

Polygamy In Senegal*

A Holistic View Of Polygamy In Senegal During the 1980's

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Abstract

Mariama Ba has captured the woman's perspective on polygamy through her semi-autobiographical novel, *So Long a Letter* which was first published in French 1980. The DHS Final Report Senegal was released in 1986 and published in French. The goal is to draw on the quantitative data (from the DHS Senegal) and qualitative data (from Ba's novel) to give the reader a better understanding of polygamy in Senegal during the 1980s.

Keywords: Polygamy, Senegal, Fiction, DHS, Translation

1 Introduction

Senegal is a country full of rich culture, deeply rooted in faith and filled with literary giants like Mariama Ba, Ousmane Sembene and Leopold Senghor. With the use of descriptive statistics (qualitative and quantitative data). I argue that a compelling narrative here is not solely qualitative or quantitative. I try to balance the two parts of descriptive statistics by looking at Polygamy in Senegal during the 1980s. This report aims to link the story, *So Long a Letter* about the main character, Ramatoulaye, and her attitude experience with Polygamy. Then to compare the ideas touched on the many letters Ramatoulaye writes to her friend Aissatou with the data from the Senegal DHS report from 1986 and possibly give some context to why the author of the book was writing about Polygamy the way she does.

From my reading of the novel, I had picked up that the union of Polygamy stems from both religion and culture. Religion because Ramatoulaye and many of the characters within the book practice Islam, they often recite the Qur'an, the main character's husband, Modou Fall, had asked the Imam to officiate the wedding. In the novel itself, Ramatoulaye questions her religion and opposes what she must do, like remarrying her younger brother-in-law, who had another wife. Culturally, Polygamy is practiced within the book by the characters' husbands (Tamir, Daouda, Mawdo, and Modou) seeking other wives; there was no mention of a woman seeing multiple husbands.

I had chosen the DHS final report from Senegal 1986 because of how close (time-wise) the two significant artifacts for this report are. The book was written and published in French in 1979, but the English translation came out in 1981. Polygamy statistics were collected by DHS's final report data in 1986. Still, within the data, I noticed a row within one of the polygamy tables provided in the final report that draws on the ESF (Senegal Fertility Survey) conducted in 1978 (Ndiaye, Sarr, and Ayad 1988). When researching this topic, I found no other sources comparing fiction with a report that had done this type of work before. Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter* is a semi-autobiographical novel on Polygamy. She voices the main character's concern with Polygamy and how it has ruined her relationship with her husband. From the novel biography of the author Mariama Ba within the novel it mentions that she is: "A pioneer of women's rights, she became

* Code and data are available at: <https://github.com/bosconic/SoLongPolygamy>

involved in several Senegalese women's organizations. Her commitment to eradicating inequalities between men and women in Africa let her write *So Long a Letter*" (Ba 1989).

Also, from the biography: "A schoolteacher and inspector by profession, Ba promoted the crucial role of the writer in a developing country. She believed that the 'sacred mission' of the writer was to strike out 'at the archaic practices, traditions and customs that are not a real part of our precious cultural heritage'"(Ba 1989). I mention this last quote because Ramatoulaye is also a schoolteacher whose goal is to be the best example for her kids and teach about her culture.

This report would not have been able to have been produced if it was not for the statistical programming language "R" (R Core Team 2021). In addition, a unique tool that has helped me convert the pdf images into the text to grab polygamy data was thanks to "magicK"(Ooms 2021).

One final note I should mention for the DHS final report, it was written in French. So I had many options to go about translating the document. Still, given the time and financial restraints, I had opted to translate the text after it was extracted using the "magicK" package to translate the text using the built-in translator in Microsoft Azure. So the level of understanding of the documents I engage with throughout our translations and not the original text could cause some minor issues with comprehension. Still, I feel it was a reasonable trade-off.

2 Data

- Again thank R again
- DHS asks just three questions to get a sense of Polygamy within the country
- pitfalls can be my French, my reliance on translator
- The Data sources Microsoft Azure Translate, SenegaDHS1986 and Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter*
- Got to give thanks to the almighty and most powerful R, the tidyverse, tidyverse packages for being the pillars for which this research is built upon
- Generate a pointblank (Using <https://rich-iannone.github.io/pointblank/>)
- possibly generate r package for polygamy data?
- "It is important to understand what the variables look like by including graphs, and possibly tables, of all observations, along with discussion of those graphs and the other features of these data." From Rubric
- "Journey of the stats not the destination" From Rubric

3 Results

- need to produce data in order to talk about this
- Polygamy is prominent in Senegal
- Many ways to look at polygamy among different demographics (which both chart and polygamy blurb mention)
- Is there a trend to follows polygamy?
- "There should also be text associated with all these aspects. Show the reader the results by plotting them where possible. Talk about them. Explain them. That said, this section should strictly relay results." From Rubric
- "In addition to conveying a sense of the dataset of interest, the data section should include details of the methodology used by the DHS you used, and its key features, strengths, and weaknesses." From Rubric

4 Discussion

The text from the Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) was originally in French, I had first thought to use an API to translate French to English. Given the time and financial constraints, I decided to just use Microsoft Azure translator function and scrap the API. But it would be interesting to implement an API to translate Senegalese survey data from a more recent year to see if the polygamy trends continue. Another possible stream with this kind of work is to see the male perspective on polygamy through Ousmane Sembene's works like *Xala*.

