

# MY PARTNER IN JEALOUSY

By A.S. Johnson (Mayanah HaSoferet)

## Abstract

The increased interest in mate sharing, specifically where a number of women share one man (polygyny), has led to an increase in counterfeit re-productions of the model that employs emotion-shaming as part of its re-imagining. The call to re-present polygyny to women, in the contemporary U.S., as a viable pairing strategy, has resulted in marketing female jealousy as a reaction alien to its authentic practice. Based on the existing work of anthropologists and relevant researchers in Africa and Asia, where polygyny has historical antecedents that are still observable, and collaborative biblical evidence, this project examines the presence of female jealousy in these un-narrated and un-coached spaces. The study presents contrasting expectations, regarding female response to mate-sharing, between societies that maintained this practice, and that sold to women in the U.S.; as well as provides insight into the representation of female jealousy as culturally normative. Because of negative stigmas that are often associated with female jealousy, this study explores different public expressions of jealousy, and rivalry; and questions of authenticity and propriety, by women in this paradigm. [Key words: authentic, bible, culture, emotion-shaming, jealousy, polygyny, women]

## Table of Contents

Abstract .....	1
Introduction .....	2
Section I: Definitions .....	4
<i>What is polygamy?</i> .....	5
<i>What is jealousy?</i> .....	6
<i>What is Culture?</i> .....	8
Discussion.....	9



## Introduction

It wasn't unusual to find two or three women gathered together at the table in Chayilah's (not her real name's) kitchen. Sometimes we'd be pouring over our marble composition books, with pages tabbed by colorful post-its,



“She was the third beer. Not the first one, which the throat receives with almost tearful gratitude; nor the second, that confirms and extends the pleasure of the first. But the third, the one you drink because it's there, because it can't hurt, and because what difference does it make?” T. Morrison, *Song of Solomon*, p.91



and notes from the bible carefully inked and highlighted, or laughing while preparing food in outrageous quantities for an upcoming function, or engaged in good natured competition over card games, like spades and bezique but today was different. Today, one of us was getting a “co-wife”. There was a time when two of us were even slated to be the “sister-wife” of the other. That didn't happen because the sister couldn't imagine hurting her sister that way and hadn't thought of her sister's husband as anything other than a brother. Perhaps, the incident passed without difficulty because it was discussed between just the sisters and remained buried between them. But this was different. The new woman was chosen without the wife, the deed was done and our sister sat across from us looking

completely defeated. She was angry, confused, hurt, ashamed, and though none of us dared say it – jealous.

At the time, I was only in my early twenties; I was making the transition from Christianity, wherein I had studied to be a missionary, to learning how to re-possess Abrahamic culture. Even after years among others with ostensibly the same goal, I was only adept in faithfully repeating the rhetoric I heard endlessly and energetically espoused by the men in our community, “there was no law against it...” We sat as women of the Israelite branches of Judah and Levi,<sup>1</sup> without authority and without counsel, resigned to the thought

<sup>1</sup> According to contemporary Israelite parlance most melanated peoples from the U.S. (especially the south) are regarded as Judah and those that are from the Caribbean Island of Saint-Domingue (Haiti) are descents



that there was nothing we could do. The men, in their more honest moments, told us that they did it simply because they could; leaving sisters wanting to blame themselves, or improve on themselves, but uncomfortably unable to.

Chayilah and I exchanged glances; we communicated mutual impotency despite our most fervent desire to comfort her and sprung from our chairs to hug her. Chayilah left the embrace to retrieve a familiar table companion, aptly named *Southern Comfort*, 100 proof of course, and three tumblers. Not every woman in our little community, made up mostly of teens and twenty-somethings, struggled with polygynous mate-sharing; but none escaped feelings of jealousy and none had permission to say so.

It has been more than 15 years since I have sat at that kitchen table but even without the convenience of social media (she doesn't have FB!) I have maintained close ties with Chayilah the old school way; and am even treated to chance encounters with her, usually when I am going or coming from the library. In one recent exchange I remarked to her, "Girl, back then the brothers gave us all the wrong information!" Laughing with an ease that time and distance affords.

