

# **Polyandry: Defined, Depicted, and Dissected**

Sociology 153 • Friday-12:30



# Polyandry

Polyandry, as seen through this paper, entails many ideas, and cannot quickly be categorized as a single precise entity. Its study involves recognition of corresponding definitions, which help to formulize an answer to the problem of deciding whether its existence is valid or not. Polyandry's, geography and specific occurrences in America can also be viewed to give a basis for further reasoning. Current theories and sociological reasons for its existence can be proffered as a means toward a better understanding of this marital custom. I hope to cover all these basic areas in my paper, and inform the reader about the complexities of this relationship between one woman and several men.

Polyandry is derived from the Greek, and is composed of two words, poly or "many" and andria meaning "men". It is supposed to polygyny, from Polly and gynia, "women", also derived from the Greek. Polygamy is the popular term by which polygyny is almost exclusively known, no doubt because it is in this form that it is most generally encountered. Actually, both polygyny and polyandry can be included in polygamy if this word is used in its proper sense. It is made up of two terms of Greek origin, also. Poly and gamia , or "marriage". With this knowledge, it is possible to offer some definitions; Polygamy: the marriage of one or more than two persons, one man and one woman, in the same union. Polygyny: the marriage of one man to more than one woman. Polyandry: the marriage of one woman to more than one man. Conjoint marriage: the marriage of more than one man

to more than one woman. It is implied that in every one of these cases, The marriage of more than one person to only one of the opposite sex, or of any many of either sex to each other, occurs simultaneously. Even if the multiple marriages are not the result of the same wedding, they do run concurrently, without the dissolution of any marriage, or marriages, which have been entered earlier. In accordance with these definitions, it can be said, that if there is no marriage, a group of men, living with one woman, having sexual relations with her, and even procreating children, cannot be considered polyandrous. The term cisisbeisms, (from the 16th century Italian meaning for attendant lover), can be



used for such an arrangement between the sexes, wary, and one or more of the male partners is not related to the woman in marriage, each of the men involved in this way to be known as a cicisbeo, and not a husband. For a parallel form of union between the sexes, distinct from polygyny, in

obligations, which while not making him a married partner, with all the privileges of a husband, does entitle him to more than if he were a cicisbeo. This type can be termed as a secondary husband, and is found predominantly in conjoint marriages. It may often be difficult to distinguish real spouse from secondary ones, and even from concubines and cicisbeo. The latter should also be looked upon as different again from occasional lovers and mistresses, whose relations with their partners, will only be fleeting and without correlated obligations and rights on either side. Only by a thorough analysis can a difference between them be resolved.



which there is no marriage between the partners, but in which a man lives an intimate relationship with a number of women, the term concubines, (not wives) can be used. In some societies, a form of union appears to exist, in which a man may be given a status together with certain in rights, and

In accordance with the terminologies, it is apparent now that what makes polyandry, and polygyny different from cicisbeism and concubinage, is marriage. The first two institutions are polygamist, while the second two are not. Numerous definitions of marriage have been given, but the word is still often used in a loose and confusing manner. Marriage can be best defined as the union between man and woman in the form, recognized by their society, and titling them individually to the specific kinship status of husband and wife, jointly to that of spouses with reciprocal rights, and obligations, and to the procreation of legitimate children within the union. This definition is independent of the nature of the wedding ceremony, since it allows for any public recognition of the union in the traditional form of the society, to which

the persons belong. It dispenses with the idea of a contract between the parties, or their respective kin groups by mentioning the reciprocal rights and obligations to which they are entitled once they are married. The future status of father, for the man and of mother, for the woman is not mentioned here, as that is another kinship relation, which both will be assuming towards their eventual offspring later, as a husband and wife team even if the spouses do not have sexual relations with each other, do not procreate children, or do not live together for one reason or another, the definition still holds good, for such occurrences, do not make any difference to the socially recognized status of husband and wife of the man and the woman, do not take any of their rights away from them, even if they are not able to enjoy them, and do not alter the obligations which they have towards one another. Moreover, the nature of these rights and obligations, together with the form of the wedding ceremony, vary considerably from culture to culture.



