

Is Polygyny a Slave to History?

How the slave trade patterns of centuries ago are still shaping African marriages today.

BY ALICIA P.Q. WITTMAYER

For decades, scholars have puzzled over why polygyny in Africa is concentrated in the continent's western countries -- Guinea, Togo, and Mali, among others. There are competing theories, rooted in variables such as relative infant mortality rates and the agricultural roles women play in different parts of Africa. A new study, however, argues that the answer may be found somewhere else, darker and uglier: the slave trade.

The trans-Atlantic trade wildly disrupted West Africa's gender ratios, argue John Dalton and Tin Cheuk Leung, economists from Wake Forest University and the Chinese

West African slaves were mostly sent to the New World, where buyers strongly preferred men capable of performing backbreaking tasks on plantations.

University of Hong Kong, respectively. West African slaves were mostly sent to the New World, where buyers strongly preferred men capable of performing backbreaking tasks on plantations. By contrast, buyers in slave trades centered on the Indian Ocean and Red Sea were often looking for women who could work as domestic servants or concubines.

Record-keeping by European slave traders shows a consistent pattern, Dalton and Leung found: Between 1545 and 1864, 66.4 percent of slaves sent to North

America and the Caribbean from present-day Senegal and Gambia were men, as were 66.6 percent sent from Sierra Leone, 65.4 percent from the Gold Coast (now Ghana), and 65.4 percent from the Windward Coast (now Ivory Coast). Going a step further, Dalton and Leung looked at data on the slaves taken from specific ethnic groups and compared it with the percentage of women in those groups who today share husbands with other wives. (They controlled for factors such as education level and religion.) The researchers

found that groups hit heavily by trans-Atlantic slavery were significantly more likely to have a high percentage of polygynous marriages.

Certainly, polygyny may have existed before the slave trade began. But this study suggests that slavery encouraged the practice by ensuring that there were fewer men available to be husbands to West African women.

Scholars are still sorting out the myriad ways in which slavery has affected Africa: how it influenced economics, trust levels among groups, and the continent's balance of power. That its impact extends to marriage shouldn't come as a surprise, Dalton says. It's merely a reminder of how deeply slavery scarred every layer of African life.

Illustration by Elias Stein for FP