

Polygyny in Tajikistan: Ideological contortions, economic realities and everyday life practices

Juliette Cleuziou¹

University of Paris Ouest Nanterre La Défense

While polygyny has been a growing phenomenon in Tajikistan since the independence of the country after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, it is still forbidden by the law. To understand this revival, I will look at polygyny as a resource and a strategy for women – especially second wives. I will argue that rather than political or economic explanations, the revival of polygyny in Tajikistan relies on the exchange of sexual relationships against social status and economic support in dire economic situation and impoverishment of the population, and especially women. The main explanation is therefore relative to sexual issues, although factors such as prestige and economic issues are also part of the process.

Keywords: Tajikistan, marriage, polygyny, second wives, coping strategy

Introduction

“If a man has money, he will either buy a car or take another wife”: this “joke” has been constantly repeated among women I met during my fieldwork in Tajikistan in 2012 and 2013. Although meant to be amusing, this sentence contains something deeply relevant to understand the present matrimonial situation in Tajikistan. After years of Soviet domination and the terror of the Civil war (1992-1997) that followed the country’s independence in 1991, polygyny has become a widespread matrimonial arrangement in Tajik society even though it is still punished by the law. Now recent surveys stated that approximately one man out of ten in Tajikistan would be polygynous (Institute for War and Peace 2011).

Polygyny is “a patrilineal and patriarchal practice which refers to the marriage of one man to two or more wives at a time” (Suda 2007, 13). Although the Soviet authorities considered it as a “crime based on customs” – a breach of women’s rights – and forbade it, along with the *qaling* (bride purchase) and the early marriages (Northrop 2004), it never completely disappeared and remained the privilege of the socioeconomic and religious elite (Bennigsen 1959).

Polygyny has been studied in different societies under various theoretical paradigms, among which the political, economic and sexuality approaches are the best-known (Clignet 1970; Koktvedgaard-Zeitzen 2008). The political approach looks at power and prestige in polygynous marriage. It sees polygynous marriage as the opportunity to extend one’s alliances with different families and therefore multiply potential political support (Lévi-Strauss 1949; Clignet and Sween 1981). Second, the economic interpretation of polygyny sees it as a way to increase the household’s labour force through different marriages,

¹ The author is PhD candidate in anthropology, Center for Ethnology and Comparative Sociology (LESC), University of Paris Ouest Nanterre La Défense. Email: Juliette.cleuziou@hotmail.com.

especially in rural or agrarian contexts (Boserup 1970; Shahd 2001). These matrimonial arrangements allow amplifying one's control over resources (land) and ensuring reproduction and transmission of the land (numerous offspring). Anthropological theories often link polygyny to the power of the elder (gerontocracy): the elder have greater access to marriageable women than the younger and therefore more access to economic means of production – land and labour force (Koktvedgaard-Zeitzen 2008). Both political and economic interpretations demand to look at the socioeconomic situation of polygynous men: according to their personal resources and occupations, the motivations and the modalities of polygynous arrangements – such as co-residence, financial support to co-wives and children – tend to differ (Shahd 2001). For example, political ambitions will rather concern men from higher spheres of the society; the labour force concern will rather motivate middle class and poor farmers. Finally, the interpretation in terms of sexuality understands polygyny as a way for men to maintain the possibility of having sexual relations despite maternal and pregnancy cycles (Fainzang and Journet 1998). This rather concerns societies where post-partum taboos (sexual taboos after women's delivery) last several months or years, or where the necessity to have a male heir is highly valorised (Clignet 1970). These three frameworks of analysis are not exclusive and could find an illustration in Tajikistan (Bennigsen 1959; Shemyakina 2009). Nonetheless, they have their limitations, as I will show it in the paper (for a detailed review of the different interpretations of polygyny, see Clignet 1970; Goody 1975; Koktvedgaard-Zeitzen 2008; Suda 2007).

Moreover, and perhaps most importantly, those three paradigms do not take into account women's points of view in the organization of polygynous arrangements: they are rather considered as the result of male or family decision. Given this gap in the literature, the paper envisages to look at polygyny in Tajikistan in terms of negotiations of social and religious norms by individuals in the context of dire economic situations. Marriage in Tajik society is at the center of one's life-cycle rituals, and entails major meanings in terms of social status and economic security. Therefore I will delve into women's choices and adjustments under this specific matrimonial relationship, and what is ultimately at stake for them. How can one understand the revival of polygyny after the collapse of the Soviet Union? How can one explain that women accept to become second wives while they have no rights, nor their children, in case of repudiation?

To provide answers to these structuring questions, I have applied ethnographic methods based on the observation of daily practices and narratives in order to understand how polygyny affect one's social identity and economic daily practices. I will propose material from extensive ethnographic fieldwork conducted with a dozen of second wives, but also with several first wives and polygamous men, between March 2012 and June 2013, in three different regions of Tajikistan: the urban area of Dushanbe, the capital, and two different rural and mountainous regions of Rasht and Darvoz.

