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# “Humans as Voices of God and Tradition?” Rethinking the Subjugation of the African Woman in Mariama Ba’s *So Long a Letter*

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## Abstract

Over the eons, man has posed as speaking for and on behalf of God and Tradition. His assumed positions on social issues, therefore, are regarded as infallibles. Polygamy as one of the issues is advantageous for male. This paper discusses, through a sociological consideration of Mariama Ba’s *So Long a Letter* and the effects of polygamy, that a positive consideration be cast on the issue in the modern African world. Women need not be abandoned, children need not be cast aside, and men’s lives need not become loveless as much as the society need not be shackled with frustrated marriages and destroyed lives. The African world, faced with the negative effects laid on the table in this paper, should sociologically re-adjust itself into the modern world of love-giving, acceptance and sharing.

[**Keywords:** God, tradition, polygamy, african world, female subjugation, sociological.]

Man is one: greatness and animal fused together. None of his acts is pure charity.  
None is pure bestiality.  
(Ba 1981: 32)

Marriage is no chain. It is mutual agreement over a life’s programme. So if one of the partners is no longer satisfied with the union, why should he remain? It may be Abou: it may be me. Why not? The wife can take the initiative to make the break.  
(Ba 1981: 74)

## Introduction

Religion and Tradition have, from eons, controlled man. Within these institutions are hidden the main controllers of man who/which use these twin issues to regulate him. The controller of man unmasked is man: small cliques and caucuses in different societies who have always constituted themselves into the mouthpieces of God and Tradition (Freeman 2012). Most of the time, they portend and pretend to speak both for God and Tradition and not for the groups they represent. Man, the general man, therefore, becomes a slave to the precepts and the (in)direct commands of these groups in nearly all societal situations, (un)knowingly and (un)consciously.

In Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter*, man, in the small clique, acts out his iconic characterization. The group, which dictates and whose puppet-like influences, from the background, controls the opinions and sayings of others, is the clergy ably represented in this text by those who echo it: the Imam (within the Islamic religion), the female-in-laws and the 'sayings' of the society's men and women. Their clandestine influences are felt through their actions, sayings, supports and oppositions to societal issues like polygamy, underage marriage, burial ceremony and others. All these, directly or indirectly, impact on the society and the people. This paper, therefore, seeks to ask the relevant but disturbing question like Kloos (2012: 330) did: "How...is it possible that polygamy proponents think this is [these are] compatible with Islamic concepts of "justice" and "fairness"?" This question is extended to the sociological implications of polygamy and the societies in which it exists.

### **Voices and Polygamy**

One of the major thematic foci of Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter* is polygamy. This has been defined by The Free Online Dictionary (2013) as "The condition or practice of having more than one spouse at one time. Also called plural marriage." The Dictionary.com (2013), in its own definition, is more specific as it sees the legality and the face of the woman-fold in polygamy: "the practice or condition of having more than one spouse, *especially wife*, at one time" (italics mine). It is pertinent to point out that polygamy is not basically an African thing as it cuts across all continents and most cultures. The African culture, unlike other cultures, gives it more prominence and allows it more room to flourish. Again, but on the basis of religion, the Islamic and African Traditional religions give polygamy a big playing ground to spread its wings. The text is an exemplification of this scenario.

Islam and African Traditional Religion play a great part in the happenings in *So Long a Letter*. The text is a depiction mainly of what occurs in the everyday life of the African woman. The African woman, married under the Traditional Religion, needs not be told that her husband is free to marry more women (numerically unlimited). On the other hand, the woman married under the Islamic injunctions is told on the day of marriage that her husband can marry more (numerically limited to four).

The enforcers of these injunctions are the clerics - prophets and clergymen of both religions. Usually, they are the nuptial 'knotters' of the initial marriages and the subsequent ones (whether the already-wedded woman at home or the to-be-newly wedded agree to being knotted to the new woman or to the man). The clergy always posit that its authority stems from religion (God) like the Islamic religion as played out in *So Long a Letter*. When Modou first got married to Ramatoulaye and Mawdo to Aissatou, the clerics would have wholeheartedly participated in knotting the marriages. In the separation of Mawdo and Aissatou it is certain that the clerics would not have been participants only but major actors.