In conclusion, if polyandry exists at all, as an institution, it does not. It does so on the basic question of whether it is a marital custom or not. If it is found that one woman and a plurality of men are joined in a marital union, it can definitely be said that polyandry exists. If on the other hand, this is not the case, and

the common bond which unites the two parties does not correspond to the definition of marriage, then it will be necessary to say they are living in cisbeism, or in another sexual relationship distinct from the true polyandry.

In dealing with the distinction of polyandry, it most logically leads to the contemporary, geographical distribution and incidents of polyandry. Quite simply, polyandry is distributed throughout the four continents of America, Asia, (and

islands of the Pacific), Australia, and Africa. However, they are not all true forms; a look at those forms occurring in America will justify this. Specifically, the pioneers have been described as practicing this custom, but the evidence does not agree with the definition of polyandry. The only evidence offered about

the institution is that sexual relations between the man and his older brother's wife is a recognized social usage, which does not require a formal marriage. The older brother will often permit his younger brother to exercise the rights of a second husband towards his wife. The Shoshone Indians were supposedly to have practiced polyandrous marriage at one time, but it seems that one husband had somehow always managed to be away hunting, while the other was at home. Thus, in the absence of more substantial evidence of polyandry among the Shoshone, even in the past, it is best to look upon this case, as not proven.

Another example is found in the Paviotso Indians where a shortage of women occurred through the frequent polygyny within this tribe. This is conducive to polyandry, and although it is not common, when it does exist, the marriages are permanent. Residence with these people is matrilineal,

and a son-in-law will contribute to the economy of his parents-in-law's household. In one case, two brothers visited a girl's parents and talked over the matter of their both marrying her and coming to live with the family. When the parents of the woman agreed, and she herself offered no objection, the brothers moved into the house and were considered as her husbands. When a child was born to the wife, both men claimed fatherhood, and were so regarded by the public opinion. In another case of the same tribe, a marriage was originally arranged only with an older brother. Then, after he had lived with the wife's family for some time, the younger brother took up residence with the couple and the girl's parents and was considered a husband. It is apparently sufficient with the Paviotso for a man and a woman to be known to be living together and having sexual relations for public opinion to regard them, as married without further formalities. For this reason, even if it was not mentioned at the time of the elder brother's marriage, that this younger brother would eventually join him as a secondary husband, the latter was, nevertheless considered to hold that status, simply on the strength of his living with the common wife, and being known to have sexual relations with her.

Mention has also been made of a case of polyandry among the Paiute, where an Indian of this tribe, who lived with a



married Shoshone woman in a reservation; also, two men living with one woman of their own people, so that they shared equally sexual privileges and economic burdens. However, nothing is stated as to how this union was formed, or whether both the men were socially recognized as husbands.

Therefore, they may have been simply living together, owing to the difficulties of getting a wife, or they could have been cisisbei or simply lovers. In *Girl Friday*, Jean Dolinger gives a popular

description of the Chama people of the lower Ukayali in Peru;

The Cashibos are a matriarchy, the tribe being governed exclusively by the women. When a Cashibo girl wants to marry, she simply steals the mosquito net of her proposed husband and moves it to her own dwelling. This act constitutes marriage under Cashibo law. The husband then adopts the name of his wife and thereafter works for his mother-in-law and his wife's relatives. Even the clothes which he wears are the property of his wife. Women of the tribe, practice polyandry, and it is not uncommon for one Cashibo girl to have five or six husbands simultaneously. Divorce is as simple as marriage: the wife returns the mosquito net of her husband, takes his clothes, which still

belong to her, and sends him back to the home of his relatives.

The husbands generally string their nets in a circle around their mutual wife, making it simple for her to bestow her favors upon whom so ever she desires. Strangely enough, there is no jealousy among the husbands



because they know as soon as they are rejected, or lose favor, with one woman, they will be free to have their mosquito nets taken by another woman of the tribe. All children, resulting from the strange marriages remain in the custody of the mother and become her sole property. There is a marked bond of affection between mother and child, but since the father is often times, unknown, little attention, if any, is paid the child by the husband of the Cashibo woman.