In this paper I will first look at how polygyny became a common matrimonial arrangement in Tajik society, especially since the beginning of the Civil war in 1992. The analysis reveals how polygyny is perceived by second wives and how they come to understand it as a coping strategy in times of great socioeconomic changes. In the second part of the paper I will analyze the differences of matrimonial arrangements between first-wife and second-wife marriages, and their relations inside polygynous unions. It will help clarifying what it means to be a second wife in Tajikistan, and the idea of marriage and gender roles polygyny underlies.

Polygyny as a coping strategy: when becoming a second wife is a means of survival

“If you don’t have a husband here, you are nothing, really nothing”
(Tajik woman, Rasht valley, 2012)

Polygyny: a resilient phenomenon?

Before the 1917 Russian Revolution polygyny already existed in Central Asia. It was the privilege of small economic and political elites in Turkestan (Bennigsen 1959, 85), where rich merchant men were supposed to have several wives in order to demonstrate and maintain their social status. According to the Qur’an second, third or fourth wives should be divorced women or widows, who need to acquire a new social status to match with social norms, as well as economic support to survive. Most of the time, second wives had children, who would stay and live with them (Harris 2004). In general in Central Asia “polygyny and divorce were both practiced; polygyny was expensive and divorce generally left women destitute, so that both were relatively rare” (Constantine 2007, 118). Polygyny was thus a feature of urban and rich areas, such as Khujand, Kokand, Bukhara or Samarkand, more than of rural regions (Kasymova 2006). Polygyny was then considered as a charitable act embedded in religion and was also a demonstration of power: the power to support financially a family, but also the power to get more servants. In fact, this charitable act had different facets, and one of them was that being a second or third wife was a source of despise. As Colette Harris (2004, 46) describes it: “polygyny required considerable resources, as well as being a source of disharmony (...). Women from poor families who had contracted polygynous marriages with wealthy men might be treated virtually as servants. Or alternatively, their mother or some other poor relative might live with them in this capacity”. There was an important distinction made in terms of social status between the first wife and all other wives, who did not usually have the means to refuse marriage offers of rich men.

Despite the Soviet interdiction of polygyny,² cases regularly appeared, especially among the ruling/wealthiest classes (Bennigsen 1959; Tett 1996). As a matter of fact:

“The Soviet legislation forbids polygamy, yet the press illustrates the surprising survival of this tradition which is taking semi legal shapes according to the following scheme: only the first marriage is registered by records office (Z.A.G.S), the next ones by the mullah (...) Most of the polygamous men are members of the Party, of the Komsomol, of the Soviet administration, etc. A whole book wouldn’t be enough to contain all the cases mentioned by the press.” (Bennigsen 1959, 104 – my translation).

According to Sophia Kasymova (2006), polygyny has widely reappeared in the late 1980s as a result of social and economic changes implemented by Gorbachev. This period allowed some people to get rich even in the poor Soviet Republic of Tajikistan. Furthermore, the sense of a greater “national freedom” and valorisation of national cultures that had started years before, allowed men to take second wives again. Wealth and “national” revival, visible through the promotion of Tajik traditions and of Muslim values, are, according to Kasymova, the main factors of this revival (2006, 9-10). After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the

² In Tajikistan, it was sentenced three years hard labour according to Article 220 of the Tajik Criminal Code (Bennigsen 1959, 93).

destabilization caused by the Civil war accelerated this phenomenon, yet the process remains the same: the first marriage can be registered (still called Z.A.G.S³ or “Russian wedding”), while the second one is only religiously based (Bennigsen 1959; Abashin 2000; Kasymova 2006).

The Civil war and matrimonial coping strategies

In Tajik society patriarchal and elders’ authority is still prevalent, as parents usually organize their children’s weddings and choose their partner. Therefore, “marrying one’s son” or “giving away your daughter” demand matrimonial strategies on behalf of each family: which family to ally to, what gifts to exchange, etc (Kislyakov 1959; Northrop 2004). But during the Civil war, marriage took different meanings. On the one hand, it appeared as the expression of the independent will of young soldiers, who would get wives “for free”; on the other hand, marriage appeared as a coping strategy in times of economic insecurity and uncertainty (Roche, Hohmann 2011), although the global rates of marriage sensibly decreased during the war (Hohmann, Roche, Garenne 2010).

In a society where marriage is widely arranged by the elders, the fear that a young girl could be raped or kidnapped by combatants, a serious offense to the honour of the family and of the neighborhood (*mahalla*), was a constant source of anxiety for parents. In those cases, affected young women could never get married and they would stay under the authority of their family.⁴ Thus both the growing independence of young fighters from normative matrimonial rituals and the necessity to marry off one’s daughter led to a lighter version of what weddings were supposed to be. Parents were willing to give away their daughters more easily than in peaceful times. Mohira,⁵ 61 years old and from the Rasht valley, comments:

“I married off my daughter in 1992. At that time people who had daughters were afraid of the soldiers. [My daughter’s husband’s family] came to my house and my husband agreed because he knew his father (...) we celebrated my daughter’s wedding at my house only with the close parents and then her husband brought her to his house. We didn’t even go to his place afterwards, we were too afraid.” (Mohira, Rasht valley)

Especially in areas strongly affected by the war, people would marry off their daughters to the first man willing to marry them, possibly at an early age. Furthermore, the ceremony of marriage during the war would not take place in the same conditions as in peaceful times. It would usually consist of small exchange of goods between the two families – small or even inexistent dowry on the side of the women and a short lunch but no important gathering as it is supposed to be the case. The usual compensation for the “maternal milk” from the

³ *Zapis Aktov Grazhdanskogo Sostoyaniya* (registry act of civil situation).

