


Adaptation and inculturation, as tools for understanding Igbo-African marriage system: A rereading of 1 Timothy 3:2

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1 Timothy 3:2 in its traditional reading is one of those Bible texts that have negatively challenged the Igbo style of marriage and family life. This is because the church's 'generalisation policy' on the sacrament of matrimony, which has presented such passages as all inclusive, has left it an out-of-context hermeneutical text both in sermons and catechetical interpretations. Since the church is assumed to be an impartial umpire in cultural matters, then, understanding such passages for an average Igbo Christian would mean to interpret them in their contexts or to interpret them through Igbo lexicology, which is technically called adaptation. But if the biblical writers used the languages and the literary forms of the ancient Mediterranean world, then a re-view of such passages through the Igbo cultural lens is imperative considering that African scholars have become aware *that neither the methodology used by the European scholars nor their theological conclusions reached reflected the reality of the African experience and its self-understanding*. This paper, with an African contextual hermeneutical view drawn from deconstructionist criticism including textual and form critical methodology, critically examined this situation, and narrowed the study to the sacrament of marriage.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: This study challenges the dogmatic theological position of the church in the sacrament of matrimony. Its potential result will be to emancipate the Igbo-African church from neo-colonialism in which it was enmeshed through dogmatic ambiguities, questioning the western opinion to godly marriage and instead, reinstating the African marriage in its place.

Keywords: adaptation; inculturation; hermeneutics; Igbo; marriage; polygamy; ethnography.

Introduction

The traditional reading of the book of 1 Timothy 3:2, both during sermons and catechetical interpretations, is observed to pose a serious challenge to some Igbo Christian families and also to prospective Igbo churchmen, especially when issues of marriage and building of family are concerned. This is due to the generalisation policy which the text has been forced to exude, including the ambiguity of the text and western hermeneutical application to the passage. Kaplan (1986:166) reminds us that 'of the many issues confronting African Christians today, none would appear to have received more attention than the problem of defining the precise relationship between Christianity and African culture'. He stated that:

the lively, sometimes heated, debate which has developed over this issue has produced in its wake a substantial body of literature on diverse aspects of a process variously labelled as 'Africanization', 'incarnation', 'contextualization', 'adaptation'. (p. 166)

That being the case, it is on record that besides the indigenous Igbo traditional religion, foreign religions have been infused into the very heart of Igbo culture to the extent that those religions, once foreign, currently influence and shape Igbo culture and become the bedrock of Igbo religious beliefs and practices. Christianity and, recently, Islam are the most prominent of numerous world religions that have penetrated the Igbo society, and almost displaced the Igbo traditional religion which unfortunately was subsequently labelled 'outdated' and 'fetish' (see Kanu 2017:26). Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, which paints a vivid picture of missionary activities in Igboland during the foreign missionary era in Africa, as well as various scholarly works (El-Dessouky 2010:105; Galvan & Galvan 2005–2008:105–117; Igboanusi 2006: 157–168; Okpalike & Nwadiakor 2015:11) suggest that those who brought the western¹ religions to Igboland, in a bid to spread their teachings to the new world, were overzealous in their evangelism or

1.The term 'west' is used in this work to mean the areas encompassed by 'the Atlantic littoral of Europe; the British Isles, Scandinavia, the Low Countries, France, and Iberia plus America' (McNeill 1997:513).

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proselytism of ndi Igbo since they could not properly study the cultural and religious mindset of those they were coming to conquer, probably because of the general European notion which suggests that Africans are inferior both in mind and body. The foundation of this notion is assumed to be predicated upon the descriptive ethnographic work of Edward Long (1774:351) which describes the African black skin as one that cannot alter even 'by transportation into other climates'. Long (1774:351) goes on to describe Africans as possessed of 'bestial or fetid smell, which they all have in a greater or less degree'. He rates the African mind as encased in absolute barbarity, even below brutishness (1774:353).