All in all the cases in America are for the most part vague and invalid as they do not adhere to the strict definition of polyandry. According to H. R. H. Prince Peter of Greece the only true polyandrous groups in existence past or present are; the aforementioned, Paviotso in North America, Bashi Lela of the Kasai in the

Belgian Congo, Kadeem, and Kagoro of northern Nigeria, inhabitants of the Marquesas in the Pacific, Tu-La or Da-La of Indo China, Kandyans of Ceylon, Tibetans, inhabitants of Simur Stae, of Terri-Garhwal State, Khasas of Jaunsar-Radar, all of North India, Dards of Dah in Kashmir, Sikkimese Bhotias, Bhutanese of Tibetan extraction. Obviously, most polyandrous relationships are found in certain parts of Asia and Africa. With respect to the other examples of polyandry, it can be stated that when the term polyandry is vaguely used, as covering, not only the marriage of a woman too many men, but also, access to another man's wife, it is possible to report on a very extensive distribution of the institution, and a quite



reasonable incidence of it all over the world. The sociological explanation of polyandry often pertains to special social organizations, concerning travel of the men or the military service, to which they are bound. However, there are other explanations, that concern, specifically, a chief will take a woman with many lovers as his wife, because the addition to the household of so many male laborers can only result in greater wealth and prestige for the chief husband. Another case entails the uncle, who invites his sister's son, to become the polyandrous husband of his wife, in acting in accordance with the cultural norm of his society, which prescribes that it is right

for the relation between the respective families of a man and of his wife, to be continued after the husband's death.

In some cases, the fact that householders were obliged in feudal times to be in attendance at court for long periods of time. This made it imperative, for someone of the family to remain with the wife, and nothing was more natural than that a younger brother should be associated in the marriage to take the place of the first husband in his absence. A variation of this theory might include men who might be called upon to stay out for many nights, guarding the field against wild

animals, or may become ill.

As in the case of Tibet, the tillable land in that country are of small extent, and all already under cultivation.

For these reasons, the farmers can no longer afford to divide up the fields among the family. The necessity that exists may prompt the men to go in search of new pastures, or to dispose of the cattle in new pasture land. A simple explanation is that someone must stay at home and look after the family in the absence of the husband, when he goes out on commercial or other travels. Adelphi polyandry, where the husbands are brothers, is then the ideal situation and solution, because should the wife become pregnant in such periods, the child to be born would at least be of the same blood of the first husband.

To be more specific, individual, personal reasons may offer a more interesting perspective. One tribesman considers that it brings peace and contentment in a family, as brothers will not quarrel if they have only one wife. Quarrels, he says, are much more common between sisters-in-law, than between brothers. Wanting to have a child may cause a man to call another into sire and heir. If a woman is free to choose her husband, she may wish to take another one of her choice, because she considers him a more potent male with whom she will have a greater satisfaction. The weaker sex may desire to have more than one husband, in order to be happier, to enjoy greater security, and also so as to acquire more prestige in the eyes of others in the community. In Ceylon, the wife of the eldest brother would, in any case, seduce the younger ones; it was just as well that this fact be taken into consideration, and that the tendency be institutionalized. Another excuse, is that polyandry is highly moral, because it kept the men of the household from quarreling. It taught them solidarity and the sharing between them of their most precious belongings.

The sociological reasons for polyandry are indifferent explanations, while the individuals reasons appear to lean toward the desire that brother should not quarrel; this is sometimes expressed in the form of not wanting many sisters in law, so that the menfolk would not become involved in their differences. In conclusion, it can be said that polyandry as a special form of the marital institution really functions, well and efficiently. It is a self-contained practice in which its different aspects are heavily integrated and operate, satisfactorily in combination with each other. Polyandry is solid and resistant, when isolated from other cultures, to a large extent, because the attitude of those who practice it, consider it highly moral. It becomes vulnerable in frontier areas where it is subject to taunts of ridicule and of backwardness, it is very quickly reduced to either being continued, hidden and avoided, or disappears altogether. Occasionally, its continuance may still be saved by a form of local nationalism, which insists, that it is a part of a people with personality and individuality, and must not be allowed to be lost.





## Bibliography