⁴ The transfer of the bride to another family is also a transfer of authority, control and responsibility. Therefore the bride’s family is not anymore responsible for her once she’s married. She falls under her husband’s responsibility only (Kandiyoti 2007).

⁵ All names have been changed.

groom side⁶ was absent and sometimes the ceremony would even be reduced only to the religious celebration with a mullah (*nikoh*). In short, there were no important ceremonies or demonstration of power because of the lack of security, and the exchange of food, gifts and money was reduced to a minimum. Farangis, a housewife who grew up in Dushanbe and lived in the area of Faizabad during the war, explains the ceremony of her own marriage:

“When I got married, the Civil war was going on, it was in 1992. I graduated from high school that year and after my exams, in summer, my husband came to my house and asked my parents to marry me. We were engaged. On December 26th we got married. My husband’s side didn’t bring much for the wedding. They came to our house, we had lunch, and that was it. Then he drove me to his house. He had brought me some dresses but not many, not like nowadays. I didn’t bring much either: I didn’t have any television, DVD player or even a couch. I had kurpatchas [Tajik mattresses] but not even golden jewellery, I only had a pair of silver earrings. But I didn’t care. I wasn’t even thinking that I could be embarrassed in front of my mother-in-law since it was during the war. She didn’t even pay attention to what I brought. She didn’t really care either. We were only hoping for peace” (Farangis, in her thirties, Dushanbe).

Therefore marriages were less of an alliance than a form of discharge for girls’ parents. It implied in most cases that girls such as Farangis would not have any chance to study after high school, a great change compared to the Soviet times. Like marriage at an early age, polygyny is one aspect of marriage that has widely reappeared after the country’s independence.

The revival of polygyny: a consequence of the Civil war?

During the Tajik Civil War, from a population of 5 million, around 50 000 people were killed, around 1 million people were displaced, and 25 000 women and 55 000 children were left without fathers, brothers and sons (Rubin 1998; Kuvatova 2001). Three main reasons, related to the consequences of the war, are given to explain the development of polygyny (Kuvatova 2001; Kasymova 2006): the demographic imbalance created by the war, since most of the human losses were men; the difficulties for women to face alone a dire economic situation – during and after the war; social and psychological vulnerability of women left without husbands, considered more vulnerable to men’s abuses. Thus getting married as a second wife is thought to provide both social and economic support and remedy to women’s vulnerability. Gulsara, who grew up and still lives in Rasht, comments on how she became a second wife:

“Right after the Civil war, after we divorced with my husband, I lived in Dushanbe in a small apartment with my two small daughters. I met my second husband because I was working for him as a secretary. When he proposed I said yes immediately. But why did you get married again if you already had two children, a job and an apartment? I was afraid. I was young, I was 29, and what could I do without a husband? So I agreed to get married to him even though he already had a wife” (Gulsara, in her forties, Rasht).

⁶ In Soviet terms also called “bride purchase” or “qaling” in Tajik. It is usually composed of money and food products (flour, oil, rice, etc.).

Becoming a second wife was thought to be the best alternative: better to be a second wife than nothing, because “here, if you don’t have a husband, you’re nothing, really nothing” (Mavluda, forties, Rasht).

Moreover, the Civil war prevented young women from having access to education and entering public places, considered too dangerous because of the presence of male combatants in the street, as the case of Farangis mentioned above illustrates. While greater female access to education tends to reduce polygyny rates in other parts of the world (Clignet and Sween, 1981), the diminishing female access to education after 1991 tends to create greater economic dependence on men’s resources and to favour the development of polygyny.

Overall, the Civil war caused great damage to the situation of women in Tajikistan: its consequences in terms of access to education and marriage tend to reinforce gender inequality and the idea that women have to be protected, economically, socially, even physically, by men (Kuvatova 2001). Women’s position and status in the society are defined by their relations to men – father, brother, husband especially. Mavjigul, a woman in her fifties living in Dushanbe, comments:

“According to our constitution, having a second or third wife is strictly forbidden. But after the [civil] war, many women were left without husband. And some mullahs then said to men ‘if you can, if you have the financial means, you should take second or third wives to reduce prostitution. And that’s what they did”

Mavjigul got married a second time to an already married man after she had learned about her first husband’s death in Russia. She was a widow with four children, working as a teacher in a school in Dushanbe but seriously lacking money. After she had “checked on his personality”, she accepted the offer of this already married man who told her that he would help her, economically speaking, whenever he can.