This is reflected in the second marriage of Modou to Binetou (the second wife). Ramatoulaye, the first wife, is left in the dark about the marriage and its ceremonial rites. The husband could not inform her personally: it becomes the job of the Imam (a cleric) and a few family males. Announcing to her, the Imam’s words look and sound like inanities:

There is nothing one can do when Allah the almighty puts two people side by side ... There is nothing new in this world... Some things we may find to be sad are much less so than others... *All he has done is to marry a second wife today.* We have just come from the mosque in Grand Dakar where the marriage took place. (Ba 1981: 36-37) (Italics mine)

In this sort of situation, fate, not the man (his lustfulness) or the new wife (her greed), is blamed. This is something intangible and abstract. According to Tamsir, Ramatoulaye’s brother-in-law, Modou’s opinion about his second marriage is that: “...it is fate that decides men and things: God intended him to have a second wife, there is nothing he can do about it” (Ba 1981: 37). A man decides in his heart to marry another wife due to various extenuating circumstances he could have controlled either at the beginning or along the line. When the die becomes cast, he posits that he is powerless. In this situation, he is also helped by the Imams, the clerics, who themselves are men and in polygamous set-ups.

Tamsir, Modou’s brother, along with the Imam and others, comes barely forty days after his brother’s death ‘to woo’ Ramatoulaye into a new marriage with him. When she refuses vehemently, the Imam, in reaction, “prayed to God to be his witness” (Ba 1981: 58) against a woman who refuses to be tied to another marriage according to the dictates of religion and tradition as propounded by men. There is basically no consideration for the woman in mourning (except for that which the men (the cleric included) would gain).

Another influencing voice is the ‘sayings of the society’ which encourage the men to become polygamous on one hand, and the women to be submissive on the other. Tradition, as earlier stated, gives the total right to the man to marry more women than one. Where this mandate was derived from none can say. All in the society continue to allude to tradition, especially the men as it is advantageous to them. The society, on the other hand, cows the woman whenever she wishes to struggle or fight against this faceless injunction that has no consideration for her. Reflecting on what her friend, Aissatou, faced during her divorce, and her strength in carrying on with her life, Ramatoulaye recalls:

You were advised to compromise: ‘You don’t burn the tree that bears the fruit’. You were threatened through your flesh: ‘Boys cannot succeed without their father’. (Ba 1981: 31)

She went on to commend her friend for having the strength so many women lack when faced with scenarios that were never in their nuptial agreements:

You took no notice.

These common place truths, which before had lowered the heads of many wives as they raised them in revolt did not produce the desired miracle; they did not divert you from your decision. You chose to make a break, a one-way journey with your four sons. (Ba 1981: 31)

Within these strength and action are embedded the negative repercussions on a woman who strikes out against the voice of the people. Counting the numbers of “the abandoned or divorced women of my generation whom I know” (Ba 1981: 40), Ramatoulaye avers that very few ever find happiness while the majority “had lost all hope of renewal and whom loneliness had very quickly laid underground” (Ba 1981: 40).

Polygamy is, therefore, a dicey situation for women who are considered like a ball; once a ball is thrown no one can predict where it will bounce. You have no control over where it rolls, and even less over who gets it. Often it is grabbed by an unexpected hand . . . (Ba 1981: 40)

This is a reference to women owing to the various parts played by the different segments of the society; even by them against themselves. This is the situation that Ramatoulaye finds herself when her husband, Modou, decides to marry Binetou, a girl the age of his daughter; in reality a friend of his daughter, Daba. This state of affair was orchestrated and initiated by another woman, Lady Mother-in-law, who was dissatisfied with her own low status in life. Binetou, the newly married, “like many others, was a lamb slaughtered on the altar of affluence” (Ba 1981: 39). This same situation was faced by Aissatou. Her marriage to Mawdo was not liked by Auntie Nabou, her mother-in-law, who went out of her way to groom a younger Nabou from childhood into adulthood as another wife Mawdo. She was extremely successful as Mawdo got married to Nabou, while Aissatou, not wanted from the beginning, was divorced.