The Europeans' quest to conquer the Igbo-African people, of whom they believed that their 'religion and cultural practices are immersed in paganism' (Baharvand 2016:43), left them with a compromised mission in Igboland so far as soul winning and communication of religion is concerned. On this, Kaplan (1986:166) asserts that the missionaries 'were unable to separate the Christian religion from such trappings as monogamy, western dress and etiquette'. He does not deny their 'extreme ethnocentricity and cultural arrogance' (Kaplan 1986:166). The theological and cultural positions of these missionaries lead one to believe that they were not theologically educated to know that religion is inborn in every human, whether civilised or primitive, learned or unlearned, theist or atheist because of the presence of the *semen religionis* in humanity before they were shipped off to commit the crime of *forced acculturation* (Kanu 2017:25) on Igbo-African. The Europeans' deceptive means and sometimes forceful tendencies in wooing Igbo-African into accepting their religious opinions, recounted through oral tradition, have dire consequences today: religious intolerance and waste of lives and property due to the projection of one religion as superior to the other, misinterpretation and mishandling of doctrinal issues to the point where brothers parade divergent views on every doctrinal matter from the same religion and see each other as satanic and a deadly monster that must be avoided at all cost or destroyed with either Holy Ghost fire or lesser *jihad*. This is considered amongst Igbo scholars as the western trick of 'disassemblage, concealed in the exploitative colonial ideology of benevolent paternalism' (Kanu 2017:25). Consequently, religion in post-colonial Igboland is seen to have done more harm than good and has become the basis for most of the wars, killings and sectarian crises seen in every quarter of this once peaceful paradise. A study of the nature of such crises suggests that if western religions adapted to the culture they met, some level of peace and quiet in society would have been achieved. Bringing the study to Christianity in Igboland, history documents the western world's activities as creating various kinds of problems for ndi Igbo, necessitated by the activities and reportage of missionaries (Kenalemang 2013:4; Ohadike 1996:xli-xliii).

Oral traditional reports in Igboland older than a century tell the story of how *white men* took advantage of ndi Igbo's hospitable and accommodating spirit as well as their less assertive ideologies to systematically erase their religious

and ethical philosophies and planting foreign religious and ethical ideologies in their place. This could be what Okpalike and Nwadiolor (2015:4) refer to as a 'high level of cultural intolerance and discrimination among the ranks of European missionaries in Igbo land especially the pioneers'. For example, the African and, by extension, the Igbo ideology for marriage was seriously altered. p'Bitek (1986) reports that:

[c]ontrary to the African idea that everybody must marry in the prime of their youth, have a family (and for a man, the more wives and children he has the better), young intelligent, beautiful and handsome Africans were lured to think that wifelessness, husbandlessness [*sic*], childlessness, homelessness, were a virtue. (p. 15)

Igbo-Africans did not only lose their religious and ethical identity; their workforce was also the European target. 'The massive loss to the African labour force was made more critical because it was composed of able-bodied young men and young women' (Rodney 2009:110) and those 'missionaries, administrators, white settlers – the whole lot – were living off African labour and resources' (Rodney 2009:324). Rodney (2009:308) calls the missionaries agents of colonialism 'in the practical sense'.

This deceit stripped the church in the Igbo nation of the opportunity for 'interplay between the gospel message and African cultures' (Van der Merwe 2016:561), which is the bane of Christianity in Igboland and seems to be the reason why an average Igbo person (especially the first generation of Igbo Christians) would not properly understand this religion (Okpalike & Nwadiolor 2015:1).

Some African scholars (Dube, Mbuvi & Mbuwayesango 2012:4) agree that one of the ways the western world is still creating problems for Africa is the heavy influence of the western style of biblical hermeneutics on Africa. In fact, 'Biblical interpretation in the African continent is thus intimately locked in the framework of scramble for land, struggle for economic justice and struggle for cultural survival' (Dube et al. 2012:4). And since Europe dominated biblical interpretation after the fall of Christianity in North Africa, they have subsequently adulterated Christian orthodoxy which was originally shaped by African church fathers (Oden 2007:45) and thrust it on Africa during the colonial era. Their domination of biblical interpretation was used as a ready tool to, amongst other things, deny polygamists in African churches the opportunity to partake in the church sacraments (Ekpendu 2015:81).

This led to the study of 1 Timothy 3:2 as it affects polygamy (which refers to polygyny in this paper). This paper is built on African contextual hermeneutics drawn from deconstructionist criticism and social scientific methodology. African contextual hermeneutics enables the African context to form:

the subject of interpretation of the bible. This means that the conceptual framework of interpretation is informed by African socio-cultural perspectives ... In this way, the people's context becomes the subject of interpretation of the biblical text. (Ukpong 2000:24)

Textual exegesis was scientifically applied on the pericope of the study and the result led to the assertion and affirmation of the tool of adaptation and inculturation. Social-scientific method helped the study to interact with other branches of human learning that studies the human society. The opinions of selected Church fathers were studied and applied in order to test the accurateness of the study's historiosophy precisely on the matter of polygamy. The objective of this study is to reassert the need for biblical scholarship in line with African culture, manners and customs, especially regarding marriage systems.

