to the husband who is designated as the begetter.

The theoretical significance of these data has not been recognized up to now. Because of lack of intensive studies in the past these customs, known since the middle 1920's (Meek 1924, 1931; Ames 1934: passim), have remained long resistant to interpretation. Smith (1953) made the first important analysis of these
marital custom. But otherwise they were accorded only minor recognition, generally as mere citations (Leach 1961:106; Goody 1962:51 Appendix). Not until 1971 did these systems become noted in general introductions to marriage (Mair 1971:144-151). This situation is easily understandable since much literature devoted to the subject gives the impression that these systems of marriage are oddities found in loose, unstructured, unstable or badly integrated societies. Such qualifications are frequent in the earlier reports on these systems, which were mostly written by colonial officers. The resolutely negative connotation attributed to such practices is shared even by one of the more recent commentators of these systems. Murdock, as late as 1959, wrote that these societies “remain, so to speak, a cultural cul-de-sac characterized by a series of interesting archaic traits ranging from widespread complete nudity to certain utterly unique marriage practices.” (Murdock 1959:96). Murdock does not know where to place these societies in his evolutionary scheme; moreover, because he does not understand their systems of marriage, he arbitrarily links the latter with nudity and by labelling them archaic traits avoids the trouble of discussing them. Since they are “utterly unique”, in Murdock’s own words, we do wonder what comparative criteria have led him to this conclusion. We shall show below that these systems of marriage can be characterized as being quite sophisticated.

In spite of its aversion to these customs the British Administration did not forbid them in the areas directly under its jurisdiction. But it did nothing to prevent the Muslim Emirs from abolishing these traditional marriage practices in their Emirates. The adverse results of these abolitions recorded by M.G. Smith (1953, 1975) attest that these systems of marriage are a central institution, linking all other aspects of the social structure. This fact had already been perceived by Meek (1931, II:91) for the Katab and their neighbors; he remarked that these forms of marriage could be analyzed as a system by saying (sic): “The social system throughout all these tribes follows a uniform pattern in two important respects viz, that the tribe is organized for purposes of A) marriage with girls not previously married, and B) marriage by elopement with married women...”

A critical examination of the literature devoted to populations practicing secondary marriage shows that their social organization, far from lacking structure, is highly structured. It may be seen as articulated around the combination of the four terms of two contrasting pairs, endogamy versus exogamy, and marriage with unmarried girls (primary marriage) versus marriage with already married women (secondary marriage). The two terms of the second pair are always mutually exclusive, i.e. a wife-taking group cannot marry both an unmarried girl and a married woman from the same wife-giving group.

The diverse combinations between the terms generate—in a group of transformations (Lévi-Strauss 1958:306)—the five following models which are represented in our tribes (fig. 1). It might be possible to generate others but this will not be attempted here.
Model I

The tribe is composed of a certain number of endogamous groups for primary marriage. These endogamous groups can contract secondary marriages with married women coming from similar groups. Thus each endogamous group for primary marriage coincides with the wife-taking unit defined, within the society-wide marital structure, as the group whose members share the prohibition of marrying women already married to other members of the group, wherever they may reside. These wife-taking units must be minimally composed, in this case and in all the others we are dealing with, of a relatively high number of lines or lineages to allow the individual members a certain marital choice outside of the prohibition of marriage (primary and/or secondary) dictated by kinship. These prohibitions vary from tribe to tribe but we shall not deal with these except to say that they are complex structures i.e., without kinship prescriptions. Thus we have in these systems two radically different types of prohibitions of marriage added to one another, i.e. the prohibitions dictated by kinship and those dictated by the combinations of the two contrasting pairs mentioned above which stem from social organization. It is with this latter aspect, or level, of our models that we shall deal presently.

Our Model I fits the Kadara (Smith 1953:301).

Model II

The tribe is composed of a certain number of exogamous groups for primary marriage, these groups taking their primary spouses from one group and giving their daughters to the other groups. These groups practice secondary marriage between lineages or lines within the exogamous group for primary marriage. The situation is symmetrical and obverse to Model I. The group of tribes known as "Bata speaking peoples", and among them especially the Jirai subgroup (Meek 1931, I: 69-136) provides us with several cases of Model II. The Bulai (Meek 1931, I: 86-87) and the Malabu are prime examples. The marriage rules of this group of tribes are particularly well described for the Malabu (see Meek, 1931, I: 91-113 and 116 where Meek gives an account of certain general rules of the Jirai of which the Malabu are part).

