

**POLYGyny IN TAJIKISTAN: IDEOLOGICAL CONTORTIONS, ECONOMIC REALITIES
AND EVERYDAY LIFE PRACTICES**

Juliette Cleuziou, PhD candidate in anthropology
Center for Ethnology and Comparative Sociology (LESC), University of Paris Ouest Nanterre La Défense.

The aim of this paper is to analyze the revival of polygyny (when a man has several wives) in Tajikistan as a form of negotiation of social and religious norms, both for men and women, but with different scales of economic and social risks (Roche, Hohmann 2011). In this paper I would like to introduce elements to comprehend women's choice and adjustments under this specific matrimonial relation, and what is at stake for them. Although the Soviet authorities considered polygyny as a "crime based on customs" – a breach of women's rights – and forbid it, along with the *kalym* (bride purchase) or the early marriages (Harris 2004), it never completely disappeared (Bennigsen 1959) and is at present still punished by the law. The revival of polygyny in Tajikistan by the realisation of several religious marriages (called *nikoh*) after 1991 and especially since the Civil war (1992-1997) cannot remain unnoticed (Constantine 2007; Rousselot 2006). How can one understand this revival? How can one explain that women accept to become second wives while they have no rights, nor their children, in case of repudiation?

Although different frames of analysis have been used to understand polygyny (as a compensation of sex ratio imbalance; a need for workforce in rural areas; a need to create more political alliances between groups, etc. See Kocktvedgaard-Zeitzen 2008), most of them would take male's points of view, keeping the female's view out of the analysis. And the more gendered approaches, which look at polygyny in terms of power relations between men and women, have been mostly dedicated to Africa (Fainzang, Journet 1988) and to the Middle-East (Yamani 2008), leaving the case of Central Asia out of sight. Consequently I would like to adapt a more comprehensive approach to this phenomenon of widespread revival as it appears in Tajikistan. I applied ethnographic methods based on the observation of daily practices and narratives. I will expose material from extensive ethnographic fieldworks (in-depth interviews and observations of daily practices) conducted mostly with a dozen of second wives, but also with several first wives and polygamous men, in three different regions of Tajikistan (Dushanbe, Rasht, Darvoz) in March-September 2012.

In most cases I've observed and been told, polygamous alliances are negotiated – contrary to what usually happens – by individuals themselves, both husband and wife, rather than by their parents. I would like to question how men and women "use" and interpret polygyny to recast their social identity (Kandiyoti 1988) and ensure their economic security. For widows and divorced women in particular, it represents the opportunity to meet, again and to a certain extent, the strong norm of being married, as well as the chance to have access to punctual financial/material support (Atkin 2005). Moreover many of them argue the privilege of autonomy (in the decision making, more freedom of movement, of work, less domestic tasks at home, no cohabitation with the in-laws, little male control, etc.) combined with respectability provided by religious marriage, without enduring the social stigma of abandoned women or the suspicion of being a prostitute (Abashin 2000). Nevertheless becoming a second wife is also a risk since *nikoh* is not acknowledged by the Tajik law: in case of problem, they are left alone. Their socioeconomic dependency increases the possibilities of male control over women (Harris 2004; Kasymova 2006). Thus matrimonial negotiations put at stake the definition of one's social status and integration in the community on the one hand, and the economic means of survival on the other (Uehling 2007). I will expose how polygyny, rather than being only a sign of growing religious practices, is thought for second wives as a compromise between what is socially expected from them (being married), their economic needs and the matrimonial life they aspire to.

More generally this negotiation reflects the post-Soviet era, also called *transition*: the search for a compromise between how former Soviet norms recast gender relations (putting forward the image of independent working women) and how current nationalistic narratives define the Tajik woman (a mother and a spouse). Women are caught between these two models of society. Therefore far from being simply a revival of polygyny in its previous cultural meaning (almost exclusively a symbol of male domination and wealth) it is also now the reflexion of individuals' responses to unstable gender roles and social

norms in a dire economic situation. The intertwining of both gender and economic issues (Kandiyoti 2007) makes of polygyny a relevant mirror of on-going social transformations at work in Tajikistan: the revival of Muslim practices or practices justified by Muslim law, of the conservative gender relation ideology, the dire socioeconomic situation, etc. But *de facto* polygyny in Tajikistan remains an underestimated phenomenon that needs analysis in terms of response to the present instability of gender roles and economic situation. It will enable a broader reflexion of on-going social transformations in the country and more broadly in post-Soviet Central Asia.

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