

Tropes of Assimilation in Ndabaningi Sithole's *The Polygamist* (1972)

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Abstract

For many decades, polygamy as a deeply ingrained social phenomenon in much of Africa, has gained the attention of writers in several genres. Among the authors who have foregrounded it have been indigenous African literary artists and Christian clergymen as well as foreign missionaries. The Zimbabwean Methodist minister and African nationalist Ndabaningi Sithole focused on this theme in his novel *The Polygamist*, which was written while he was incarcerated during the rule of Ian Smith. The critical treatment of polygamy, especially among the country's Ndebele, is considered in terms of Sithole's Christianity and his attitudes towards cultural assimilation and modernisation. Comparisons with the views expressed by the Swedish missionary Gunnar Helander in his book of 1948, *Must We Introduce Monogamy?* are also drawn.

Keywords: Ndabaningi Sithole, *The Polygamist*, Gunnar Helander, polygamy, Ndebele, *lobolo*

For decades, polygamy has been a recurrent theme in African literature, both fictional and nonfictional. Several novels, for example, have appeared with titles bearing the word 'polygamist', among the most recent Sue Nyathi's Zimbabwean *The Polygamist* (2012). Much of the fascination with this topic has been in the minds of European-descended writers, but it was repeatedly foregrounded in the surge of indigenous writing that accompanied decolonisation in the 1960s and 1970s. Among the African *littérateurs* who pointed

their pens at the much-disputed practice of plural marriage was the young Rhodesian teacher, pastor, and political activist Ndabaningi Sithole (1920-2000). Written while he was incarcerated in the early 1970s, his *The Polygamist* reflected his commitment both to the preservation of indigenous cultural traditions during an era of rapid political and social change and an ideal of monogamous marriage. Initially published in 1972 by the now defunct Third Press in New York, it was re-issued by Hodder & Stoughton in London the following year. While much has been written about Sithole's brief moment in the sun of Rhodesian/Zimbabwean politics, his efforts as a novelist have almost completely escaped scholarly attention. One modest exception to this neglect was published in the Zimbabwean journal *Zambezia* four decades ago (Day 1979).

The present article will take steps towards addressing this neglected dimension in Anglophone African literature. It will consider pivotal themes in *The Polygamist*, especially the practice of plural marriage, and relate them to their historical context, especially with regard to the impact of European civilisation and folkways on Ndebele culture in southern Rhodesia. As an analytical tool for linking Sithole's novel contextually to a noteworthy nineteenth-century Christian defence of polygamy and one twentieth-century critique of missionaries' insistence on monogamy, we shall consider first John Colenso's relatively well known argument and subsequently Gunnar Helander's *Must We Introduce Monogamy?*, which had been published in South Africa in 1958, *i.e.* shortly before Sithole's *African Nationalism* was issued. It should be underscored that in this insightful if artistically limited work, polygamy serves as a synecdoche for traditional African customs in general, especially in their confrontation with European or colonialist ways and mores. The principal protagonist, Menzi Dube, has seven wives, and Sithole devotes much space to exploring their enmeshed lives, paying especial attention to psychological problems stemming from this sort of conjugal arrangement. However, Dube also serves explicitly as a paragon of a strongly traditionalist stance *vis-à-vis* the intrusion of European civilisation.

In the history of southern Africa, Sithole is undoubtedly less well remembered as a man of letters than for his relatively prominent role in the turbulent years after Rhodesia's Unilateral Declaration of Independence from the British Empire in 1965, a proclamation which ushered in a protracted paroxysm of violence culminating in the victory of Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe African National Union-Popular Front and the