Secondary marriage and cicisbeism are found side by side among the Malabu within the group simultaneously exogamous for primary marriage and endogamous for secondary marriage, i.e., within the group called "wife-sharing unit" by Meek. Cicisbeism is different from secondary marriage; the latter implies the possession of children begotten by the secondary husband; whereas the former does not carry any rights over the children. A more pertinent difference is, among the Malabu, that sexual co-residence of the woman and her husband together with her cicisbeo is simultaneous; whereas in the case of secondary marriage the cohabitation is with only one man at a time. The Malabu carefully distinguish between secondary marriage and cicisbeism on the basis of the woman's residence which insures affiliation of the children to the husband the woman is in residence with, the cicisbeo coming to the latter's house. When a woman shifts her residence, and therefore changes spouse, she cannot take her cicisbeo to be her
Circle A; BiC Endogamous unit for primary marriage and exogamous unit for secondary marriage (wife-taking unit)

--- secondary marriage

--- primary marriage

O exogamous unit for primary marriage (wife-taking unit)

model I

Circle A, B, C. Exogamous unit for primary marriage and endogamous unit for secondary marriage

--- secondary marriage

--- primary marriage

O exogamous unit for secondary marriage

model II

Circle A, B, C. Exogamous unit for secondary marriage (wife-taking unit)

--- secondary marriage

--- primary marriage

O exogamous unit for primary marriage within Ego's wife-taking unit

model III

Circles A, A, A. moiety
Circles B, B, B. moiety
Circle A, A, B, B. wife-taking units

--- secondary marriage

--- primary marriage

O exogamous unit for premarital relations (among the Rukuba only)

premarital relations (among the Rukuba only)

model IV

Circles A, A, A. moiety
Circles B, B, B. moiety
Circle A, A, B, B. wife-taking units

--- secondary marriage

--- primary marriage

O exogamous unit for premarital relations (among the Rukuba only)

premarital relations (among the Rukuba only)
secondary husband before having parted with him *qua* cicisbeo and having taken another cicisbeo in his stead (Meek 1931, I:116). We must remark here that cicisbeian relationships are also a powerful factor in social integration implying, at the level of the model, at least three groups practicing cicisbeism in a circle, man A being the cicisbeo of B's wife, B being the cicisbeo of C's wife and C closing the circle with A's wife. We shall now leave this question aside and simply note the work of others regarding the Nigerian Plateau (Smith 1953, where a very interesting discussion together with a bibliography up to 1953 is found; Baker 1954; Smedley 1967; Netting 1969).

**Model III**

Secondary marriage can also be found in societies where exogamy and endogamy in wife-taking units are not mutually exclusive. Here primary marriage can be contracted within the wife-taking unit or outside it, in another wife-taking unit. Thus primary marriage can be contracted in any wife-taking unit, and secondary marriage can be arranged with all married women save those already married to members of one's own wife-taking unit. But when a man contracts a primary marriage in a unit other than his own he is debarred from contracting a secondary marriage with a woman married within the lineage which has given him a primary spouse. This model applies definitely to the Chawai (Meek 1931, II: 145-147) and to the Irigwe for whom we possess the most complete published description (Sangree 1969, 1972, 1974a, 1974b and the contribution in the present volume).

**Model IV**

The society is comprised of a certain number of exogamous groups for the purpose of both primary and secondary marriages. These groups, which I call wife-taking units, form two moieties where the wife-taking units of both moieties marry each other's girls in primary marriage and contract secondary marriages with spouses married in other wife-taking units belonging to the same moiety. The original form of the Katab social organization is an example of this model (Meek 1931, II:1-128) together with the Rukuba (Muller 1969, 1972, 1973, 1976).

**Model V**

The Abisi (Piti) until very recently included five groups entirely exogamous for both primary and secondary marriages, groups that I also call wife-taking unit. A woman is simultaneously married to three men from differing wife-taking units at her first marriage. She links then four wife-taking units through her three marriages: her own group and those of her three husbands. This leaves room for only a fourth marriage with the last wife-taking unit which has not yet married her. The men have also three spouses married in primary marriage. A husband cannot marry in secondary marriage wives married into the three lineages which have given him a daughter. However he can abduct married spouses from any lineage in any of the other wife-taking units, provided that the wife is not a daughter of his own wife-taking unit and that she has not
yet been married to a man of his own wife-taking unit (Chalifoux 1977 and the contribution in this volume).

These are the most simple and elegant models. Others, like the Kagoro, are more complicated variants of them and they will not be analyzed here for lack of space.