- Why people practice polygamy? -positives to polygamy -possible negatives
- Religion in Senegal (Predominately Muslim population)
- How are women viewed in Senegal during 1980's.
- Family and Marriage
- Polygamy, Polygyny and Polyandry (Multiple papers make the distinctions between the three words)
- Connect So Long a Letter with DHS data present
- “What is done in this this paper?” From Rubric
- “What is something that we learn about the world?” From Rubric
- “What is another thing that we learn about the world?” From Rubric
- “What are some weaknesses of what was done?” From Rubric
- “What is left to learn or how should we proceed in the future?” From Rubric

4.1 First discussion point

4.2 Second discussion point

4.3 Third discussion point

4.4 Weaknesses and next steps

Appendix

Polygamie

La polygamie est une forme d'union très courante au Sénégal. Elle est entretenue grâce à un écart d'âge important (8 ans environ) entre les conjoints. Bien qu'à degré variable, toutes les couches sociales sont concernées par le phénomène.

Dans l'EDS, trois questions sont posées sur la polygamie. La première permet de savoir si la femme vit ou non dans un ménage polygame. Deux autres permettent de saisir le nombre d'épouses du mari (ou partenaire) actuel et le rang qu'occupe la femme dans le mariage actuel si celui-ci est polygamique.

Sur l'ensemble des femmes mariées, 46,5 pour cent sont en union polygame contre 48,5 pour cent en 1978 comme le montre le tableau 2.2. Pratiquement à tous les âges, la prévalence de la polygamie est moins importante qu'elle ne l'était dans l'ESF. Mais dans les deux enquêtes, la pratique de la polygamie reste à un niveau élevé; à plus de 30 ans, plus d'une femme sur deux est en union polygame. Naturellement, les pourcentages des unions polygames augmentent régulièrement avec l'âge, les hommes préférant prendre leur première épouse parmi les femmes jeunes.

La pratique de la polygamie, compte tenu de son soubassement culturel et socio-économique, est plus ou moins acceptée, par delà, plus ou moins courante selon la catégorie sociale.

Ainsi, l'urbanisation et l'éducation apparaissent comme des facteurs très discriminants de différenciation. Dans l'ensemble, la polygamie est plus répandue en milieu rural (49,0 pour cent) qu'en milieu urbain (41,4 pour cent). La même situation prévaut à tous les âges. L'éducation est, elle aussi, un facteur très défavorable à la polygamie. Les femmes n'ayant jamais été à l'école sont à 48,7 pour cent dans des unions polygames, tandis que celles qui ont été à l'école le sont à 36,4 pour cent pour le niveau primaire et 26,8 pour cent pour le niveau secondaire ou plus. Chez les femmes ne sachant pas lire, 48,6 pour cent sont en union polygame contre 30,8 pour cent des femmes qui savent lire. Les résultats déjà révélés par l'ESF se confirment: les femmes jeunes, urbanisées et/ou éduquées sont moins intéressées par la polygamie. Les aspirations sociales et économiques des générations modernes (bien-être des membres de la famille, scolarisation, coût de la vie, problèmes d'héritage ...) expliquent probablement l'essentiel du recul de cette pratique.

Figure 1: page 15 of polygamy text part 1 DHS Senegal 1986 Ndiaye, Sarr, and Ayad (1988)

A Additional details

dans ces groupes. Mais de façon générale, la baisse évoquée plus haut par rapport à l'ESF se retrouve dans les sous-groupes, en particulier de façon très prononcée en milieu urbain (45,7 pour cent dans l'ESF contre 41,4 dans l'EDS) et chez les alphabétisées (37,0 et 30,8 pour cent respectivement dans l'ESF et l'EDS) (ESF, 1978, Vol. 5: 81).

Au niveau ethnique, les principaux groupes se classent ainsi: Wolof (50,1 pour cent de polygames), Mandingue (48,8 pour cent), Pouular (44,8 pour cent), Diola (44,2 pour cent) et Sérer (38,0 pour cent). L'analyse des données selon l'âge révèle certaines particularités. En effet, avant 25 ans, les Pouulars semblent les plus nombreuses à adhérer à la polygamie tandis que les Wolofs ne dominent qu'après cet âge. Par ailleurs, alors que chez les Wolofs, la prévalence de la polygamie augmente régulièrement avec l'âge, chez les Pouulars, on observe une chute drastique à partir de 40 ans. Il est possible que les Pouulars mariées plus jeunes et ayant une plus grande mobilité conjugale, pratiquent davantage ce qu'on convient d'appeler "polygamie de jeunesse" et qu'aux âges avancés, elles restent plus que les autres en situation de rupture d'union.

