

Muslim Marriage

A Womanist Perspective on Troubling U.S. Traditions

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The social and theological dynamics peculiar to the reality of African American Muslims continue to influence how they marry and organize their households. Indeed, the peculiarities of black life in America have historically distinguished the lived experiences of these Muslims from other practitioners of Islam regardless of their nationality or citizenship. That is, the absence of marriageable men (e.g., single, heterosexual, legitimately employed, living outside of prison walls, and free from drugs) within black America and the higher status routinely afforded married women have led some African American Muslim women to accept plural marriage.¹ Moreover, the educational and, often, financial strides that black females have achieved have created a related reality: Muslim women who prefer to knowingly share their husbands, regardless of the knowledge or consent of their husbands' other wives. Whether practiced within a Muslim-majority nation or non-Muslim state, this form of nontraditional marriage is contentious. Though few in number compared to the overwhelming number of heterosexual monogamous unions, plural marriage among the single largest group of American Muslims offers a fascinating, complex, underexplored, and often misunderstood teachable moment about Muslim marriage.²

POLYGyny AND AFRICAN AMERICAN MUSLIMS³

Plural marriage in Islam is equated with *polygyny*, the practice of a husband being married to up to four wives at the same time.⁴ Unlike *polygamy*, which refers to more than one spouse—husband or wife—and thus is un-Islamic, polygyny is permitted by the Qur'an, the primary authority of the world's

estimated 1.82 billion followers of Islam.⁵ The guiding Qur'anic perspective on plural marriage, *Al Nisa*3, attempted to address an inequity concerning the rights and maintenance of women and children, and the existing customary practice that both became the property of men when they married in pre-Islamic Arabia.⁶ While examinations of Islamic legal materials routinely promote this verse as a divinely inspired reform in Arab history that served to repudiate one expression of patriarchy and protect women and children from abuse and destitution, no consensus exists about how, where, or when *Al Nisa* 3 should be invoked today. Indeed, opponents of polygyny have declared that “the love between a husband and wife should not be divided.”⁷ Debate also surrounds the question of whether the intent of this “Qur'anic reform” was to “raise the status of women” and, if it did, what that means in the twenty-first century.⁸ Indeed, both supporters and opponents of the practice within African American Muslim communities defend their positions with divergent interpretations of this verse. Even so, both sides agree that this verse addresses a personal and/or family matter that should be adjudicated in a way that privileges the Islamic legal position on marriage.

Al Nisa 3 was revealed following the deaths of about seventy Muslim men in the seventh century “as a concession to the prevailing social conditions” when “equal justice and impartiality were guaranteed.”⁹ It was, as Michele Alexandre has observed, “innovative and radical at the time, especially considering the laissez faire state of polygamy before the Qur'an was revealed to the Prophet. [He] was concerned that, in a time of great wars, wives not be left widowed and destitute and children not be left orphaned and homeless.”¹⁰ A popular English translation of this verse reads, “If you fear that you shall not be able to deal justly with the orphans, Marry women of your choice, Two or three or four; but if you fear that you shall not be able to deal justly (with them), then only one, or (a captive) that your right hands possess, that will be more suitable, to prevent you from doing injustice.” In seventh-century Arabia's patriarchal, misogynistic society, the physical survival of women often necessitated depending upon provision from the men in their lives, through whom women also negotiated their legitimacy and social honor. Without recognition as autonomous moral agents, women who outlived their “protectors” could traverse few avenues to secure their own survival or the survival of their children. That is to say, women displaced by war without a husband or male relative were suddenly on their own “in a society that confused value with material wealth.” Widows also were undervalued in a male-privileging society that not long before murdered female infants at birth. With the advent of the Qur'an, Muslim men were instructed to marry no more

than four women, with the number dependent upon a man's ability to provide for and treat each woman with justice. Thus the revelation of the Qur'an did not accompany the introduction of polygyny, but with it, one form of plural marriage was regulated and restricted.¹¹