constituting of Zimbabwe in 1980. A part-Ndabele who began his career as a teacher and lay preacher, he received further education in Rhodesia before being sent to Andover Newton Theological School in the United States of America for a three-year stint which ended in 1958. This coincided with a seminal early stage of the civil rights movement when Martin Luther King, Jr and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference first gained national prominence because of their successful boycott of the buses in Montgomery, Alabama. Ordained a pastor shortly after the completion of his studies, Sithole returned to Rhodesia and served briefly in the ministry. He also became one of that colony's many outspoken anti-colonialists. His *African Nationalism* was published by Cambridge University Press in 1959 but almost immediately banned, a move which further motivated Sithole's interest in politics. He was the principal architect and first president of the Zimbabwe African National Union which included Mugabe and others. The newly installed government of Ian Smith banned the ZANU in 1964, however, and detained Sithole. He was subsequently imprisoned in 1969 and spent the next five years in jail. By the time of his release, he had fallen foul of Mugabe, and the ZANU was undergoing a rift, partly along tribal lines. The Mugabe faction championed militant action; Sithole reversed his earlier commitment to armed revolt and favoured peaceful negotiation. As the former gained the upper hand in the Rhodesian Bush War, Sithole, along with fellow Methodist minister Abel Muzorewa, cut a short-lived deal with the Smith government, but this ended in 1980 with the election of Mugabe as prime minister (and later president) of the new nation.

At the time of his death, Sithole was remembered for his ability to communicate effectively through both the spoken and the written word. According to one typical obituary, 'His oratory, coached in the Methodist pulpits of the United States, ignited vast crowds of black people in his country's poor townships with his war cry, 'We are our own liberators''. The same journalist noted that *African Nationalism* had become 'the bible of young blacks emerging into radical political consciousness' (*Cape Times* 2000). For understanding the thematic thrust of *The Polygamist*, however, it is particularly important to bear in mind that Sithole was not allergic to what is sometimes called 'cultural imperialism', *i.e.* the encroachment of various folkways of the hegemonic power into the life of African ethnic groups. As a teacher, he was committed to education purveyed chiefly along European lines. As a theologically trained Christian, he did not believe in a plurality of

tribal deities or the efficacy of ancestral spirits. As a minister of the Gospel (though his service in that calling was brief), he accepted monogamy as the divinely appointed norm for married life. All of these convictions shaped his rhetorical strategy in *The Polygamist*.

John Colenso's Antecedent Case for Defending Polygamy

Occasionally in the nineteenth century and first several decades of the twentieth, missionaries in southern Africa argued that plural marriages were not necessarily incompatible with the Christian faith. Among the first and most prominent was John Colenso (1814-1883), the controversial Anglican missionary bishop of Natal. In the history of the region, Colenso stands out as a Victorian whose general respect for and defence of Zulu culture challenged settlers' attitudes and whose participation in international Biblical scholarship rocked the boat of ecclesiastical stability. This Cornishman and Cantabrigian was consecrated to a missionary bishopric in the new colony of Natal in 1853. Residing in Pietermaritzburg, Colenso gained widespread British attention in 1861 with the publication of his commentary on Paul's epistle to the Romans, in which he argued for universal salvation, a position which many other Anglican theologians rejected. A year later Colenso published the initial volume of *The Pentateuch and Book of Joshua Critically Examined*, arguing that much in them was unhistorical. Bishop Robert Gray summoned him to an ecclesiastical trial in Cape Town, where Colenso was found guilty of heresy removed from his bishopric¹.

The controversial Colenso returned temporarily to the United Kingdom in 1865 and delivered a lecture to the Anthropological Society of London titled 'On the Efforts of Missionaries among Savages'. He challenged the general indictment of plural marriages which was a hindrance to church membership. Colenso asserted that 'the course which the great body of missionaries have taken on the question of polygamy is a very serious impediment to the progress of our work'. He lamented that among Anglicans 'many' had 'laid down the law, that every convert admitted into

¹ The most complete interpretation of the Colenso affair and its significance in South African church history remains Jeff Guy, *The Heretic: A Study of the Life of John William Colenso 1814 – 1883*. Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press (1983). See also Peter Hinchliff, *John William Colenso: Bishop of Natal*. Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd (1964).

the Christian Church shall put away all his wives but one, if he had more than one, before baptism'. Colenso understood that a moral and ecclesiastical dilemma was inevitable, but he denied that it was insoluble. 'It would be reasonable', he remarked of his fellow missionaries, 'if they said: 'You need not be baptised at all; you may be good men without being formally received into the Church, as there have been good men of old who were never baptised, and who had more wives than one, yet lived faithful lives''. Colenso found justification for this in the Old Testament and believed it should be shared with the Zulus: 'It is written in the Bible of the polygamist Abraham, from the mouth of Jehovah himself, 'I know him that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of Jehovah to do justice and judgment;' and you, with your many wives, must try to do the same'. However, Colenso thought it necessary also to state to any such prospective member of the church that 'you cannot take more; but you must not be false to those you have already taken, and to the obligations you have already contracted lawfully, according to your native customs' (Colenso 1865: cclxxiv-cclxxv).