Brief background of 1 Timothy 3:2

In order to create a context for other sections in this study, this section adumbratively offers a background of 1 Timothy 3:2, explaining Paul's reason for writing the text. Starting with authorship controversy, the book of 1 Timothy, as part of the Pastoral Epistles, is traditionally believed to have been written by Apostle Paul (Long 2016:1). However, this view is challenged in some quarters after 'the Pastoral Epistles were compared to the acknowledged letters of Paul' (Hanson 1982:2) and the styles of writing purportedly differed despite the recognition of Paul's authorship in the prologues. It is, however, the opinion of this study that Paul is the author of this book based on almost irrefutable internal and external evidence supplied by the likes of Knight (2000:46–52) and Long (2016:11–12). In fact, Stott's (1996:23) statement that Paul's authorship of 1 Timothy was 'almost universally accepted by the church from the beginning' lends great support to other scholarly opinions.

The text under study belongs to a pericope which is catechetical in genre and of which the *Sitz im Leben* is associated with Paul's attack against the Jewish heretics who viciously opposed him. In other words, 1 Timothy 3:2 was written by Paul to combat imposters and heretics who masqueraded themselves as overseers/elders/bishops in the church (see Halfmoon 2007:9; MacArthur 1995:10). Kuwornu-Adjaottor (2011:12) states that these heretics and opponents of Paul were caught up in vile behaviour inconsistent with the office of an elder, including forbidding people from marrying or having their own wives. Therefore, they were prevented from spoiling ignorant Christian women. Paul is painted in the traditional interpretation as having insisted that these men were disqualified from being church overseers if they were not married. Considering the sociological situation of the text, this author re-read the text of 1 Timothy 3:2 first with the tool of textual criticism, which led to the discovery of hermeneutical ambiguities. Such ambiguities may have adversely affected the Igbo-African usage of that text. That further led to the application of cultural adaptation and enculturation to find the nexus between the text and Igbo Christian matrimony. This enculturation has been defined as (Walligo 1986):

[t]he honest and serious attempt to make Christ and his Gospel of salvation ever more understood by peoples of every culture, locality and time. It is the reformulation of Christian life and

doctrine into the very thought patterns of each people ... It is the continuous endeavour to make Christianity 'truly feel at home' in the cultures of each people. (p. 11)

This study adopts this definition as wholly practicable.

Need for textual deconstruction in 1 Timothy 3:2

When hermeneutics is approached philosophically, scholars think of textual deconstruction (probably originated by Jacques Derrida). Deconstruction requires that the reader, not the author, become central in determining the meaning of a text. This means that such text (even the Bible) can be understood and interpreted in a different way by each reader since the deconstructive process does not come from the reader to the text but from the text to the reader. Even Derrida himself considers deconstruction simply as 'a useful means of saying new things about the text' (Hendricks 2016:2). Other scholars have come to justify Derrida's deconstruction by seeing it as 'the tension between what the text manifestly means to say and what it is nonetheless constrained to mean' (Rolfe 2004:274). This is not the same as corrupting the grammar of a text by using interpolations favourable only to a race of people to interpret difficult words in the text. During the 'dark' period, Christianity doctored the New Testament in an attempt to textually deconstruct it so as to include other religions in Christian thoughts. Dungan (1888) reports that:

During the dark ages Christianity was greatly corrupted. But in no respect did it receive greater injury than in being mixed with other religions. After four centuries of this doctoring, Christianity was little more than baptized heathenism, with lines of Judaism interwoven. (p. 86)

It is within the period of this 'doctoring' that the earliest manuscripts were dated. Orsini and Clarysse (2012:449) opine that 'not a single surviving literary manuscript between the first and sixth century is actually dated, and only few are datable', meaning that the text of the New Testament was badly mixed up until the sixth century. It was at this time that many Greek words of the New Testament text acquired definitive meanings that led to certain rigid interpretations with a complete nonchalance regarding the instability and metamorphosis of language and philology (Haines 2000:6). The West has used this opportunity very well since the environment through which such interpretations developed was theirs. This situation has led to literary translations which are wholly not in tandem with Igbo-African and their cultural outlook. This textual manipulation of biblical hermeneutics makes Fuller's (1993) strong assertion relevant:

The Christians of each part of the world need to explain the Bible's message so that people in their culture can understand it and realize how it applies to their own lives. Most of the books and methods available in the world today on Christianity were written by westerners and deal mainly with the spiritual problems westerners face. Scholars from other cultures need to develop teaching materials that will make a real impact for

Christ on people of other backgrounds. These scholars need to be able to dig into the original scriptures for themselves. They should not be limited to what the western experts tell them. (p. 1)

Sadly, the dominant western interpretation of 1 Timothy 3:2 as a text on marriage has always been limited to and has favoured monogamy above polygamy (see Kelly 1981:75); this is a good case in point. Its implication is that anyone who practices polygamy is either godless and should not partake in the church sacraments or uncivilised and need civilisation. This (wrong) idea indicates the need for textual deconstruction of 1 Timothy 3:2. Furthermore, recent data by some western scholars indicate that polygamy is founded in human evolution. Two evolutionary biologists, Fortunato and Archetti (2009), argue that:

[t]he majority of human societies allow polygynous marriage, and the prevalence of this practice is readily understood in evolutionary terms. Why some societies prescribe monogamous marriage is however not clear: current evolutionary explanations – that social monogamy increases within-group co-operation, giving societies an advantage in competition with other groups – conflict with the historical and ethnographic evidence. (p. 149)

In this study, serial monogamy (divorce and remarriage) is seen simply as polygamy and nothing more. This opinion is further supported by the discovery that etymologically polygamy literally means ‘often married’ in late Greek (Zeitzen 2008:3) or ‘many marriages’ (Muthengi 1995:55). Francesconi, Ghiglini and Perry, another group of evolutionists, produced what they called the overlapping generations model. This model, which is capitalist in nature, shows that paternal investment (that is material provisions by the father) and uncertain paternity (possible untimely death of the father) play a key role in consolidating a family line (Francesconi, Ghiglini & Perry 2016:2). According to this model, ostensibly monogamy is superior both to serial monogamy and polygamy in that it encourages the making of wealth and centralising its profits in a one-woman family system, thereby discouraging the sharing of wealth with children from multiple women and so it is thought to boost economic growth and advancement (Francesconi et al. 2016:2–3). Obviously, this was the same mentality early European missionaries and anthropologists had when they stepped into Igbo Africa. Their operative psychology was captured vividly by Rodney (2009):

Prevailing African customs such as polygamy were attacked without reference to their socio-economic function. On the question of monogamy the Christian missionaries were introducing not a religious principle but rather a facet of European capitalist society. (p. 310)

This capitalist-oriented ideology – which is fast destroying the communal spirit which Africans are known for (Kasambala 2005:300) in Igboland – has also found its way into the family institution, producing what has since been christened ‘Christian marriage’, with little or no care for its origin or consequences for the Igbo cosmology.

Complex etymology and ambiguous hermeneutics: A literary reading of 1 Timothy 3:2

The study critically investigates the word $\mu\acute{\iota}\alpha$ in 1 Timothy 3:2. It is the feminine nominative numeral of the word ‘one’, and the equivalent (except in its gender form) of the words $\epsilon\acute{\iota}\varsigma/\acute{\epsilon}\nu\alpha\varsigma$ (masculine) and $\acute{\epsilon}\nu/\acute{\epsilon}\nu\alpha$ (neuter). It is easy to assume that $\mu\acute{\iota}\alpha$ is clearly a *cardinal* numeral and shows only quantity in its descriptions. Such assumption easily leads to belief that (since it shows quantity) the correct translation remains ‘one wife’. However, attention should be called to the fact that textual criticism teaches us that ancient scribes used to ‘substitute a more familiar word or better remembered phrase for a less common or unusual one’ (Holmes 1991:102). Consequently, $\mu\acute{\iota}\alpha$ in 1 Timothy 3:2 could originally be $\omega\rho\omega\tau\eta$, which is an *ordinal* number, which shows us the position of things in a series, and in this case means ‘first wife’. Furthermore, scribal *harmonisation* policy led many ancient scribes to boldly ‘venture to correct what appeared to [them] to be an error or difficulty in [their] Exemplar[s]’ (Holmes 1991:102–103); these cases could have led to the alteration of what is originally contained in 1 Timothy 3:2. Another angle to the postulation is that, without scribal interpolation or alteration, $\mu\acute{\iota}\alpha$ originally could have served a dual purpose in the text. It would have served the theological purpose of an ordinal number whilst retaining the literary meaning of a cardinal numeral. This hypothesis about the rightful usage of $\mu\acute{\iota}\alpha$ in the New Testament both as cardinal and ordinal numeral is foundational upon the ‘comparative mention principle’ of biblical hermeneutics which Ninan (2018:83) describes as the process of using a particular scripture to interpret another either by comparing or contrasting. Here, Matthew 28:1 shall be used to interpret the numeral in 1 Timothy 3:2. In Vine (1996:446), the word *shabbaton*, when it appears in Matthew 28:1, though translated in the King James version (KJV) as ‘the first day of the week’, literally and idiomatically means ‘one of the sabbaths’ signifying ‘the first day after the sabbath’. This means that the ordinal word ‘first’ stood correctly for ‘one’ in the phrase. Again, in John 2:11 Jesus’ miracle of turning water into wine was called the ‘beginning’ (a numerical word) of miracles in Greek; however, some Vulgate manuscripts preferred using ordinal numbers instead. In fact, it is said that ‘[i]n the Vulgate it is given as *hoc fecit initium signorum*, but some manuscripts use the ordinal number instead: *hoc fecit primum signorum*’ (Forster 2014:180). But quite surprisingly, some manuscripts combined the word ‘beginning’ and ‘first’: ‘*hoc primum fecit initium signorum*’ (Forster 2014:181). Applying this same principle in 1 Timothy 3:2, the study observes that Paul’s use of $\mu\acute{\iota}\alpha$ could serve the same purpose as in Matthew 28:1 and John 2:11. Such assumption is further made because the hermeneutics of the Greek construction of 1 Timothy 3:2 is quite ambiguous, and so should not even be a basis for doctrinal formulation. For example, the rendering in English is ‘the husband of one wife’ and in Greek it reads ‘ $\mu\acute{\iota}\alpha \gamma\upsilon\upsilon\alpha\iota\kappa\omicron\varsigma \alpha\upsilon\delta\omicron\rho\alpha$ ’ which literally translates as ‘a man of one woman’. The phrase is ambiguous because it could be interpreted in three ways and each of