Many African American Muslims, particular those who follow the teachings of W. D. Mohammed, view marriage as "the legal gateway to a vast array of tangible and intangible protections, responsibilities, and benefits, most of which cannot be replicated in any other way."¹² Routinely, they are taught to privilege marriage as superior to and opposite of singleness, though fully aware that polygyny is illegal in the U.S. and that the majority of the world's people consider polygyny akin to human slavery—that is, "[as] an institution whose past purpose was no longer acceptable to most people."¹³ African American Muslims also are aware that perspectives of Muslims and others that the "original intent" of the Qur'an on this matter was to lead to its prohibition, as occurred with slavery.¹⁴ Ultimately, like most Muslims, they recognize marriage as the only legitimate arena for sexual intercourse and procreation. Legalities aside, they also acknowledge a few realities highlighted in recent national polls, namely:

- "Black women born after 1950 are twice as likely as white women to never marry by age 45 and twice as likely to be divorced, widowed, or separated."¹⁵
- Only about 30 percent of black women are living with a spouse, compared with about 49 percent of Hispanic women, 55 percent of non-Hispanic white women, and more than 60 percent of Asian women."¹⁶
- Finally, "highly educated black women have increasingly fewer options when it comes to potential mates."¹⁷

BLACK THEODICY AND WOMANISM

Proponents of polygyny subscribe to the idea that the landscape of seventh-century Arabia is strikingly comparable with the context of twenty-first-century North America, whereby "war" has led to population imbalances in both regions. Then, as now, they say, the lack of available men, and/or the high number of female-led households, and the continued economic disparity experienced by mothers and their children, makes the practice of polygyny both mandated and permissible.¹⁸ Unlike Arabia's first Muslim women, their contemporary counterparts in black America are often more financially stable than Muslim men. Thus African American Muslim women may—and often do—choose polygyny because they believe it to be the only way they

authentically can practice their religion, live a morally good Muslim life, and sustain their communities. As these women demonstrate with their commitment to the continuation of community life and the superiority of marriage over singleness, they risk—and sometimes sacrifice fully—the legal rights afforded to wives in dual-partnered monogamous unions. Women married to polygynous men and those who approve of their family formations also are less likely to interrogate sexism in the primary setting they inhabit—the home.¹⁹ Granted, as Donald McCrary has pointed out, the home is a challenging environment to analyze. Still, no other representation of the private sphere can claim the spotlight as “the place most people first acquire sexist attitudes.”²⁰ With that line of reasoning, proponents of polygyny, I would argue, invoke two theoretical frameworks that are significant considerations for this issue: black theodicy and womanism. I will offer an analysis of the relationship of these frameworks to the lived realities of African American Muslims and to the “black family question.”²¹

Throughout the history of the U.S., African Americans have experienced life in America as what William James labeled “multiple realities.”²² For them, one sphere consisted of the limitations of housing, educational, and other opportunities, along with characterizations of black life established and promoted by the dominant culture. This “reality,” or *outsideworld*, was created by “white modes of cultural domination” that fostered, constructed, and reinforced knowledge about African Americans by encounters (or perceptions of the same) between them and white Americans.²³ In this world, as Michael Eric Dyson notes, “black men and women became sexual and economic properties” and “healthy black self-regard and self-confidence were outlawed.”²⁴ More often than not, contradictions of this world were created solely by African Americans, who organized an alternate world about themselves and their experiences living in a racist society. In this “reality,” parallel universe, or *inside world*, African Americans were freer to exercise control over their representations, the formations of their households, as well as their actual experiences and the meaning they and others derive from them. Still, this inside world was a multidimensional, complex sphere with boundaries (sometimes fluid) that African Americans traversed depending upon their viewpoints on such issues as religion, sexuality, marriage, and black identity as forms of resistance. African Americans interpret both worlds in relation to each other. Situated at the breach between them is the moral authority to acknowledge and respond to black suffering, even if doing so challenges civil law.