Continued Opposition to Polygamy

Colenso's tolerant position by no means foreshadowed a noteworthy change in Christian missionary attitudes in Africa or elsewhere. In 1920, for example, meeting at one of their periodic Lambeth conferences in London, Anglicans they rejected it. The hostility remained strong in other denominations, as well. For instance, in 1926 the International Missionary Council, a multid denominational Protestant organisation, arranged a major conference at Le Zoute in the Belgian Congo which attracted more than 200 delegates from a wide range of churches in sub-Saharan Africa and Madagascar. Many of the churchmen in attendance, including a considerable number of Africans, pleaded for greater respect for traditional African practices. Some of the Europeans agreed. P.O. Hennig, a former Moravian missionary then serving in Germany, proposed that the Council take an inclusive position stance with regard to marriage. He asked that the conference adopt this resolution:

Granted that polygamy is a heathen abuse of the divine order of things, we nevertheless maintain that the Christian Mission has no

right to treat as illegal conjugal unions contracted by heathen according to the legal standards of their people. We further hold that the Christian Mission has no right to refuse to such, if they believe in Christ, the sacrament of baptism and with it the right of entrance into the Christian Church.

However, following vigorous discussion, the delegates voted to reject the proposal. They declared: 'The Conference is convinced that Christian Society must be built on Christian family life and that the ideal of the Christian family can only be realized in monogamy' (Smith 1926: 52).

Helander's Study, *Must We Introduce Monogamy?*

It was against this deeply entrenched tradition of hostility that in 1958 the reputable publishing house Shuter & Shooter of Pietermaritzburg issued a brief study by Gunnar Helander (1915-2006), *Must We Introduce Monogamy?* A former Swedish Lutheran missionary among the Zulus both in Natal and on the Witwatersrand, he had returned to Sweden in 1956 after serving in South Africa since 1938. Helander methodically spelled out the problem which polygamy was posing for the propagation of the Gospel and sought to present objectively his case for allowing converts to Christianity to become members of churches without becoming monogamists by divorcing all but one of their wives.

On the one hand, Helander noted that 'missionaries in South Africa and elsewhere have practically always presumed that monogamy is a necessary consequence of Christianity'. On the other, Helander generalised that 'in the African Native community in which they have to work, polygyny was always accepted as a legal form of marriage'. This duality and the dilemma it posed seemed particularly vexing because it had 'obstructed the way for many a heathen into the Christian Church, or caused broken African homes and untold suffering for the discarded wives'. Helander, increasingly sensitive to indigenous viewpoints on various matters, sympathised with the perplexity of such converts and prospective members of the church because 'convincing biblical or other reasons for the necessity of monogamy have seldom been given them; they simply have had to take the missionaries' word for it'. He therefore structured much of his book as a response to two questions: '(1) Is monogamy the only permissible form of marriage for a Chris-

tian? (2) If the answer to that question is yes, are then the methods used by the missions to introduce monogamy the right ones?' (Helander 1958:7-8).

