

Khadi Fall

ON POLYGAMY

They say nothing good of the way we lived
before they landed on our coasts,
but of all that they discovered in us,
the worst by far was polygamy.

In some African traditions, a man was allowed two or three wives:
the first, a young virgin, perhaps;
after that a divorcée, or maybe
a widow with children.

When Islam came to Africa—
when Arab merchants carried Islam to the African merchants—
this number jumped to four.

If you see more than four wives, in many places this means
the traditional African religions are no longer fostered
or that Islam has no footing.

When they pity women in polygamous marriages
their pity cannot come from jealousy
they witness among co-wives.

If a woman does complain of jealousy
I hear in her words the influence of so-called civilization,
civilization brought by the *tubaabs* through Christianity
civilization taught in colonial schools.
The reason African women accept polygamy is:
Traditionally women would not like their husbands near them all
the time.
Women need to be by themselves sometimes,
in a place where no man should be allowed.

Women need to be on their own, to stay only with themselves,
so that they may let their bodies and their minds live free,
free from caring for husband, free from caring for children.
Since too many special occasions with the husband
can lead to needless tension.

Sometimes when a husband goes for too long without marrying a second wife
the first wife goes out and finds another wife for him.

You must understand the situation is affected
by our traditional taboos and Islamic prohibitions,
which forbid a married man to have relations
with women he hasn't married.

The reason African women accept polygamy is:
Tradition teaches people across Africa
that no woman can own her husband
and no husband can own his wife.
Tradition teaches that you belong only to the one
who has created you. That your responsibility is
only to endeavor to make life easy for the other.

In many parts of Africa, people say that
the women prone to jealousy do not like themselves enough
and that they are not strong enough on their own.

Which is why women in many traditions used to say:
Men are often polygamous—they need us a lot.
But we don't need them a lot.
They know why they need us a lot,
but we don't see why we should need a lot of them,
because even a single one of them
can be too much for us sometimes.