“He was looking for another woman since his first wife is sick. She cannot satisfy him sexually speaking. We got married in the religious way to show that I am not a prostitute but an honest woman, whom you can trust. And as a teacher and a mother, I didn’t want him to break his marriage with his first wife: he has two children with her, what would they do without him?” (Mavjigul, June 2012)

From Mavjigul’s testimony two important aspects of polygyny in Tajikistan become clear. First, most second wives were married as first wives before. They are either divorced or widows and wanted to find moral, social and economic support somewhere else. Mavjigul, as many other women, decided to get married again to ensure her moral respectability as much as her economic security. Second, one has to underline that most of the second wives at the time actually worked to ensure their economic survival after they were left without men (tradeswomen at the market, teachers, civil servant, etc.). Therefore they were not completely economically dependent on their husband, but were usually in search of additional economic support. Sexual relations framed by a formalized marriage (religious or civil) are an important means to have access to men’s resources (Koktvedgaard-Zeitzen 2008, 80-81). But our research showed that while second wives expect economic and moral support from their husband, they are in fact provided with punctual financial help rather than by full economic support. One can assume that men tend to choose a working second wife for the simple reason that it is less expensive (Shahd 2001; Mahmudov 2012).

Polygyny in Tajikistan thus widely reappeared as a result of the Civil war, and its practice has been extended beyond the socioeconomic elites which characterized it before and during the Soviet times. One could describe this extension of practice as a form of democratization

of polygyny: rather than characterizing only the elites, it now concerns men with different socioeconomic backgrounds – including men who cannot actually afford to fully support two families. We will now look at the different sorts of practical arrangements that can be negotiated among polygynous spouses.

SECOND WIVES: A SECOND-RANK STATUS?

“Whatever you say or you do, a second wife is not really a wife”
(A second wife from the Rasht valley, 2013)

Polygyny Fifteen Years after the Civil War: Second Wives’ ‘profile’

Polygyny has extended, socially and geographically, since the Civil war: from a punctual phenomenon during the Soviet Union, recent survey asserts that about 20% of married women would have a polygynous husband (Shemyakina 2009). According to B. Kossidin, vice-President of the Islamic Rebirth Party, even one man out of three would be polygynous.⁷ And the phenomenon has been witnessed not only in regions hit by the Civil war (Rasht, Khatlon, and Dushanbe) but everywhere on the Tajik territory.

If during the Civil war the sex-ratio imbalance was explained by men’s deaths, now it is locally explained by male labour migration to Russia. Many of the males leave right after high school (at the age of 17-18) or after university (at the age of 22-23) to work in Russia. It is true then that there are fewer unmarried young men than young girls ‘visible’ inside the country (Khegai 2002). Yet it seems that many of them actually come back to get married to a Tajik girl or leave after their marriage (Olimova and Bosc 2003, 34). The reason for that is simple: most of the male want to give their mother a bride to help them at home.

Most of the second wives I interviewed during my fieldwork are women who had been married before and who often had children. Therefore, they saw in this matrimonial arrangement the opportunity to benefit of a better social status. This aspect is so important that even a non-Muslim Russian woman, who had got married in Tajikistan in the Rasht valley, became a second wife after her first husband’s death:

“My late husband’s brother told me that it would be better for me to get married: I was a foreigner in that country, I was still young and I had four children. What else could I do? Although, it’s not something I understand until now – I don’t understand how a man can have two families – I got married a second time as a second wife”
(Lola, 64 years old, Rasht).

In a patrilineal and patriarchal society like Tajikistan, men are the guarantor of family safety and of its economic security. When I asked Risolat if she was married, she first replied “no”, and then, seeing my interrogating eyes, she added: “I mean I have a husband, I am his second wife, but he doesn’t help me anymore and since we are old, he rarely visits me. It’s like if I wasn’t married” (Risolat, in her sixties, Rasht valley). Risolat was a teacher and was working when she got married as a second wife, but she was looking for additional support.

⁷ “Actual polygyny against Islamization: Tajikistan in one week”, 20.09.2010 [seen on December 11th, 2012] http://www.toptj.com/News/2010/09/20/prakticheskoe_mnogozhjonstvo_protiv_islamizacii_tadzhikistan_zanedelyu

A survey conducted in 2012 on bigamy did not even mention the possibility that second wives could be unemployed.⁸ And according to the same survey, almost 35% of the polygamous are business men, 13,4% as civil servants, 10,4% are doctors or professors and, interesting enough to be mentioned, 6,5% are migrants working abroad⁹ (Mahmudov 2012, 12-16). Although polygamous men are mostly wealthy men with the possibility to help their second wives, in all the cases that came to my knowledge they do not support second wives as much as first ones. The Muslim obligation to treat equally each wife is not a reality in Tajikistan. That is why since the Civil war, the process of democratization of polygyny (i.e. its extension to different lower social strata of the population) matches with the development of a typical profile of second wives: most of the time they were married before and have children, they work and they have their own apartment (from their parents' or their former husband). In short, they constitute to a certain extent a separated and rather autonomous household.

Cases of young (virgin) women married off as second wives exist but seem to be rather uncommon. The second wives whom I met in this situation did not know they would become second wives, when they got married, nor their close relatives. Those situations are more frequent in rural areas and in poorer families, where people might be less "cautious" to the family they are marrying to. This usually happens because poor families are eager to marry off their daughters as soon as possible to escape the obligation to feed them (Khegai 2002).