Drawing on his experience with the tribe he knew best, Helander noted that quantitatively polygamy was not a particularly common phenomenon because large numbers of Zulu men could not afford to pay the *lobolo*, or bride-price for even one wife. He also asserted that in taking a second wife, a Zulu man did 'not do so just for carnal desires or undisciplined male lust'. He further explained that in contrast to what many opponents of polygamy assume, the first wife sometimes takes the first step towards establishing a polygynous marriage. 'It often starts thus: he [*i.e.* the sole husband] has been married to his first wife for several years and she has now children to look after. She might even herself ask him to get another wife to help her in the household, if he possibly can afford one'. Helander conceded, however, that in many cases the husband took the initiative without consulting his first wife. In such instances, he declared, the man merely brought home another spouse. 'There will perhaps be jealousy, but less so than one would think', he explained. 'One sees many polygamous African homes where life appears to be contented and harmonious'. It was the existence of this traditionally accepted phenomenon alongside conventional ecclesiastical practice, Helander reasoned, that made monogamy as a prerequisite to church membership problematical: 'The question is: is this arrangement, nevertheless, to be condemned and broken up because it is in conflict with Christian principles? Things might have the appearance of being sound, practical and acceptable, but may still represent an inferior ideal, [and] be rejectable in the light of a higher morality'. Yet he did not postulate that European ecclesiastical practice could be equated with such 'morality'. Helander thought the question first had to be not only posed but also answered: 'Does Christianity in this case give us such a higher ideal, a monogamic principle to be enforced?' (Helander 1958: 11-12).

In the final chapter, Helander briefly delineated his own position on the matter. The 'only conclusion' he could reach, he stressed in italics, was as follows: '*Monogamy is preferable but not absolutely necessary. We can therefore work for its introduction without fanaticism, without resorting to cruel measures and without breaking up existing polygamic homes*'. (Helander 1958: 53). Anticipating criticism of this position, he insisted that it would not be catastrophic for the mission church to have some polygamists in its membership and that in South Africa the enforcement of civil law

would place a low ceiling on the number of polygamous marriages contracted. Helander also reiterated his conviction that the existing missionary practice of insisting that converts with more than one wife divorce their plural spouses was contrary to Biblical prescription as found in Mark 10.

Plot Summary and Literary Attributes

The plot of *The Polygamist* is perhaps among the most economical in the entire corpus of postcolonial African fiction. Spanning fewer than 180 pages and divided into fourteen chapters, Sithole's first novel is told by a conventional non-quite-omniscient narrator. The narrative is generally linear as it traces the lives of Menzi Dube, the head of an Ndebele village in southern Rhodesia, various friends and relatives, and other individuals. Dube has no fewer than seven wives, for each of whom he has paid *lobolo* of between four and seven cows. The story unfolds at some point in the twentieth century, but the text contains few clues to identify the time frame more precisely. The narrator states that Dube's father fell in the Matabele Rebellion of 1896, suggesting that the present story might be set in the 1930s or 1940s. The city of Bulawayo appears to be fairly well developed; there is a railway, and some people travel by bus. Possession of a bicycle is a status symbol among rural Africans. A rural shopkeeper teaches the protagonist's brother how to drive an automobile. Most of the characters in this rural gallery are neither Christian nor, apparently, monogamous, but they are aware that many of their ethnic fellows have converted to Christianity, and that religion has existed among them long enough to give some of the people in Dube's village the impression that it threatens their traditional way of life, though only because its propagators insist on monogamy. Monotheism is not mentioned. The foreign challenges also include the adoption of European clothing, especially by Ndebele women, and the proliferation of school-based education.

The early chapters relate the participation of Dube and other men in large beer parties which first the headman (and husband of twelve wives) of a neighbouring village and then Dube himself throw. Drinking sorghum beer, it seems, is a principal pastime and form of entertainment in their society. Dube's wives contribute to the merriment by brewing the beverage and joining in the endless banter when it is quaffed. There is discussion of plural

marriage, which Dube and the other men find natural and therefore beyond debate. On the other hand, some though not all of their wives privately express misgivings.

The idyll is interrupted, however, when the men must gather in a traditional village court. A polygamous man has returned his wife to her family of origin because she has allowed their young son to seduce her. The woman's excuse for willingly participating in this incestuous liaison is that her husband is too preoccupied with his other spouses to have intercourse with her on more than a monthly basis, and she simply needs more affection than he routinely gives her. The son confesses his misdeeds and suffers whipping as a punishment. His mother is not directly penalised but is shunned by other women when she is returned to her husband's village.