them would comfortably interpret the original words of Paul. Here, deconstruction is required in order to reject 'the traditional assumption that language can accurately represent reality' (Kennedy & Gioia 1995:1818). Alcorn's (2010:online) points loosely correspond with the three points discussed below:

- *Μίας γυναικος ἀνδρα* could mean 'one wife husband', which literally means a husband married to only one wife. In this case, this man is to be different from others in that others could have more than one wife, but he cannot. Some scholars dismiss this point and argue that 'polygamy wasn't common and was outlawed for all church members anyway' (Alcorn 2010:online), but Alcorn argues against such opinions by stating that 'there's significant evidence to the contrary' (2010:online).
- *Μίας γυναικος ἀνδρα* could also mean 'a wife man', which literally means a married man, the number of wives he married notwithstanding. The indefinite article 'a' in the phrase 'a wife man' correctly defends the statutory position of that Greek word *μία*, which explains that a bishop must not be a bachelor. In this context, the Bible does not mention number but status. This is comparable to calling a learned man 'a book man'; this does not mean he has read or that he possesses only one book.
- *Μίας γυναικος ἀνδρα* could also mean 'first wife husband' since, as discussed above, the article *μία* is theologically preferred above *πρώτη* in the translation of 'first'. In this context, the Bible was saying that a bishop must be the husband of his first wife; that is, he must be a man who has never divorced since it shows incompetence in leadership. In this case, God tries to show us the meaning of divorce (lack of willpower, idea and strength in managing a family) and a priest should never be found lacking in these (see 1 Tm 3:4–5).

This last interpretation of *μίας γυναικος ἀνδρα* is the only one amongst the three that properly explain the phrase and also closely aligns with the following priestly scriptures: Leviticus 21:7 (NLT) and Ezekiel 44:20–22 (NKJV).

So, if the phrase 'husband of the first wife' more closely explains *μίας γυναικος ἀνδρα*, it naturally suggests that there could be other wives if the overseer so chooses and if the culture allows. This assertion leads the study to question the school of thought that the one wife referred to by Paul means the church, in other words, the bishop or elder must be married to only one wife, namely the church. Kuwornu-Adjaottor (2011:4) says, to those who hold this belief, it means 'that a man must be dedicated to the work of the church in order to qualify as an elder'. This negates the priesthood of all believers and presents the elder as the only bride of Christ, which opposes the argument it intends to defend. It also disqualifies Jesus and even Paul as overseers of the church.

A close study of the three possible interpretations of the phrase in 1 Timothy 3:2 indicates that they all support polygamy. To the first, if a bishop should be a 'one wife man', it means that others may have more than one. To the second,

if a bishop should be a 'wife man', it means that the most important thing expected of him is to be married, and the Bible did not bother itself with the idea of how many he married. To the third, if a bishop should be the 'first wife man', it means that he has never divorced his first wife or taken a divorced woman as a wife, since taking a divorced woman no longer makes him a first wife man (Lv 21:7; Ezk 44:20–22).

