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Book Review: Polygyny: What It Means When African American Muslim Women Share Their Husbands

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***Polygyny: What It Means When African American Muslim Women Share Their Husbands*, Debra Majeed, 2015, University Press of Florida: Gainesville. 194 pages Appendices and Index included. \$74.95 hardcover**

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Why would a woman remain married to someone seeking to be married to another woman? Why would a woman desire to be married to a husband already married to another woman? Is polygyny even permissible according to Islam or civil law? *Polygyny: What It Means When African American Muslim Women Share Their Husbands* by Debra Majeed seeks to accomplish many goals. One of the overarching goals is to highlight the findings of a study seeking to explore the variation and nuances in the lived experiences of African American Muslim women living polygyny. As with any human relationship, those “living polygyny” may experience a range of relationships from relatively harmonious to abusive. Throughout the book, Majeed does not seek to provide a judgment about living polygyny, but rather to “use a small sampling of African American Muslim life to ask readers to rethink their ideas about what constitutes a family as it encourages Muslim women and men to recognize their agency more fully and to be more cognizant of their responsibilities to one another. [Majeed invites] readers on the journey on [which she] embarked, one that compelled [her] to think more critically about gender inequality, gender responsibility, and gender justice in Muslim family life” (p.ix). The work is framed using the insights of ethnography, history, and performance.

The preface of the book speaks to the academic questions regarding polygyny for African American Muslim women, but also draws the reader in with connections to the personal experiences of the author. Some Muslim leaders tried to persuade Majeed not to write about or research the topic of women’s experiences living polygyny. The author embarks upon a controversial and nuanced topic. Much of the first part of the book is devoted to outlining how the work fits into the existing literature. Majeed raises many considerations to address later in the work. She hopes to provide “nuanced portrayals of the lived realities of Muslim women as complex subjects and the multilayered voices of their narratives” (p.6). She suggests that the work will focus on the experiences of women in their own voices, particularly those following Imam W.D. Mohammed. This goal is met, to some degree. Additionally, Majeed aims “to encourage further the thoughtful and important dialogue the imam desired among African American and other Muslims; to dispel myths that a single form of polygyny exists in the United States; to present multiple-wife marriage from the perspectives of Muslim women who react to and live it; and to promote ‘authority of experience’ as a form of Qur’anicly approved liberation that Muslims must utilize if healthy family and community life is to be a permanent fixture” (p.9). The preface and introduction leave the reader ready to hear the actual experiences of women.

Chapter two is an engaging presentation of the qualitative findings through the juxtaposition of the voices of study participants representing three different trends in marriage types – polygyny of liberation, polygyny of choice, and polygyny of coercion. While the women (and men) did not speak to each other outside the confines of the pages of the book, Majeed uses both interview and secondary data to construct a conversation among individuals representing a

range of marriage perspectives. This section of the book allows the varied perspectives of those living polygyny to shine through. If a reader is really looking to find a condensed and engaging place to explore the nuances and range of experiences for African American Muslims living polygyny, then this is the chapter to read. Majeed stresses that the women's experiences demonstrate the need to include "women in decisions about their roles in family life"; this is related to meeting the Qur'anic mandates of fairness and justice for all wives (p.51).

Chapters three and four speak to the marriage options (religious/civil) available for those seeking marriage. Chapter five outlines the guidelines, as conceptualized by Imam W.D. Mohammed, for men considering polygyny. Throughout, these chapters speak to the religious rationale for and against polygyny as well as the cultural context in the development of polygyny and Islam in the United States and beyond. Some see polygyny as being particularly open for discussion and debate among the followers of Elijah Muhammad and W.D. Mohammed due to their own relationships with multiple women. The type of marriage (religious/civil) entered into sets up the recourse that women have if the marriage dissolves. This recourse may also vary due to the fact that "mosques or local religious communities represent 'semi-autonomous fields' that often generate their own rules" (p.63). A key theme throughout this section is that the details of the marriage terms and conditions are left up to the individual and the individual's faith community.

The mental well-being of the women and children living polygyny is raised in the second half of the book. This is an interesting element to consider regarding the lives of women living polygyny. A key tenet of those considering polygyny is the ability to provide physically and emotionally for two (or more) sets of women and children (although many women also financially support their families). The idea of mental health really starts to emerge in chapter four, but does not really move into the spotlight until the final chapter. In the final chapter, chapter six, Majeed provides two case studies to begin to demonstrate the range of perspectives that children of polygynous families may hold. Parents were very protective of the implications that their marriages might have on the experience and perceptions of their children. It seems like there is even more to explore regarding the mental health of the women living polygyny than what is detailed in this chapter. Through the afterward, Majeed weaves together the experience of one family with some key recommendations to help ensure that those living polygyny are living faithfully while also maintaining the dignity and respect of all involved.

As an anthropologist, my personal bias was that I desired a little more detail regarding the lives of the women themselves for chapters three through five. I wanted to hear their voices even more. A few of the chapters did highlight some key experiences of the women living polygyny (particularly two, six, and the afterward); however, some of the chapters (particularly three through five) seemed that they were going to speak to the lived experiences of women, but then focused more on the history of polygyny in Islam, particularly for followers of Elijah Muhammad and W.D. Mohammed. While knowing the wider context of polygyny is significant, it seemed to detract some from the author's intent of highlighting the women's experiences.

While the reasons some women might desire or even prefer polygyny were raised throughout the book, these points did not seem to be stressed. Majeed notes that some women may desire to live in polygynous marriages as a way of being married, particularly to someone sharing their religion and culture. This is particularly salient for women who may find themselves at the intersections of social identities leading them to the experiences of marginality in the United States. Polygyny may be a cultural solution due to a "...lack of marriageable (single, heterosexual, and available) men, and/or the high number of female-led households, and the continued economic

disparity experienced by mothers and their children make the practice of polygyny both mandated and permissible” (p.26). Embedded in the book is the idea that African American Muslim women (and men) living polygyny need additional supports from their faith communities. Supports seem to vary depending on local context. Majeed highlights key areas for additional supports through the afterward, such as conversations around permissible marriage forms in Islam in the United States and how to address the needs of children when their parents are preparing for marriage or divorce.

Majeed notes “I wrote this book to be useful in the fields of religion, history, and women’s studies” (p. 12). While the author uses ethnography and raises some interesting points about family formation, the audience for this book does appear to be those with a background in religious studies (particularly Islam in the United States). A key target audience for this work would be those interested in the overlapping domains of religion and gender relations. Overall, this book was an interesting exploration of African American Muslims living polygyny. Majeed observes that the work “fills a void in the scholarship on the study of polygyny among African American Muslims...[with] no comparable book-length work that focuses on African American Muslims...” (p.17). This book seems like a great step toward filling this void. It left me wanting to know more and hoping that Majeed would continue to write about her research and reach out to an even wider audience.