These events, which illuminate traditional Ndebele practices, serve as background for an extended segment of the plot which endures for the rest of *The Polygamist*. Dube's eldest son, Ndanda, has left home seven years earlier but not communicated with his parents. When he finally reappears in the village, he offers no credible excuse for failing to write to them, but he relates how he worked in Bulawayo for a few years, then attended night school there before proceeding to a mission school, where a sympathetic missionary had taken him under his wing and trained him to become a teacher. Ndanda has become a Christian, and he wears European clothing. Most significantly, he announces his intention to wed a nineteen-year-old Christian girl named Jessie.

Ndanda's parents rejoice in his engagement, but they, especially his father, questions his prudence in accepting a religion which staunchly opposes polygamy. By doing so, Dube believes, it violates a law of nature. At the same time, he accepts his eldest son's sartorial transformation but chooses to continue to wear traditional garb. His wives, however, have already made the transition to dresses which they purchase at a store in their 'location'.

The chink in Dube's traditionalist armour appears when Ndanda returns to the village some months later with a green Humber bicycle as a gift to his father. Appealing to his inflated ego, the younger man assures him that important black people in Bulawayo ride bicycles and suggests that his father should do likewise as the headman of the village. Dube concurs and learns to ride, a process which necessitates a change from wearing 'kilts' to trousers or shorts. Not long thereafter, Dube believes that a man of his status

and wealth should be transported by automobile, and he sends his younger brother to the school where Ndanda teaches in the hope of taking private driving lessons. Eventually Dube spends £500 for a car, of which he is immensely proud. In the meantime, he has also chosen to spend a considerable portion of his hoarded money by buying clothing, additional food, and housewares for his conjugal coterie.

Dube's efforts to persuade his son not to enter into a Christian, and therefore monogamous, marriage come to naught. Both Ndanda and his fiancée adamantly resist his efforts. On her part, Jessie defies her parents' insistence that Ndanda's family are not good enough for her because they are not in the Nguni wing of Ndebele tribe. Eventually the two families meet harmoniously in Jessie's village. *The Polygamist* ends with the elder Dube acknowledging that cultural change is inevitable and that he himself has undergone a profound transformation. But there is no indication that his path away from the ways of his ancestors will lead to acceptance of the Gospel and, concomitantly, to a rejection of polygamy.

The narrator frequently interrupts his recounting of village life to inform readers about Ndebele customs, a tell-tale indication that Sithole had chiefly readers from other ethnic backgrounds in mind when he wrote *The Polygamist*. We are told, for example, that the Ndebele 'greatly treasured human dignity' (Sithole 1973: 5), arrange their huts in a certain way within a village (Sithole 1973: 6), and avoid daytime sexual intercourse (Sithole 1973: 6). Moreover, members of the tribe observe a strict division of labour along gender lines (Sithole 1973: 21), brew six kinds of beer (Sithole 1973: 53), observe both monogamy and polygamy (Sithole 1973: 48) and, of particular significance to the pivotal theme of this novel, practise different ways of meeting the sexual desires of plural wives (Sithole 1973: 18).

The Multifaceted Case against Polygamy

Almost from cover to cover, Sithole embeds in his text arguments against polygamy, usually with little subtlety. One finds a general crescendo of voices against plural marriage and, in tandem with that, gradual acceptance of numerous colonialist practices and values, some of which mesh with those of the rural Ndebele while others challenge them.

At the outset, the authoritarian, beer-swilling Dube is described as a successful and contented man. His farm prospers on a modest scale; he has

more cattle than most of his fellows in the region, though not as many wives as at least one; his extensive family enjoys robust health; and he is on cordial terms with his neighbours in villages nearby. The spirits to whom Dube offers sacrifices appear to favour him. On the surface, his wives seem contented; at any rate they are said to be grateful to be married to 'a big man' whose generosity is manifested especially in his willingness to throw beer parties and even slaughter an ox occasionally, giving guests the luxury of meat to supplement their staple, predominantly carbohydrate diet.