She nodded soberly and replied, "Yeah, but *you* always knew; you always said that."

Disgust was etched into her features, still attractive and youthful after four children and nearly two decades. She appeared to be reflecting on her own reality as inevitably, even if only temporarily, she had been snared into polygyny herself. For an instant, as a result of not being able to protect her or our sisters back then, something akin to guilt washed over me, before evaporating into redeeming excitement.

I told her, "Yeah but now I can prove it!"

---

of Levi. Both were the sons of Leah blessed and assigned leadership roles over the nation of Israel; Judah being the line of kings (authority) and Levi the line of priests (counsel).



## Section I: Definitions

Polygamy is a mate-pairing paradigm; classified as subcategories are polyamory, polyandry, and polygyny. Polygyny, in particular, has gotten a boost in main-stream imagination, as families like these are added as fodder to media's fetish for "reality television," particularly in the U.S. Shows like *The Real World*, *The Bachelor/Bachelorette*, *Flavah of Love*, *Love and Hip Hop*, *Basketball wives*, and the *Real House Wives of [insert state here]* exemplify the country's preoccupation with romance; and *Sister Wives*, *Big Love*, *My Five Wives*, *Polygamy USA* and *One Man, Four Wives* (on BBC), have joined to line-up<sup>2</sup>, for the voyeuristic pleasures of audiences across the nation. Ostensibly, the point of these shows is to demystify the worlds of people whom the audience would normally not have access to; allow them to vicariously indulge in fantasies of ostentatious luxury with love providing a warm but not guaranteed backdrop. In the end all of these *reality* programs depicting both monogamous and polygamous pursuits have one more thing in common – jealousy.

Unquestionably, Hollywood did not invent human relationships, but the influence of television public perception of society, self-evaluation, personal choices and behaviors has proven significant (Lundsten 1998; Rose & Wood 2005; Perkins 2016; Gamson, et.al 1992; Shrum 2015). Consequently, exposure to media programs that help to frame jealousy as outside of religious (biblical) acceptable conduct, contributed to counterfeit representations of polygyny; and add to the misconception that female jealousy and mate-guarding is a product of (secular) socialization rather than an authentic response to mate-sharing.

Whether or not it is the family strategy for you, jealousy is a predictable companion in polygyny. Attempts to re-imagine the paradigm as a "polytopia<sup>3</sup>," or the life choice of Saints, is as pretentious as the attempts to

---

<sup>2</sup> There a few programs about polygamy that sought to run neutral e.g. *Our America*, (OWN); or contesting views e.g. *Escaping Polygyny* (A&E) *Escaping the Prophet* (TLC)

<sup>3</sup> Some groups that have adopted mate sharing have opted to calling themselves "polys," –topia comes from the word "utopia" used for a fictional, or imagined, place or state of ideal or perfect living. Hence polytopia



police and shame the emotions of women it is often bundled with. This practice is termed “emotion-shaming” and is similar in methodology and injury as other types or ridicule that seeks to exploit a personal aspect and incite insecurity in that space. For example, it is sometimes said of female jealousy that “it is not a part of *our* culture,” to preclude any sincere investigation of dyadic couple, and intrafemale conflict, by suggesting that there is something unsightly with the person (in this case jealousy) and not the circumstances they are responding to. In an effort to inspect this supposition, there is a need to examine the terms used; therefore, the words *polygamy* (polygyny), *jealousy* and *culture* are defined in this section; with further discussion of culture following separately (in Section II).

***What is polygamy?*** Polygamy is the only word that actually denotes plural marriage. The extra-dyadic, (more than two-person) unions typically subcategorized under it, are conspicuously free of any *marriage* designation present in their individual construction; preserving only the meaning of *many* between them.