Kudbinisso lives in a village near Garm. She is the head of a poor family since her husband died. To marry off her last daughter, she trusted her late husband's sister, so that she would find a family who would agree to take her poor daughter as a bride, and to agree on a very simple wedding celebration. Kudbinisso did not 'check' on her future son-in-law's family: she agreed right away, happy to find a good match for her daughter and to entrust another family to take care of her. She learned that her son-in-law already had a wife in Russia only after the wedding. Her daughter became a second wife without knowing it (From Kudbinisso's interview, Rasht, 2013).

But cases when women did not know their future matrimonial status, although they exist, are pretty scarce. When it happens, it is usually due to lack of information, which reflects their poor economic and social situation. Cases of second wives whose parents married off their daughters knowing they would be second wife are even rarer and I met only one case during my research. Being married as a second wife without knowing it in advance was the case of migrants' wives (whose husbands had already a wife in Russia but did not mention it) or wives whose family was fooled by the husband – men know that mentioning a first marriage could prevent them from having a young woman (a virgin) as a second wife.

In short, most of the second wives I met chose to marry again as second wives in order to find economic support as much as to acquire again the status of a married – and therefore respectable – woman. But the "traditional" economic interpretation of polygyny – men taking several wives as an additional labour force or source of income for the household – is not relevant here, since working second-wives keep their income for themselves and they do not participate in the husband's household daily work.

⁸ Although one can assume that some second wives are unemployed or housewives, the percentages appear to be really low (Mahmudov 2012).

⁹ I'll come back to this later in the paper.

How does one become a second wife?

In most cases second wives' marriages are not registered. The wedding is therefore not acknowledged by the state. Part of women's insecurity in marriage actually concerns the non-registration issue, i.e. marriage based on a religious ceremony but not registered by civil authorities. In case of conflict, the husband only has to utter three times the word "*taloq*" to repudiate his wife. Women in those cases have almost no legal means of redress – and repudiation cannot be pronounced by women (and the absence of civil recognition of the religious marriage means that after their husband's death they usually do not have access to his heritage) (Harris 2004).

In addition, the organization of second marriages itself differs in many points from first marriages. While wedding celebrations in Tajikistan are crucial moments for the demonstration of one's wealth, for the reproduction of one's family and the maintenance of one's social status, the *nikoh* celebration of second wives' wedding are usually organised with a small circle of acquaintances:

"For my nikoh, my husband came with a mullah to my apartment. I had called my brother and the brother of my late husband with whom I still have good relations. They came as witnesses. They were sitting in this room, and I was sitting behind the door so they couldn't see me. I didn't invite women, only my daughter was here. What for? It's only a second marriage" (Mavjigul, Dushanbe).

In first marriages, the religious celebration of the marriage gathers as many women as men, if not more women. While the mullah recites prayers in the room where men are gathered, female relatives and girlfriends of the bride are waiting with her for the witness to ask her answer. When the witness comes in the bride's room, he asks her "do you take your uncle as a deputy (*vakil*) for your will?", then she answers "yes" and the witness goes back to the men's room to transmit the answer. The deputy-uncle will then answer for the bride: "yes, she wants to take X as a husband". In *nikoh* celebration for second wives, there is no *vakil*, no deputy. According to Mavjigul, "I'm not a virgin anymore, why do I need a deputy? It's not that important. He did not bring a *qaling* [money and presents] either and I did not ask anything".

For her second marriage, Kurbongul did not know her husband, as he was working in Russia. Her second brother negotiated the engagement with her husband over the phone, then the latter sent money for her to fly to Russia and they got married there. On her side, only one brother was present at the ceremony. And her father did not even take part in the matrimonial negotiations. "It's not so important anymore, it's only a second marriage" he argued.

The family and generational dimension of the *nikoh* celebration disappear when the bride is no longer a virgin. The role of the maternal uncle as the bride's will's deputy, the presence of the groom's and bride's parents, and the presence of a female assembly are no longer relevant. The duration is also different. While usually the bride should make people wait before giving her answer in front of the witness, sometimes for an hour or more, second wives do not have to enter this small-scale power struggle. "For my second wedding, the ceremony lasted five minutes. The mullah recited the prayer and I just had to say 'yes' a bit loud so men could hear me through the door. And it was done" (Mounissa, Dushanbe).

While wedding's celebrations are usually considered by many men as female celebrations (Roche and Hohmann 2011), *nikoh* in this case is rather a male affair. There are no exchanges of gifts, goods or money as it is usually the case between the two families.

Although the husband should ask his second's wife's parents for permission, the wife has the final decision. Except for those second wives who were ignorant of the husband's earlier marriage and whose parents therefore celebrated their wedding as usual, the second wives I met never organised a special "tu'y" (celebration) for their second wedding as second wives. However, this can be different for women who got married in the first place as second wives, since they are still virgin.

But there is a paradox here: becoming a second wife is also a way to gain social – therefore public – status (better to be a second wife than not married at all); but the public character of the wedding is not always explicit. The usual *ma'raka* (celebration dinner) where neighbours and relatives are invited does not take place. One has to notice that for weddings between two divorced or widowed persons, wedding celebrations are also made at a smaller scale but the *ma'raka* will take place anyway, which is not the case for second wives' marriages. Polygyny remains, for men, a way to exhibit one's wealth, to assert one's prestige: the sentence quoted in the introduction, "as soon as a man has money, he either buys a car or takes a second wife", is highly enlightening in that perspective. Nonetheless, the limited publicity of the celebration in Tajikistan tends to make us think there is also a more personal element in it. Polygyny is the expression of a male individual's will. Taking a second wife is the act of a grown up man who has his own house, of an accomplished individual, something which brings out his status (his wealth, his desire for a son, his religious piety) (Kislyakov 1959). Men do not have to ask their parents for permission to get married again, although they may ask for their advice. The dimension of love is also not absent from this phenomenon. "The first wife is for the parents, the second wife is for the heart" is also a sentence I have heard from second wives and polygynous men.

