

# Polygamy and multiculturalism the French way

Tired? Run-down? Need a vacation? How about romantic Africa, where a man can raise a first and have as many wives as he likes? And how about topping off our romantic, multicultural voyage with a short stay in Paris for the latest in social engineering, showing the benefits a modern European welfare state can shower on its polygamous African immigrants?

With fresh, shapely 14-year-old girls, unspoiled, straight out of the bush, going for the modest bride-purchase price of \$69, what was wrong with a Paris taxi driver from Senegal treating himself to two wives? Three wives? Not for the vulgar, physical pleasure of consorting with women, you understand, but as an investment. Because in Paris, polygamy's a growth stock.

As things stand, with France having decided respectfully that an immigrant from one of its former African colonies should be able to continue his ancestral cultural tradition of polygamy — and

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that all his children should benefit from the advantages of France's welfare state — a house overflowing with wives and children is about the best investment a Franco-African taxi driver could possibly make. The poor, illiterate, non-French-speaking wives are little better than slaves, mind you, and hate their



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fellow co-wives, and have a tendency to poison each other with magic philters, but what investment doesn't have its risks? Nowadays thousands of polygamous African families are in low-cost public housing in Paris's slummy suburbs. Invisible to tourists, they're a strain on traditional French tolerance and loyalty to their ex-colonials and are attracting mounting criticism from France's taxpayers, who last March produced the biggest conservative landslide in democratic history.

Unhonored, I was a premature anti-

sexist and am an old-style defender of women. For years I tried to tell people here that Africans practiced on young girls what is now called "genital mutilation" — which, since novelist Alice Walker took up the cause, has only recently become a respectable subject. For years I was simply not believed when I told American women — complaining at their lot and dreaming of "freedom" in other societies — that if they were Africans they'd probably have had amputated in childhood certain very sensitive parts of their bodies. When I wrote this for publication it was regularly censored as "disgusting." Thus does prudery protect romantic ignorance.

But looked at from the right angle, polygamy is kind of a fun thing, implying absence of bourgeois restraints, joyful sensual license, a certain community of women among the co-wives. That is, it's a fun thing if you don't know anything about it. In actual fact, it usually accords women a pitiable social standing barely distinguishable from slavery.

First: romantic Africa, with bare-breasted women all over the place, laughing and dandling babies. This surely must be Arcadia. But of the for-

mer French West African colonies, only the Ivory Coast has banned polygamy. In all the others any man, to win respect, must have several wives. He can pick up used women like widows real cheap, of course, but even top-of-the-line 14-year-olds used to come for well under \$100. So, with two wives, let's say a young man of substance emigrates to France and starts driving a taxi in Paris.

The French muddled over the morality of the thing for quite a while. It was surely all right for Africans to practice polygamy in Africa. But in France? Then, under the spell of multiculturalism, the French modestly asked: Who were they to say monogamy was better than polygamy? And in 1980 the *conseil d'état*, ruling on the Montcho case, decreed that any African or Franco-African with dual nationality could have as many wives as he liked. Even more important was the decree authorizing for polygamous families the full benefits of France's welfare state.

Take your "classic" Franco-African family: one man, two wives, 10 babies. The wives' duty is to keep popping out babies, and you'll see why. The man's

yearly salary as a Paris taxi driver: \$10,000. His state *allocation familiale* (family allotment): \$15,000. Other social services: \$8,000. One of his wives works as a cleaning woman: \$3,000. This Franco-African taxi driver has a tidy little yearly income of \$36,000, of which over

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60 percent comes from the state for this baby factory he's operating.

Africans say: "A man earns his wives by the sweat of his first wives' brow." And soon our taxi driver orders another wife from a mail-order house, and when she comes he marries her at the nearest consulate and immediate-

ly puts her into production. Then he orders a fourth wife, with his income increasing steadily with each plant expansion.

Every dynamic innovation introduces economic dislocation, of course, and the price of unspoiled 14-year-olds back in Africa has gone through the roof. They're now regularly sold at auction off, and they go for as much as \$7,000 — which is really outrageous. Why, you could buy a good used automobile for that. On the other hand you'll get your money back in six months with the *allocation familiale*. And for those back in Senegal pumping out these young females for whatever the market will bear, it's a real bonanza. In Africa many fathers of worthless, spindly, little girls think they've suddenly hit the Comstock Lode.

Naturally the well-intentioned people who set up France's welfare state in the late 1940s had in mind no such African bride auctions or Franco-African baby factories. But when you take to social engineering, and under-rate people's response to economic incentives, you never quite know what you're in for, do you?