The research found therefore that the third interpretation conveys the intrinsic probability more accurately and therefore serves as the most acceptable interpretation for *μία* in the text. Still on internal evidence, *μία* as an ordinal number seems to give a proper footing for the explanation of verses 4–5, wherein the Bible talks about the bishop ruling his house well. 'House' here is used by metonymy to mean a (large and complex) family or home; a large and complex family cannot be just a man, wife and few kids, which is the western definition of family. Sofola (1973) explains it thus:

A fanatical Christian convert would have ostracized himself from the rest of his broadly-based family and defined his family to include himself, his one wife and their children only. But this is not the case in Nigeria or Africa as a whole. (p. 15)

Adaptation and enculturation, as applied in 1 Timothy 3:2

Inarguably there are some doctrinal interpretations that have become a problem for Igbo-African Christians over time because they do not match the African pace of civilization. The western hermeneutics of 1 Timothy 3:2 seem to be chief amongst them. Culture and religion are inseparable, and the former dictates the condition of the latter. The West knew this truth and has constantly subjected its culture to scrutiny, upgrade and metamorphosis in order to have it serve them and not vice versa. For example, it is insinuated that ancient history confirms that the rigid practice of monogamy is part of western culture (Fortunato & Archetti 2009:150). Although this insinuation is proven incorrect by ethnographic works of more primitive times (see Westermarck 1891:431–434), the West had enough foresight to cushion and ameliorate the harshness of such culture by legalising the acquisition of mistresses and prostitutes to attend to them. Knight (2000:158) says of the Romans and the Greeks 'that men could have sexual relations with women other than their wives'. In some parts of the United States today, any attempt to decriminalise sex work is in fact considered a feminist issue (Bazon 2016:online). This calls to mind that, right from the origin of socially imposed monogamy (SIM) or so-called modern marriage in Rome and Greece (MacDonald 1995:4; Scheidel 2009:280–291) to date, men in the western world by law are married to only one wife but have a large number of other women who legally add flavour to their sex life, and through whom they can have numerous children (Fortunato & Archetti 2009:150). However, the unmarried women whom they use as mistresses and prostitutes were branded 'the worst of the infames' throughout history (Duncan 2006:255). In fact, a Roman Catholic priest, Father Eugene Hillman (1975:17) accused the Church in Rome of banning

polygamy so as to live up to the Greco-Roman culture which demands only one legal wife whilst putting up with concubinage and prostitution.

But here in contemporary Africa, present events suggest that when the West came to Africa, they denied African culture the same freedom to exist and display its own dynamism. Great men and various cultures of Africa were emasculated and this perpetuated Africa's third-world status (Rodney 2009:116). The same trick they played on Jaja of Opobo, one of the greatest African monarchs of his time² and the highly intelligent and pragmatic Eseonu of Ohuhu Umuahia – is the same trick they are playing on the minds of African men, systematically eliminating one of the blocks to African 'wealth' and 'greatness' (Antoine & Pilon 1998:4), which is polygamy. It is argued that '[f]or nearly two millennia, the West has thus declared polygamy to be a crime and has had little patience with various arguments raised in its defence' (Witte 2015:1678). However, the academic relevance of the discourse on polygamy is reasserted by Kyomo and Selvan (2004:35), who argue that '[p]olygamy has been a widely discussed topic in African theology since the 1960s and it is a burning issue even today'. The academic viability of the subject of polygamy off Igbo-African soil is further promoted by the fact that:

[t]he first sustained scholarly arguments for legal toleration if not state recognition of polygamy has been pressed – with various liberals and libertarians, Muslims and Christians, philosophers and social scientists, multiculturalists and counterculturalists finding themselves on the same side. (Witte 2015:1678)

Furthermore, Sofola (1973:14) suggests that monogamy is against African culture: 'individuality and monogamy are well-known doctrines upheld by the Christians in contradistinction to the cultures existing in the African society of Nigeria'. On the same note, ethnographic scholars believe that 83% of human societies allow polygynous marriage (Fortunato & Archetti 2009:149; Murdock & White 1969:329–369; Murdock & Wilson 1972:254–295).

In Igbo-African religious cosmology, it is rare for a *dibia* or the chief priest of any shrine to be a monogamist even now. This is because of the psycho-spiritual nature of Igbo patriarchy which Chukwu (God) share only with men, and which emboldens men towards rendering services as priests and healers. The novel *Nkọli* tells of the *dibia* Obiogbodu who had six wives and they all lived in peace (Ikwubuzo 2012:153). In fact, this was the norm in Igbo-Africa before the colonial era, not only amongst the priesthood but also amongst the menfolk, because in Igbo-African, every man was a priest in his family before he was a father to his children and husband to his wives. The success of polygamy was because 'men love[d] their wives equally in the polygamous Igbo family' (Ebele 2015:135). Men and especially women respected this marriage system because they saw it as 'an integral part of family law, which was based mostly on cultural beliefs'

²African warlords like King Jaja of Opobo and Warrant chief Eseonu of Ohuhu were betrayed and murdered in 1887 and 1892 respectively for posing serious threats to European domination of trade and politics.