The second wedding does not carry the same social meaning as the first one for the second wives either. It is also an individual decision, sanctioned by religion, by which one demonstrates one's search for socioeconomic protection. But it clearly appears that this wedding makes women "second class" wives, because what is staged – and not staged – is their former sexual experience, rather than their family's social reproduction. Nevertheless, despite this second-rank wedding, this matrimonial situation can give concrete advantages: polygyny is not only a male affair; it is also a female strategy of increasing one's well-being.

Negotiating polygyny?

Mounissa is a 26 year-old woman who lives in Dushanbe. After a first three-month-long disastrous marriage, she is divorced. A year later she got married a second time. She comments on her second wife status:

"Being a second wife allows you not to live with your mother-in-law; you can have your own apartment. The first wife has to live with her and take care of her, but the second wife is free. My mother-in-law is not interested in me, she doesn't need me. She doesn't help me, I don't help her. We don't bother each other. For her, it's for the best. Usually the husband's family doesn't meet second wives. When you are the first wife, you have to care about too many things. Your husband is at home, you have to clean, to cook food, but I don't like that. I just want to meet him somewhere outside, go for a walk, eat skewered chicken, have some good time and come back home quietly. And at home, you're at ease. You don't have to clean his socks or his sheet. First wives have to do that. I could see him only two or three days a week and I would be happy!"

Being a second wife has thus some advantages. It allows to acquire the status of a married woman through *nikoh*, while not having to deal with heavy domestic burdens (cooking, cleaning, washing, etc.) or in-laws' authority. Usually, the consequence of all that is an improved freedom of movement while enjoying "the company of a man". Moreover, the marriage is negotiated under specific conditions. Marriage can be arranged between the individuals who are going to get married, and not anymore by their family. On the men's side it is an act of greater autonomy from his family since he chooses his wife himself. On the woman's side, she usually asks her parents' permission but she has the right to refuse and to put her own conditions for this matrimonial arrangement. For example, the husband should help her children to study, he should help pay the rent for the apartment, or even give it to her, etc. Mounissa, for example, often repeated that she chose to stay in the apartment her own father gave her and that she agreed to marry as a second wife under the condition to keep on working at home as a tailor and keep the money she earns. "And he accepted", she says. Moreover, as Margarita Khegāi (2002) mentions, it allows women to have sexual intercourses in the frame of religious law (*shariat*): Muslim norms and Tajik habits do not allow people, especially women, to have sexual relations outside of a religious alliance, or the accusation of prostitution soon becomes a source of social exclusion and despise. In Tajik society, women's reputation and social respect – and those of their family and *mahalla* – are closely linked to what people know – or think they know – about their sexuality (Harris 2004). Here we have to differentiate between urban and rural areas. In urban areas, women have wider access to services (market, hospital, administration, education, etc.), greater access to possible work and to larger socialization. Therefore if a woman is a second wife but has her own apartment and work, being married offers the advantages of having a social status and to have sexual relations according to religious morality. However, in rural areas second wives might be more isolated, in the sense that women have little possibility to work and therefore acquire some sort of economic autonomy. This reminds us that some advantages quickly find their limitations that I would like to consider now.

Daily comments I could hear from my interviewees on their second-wife neighbours reveal that the status carries somehow a negative connotation. "Here it is quite bad seen to get married again: women are ashamed to say they want to remarry after they got divorced" says a woman from the Rasht valley. Polygyny reflects on women's submission to social reputation: for women living alone, polygyny appears also as a last resort to maintain their reputation. As Mavjigul says: "being a second wife shows everyone I am not a prostitute". Maintaining one's reputation is also a central argument to these marital strategies which reminds us of the importance of the honour/shame frame of representation in Tajik society (Harris 2004). Sometimes parents themselves incite their daughters to get married again. "She is young, she has three children, what is she going to do? She's not going to stay all her life here [in our house]. She would be better if she could get married again". The idea of choice is therefore a limited one as divorced women, especially with children, have to go back to their parents' house and represent a burden: she has to be supported, and more importantly she would compete with her sisters-in-law, who are her mother's successors as housewives.

Furthermore, as I mentioned before, the instability of some husbands' financial means is also a problem: "He cannot help [them] all the time, he doesn't have much money, he helps only when he can", "sometimes he comes here, sleeps here and then tells [them] 'I'll give you money later, when I have some' but actually he never helps me!" (Mavjigul, Nargis and Tojinisso, Dushanbe). From women's viewpoint, being a second wife has economic

motivations, but with the recent extension of polygynous practices I mentioned before, not only rich men get into polygynous unions. It negatively affects second wives since now they usually cannot expect a full financial support from their husband. Sometimes they have to leave their children from a previous marriage to their parents' house, because their second husband cannot afford to raise them. Although many of the second wives reflected on this only half-satisfying status, they cannot expect their parents' support. In short, being a second wife constantly carries the contradiction between the shame of getting married *again* (meaning the first marriage was a failure) and the difficulties of being alone, for one's social reputation and economic survival.