The voices that portend to represent God and Tradition are, therefore, many, diverse, consistent and vitriolic. It is those on the receiving end who feel the pain. This pain, as feminine-restricted and limited as it is, is most of the time inflicted by the same group on its members. And others, from diverse backgrounds, become encouraged by this dog eat dog situation; they prey on the fallen dogs.

### **Voices, Groups and Effects**

It must be pointed out that polygamy involves individuals, the couple(s) most concerned and other groups. The society, at large, is most of the time touched and affected. In most cases, these effects are more of negative than positive. They cut across societal divides and strata, sexes and ages. No one within the stated groups is exempted. Nurmila (2009) draws this same conclusion pointing out that the effects span the economic, emotional, and psychological lives concerned. It also

involves physical violence that affects the lives of the children and the wives (and even those of the husbands).

The first major group consists of the perpetrators themselves: the men. The over-riding question that should be asked of them no matter how hyperbolic and insulting one considers the question to be is: “Madness or weakness? Heartlessness or irresistible love? What inner torment led Modou Fall to marry Binetou?” (Ba 1981: 12) *as a second wife?* (Italics: my addition). Whether the man is able to answer this question, justifiably or not, according to the text, “In loving someone else, he burned his past, both morally and materially” (Ba 1981: 12). With this, love within the home flies out. Most times, the woman in refracting her love from the man turns it, full-blown, on the children or on religion. With this occurrence, the man suffers just like Mawdo after his estrangement from Aissatou. Lamenting his loss Mawdo states:

I am completely disoriented. You can’t change the habits of a grown man. I look for shirts and trousers in the old places and I touch only emptiness . . . My house is a suburb of Diakhao. I find it impossible to get any rest there. Everything there is dirty. Young Nabou gives my food and my clothes away to visitors. (Ba 1981: 33)

Modou is not left out too. From the day he gets married to Binetou, his life of lies starts. His message to his wife is that he had been destined to marry more than one wife. He continues with the lies while trying to meet up with young Binetou’s social demands: he dyes his hair, avoids his first wife and sows tight fitting clothing to hide his aging body fat. These are done in order to hide his old age but all he gets in return are Binetou’s “laughing wickedly” at him. Men will always try to create make-believe worlds but always, they find the reality that stares them in the face.

Women, as a group, are also affected. This assemblage can be sub-divided into three based on how they perceive, react to and are touched by polygamy. There are the first wives, the other wives and the women-victimizees. The most touched and the first mini-group are the first wives i.e. those already married. One of the major reasons women are treated with levity in the African world is that they are regarded as part of inheritance - part of the common household furniture to be passed on to another man. When a man, therefore, decides to marry again, tradition plays its havoc on the first wife. She is abandoned, turned into a second fiddle, and is scorned not only by her husband but also by the society. She becomes, in addition to being a mother, a father to her children because the husband, like Modou, no longer has time for her and her children. This is summed up in Aissatou’s case when Mawdo marries young Nabou:

From then on, you no longer counted. What of the time and the love you had invested in your home? Only trifles, quickly forgotten. Your sons? They counted for very little in this reconciliation between a mother and her one

and only man; you no longer counted, any more than did your four sons: they could never be equal to young Nabou's sons. (Ba 1981: 30)

Usually, there are just about two choices for the woman. The first choice, that of acceptance (emanating from the docile characterization of women as weak vessels), is an offshoot of and as preached by both the Islamic and African Traditional religions. This choice, Ramatoulaye sticks with to the chagrin of her loved ones, admirers and even her children: she finds solace in the religion that imposes polygamy on her! Kloos (2012) calls this situation "the inward turn". The second opening is for the woman to opt out of the marriage. This modern, untraditional choice advocated in *So Long a Letter* is vehemently opposed by religion and society. The woman, though on the receiving end of the broken marriage, will be ostracized and labelled by both religion and society. Aissatou takes this path. Out of the many that tread this road, as an exemplification, she is seen as lucky because she has a job. Most, who decide to walk this lane while jobless, either remarry - falling into the old trap (as they become second, third, or fourth wives somewhere else) - or are totally abandoned (dying early of loneliness or from societal scorn). In this wise, women are encouraged to submit to polygamy. In this 'piety', like Frisk's (2009) paper topic *Submitting to God: Women and Islam in Urban Malaysia*, they are aided into submitting to God, and advised that they would be well rewarded spiritually, especially when they get to heaven.