(Mwambene 2017:4). However, in recent times, some Igbo feminists may have joined other feminists round the world to assert opinions such as the following:

Polygamous system rests on patriarchal values that oppose the emancipation of women and restrict them to their traditional roles. In societies in which polygamy is practised, the acquisition of multiple wives generally improves the status of men, but deprives women and girls of the right to equality. (Conseil du statut de la femme 2010:7)

Words such as 'emancipation' and 'equality' suggest that men subdue and enslave women through polygamy. Though Igbo-African society is patriarchal, no woman is forced into polygamy and the spirit of equity displayed by a typical Igbo man amongst his wives to avoid *erim* (retribution from the gods) makes him more of an umpire than an overlord to his wives. Polygamy is not the stock-in-trade of only the men in Igbo-African; '[i]t is favoured and fostered equally by men and women' (Onwuzurigbo 1990:436). Indeed, from the Igbo cultural worldview the practice of polygamy is culturally interpretable with Paul's instruction in 1 Timothy 3:2. A bishop who is a chief priest (*Eze Muo*) must be the husband of his *first* wife (see exegesis above). This biblical injunction is indeed Igbo cultural in practice.

When Christianity started spreading to other parts of Europe from Rome, it met cultural huddles which were scaled over with acts of *toleration* of pagan cultures (Petts 2011:11–138) and even outright imbibing of pagan ways and values (Viola & Barna 2002:1–252). But, at the advent of Christianity in Africa, there was a definite attempt not to tolerate or imbibe but to demolish cultures that have existed for decades, whose nexus with Christianity could have been found with a good interpretation of the Bible.

Benefits and risks of polygamy to the Igbo-African

Based on the numerous morphological and syntactic inconsistencies between the Greek and the English Bible (Metzger 1993:227), it is assumed that biblical root words are altered to suit western cultural beliefs. In that sense, 1 Timothy 3:2 was interpolated to suit a certain historicity in defence of monogamy to the point that it now looks as if the Old Testament figures who practiced polygamy were either stupid, godless or uncivilised. However, in her ethnographic studies, Zeitzen (2008:4) argues that 'polygamy is not an exotic non-western custom, practiced by people who have not yet entered the modern world'. She insists that polygamy is:

[w]orldwide, cross-cultural in its scope, it is found in all continents and among adherents of all world religions. Its practitioners range from modern feminists to traditional patriarchs illustrating the great versatility of polygamy as a kinship system. (p. 4)

It seems that polygamy has benefits which are hurriedly overlooked; it also seems to have risks which are not fully explored. The study suggests that it could be the solution to women's overlabour since it is a clear undisputed fact that

the roles of a modern woman in the family and indeed the society 'are energetic' (UNECA 1989, cited in Nwaoga 2013). Women's overlabor is a very remote (hence not easily recognised as a determinant factor) but well pronounced cause of contemporary family *fracassare* and even breakups. Most Igbo-African women assume the multiple roles of housewives, civil servants, mothers, students, traders etc., all at the same time, and unintentionally but unconsciously become aggressive at the slightest provocation by their husbands and children as a result of much physical exertion and mental fatigue. Such exertion drives so many of them to unintentionally snarl at their husbands like a nursing canine mother and to have no energy for sexual activity. The possibility of having domestic help is seriously on the decline, which makes matters worse. It also looks like polygamy could be a solution to the complaint by many African and African-American women that there are no longer enough men who are 'marriage material'. Since sociologist William Julius Wilson used the words 'marriageable male' in his book *The Truly Disadvantaged*, many have engaged in research to verify the claim of limited marriageable men. Sawhill and Venator (2015:5) agree that there is a decline in the number of marriageable men 'only when we look at the number of men compared to childless women (whether employed or not)'. This discovery applies to America; the accurate demographic of marriageable men in Africa is not yet known. Zeitzen (2008:156), citing Adams and Mburugu (1994:159–166) and Hetherington (2001:157–180), traced the decline of polygamy in Africa to economic suppression which made the acquisition of mistresses cheaper than second wives. Such direct economic relations to polygamy have been considered quite negatively when Arthi and Fenske (2016:7) bemoaned the role polygamy plays in perpetuating poverty in sub-Saharan Africa and promoting child mortality. Other risk factors identified with polygamy include 'the problems of co-wife rivalry' (Ikubuzo 2012:152), engendering 'family conflict and violence, with negative effects on the health of women and children' (Conseil du statut de la femme 2010:7).