Finally, competition among women is a structural component of polygyny (Fainzang and Journet 1988; Yamani 2008). Rather than a consequence, it is a key element of women's subordination in the relationship. The fear of being abandoned feeds the competition. In case of repudiation, second wives cannot appeal to legal means. Their only alternative in such situations is to go back to their parents' house,¹⁰ if the latter agree to take them back, and they will probably become servants at home. As a consequence, they are not able to fight, e.g. against men's violence for fear of being repudiated without any rights.

Thus most of the "advantages" of being a second wife strongly depend on their personal economic situation (the degree of their economic dependence) combined with the competition with first wives. Daily relations in polygynous marriages depend therefore on the negotiations that occur before the marriage; and the nature of these negotiations is related to the socioeconomic position and the former matrimonial experience of both the husband and his second wife.

Two wives, one family?

As mentioned before, in most cases of polygyny, wives do not live together, do not have contact, and the co-wives' families cannot be considered as one extended family. Delia Rahmonova-Schwarz suggests talking about "polynuclear families" to describe the type of polygynous arrangements (2012, 195). But, in some cases, cohabitation happens:

Mounissa has three children from a first marriage. She got divorced from her husband and went back to live at her parents' place; she stayed seven years with them before getting married again to an already married man, who lives in another region of the country. This man wanted to get married again to ensure his wife's posterity: the latter has a genetic disease and will probably die at early age. Mounissa moved in with the first wife but she had to leave her own children to her parents. Her husband's children now call her "mother", and Mounissa call her co-wife "older sister". (Personal research, Mounissa, Rasht, 2013)

Terms of kinship are used by the members of the first wife's family to include the second wife into the family. But in this case Mounissa had to leave her three children from her first marriage to her parents, because her second husband would not accept to marry her and take her children, for economic reasons. She was in too much of a miserable situation to put her own conditions and she accepted. The negotiations over the children actually reflect on one's social position: women without apartment, and much parents' support would often have to leave their children to their parents. In the case of Mounissa, she could not stay at

¹⁰ In cases when their husband actually paid their apartment.

her parents' place where already three brides and their children lived, raising the number of persons to twenty in one house. In other cases, the second husband can play the role of the father for second wives' children and take them under his wing, at least to a certain extent:

"My son never called my second husband "father", but he respects him, he calls him "older brother" [aka] and they have good relations. He was small when I got married again. Although I was his second wife, he married my son, he found his wife and paid for his wedding" (Lola, Rasht)

But although Lola's second husband helped her and was always good to her, "I never considered him as a proper husband and I don't consider his relatives as my family. With my first husband's relatives, it's different. We still call and visit each other, and they're definitely my family. But I never felt like being involved with my second husband's relatives, although they're certainly very nice". Unless a second wife goes and lives at her husband's place, she will probably never have the same relations to her husband's relatives as the first one. Because, as Mavluda summed it up, in the end, "whatever you say or you do, a second wife is not really a wife". This would actually confirm the idea pointed out by Kasymova (2006) about the gender gap reinforced by Tajik polygyny. While for women it is a way to secure their social status at the lowest level, without the possibility to become a "real" wife, for men, it is rather a way to officialise a lover, a mistress, and to have sexual intercourses with different partners. This questions the notion of extended family one could understand while talking about polygyny: in Tajikistan, it seems difficult most of the time to talk about "one family" when one speaks about co-wives. And the reverse is true as well: men have usually little relation with their second wife's relatives. Therefore the explanation of polygyny in terms of political network and extension of mutual help does not really fit. As a result, we can assert with Goody that: "the reasons behind polygyny are sexual and reproductive rather than economic and productive" (1975, 189). It is confirmed, but only from male's point of view, in Tajikistan. This is even better illustrated when the co-wives do not live in the same country.

What about transnational polygyny?

The phenomenon of polygyny might have also increased under the influence of labour migration, by contacts with the Russian way of life, a society promoting love affairs outside marriage. During the Soviet times, Tajik men travelling to Russia would in most cases go back to Tajikistan, sometimes with a Russian wife and their marriage would be celebrated the Tajik way. But now Tajik males who go to Russia and get married there would rather celebrate their wedding the "Russian way". The in-between situation of those men living between Tajikistan and Russia reveals deeper contradictions such as those summarized by Tojinisso:

"They want us to follow our traditions, to respect the law of Islam, but they also like to look at beautiful women dressed like Russian women. What should we do? I also have a very nice silhouette but I wear Tajik national dress because that's what we have to do, and that's what they want us to do. Those men don't know what they want and because of these contradictions, they're ruining us in the end" (Tojinisso, Darvoz, 2012).