Beneath this veneer of rustic tranquillity, however, not all is well on the domestic front. As Dube's wives brew beer for his party, hints emerge from the text that at times they comply with his wishes as a matter of practical necessity. Moreover, within the group there is a certain pecking order, with 'senior' wife Masibanda (the mother of the absent son Ndanda) at the top and the most recent spouse, the particularly attractive but childless Manyati, whom Dube married when in his mid-forties, at the bottom. This young beauty is 'a real thorn in the flesh' of the others. 'Her high bossom [*sic*] was particularly 'offensive' to the other wives' eyes, but a delight to Dube's', notes the narrator. 'They envied her youth and vitality' (Sithole 1973: 17). Within this ranking, there is considerable jockeying for positions on the ladder, not least through currying favour with their shared husband. The 'shrewd' Masibanda is determined not to be 'outmaneuvered' by any of the others or jeopardise her standing as what the narrator calls (perhaps tongue in cheek) 'Dube's chief executive officer' (Sithole 1973: 13).

At the same time, however, readers are assured that there is voluntary complicity in the system of polygamy; it is not merely imposed by men who hold the reins of social power. In what must strike many as a curiosity, Dube's fifth wife, for whom he paid a mere four heads of cattle, is named Masibanda, just like her elder sister, the senior wife who 'was only too happy to cooperate' in recruiting this sibling to the harem (Sithole: 1973: 17). This dovetails neatly with an argument in favour of tolerating polygamy which Helander made in *Must We Introduce Monogamy?*

The first extended critique of polygamy occurs not in Dube's village but in another, and it is triggered by gossip in the wake of the trial at which an incestuous and adulterous liaison is condemned. Notably, the opposition to plural marriage initially has nothing to do with religious principles; rather, it is based on the need for sexual gratification. Generally speaking, the residents of that second village condemn the wife who was unfaithful to her

husband and succumbed to her own son's inveigling. However, one woman believes there were mitigating circumstances: 'I fully sympathise with everyone [*sic*] of Matutu's wives because they are starved women', she explains to her husband. 'The same goes for all these women in polygamous families. You can't go on starving, starving, starving all your life. One day you are forced to steal when you can steal. This is only natural' (Sithole 1973: 46). He counters in jest that she is 'lucky' to have him all to herself, a quip which she answers determinedly, 'If you try to get a second one, I will tear her to pieces' (Sithole 1973: 46). Two pages later, we encounter the narrator's didactic intrusion about polygamy among the Ndebele. He emphasises that it is a matter of choice for both men and women. 'Most women preferred to marry men who had no other wives', he asserts (Sithole 1973: 48), but no reason for this alleged preference is stated.

The chapter about Dube's large beer party provides Sithole an opportunity to begin to explore the relationship of Christianity to polygamy. One of the male guests expostulates on the 'three kingdoms' which 'we' (presumably meaning Ndebele men in their traditional state) enjoy. The first, Ndaniso emphasises to the full agreement of his audience, is beer. The second is meat. Finally, he reveals after an appropriate pause to heighten the suspense, is 'woman'. 'Unless a man has a plentiful supply of beer, meat and women, he cannot claim to have a real kingdom', Ndaniso continues to the delight of the other drinkers. But their tripartite hedonistic realm is under threat: 'These churches have come to destroy all our kingdoms', he announces. 'This is why I don't like them. Anyone who joins them must promise never to smell beer. He must give up two of the kingdoms. The only kingdom they allow is meat'. Because of their hostility to beer and polygamy, Ndaniso concludes, 'There is no life in the church' (Sithole 1973: 60). Another guest concurs and declares that the only purpose the missionaries in the area have is 'to destroy our kingdoms'. In words which virtually cry out to be challenged as inane, he asks rhetorically, 'How can a man be a man without drinking beer? How can he be a real *indoda* [*i.e.* man] without many wives?' (Sithole 1973: 60).

This appears to be the consensus of opinion at Dube's party, but it is not a unanimously held one. An otherwise unidentified 'quiet voice' states that 'those who have joined these churches are much better off than most of us here' (Sithole 1973: 61). He adduces generalised evidence from a male perspective and argues on a purely materialistic basis: 'They have built themselves good and big houses. Their wives and children certainly look

much better than ours'. His conclusion ensues: 'If I had the opportunity I would certainly like to join these Christians' (Sithole 1973: 61). Nowhere, however, does he offer a criticism of polygamy.