The contextualization of proponents of polygyny echoes Sherman Jackson's view of black theodicy as the theory of ethnic misery that "focuses on the problem of evil in the more specific context of the historical communal suffering of Blackamericans" and the implications of broken relationships.²⁵ In Jackson's world, this particular category of theodicy brings forth the question: How can African American Muslims—as self-determined, active agents—free themselves from the social evils perpetrated on the black family without questioning the justice, omnipotence, and omnipresent nature of Allah?²⁶ Black theodicy rejects the individual, "out-for-me" mentality in favor of a communal, "the good of the many outweighs the good of the one" framework that supports African American Muslim attempts to experience "the Islamic theological tradition speaking effectively to *their* concerns and realities."²⁷ Black theodicy also permits considerations of Muslim marriage as a response to black suffering and as a method of survival that links African American Muslims to their first-generation Muslim ancestors.

Second, proponents of polygyny hold perceptions about how best to organize their households that prompt an exploration of what Katie Cannon labels, "the womanist house of wisdom."²⁸ Indeed, this essay brings debates about Muslim marriage to bear on a section of "the house" that I label "Muslim womanism," a theologically infused cultural hermeneutic that "foregrounds" the lived reality of African American Muslim women as it challenges totalitarian understandings of marriage, partnering, and household organization.²⁹ Like my colleague Traci West, I am concerned about "those persons who are victimized by violence (sometimes lethal) that is too easily tolerated by society."³⁰ For this research project, society is African American Muslim communities. Potential victims are Muslim women, wives, and children.

Muslim womanism is grounded in the racist and patriarchal culture of the U.S., in the nuances of black struggles for justice, in acknowledgment of Islamic legitimacy and Qur'anic justice. This strategy challenges scholars to speak holistically about Islam and the diverse experiences of its female adherents by accomplishing for Muslim women what Katie G. Cannon and other Christian womanists have endeavored to achieve for their Christian subjects: documentation—and when necessary, problematization—of the agency, subjectivity, and moral formulas that African American Muslim women accept and construct. That is, Muslim womanism uses the works of Muslim (usually female) scholars to promote internal critiques on at least two fronts: first, as a challenge to followers of Islam to question limitations imposed on the role and/or agency of Muslim women in the private or public sphere, including a woman's rights in marriage; and second, as an analysis of the burden Muslim

women tend to assume for the survival of the community.³¹ Thus the discourse of Muslim womanism moves beyond the race analyses of black male intellectuals, the gender analyses of many feminist (predominantly white female) intellectuals, and the faith analyses of Christian womanists and Muslim (largely non-Western and nonblack) feminists in its interest in questions of knowledge production, history, and human existence that form African American Muslim family life and the life-world of African American Muslim women.³²

Muslim womanism removes the scholarly and popular veil from the realities of African American Muslim life, giving public voice to and advocating justice for what has long existed privately, though misunderstood, due to two “parallel” and internal structures.³³ The first structure is cultural patriarchy, as expressed by some male Muslims and others who presume to dictate what are the embodied experiences of African American Muslim women in both the private and public spheres. The second structure, cultural exegesis, draws attention to the ways in which African American Muslims approach the Qur’an for theological insight, gender liberation, and communal survival, especially in their consideration of polygyny as a necessary form of Muslim marriage. In this regard, polygyny becomes a “language against oppression” and a tool for cultural survival in which the otherwise marginalized seize power from the dominant culture.³⁴ In other words, to use Muslim womanism as a theoretical lens for the exploration of Muslim family life is to particularize the experiences of the single largest group of American Muslims, and to promote the excavation of black reality from the perspective of the women who live it.

THE PRACTICE OF POLYGyny

“We’re at war,” declared a male religious leader in the New York region, alluding to the battles and loss of life in the time of the Prophet Muhammad. “With the high incarceration of our men and other social challenges, we have to find some solution to save our community. When polygyny is practiced correctly and honestly, it has tremendous results for everyone involved. When it is not practiced correctly and honestly, the suffering and hurt can be devastating.”³⁵ Women who share their husbands do not self-identify as polygynous; rather they speak of their unions as monogamous in that only their husbands are married to other spouses. Both women and men do, however, agree on the emotional strain polygynous households experience. In the words of one husband with two wives: “[Polygyny] has an emotional component. [For its success,] you would have to make sure that the sisters can afford the emotional ride that it will take. That’s sometimes more important than the