**Poly: Many**

- gamy: marriage
- gyny: women
- andry: men

Despite the general acceptance that polygyny and polyandry *imply* marriage, at least one team of married anthropologist, the Comaroffs (1991: 245), made the distinction between a social system that sanctions more than one spouse (polygamy) and “polygyny” to express the condition of a man in multiple relationships with women (to the inclusion of extra-marital constructs). I won’t discourage the thought that the existence of a term, which acknowledges plurality for marriage ***in theory***, but has no marriage terms ***in practice***, doesn’t suggest a concession that the *echad* (oneness) in

---

is a comment on the presentation of poly strategies as the solution to real conditions without any real consequences.



marriage is uniquely complicated by plurality, in either direction. However, for the purposes of this disquisition that complication is evinced in the form of co-rivalry and co-jealousy between women. In fact, jealousy, rivalry and enemy are terms used for the “co-wife” in the several societies, as discussed further in the paper (Section 2.2).

***What is jealousy?*** In a relationship context, jealousy is a mate-guarding response triggered by the threat of mate-sharing, real, imagined or implied. Jealousy is distinct from envy primarily because jealousy is connected to what one does have rather than what one does not have.<sup>4</sup> In *The Dangerous Passion: Why Jealousy Is as Necessary as Love and Sex*, David Buss writes that “jealousy came into the English language through the French language”; in the proclaimed “language of love” *jealousy* shares kinship with the words *jaloux* and *jalousie*. It is noteworthy that parent word for jealousy is zealous, originating in the in Latin *zealous* and Greek *zelos*, respectively (p.28) meaning of “fevor, warmth, ardor or intense desire.”

The book simply titled *Polygamy* contains 17 essays, often with one taking the negative and one taking the affirmative on specific aspects of polygyny. Jorge Ferrer and William Saletan take the issue of jealousy, in non-monogamous relationships, to task in the fourth and fifth articles. Ferrer (2009) concedes that jealousy is usually “widely understood as normal” even citing that jealousy was considered reasonable in cases of homicide, when a spouse was discovered in the act of adultery<sup>5</sup> in Texas and other states “as late as the 1970’s” (p.35); but is unconvinced of jealousy’s place in mate-sharing. Ferrer, make two notable observations (1) unlike other emotions there is no direct antonym for jealousy, according to him, “in any human language” and (2) Assuming balanced mental health, most people “naturally share, to some degree, in the happiness of their mates.” Building on these points he offers two suggestions a) rather than addressing the catalyst for jealousy, individuals should accommodate the situation; choosing

---

<sup>4</sup> For a more detailed explanation of the distinctions between envy and jealousy see Johnson, A.S. ( 2017 August). Just the Stats Ma’am.

<sup>5</sup> Biblically “adultery” follows the status of the woman. Therefore a man is guilty of adultery, only if the other party is married. In the case of the wife her status is the criterion that designates any extra-marital encounter as adultery.



“sympathetic joy” (one of 4 Buddhist principals<sup>6</sup> called “mudita”) to glean from their partner’s happiness being in another relationship and b) the adoption of two words better suited for poly-joy; “compersion,” coined by the founder of a polygamous community called *Kerista*, which has the approximate meaning of “taking joy in the joy that others you love share among themselves.” and poly-fidelity which is meant to signify “faithfulness to many” (p.33-36) paradoxically denotes having multiple loyalties.

Unwilling to argue with poly-positive advocates, who insist on infidelity as natural, Saletan (2009) counters, somewhat sardonically, that “fidelity isn’t natural, but jealousy is” (p.30); a point that he suggests informs the “one spouse rule.” Noting that while over-time societal opinions and permissions have changed to accommodate the different politics, which govern our private and public lives; Saletan reminds us that, “we’re still jealous.” Attridge (2013), in his article *Jealousy and Relationship Closeness*, adds that jealousy has a practical purpose and challenges Ferrer’s implications about jealousy and mental health, writing

Jealousy may have evolved to deter a partner’s infidelity. Thus, in this view, jealousy is central to relationship enhancing goals of mate guarding and mate retention, and is therefore not a personal failing or pathology, despite its sometimes negative consequences. (p.3)

Jealousy as a deterrent to ensure relationship longevity supports Buss’ explanation for the presence and persistence of this mate-guarding response,

jealousy I was forced to conclude is no less basic than fear or rage, its expression no less basic than flight or fight. (2001:27).