Thus one can interpret to a certain extent polygyny as a local adaptation of male's desire to have sexual relations with different women (Kasymova 2006). Rather than multiplying lovers, getting a second or a third wife can satisfy one's desire to enjoy several sexual partners. But if the two wives come from different sociocultural spheres, male demands

towards their wives can also be different (talking as much about daily practices as about sexual behaviour). Transnational polygyny and the gap between the “model” of Russian and Tajik wives seems to reinforce in a way conservative gender roles for women in Tajikistan (Olimova and Bosc, 2003).

The development of transnational polygyny tends to transform relations inside polygamous triangles: second wives who live in Russia spend more time with their husband – with whom they got married after the latter migrated to Russia – than first wives who live with the children (and in-laws) in Tajikistan. Men have closer relationships and greater proximity with their second wives, which is rarely the case when both wives are in Tajikistan.

“I have one wife here in Tajikistan, and one there; you know that’s important for men to be able to have sexual relationships on a regular basis, otherwise it’s not healthy. And it’s better to have a second wife rather to go to the prostitutes” (Ahmed, Dushanbe).

The liberal character of sexual relations associated to the “Russian wife” is perceived as a greater danger and it seems that polygyny increases, for Tajik women, the feeling of competition. As Tojinisso says, Russian women and Russian life are too easily attractive for their husbands – sexual motivation is explicit – and therefore constitute an important risk for their own security as a wife; and divorce in polygamous relations seems to be more frequent in cases of transnational polygyny.¹¹ This explains why the second-wife who lives abroad (mostly in Russia) carries a strongly negative connotation: she is the one who ‘stole’ the husband from the first wife; she is the one who takes the benefit from the husband’s physical presence and economic support.

We observed that having children is not always a motivation for taking several wives, if the first wife was not barren. Rather than anything else, sexuality – associated in some cases to prestige (the possibility to have several wives) – is the most common reason to justify the development of polygyny from men’s point of view – that is the desire to have sexual relationships with other women. Whether the second wife lives in Tajikistan or in Russia, they are to satisfy men’s desire: in exchange, women have the possibility to have sexual relations in the frame of a religious marriage, and it will offer them a relative of socioeconomic protection.

Conclusion

As a “male affair”, polygyny in Tajikistan is symptomatic, on the one hand, of the revival of values linked to conservative gender roles and growing religiousness; on the other of dire economic situations which affect most vulnerable parts and of the population (notably poor women). It also reflects the gender gap between men and women’s aspirations. While for men, polygyny offers the possibility to emancipate from the elders’ authority and exhibit one’s wealth, for women it seems to be rather a strategy of survival when the state is no longer helping, although in both cases love should not be excluded from the understanding of these relations. Therefore second wives have all the characteristics of lovers, mistresses, sexual partners for their husband. They strategically obtain the status of married women but the fact that most of the time their husband does not live with them prevent them from

¹¹ This topic demands further research, but one has to take into account different motivations and contexts for men to start another family in Russia. See Rahmonova-Schwarz 2012.

acquiring full-rank wife status. It is definitely a second-rank status socially speaking. But while literature on polygyny – which rarely concerns Tajikistan or Central Asia in general – usually focuses on the male’s point of view on whether to become polygynous or not, I tried to show how women also take part in the recent configuration of matrimonial strategies.

In the socioeconomic context of reconstruction after the Civil war, the stakes of marital alliances are high because public services do not work anymore and alternative networks of mutual help are also based on marriages. Although polygynous rituals enhance the male’s prestige, daily relations between husband and wife inside polygynous arrangements in Tajikistan are also determined by such factors as the socioeconomic situations of individuals, their income, their former matrimonial experience, forms of residence, the nature of the marriage negotiations.

Consequently, the revival of polygyny in the Tajik context has to be analysed as an individual choice made to satisfy individual and social expectations, and economic needs, from men’s *and* women’s point of view. The subtlety of power and economic struggles that takes place in polygynous unions show that polygyny is not only about male domination on women but also about women putting back the responsibility of feeding one’s family on men’s shoulders, in times of dire economic situations. As D. Kandiyoti stated it, “the breakdown of a particular patriarchal system may, in the short run, generate instances of passive resistance among women that take the paradoxical form of bids for increased responsibility and control by men” (1988, 285). Promoting conservative gender roles, from women’s viewpoint, is also a strategy of survival. In Tajikistan though, men are not always successful in supporting their families, and polygynous arrangements, as we described them above, often look rather like an official extramarital relationship than a second marriage. The poorer the women are, the more polygyny resembles an exchange of sexual relations against socioeconomic support and recognition. And this “agreement” is not regulated by the state, which can leave women in difficult situation. The current situation of *de facto* polygyny – while still forbidden by the law – created debates in the Parliament regarding the legalization of these matrimonial arrangements.

Political stakes in legalization are delicate in light of numerous NGOs promoting gender equality in the country, but also in light of the migrants working in Russia who constitute the main source of income for Tajik people. One should also keep in mind that polygyny may be used as a weapon to prosecute political enemies (as it was the case in spring 2013 for the opposition member Aziz Zyadov). But to what extent could legal polygyny provide social protection for second wives, as opposed to unofficial second marriages that can leave them in desperate situations? Is legalization the solution? That is one of the main stakes of the debate that will be exposed in further research. In any case, the future of polygyny in Tajikistan seems well assured, in a legalized form or not.

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