However, monogamy is one of the reasons why HIV is on the rise, contrary to an opposing idea. For example, Baloyi (2013:167) and Fenske (2011:1) believed that polygamy increases people's chances of becoming HIV positive. However, in later research, Fenske (2015:59) could not see the impact of increased education on HIV amongst Zimbabwean women on polygamy. Thirty-five million people globally live with HIV (Kharsany & Karim 2016:3). The worst affected countries in sub-Saharan Africa are South Africa and Nigeria where 2.9 million (2.6 million to 3.4 million) young people (aged 15–24) are living with the virus (UNAIDS 2014:26). The majority of these young people are young women and teenage girls (Quarraisha, Sengeziwe & Chery 2010:6) who contracted it due to the injustices of 'gender-based violence including sexual abuse, lack of access to education and health services' (UNAIDS 2014:31). One wonders why such injustices are not also meted out to married women. The study proposes that these young women are subjected to

these inhuman treatments that expose them to HIV infection because they have no husband to protect them or provide in their basic needs; and the available young men are either already married or not able to choose a partner of their own due to their financial dependence on older family members (Anukriti & Dasgupta 2017:5).

The African traditional religion and Islamic religion seem to have much in common, of which polygamy is just one, and so they fertilise each other (Nabofa 1991:80). Such fertilisation and the kind of excommunication treatment meted out to polygamists in the church suggest that Islam may not need *jihad* to overrun the entire continent (see Haselbarth 1976:73).

In his work, Haselbarth (1976:72) bluntly opines that 'by Christian standards ... monogamy is the order of the future', yet he quickly adds that in 'modern Africa' polygamy could resurface with 'tenacity'. The author believes that Africa is at that point now. Discussions concerning the marriage of former Miss Kenya, Cecilia Mwangi and Tusker Project Fame Season I winner, Linda Muthama, who are both in polygamous marriages, strengthen such belief.

Opinions of past church leaders

History is ripe with the opinions of apologists of the church. The opinions of these church leaders may be circumstantial but they are found in history. It is said that St Augustine endorsed polygamy (Muthengi 1995:56) though the full circumstances that led to his belief is not immediately ascertained. Barrett (1968:116) states that Augustine did not see in polygamy anything contrary to the law of nature or the law of God itself. Hillman (1975:181) writes that Aquinas' philosophy endorsed polygamy. He boldly asserts: 'Nowhere in the New Testament is there any explicit commandment that marriage should be monogamous or any explicit commandment forbidding polygamy' (Hillman 1975:140). Martin Luther's opinion on the matter was that 'the Christian was at liberty under the Gospel to have more wives than one' (Barrett 1968:117). The radical reformation in Münster, Westphalia, led to 'the imbalance between numbers of men and women in the city' (Arms 2001:4), to the extent where 'almost three-quarters of the adult population of Münster was female' (Jelsma 1998:68). In those circumstances, Bernhard Rothmann took nine wives, saying 'God has restored the true practice of holy matrimony amongst us' (Rothmann 1972:101). Johann Lyser wrote a book entitled *Polygamia Triumphatrix* in which he strongly defended polygamy. He was branded a heretic and exiled from Italy (Weber 2017:6). In 1715, Samuel Friedrich Willenberg's pro-polygamy book entitled *De Finibus Polygamiae Licite* was ordered to be burned. Friedrich escaped with his life but was fined one hundred thousand gold pieces (Ditchfield 2003:20–21). Karl Barth (1961:199) said, 'We can hardly point with certainty to a single text [in the Bible] in which polygamy is expressly forbidden and monogamy universally decreed'. Ejenobo (2010:46) argues that 'it is now time for African Christian theologians to come out boldly to affirm that polygamy is not an evil way of life, neither is it primitive'.

Conclusion

This paper argues that marriage systems are a cultural issue. Therefore, it is wrong for a race of people to force their cultural beliefs on another race in the name and guise of sound religion through an unbalanced hermeneutics of such scriptural passages as 1 Timothy 3:2. Every culture is unique and can comfortably blend with Christianity if allowed to exist. The West and its approach to cultural issues differ from that of an average Igbo-African. The mode of dressing of an average Igbo-African, his manner of association, way of interaction and pattern of marriage are all Bible backed if the cosmetic approach that is western is removed from it and unaltered hermeneutics is applied to it. The result of the research made it difficult for the author to understand why an average Igbo man should engage in three different kinds of wedding with one woman instead of one kind of wedding with three women as African civilization and the Bible would support. A modern Igbo man has a court wedding, a traditional wedding, and a so-called white (not Christian) wedding. When he wants to read and interpret the Bible soundly, it must be in English or else the interpretation is not acceptable. All these are problems that have landed Igbo Christianity in doctrinal mismanagement, with the resultant effect of segregation, hatred, intrigue and even war.

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The author has declared that no competing interests exist.

Author's contributions

I declare that I am the sole author of this research article.

Ethical consideration

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