One fact is that while some of these systems allow a woman to have two or more husbands simultaneously others insist that a woman have at least two, or even three of them, the second and the third being married shortly after the first marriage or even at the same time as the first, the cohabitation, however, being deferred for the second and the third husbands. The Abisi and the Irigwe are well documented cases of this. We would then divide these societies into those which merely authorize secondary marriage and those which prescribe it. However, the documentation on this point is thin for several of these systems and does not permit us to make a definite classification. The important point to bear in mind is that some of these societies have utilized the integrative value of the principle "a woman has two simultaneous husbands in two different groups" and have systematically applied it; or they have managed to add certain refinements to this basic rule as evidenced by the Rukuba, seemingly as if their rules prescribing multiple marriages were still not sufficient to satisfy their need to circulate women.

We can now try to reason about the theoretical models of these forms of social organization and marriage. The simplest theoretical model, Model I, can be reduced to two exogamous units with regard to primary and secondary marriage to enable the society to function minimally with women having two husbands. Those units are, in turn, subdivided into subunits for primary marriages. Model II could also function minimally with two wife-taking units. The Bulai (Meek 1931, I:86-87) are a good example of this solution. Model III needs at least three wife-taking units and Model IV needs four wife-taking units for the system to function minimally with the woman having at least two husbands. Model V needs at least five wife-taking units to operate minimally. All these societies can be effectively composed of a fairly great number of wife-taking units; for instance, the Rukuba have more than twenty wife-taking units per moiety and the Irigwe have twenty-four units that are called sections by Sangree (1969:1047, 1050) after the Irigwe local term.

But, as we have already said, there is more to it; some populations complicate their marriage rules within the framework of these models as if the bare framework were not sufficient to satisfy their urge to circulate women. However, we shall leave these intricacies and limit ourselves to the study of the implications of the models only.

We are confronted, in all these systems, with a basic integrational principle, fundamentally different from the general conception of marriage linking only two groups through one woman. The consequence of this is a multiplication of the alliances tying a wife-giving group to several wife-taking groups. It would,
therefore be a mistake to qualify these systems as being loose or unstructured. The contrary would be more apt. These systems might be characterized as mobile (Sangree 1969:1049), but they are not unstable or, worse, in transition (to where?) and in crisis. If one must characterize them by comparison with systems uniting only two groups through a woman one may speak of an excess of structure rather than a lack.

Looking at them from this point of view we notice that many of these models are created through the imbrication, effected in a particularly ingenious way, of several societies with a complex marriage structure, each of the endogamous or exogamous groups being potentially a society in itself since they could be autonomous for marital purposes should they decide to marry their girls in primary marriage only and keep them as could be done with Models I and III. Likewise, among the Rukuba, the compulsory premarital relations entered into by the youths within each wife-taking unit could very well turn into effective marriage since these relations only apply between people outside of the Rukuba prohibition of incest (Muller 1969). Instead these societies seem driven, on the one hand, to keep their married daughters moving by sending them to other wife-taking units or, on the other, try to share each other's wives within one's own "wife-sharing unit" as among the Malabu, all this to complicate the nice sociological game of exchanging women to obtain either a broader or a denser integration, or both.

Nothing could be farther from the "archaic traits" with which Murdock is satisfied when characterizing these systems. It would rather be the opposite if we adopt the Murdock scale which equates complication with evolution.

But we shall not make the error of trying to find or to assign pseudo-functional causes to "explain" these systems. Lucy Mair (1971:151), with her usual sharpness, says about the rationale of these systems:

As for Kadara and Kagoro polyandry, what shall one say? These people live in just the same environment as many others who do not recognize their legalized custom of "wife-stealing." Most British anthropologists would, I think, see in these examples an argument against theories that social institutions are determined by the resources of the environment. There is an American school of thought which seeks explanation of all social facts in the ratio of population and land area; it would be interesting to hear their explanation of polyandry. It could of course be argued that, although the marriage of a woman simultaneously to more than one is a feature of all these customs, the features which differentiate them are more important.

This is exactly what our analysis has shown; our models are simply and only the different realizations of a series of cogent and logical possibilities—a group of transformations—derived from the application of very simple conceptual principles which seem strange to us because our ethnocentrism has blinded us to anything we have not been able to imagine ourselves.
However, these five models that we have just presented do not seem to have appeared in isolation; we need only browse through the literature devoted to Central Nigerian peoples (Gunn 1953, 1956 and Meek 1931, I and II) to realize that the fundamental social questions these populations have been concerned and preoccupied with are how to divide and subdivide rights and obligations between spouses (or lovers and cicisbeos), how to allocate children, how to practice secondary marriage, indeed how to complicate the circulation of women, all this while keeping an eye on being sure to organize oneself in these matters in a way different from that of the neighbors. Some of the solutions attained attest that they are the fruit of such sophisticated sociological speculation that they might arouse even an Australian's envy!

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