The second mini-set in the women's group are the other wives. Half of the time, these are not yet women but female adolescents who are withdrawn from schools. The men who marry them, whether they like it or not, are aware of it or not, play the part or not, are regarded as 'Sugar-Daddies' - they are basically out of the generation of the adolescents whose lives are crippled to satisfy their own ego, lust and demands. Wooed by wealth, betrayed by their own mothers and confused by their innocence and societal failings, these young, developing women usually become estranged from their own social class, the married class and even from their husbands (from the moment the men are satiated). They, therefore, become floaters, abandoned to their fates, lonely ghosts with lives truncated and ambitions cut short; they are "lamb[s] slaughtered on the altar of affluence" (Ba 1981: 39). And like Binetou, who watches "The image of her life, which she had murdered, broke her heart" (Ba 1981: 50), they die instalmentally like the Nigerian war victims in John Pepper Clark's poem "The Casualties" (Solanke 2005: 15-21).

The third mini-set in the women's group are the women-victimizers. These are the core traditionalists, the women who stand to gain from more marriages, the mothers and mother-in-laws who carelessly, for the love of self, destroy other lives. They are the women who perpetrate and perpetuate polygamy on other women. In the text, they are about three: two succeed because they have adolescents they could confuse while the third (the griot-friend of Ramatoulaye) has a matured woman (Ramatoulaye) who thinks with her head and not her heart to attempt confusing. Lady Mother-in-Law is able to ensnare both Binetou and Modou. She wants out of poverty. For this, she helps by confusing Binetou to

forfeit her education and life ambition. The other woman, Aunty Nabou, “planned her revenge” (Ba 1981: 20), installs young Nabou as a second wife and succeeds in having Aissatou divorced from Mawdo. This is because Mawdo and Aissatou are not from the same social stratum. In both cases, women go out of their ways to hurt and destroy other women. As voices of God and Tradition, enforcers of polygamy, women become acidic canes on other women destroying their own lives and that of others.

Another major group affected by polygamy are the children. As young as they usually are, they suffer at the hands of nearly every adult concerned. Like Daba, their prides are usually wounded when they see their fathers consorting with girls their own ages. When the new wife is brought in, they become enemies to her and their father. In her case, Daba wants her mother to be divorced from her father. At the mother’s refusal, she vehemently tells her, “You have not finished suffering” (Ba 1981: 46). After Mawdo’s divorce, his sons go to live with Aissatou, their mother. It is a certainty that their lives will lack the fatherly touch. In this line, Modou’s children, who are left with their mother, Ramatoulaye, develop various degrees of problems associated with divided homes: Mawdo Fall, a son, has academic problems with his teacher; Aissatou, a daughter, gets pregnant; the feminine trio of Dieynaba, Arame and Yacine smoke secretly. While these problems look insurmountable, Ramatoulaye, in all outlooks, a single mother, is supported by her first daughter, Daba.

## Conclusion

These physical voices, as much as they are participants in the polygamic process and structure, are painfully hurt and affected to different levels. As much as they are supposedly voices for God and even Tradition, they serve themselves first looking for material things which are advantageous to the self. These voices are emblematic of the current African world that is slow from moving from the shadow of polygamy to that of the full light of monogamy. The African world is still faced by the problematics encountered in polygamous environments with its nefarious and octopoid effects. Africa, through these voices and the submissions in this paper, is encouraged to take a second look at the issue of polygamy and have a rethink. One cannot but agree with Nurmila (2009:146) who states that (Indonesian) Marriage Laws should undergo changes and be “modified to abolish the practice of polygamy.”

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