If the discourse around intrafemale conflict is weighed down by the stigma associated with jealousy in its English form, as anti-spiritual, perhaps a shift towards its Latin roots would ease the burden; after all no one ever accuses the zealot of being, or under-expressing, their *spiritual* commitment.

---

<sup>6</sup> The other three being loving kindness *metta*, compassion *karuna*, and equanimity *upeksha*





However, if both the Greek and Latin are unacceptable, section two will provide more words from other cultures to consider.

***What is Culture?*** Culture comes from the Latin word *colere* and usually applied to the altering and development of a place<sup>7</sup> where humans live or have set up permanence through cultivation (use of animals and crops), inhabitation, protection and defense. It further

refers to all those rituals, skills, crafts, technologies, arts, and other **forms of expression that** have been created to bind together groups of people and **enable them to survive**. (Kohl 1992:126-127). Emphasis added

To test the position held by this paper, that jealousy *is* a part of the culture, where polygyny is practiced, and cannot be excised from this mate-pairing choice (simply because it is inconvenient to the eager practitioner or practitioner hopeful), I searched for evidence of jealousy among these understood features of culture (delineated in section 2). Section two is divided into 5 parts in order to give examples of artifacts (2.1) language (2.2) norms (2.3) symbols (2.4) and values (2.5).

---

<sup>7</sup> Human settlements are not always tied to land “culture” can be used of rituals, skills, crafts etc. in other contextual spaces, for example, “hip hop culture” or “Culture of poverty”.





## Discussion

Is a catalyst necessary for jealousy? (Does something first “trigger” this response)?

Has media and social media contributed to awareness of polygamy?

Has seeing and hearing about polygyny more frequently had any effect on your perception of the paradigm?

What do you anticipate “culture” has to say about the place of jealousy in polygamy?

Do “non-westernize” spaces escape jealousy?

## References

Attridge, M. (January 08, 2013). Jealousy and Relationship Closeness. Sage Open, 3, 1, 1- 16.

Buss, D. M. (2011). The Dangerous Passion: Why Jealousy Is As Necessary As Love and Sex.

Ferrer, J. N.(2009). Men's Jealousy in Non-Monogamous Relationships can be Overcome. In Lankford, R. D. (Ed.), Polygamy. (pp. 33-43). Detroit: Greenhaven Press

Gamson, W., Croteau, D., Hoynes, W., & Sasson, T. (1992). Media Images and the Social Construction of Reality. Annual Review of Sociology, 18, 373-393. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2083459>

Johnson, A.S. Just the Stats Ma’am. The Poly-Gamē | Unpacking the Acceptance of Polygyny among Women In and Out of Biblical Contexts Retrieved from <http://www.litbalm.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/The-Poly-Article-1.1-JUST-THE-STATS-MAAM.pdf>



Kohl, Herbert (1992). *From Archetype to Zeitgeist*. Toronto: Little, Brown, and Co.

Lundsten, L. (April 01, 1998). Modal Ontology Television: How to create Social objects. *American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, 58, 2, 221-240

Perkins, K. R. (July 25, 2016). The Influence of Television Images on Black Females' Self-Perceptions of Physical Attractiveness. *Journal of Black Psychology*, 22, 4, 453-469.

Rose, R. L., & Wood, S. L. (January 01, 2005). Paradox and the Consumption of Authenticity through Reality Television. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 32, 2, 284-296. doi:10.1086/432238

Saletan W. (2009). Non-Monogamous relationships lead to Jealousy. In Lankford, R. D. (Ed.), *Polygamy*. (pp. 28-32). Detroit: Greenhaven Press.

Shrum, L. J.(2015) .Television Viewing and Social Reality. Effects and Underlying Processes. Wänke, M ed. In *Social psychology of consumer behavior*. New York: Psychology Press.