But one wife of a polygamous guest at the party does precisely that. To this Magutshwa, monogamy lies at the heart of the missionaries' message. 'I like what the churches are preaching', she confesses, adding that all who become Christians must renounce polygamy. Magutshwa acknowledges that plural marriage is an Ndebele custom but insists that it is a 'bad one' which she hates (Sithole 1973: 66). When queried about the grounds for her animosity, she offers a lack of adequate sexual gratification as her reason but couches that euphemistically: of each of a hypothetical man's ten wives can 'see' him only once a month (Sithole 1973: 66). Her opinion is not isolated. Effectively echoing the ancient Roman proverb *in vino veritas*, the narrator relates that 'under the inebriating influence of liquor' the women at Dube's party ventilate their views quite freely. 'Many' admit regretting their willingness to marry polygamous men; 'some' envy those women who had migrated to cities where the choice of potential husbands was significantly greater and they 'would not be tied to the custom of polygamy'. Moreover, 'they envied the woman who had contracted a Christian marriage where the man had vowed to have and keep only her until death separated them' (Sithole 1973: 7f).

Dube's position remains unmoved, however, and the absurdity of his argument in favour of polygamy becomes part of Sithole's rhetorical strategy to illuminate the weakness of its attitudinal underpinnings. At least before Ndanda's marriage, he continues to believe that monogamy is 'a violation of the law of nature', and therefore it prevents the attainment of real happiness. Furthermore, Dube tells his brother that to prevent Ndanda from ruining himself, he must convince that son not to enter into a Christian marriage but rather 'to do as every respectable man does' (Sithole 1973: 161). When Ndanda next returns to the village on holiday, his father peppers him with arguments. His mind captive to the axiological hierarchy of his rural setting, he asks Ndanda whether a solitary wife could 'tend to the many cattle, sheep and goats that were part of the possession of a big man' like himself, apparently failing to understand that as a teacher his son had attained professional status quite apart from farming (Sithole 1973: 162). Dube suggests that by being on the verge of entering into a monogamous marriage, Ndanda has 'strayed from our tradition' (Sithole 1973: 163), conveniently ignoring the fact that by adopting European clothing for himself and

generously encouraging his wives to do likewise he himself has wandered far from the ways of his ancestors. Turning to zoological evidence for polygamy, Dube shows his son how his one bull has many cows, his ram numerous ewes, and among his chickens one cock mates with a large number of hens. To Ndanda, of course, these supposed analogies are risible and easily bowled over by explaining that the numerical balance has simply been upset by the slaughter of most of the males as part of the village's meat supply (Sithole 1973: 163-165).

The extent to which Ndanda has a conscious strategy to modernise his father is not explicitly stated in *The Polygamist*. What is clear, however, is that the younger man is an enthusiastic convert to a post-traditional lifestyle and has great faith in what he has acquired through education and exposure to Christianity. On his first visit to his father's village, he states that the missionary who trained him also imparted unforgettable words of inspiration: 'Anyone who's willing to work hard can always find his way in this world' (Sithole 1973: 114). This impresses the older man, as does his son's recounting of his travels, employment in Bulawayo, and education. 'You've seen more of the world than I have', he concedes (Sithole 1973: 116).

Strategically or otherwise, Ndanda's gift of a bicycle is the domino that leads to the falling of one after another of his father's bulwarks of resistance to change. Though keen on using it, he understands that pedalling the machine is difficult when wearing a 'kilt' and therefore sends another boy to a shop to purchase two pairs of shorts. This represents a noteworthy departure from his earlier conviction that his ancestral spirits would recognise him and not feel offended only so long as he bears traditional attire (Sithole 1973: 62-63). The convenience of riding a bicycle, together with the added prestige it gives him in and near his village, whet Dube's appetite for further participation in modern life. He insists that he should use an automobile, probably one purchased in Bulawayo, which in *The Polygamist* serves as the locus of modernity. His hostility to monogamy proves to be a harder nut to crack, but one gets the impression that it has been somewhat softened by his admiration for his son's progress in life and, perhaps, an unconscious awareness that some flexibility with regard to assimilating colonialist ways can prove beneficial. In the end, he and some of his other relatives travel to the village where the non-Christian parents of his future daughter-in-law live. The cordial and respectful welcome they receive (after those parents relent and accommodate their daughter's plan to marry a man

from a different branch of the Ndebele tribe) also appears to play a key role in this endorsement of Ndanda's monogamous, Christian marriage.