Les différences inter-régionales sont assez significatives. Au niveau global, le Sud a le pourcentage le plus élevé (51,7 pour cent). Il est suivi par l'Ouest et le Centre (49,0 pour cent chacun) et le Nord-Est (47,0 pour cent).

Figure 2: page 17 of polygamy text part 2 DHS Senegal 1986 Ndiaye, Sarr, and Ayad (1988)

TABLEAU 2.2 POURCENTAGE DES FEMMES ACTUELLEMENT EN UNION QUI SONT EN UNION POLYGAME SELON L'ÂGE ACTUEL ET LES VARIABLES SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIQUES

Variables socio-démographiques	Âge actuel de la femme							Total
	15-19	20-24	25-29	30-34	35-39	40-44	45-49	
Milieu								
Urbain	23,8	25,2	31,3	49,6	60,9	54,2	55,0	41,4
Rural	27,7	36,8	45,7	60,3	65,2	62,1	64,9	49,0
Région								
Ouest	23,5	29,6	30,3	48,7	57,4	54,3	55,3	49,0
Centre	21,4	30,0	46,6	65,3	66,7	67,6	72,3	49,0
Nord-Est	32,0	34,3	51,0	50,0	66,7	57,4	52,5	47,0
Sud	39,7	48,4	41,6	59,0	68,3	53,5	58,5	51,7
Ethnie								
Wolof	28,6	27,5	43,3	60,4	69,4	68,3	80,2	50,1
Pouular	29,1	36,6	41,9	56,9	63,5	52,5	51,5	44,8
Sérer	14,3	25,0	30,4	49,0	50,0	56,0	52,6	38,0
Mandingue	24,1	35,5	47,5	58,3	74,1	*	*	48,8
Diola	*	57,1	33,3	44,4	52,2	*	*	44,2
Autres	29,8	50,0	45,8	51,0	59,1	71,0	50,0	49,1
Instruction								
Aucune	27,7	34,4	44,1	59,9	65,6	59,9	62,5	48,7
Primaire	12,5	29,2	31,4	47,9	52,9	*	*	36,4
Secondaire +	*	22,2	12,8	26,7	45,5	*	*	26,8
Alphabétisation								
Ne sait pas lire	27,7	34,8	43,9	60,1	65,8	59,7	62,6	48,6
Sait lire	13,0	22,7	23,1	35,6	48,1	*	*	30,8
Total	27,1	33,2	40,9	56,0	63,7	59,7	62,0	46,5
ESF, 1978**	30,6	35,5	46,5	57,7	56,5	65,5	64,8	48,5

*Moins de 20 femmes

**Enquête Sénégalaise sur la Fécondité, 1978, Vol. I, p. 79, Direction de la Statistique, Division des Enquêtes et de la Démographie, Dakar, juillet 1981.

Figure 3: page 16 of polygamy table DHS Senegal 1986 Ndiaye, Sarr, and Ayad (1988)

I

Dear Aissatou,

I have received your letter. By way of reply, I am beginning this diary, my prop in my distress. Our long association has taught me that confiding in others allays pain.

Your presence in my life is by no means fortuitous. Our grandmothers in their compounds were separated by a fence and would exchange messages daily. Our mothers used to argue over who would look after our uncles and aunts. As for us, we wore out wrappers and sandals on the same stony road to the koranic school; we buried our milk teeth in the same holes and begged our fairy godmothers to restore them to us, more splendid than before.

If over the years, and passing through the realities of life, dreams die, I still keep intact my memories, the salt of remembrance.

I conjure you up. The past is reborn, along with its procession of emotions. I close my eyes. Ebb and tide of feeling: heat and dazzlement, the woodfires, the sharp green mango, bitten into in turns, a delicacy in our greedy mouths. I close my eyes. Ebb and tide of images: drops of sweat beading your mother's ochre-coloured face as she emerges from the kitchen; the procession of young wet girls chattering on their way back from the springs.

We walked the same paths from adolescence to maturity, where the past begets the present.

My friend, my friend, my friend. I call on you three times.*

Yesterday you were divorced. Today I am a widow.

* Notes are to be found on p.90.

Cher frère blanc,
Quand je suis né, j'étais noir,
Quand j'ai grandi, j'étais noir,
Quand je suis au soleil, je suis noir,
Quand je suis malade, je suis noir,
Quand je mourrai, je serai noir.

Tandis que toi, homme blanc,
Quand tu es né, tu étais rose,
Quand tu as grandi, tu étais blanc,
Quand tu vas au soleil, tu es rouge,
Quand tu as froid, tu es bleu,
Quand tu as peur, tu es vert,
Quand tu es malade, tu es jaune,
Quand tu mourras, tu seras gris.

Alors, de nous deux,
Qui est l'homme de couleur ?

Léopold Sédar Senghor

Figure 5: Leopold Senghor's Poem Cher Frère Blanc "R/Francophonie - " Poème à Mon Frère Blanc " - Léopold Sédar Senghor" (n.d.)

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