Sithole's Argument in Relation to Colenso and Helander

How does Sithole's opposition to polygamy relate to Colenso's and Helander's qualified toleration if not necessarily endorsement of it? The Anglican bishop had argued that the missionary practice of denying admission to polygamous men was 'was a very serious impediment to the progress of our work'. Sithole's portrayal of Dube and his rural comrades corroborates this perception. There is no indication in *The Polygamist* that these men are on the verge of abandoning the conjugal cornerstone of their culture. However, Sithole places their opposition to monogamy into the context of a growing openness to assimilate colonialist ways, and this at least allows for an eventual change of mind. But what is conspicuously absent from *The Polygamist* is any mention of whether in any cases men with multiple wives are permitted to become church members without, as individuals, becoming monogamous.

It is not known whether Sithole ever read Helander's *Must We Introduce Monogamy*, which was published in the year of his return from the USA. In any case, the argument of *The Polygamist* differs at key points from that of Helander's book but harmonises with it at others. The Swede had contended that polygamy was relatively rare among the Zulus, but in *The Polygamist* it is presented as the norm among rural Ndebele. Helander asserted that sometimes a first wife took the initiative in urging her husband to take a second one. In Dube's marriage, his senior spouse Masibanda willingly helps to bring her younger sister into the household, though it is not stated that this was on her own initiative. Helander believed that polygamy was not merely an expression of male carnal desire. Sithole appears to have agreed; in any case, in the case of Dube and his peers, egotism, social status, and unswerving devotion to tribal tradition are underlying factors.

The Polygamist brings crucial elements into the debate which neither Colenso nor Helander broached, particularly by paying particular attention to the attitudes of wives. They are by no means a passive, silent majority. Rather, jealousies and other forms of discord are common among them. Furthermore, Sithole develops the theme of unsatisfied sexual desire on the *wives'* part as a pillar of his argument against monogamy.

Conclusion

In both Western and African literature of the twentieth century, the bibliography of 'prison literature', *i.e.* works written during or about one's incarceration, is quite extensive. In Europe, it features such books as Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, whereas in African letters it encompasses texts by *inter alia* Herman Charles Bosman, Alex la Guma, Breyten Breytenbach, Hugh Lewin, and Dennis Brutus, to name but a few. In Kenya, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o added his mite. Sithole's first novel stands in a long and fascinating tradition. Much of the literature in that legacy has focused on political liberation, a topic to which Sithole was no stranger. *The Polygamist* deals with a different kind of freedom, namely that from the shackles of polygamy and, in a broader context, what its author perceived as unnecessary bondage to the cultural ways and thought patterns of the Ndebeles' ancestors. Sithole's maiden novel comes down strongly against polygamy without, notably, explicitly condemning its practitioners. Remarkably, this theologically educated writer did not explore the arguments which fellow Christians had offered in their assault on this venerable African institution.

In the end, one must wonder what the purpose of *The Polygamist* is. As indicated above, considerable internal evidence suggests that it was written for non-Ndebele readers, and to the extent that this novel, published initially in the New York and a year later in London, was for white people, on one level it seems like a case of preaching to the converted. After all, there is no reason to believe that an appreciable number of such readers held any brief for polygamy to begin with. Viewed more broadly, however, as a fictional exploration of the confrontation of conventional African folkways, including not only polygamy but also clothing, the status of women *vis-à-vis* men, means of transportation, and the attainment and maintenance of status in a traditional community, with inevitable forces of modernisation, *The Polygamist* shines as a lucid display of the appeal and almost inevitable victory of the latter. Issues pertaining to this are foregrounded so clearly as to lack nearly all subtlety. Readers might find Sithole's want of artistic flair disappointing and his psychological insights shallow, but they are left with an uncamouflaged image of how even die-hard traditionalists were won over to the ways of their colonial overlords.

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