Polygamy in Islamic Context: A Qualitative Analysis of Perspectives and Realities among Persis Women

Nurul Irfan

Persis Islamic College, West Java, Indonesia
Correspondence: gnurulirfan@staipersisgarut.ac.id

Abstrak: This research aims to comprehensively explore the following aspects: (1) the conceptual frameworks employed by Persis scholars in their understanding of polygamy from the perspective of Persis women; (2) the subjective interpretations and meanings of polygamy among Persis women; and (3) the empirical realities and experiences of religious practice among Persis women regarding polygamy. The study adopts a qualitative research approach, utilizing socio-phenomenological methods, specifically drawing upon symbolic interactionism theory and social construction theory within the Bergerian sociology of knowledge, as the analytical framework. The research findings reveal significant variations in the perspectives of Persis scholars regarding the doctrine of polygamy. These divergences can be attributed to differences in educational backgrounds among Persis scholars (*asatidz*). Central to the debates are interpretations of justice within the context of polygamy, the criteria for engaging in polygamous marriages, the understanding of the permissible number of wives, and the interpretations of scriptural verses related to polygamy, whether regarded as *mutasyabihat* (ambiguous) or *muhkamat* (clear). In terms of the understanding of polygamy among Persis women, socio-cultural factors play a significant role, resulting in a context where Persis women in Garut perceive themselves as equal to men. Consequently, they assert their personal rejection of polygamy, while simultaneously recognizing its permissibility within the framework of Islamic teachings. In practice, instances of polygamous marriages among Persis women are rare, primarily due to the perception that the requirements for polygamy are nearly unattainable (suprahumanization of polygamy).

Keywords: *Fenomenology; Gender; Persistri; Polygamy*

Introduction

Polygamy is a contentious aspect of Islamic doctrine, eliciting debates among Muslims and various groups, including Liberal Islam and feminist circles, who perceive it as an oppressive and discriminatory practice against women. Abdullah Ahmed Na'im argues that polygamy entails legal discrimination within family and civil law, granting Muslim men the right to marry up to four women simultaneously while limiting women to one husband. An-Naim (1997) considers polygamy a tradition that oppresses women, whereas Amina Wadud (1994) views it as a non-Qur'anic practice that supports men's unbridled desires. Conversely, Mahmud Muhammad Thaha (2003) asserts that polygamy is not a fundamental tenet of Islam.

Polygamy involves a marital system where one party, typically the husband, simultaneously has two or more lawful spouses. This form of marital practice finds its foundation not only in the Quran, specifically in An-Nisa verse 3, but also in the example set by Prophet Muhammad himself, who had multiple wives. Within the Islamic faith,

where the actions of the Prophet are considered Sunnah (tradition), certain segments of society regard polygamy as a practice imbued with Sunnah value. There are divergent opinions among scholars regarding the legality of polygamy and the criteria for its practice. Ibn Jarir al-Tabari (1978) provides an interpretation of Surah An-Nisa verse 3, which forms the foundation of polygamy, suggesting that the verse addresses concerns related to a guardian's ability to manage the property of orphaned children equitably. If there is apprehension about the well-being of orphans, similar concerns should extend to women. Therefore, men are advised to marry only those women whom they believe they can treat with justice, up to a maximum of four wives. Conversely, if doubts arise regarding the ability to ensure fairness in polygamous marriages, it is recommended to restrict oneself to a monogamous union.

Al-Shawkani (1973), another commentator, associates the revelation of Surah An-Nisa verse 3 with pre-Islamic Arabian customs. He categorically states that marrying more than four women is prohibited as it contradicts the Prophetic tradition (Sunnah) and deviates from the generally accepted understanding of the Arabic language. Fazlur Rahman argues that the permissibility of polygamy is an exception that arises under specific circumstances. In practical terms, these circumstances manifest during times of war when there is an abundance of widows and orphans (Nasution, 1996). Furthermore, Muhammad Abduh asserts that polygamy is not permissible under normal circumstances. It is only allowed in specific situations, such as when a wife is unable to conceive or bear children. Citing Surah An-Nisa (4):3, Abduh emphasizes that while Islam permits polygamy, it necessitates fair treatment of all wives. Ultimately, Abduh concludes that monogamy is the fundamental principle of marriage in Islam. Muhammad Rasyid Ridha, concurring with his mentor Muhammad Abduh, shares the view that polygamy is prohibited if a husband cannot maintain equity among his wives (Nasution, 1996).

Despite the ongoing debates surrounding the legality and prerequisites of polygamy in Islam, it can be inferred that, on the whole, this practice is endorsed by scholars (Sonbol, 2020). Some scholars even consider it to be a prophetic tradition that should be followed. Nevertheless, the actual prevalence of polygamous marriages among Muslims remains relatively low. Interestingly, there is a scarcity of documented records among scholars themselves detailing their personal involvement in polygamous relationships, despite the religious permissibility. To the best of our knowledge, the majority of scholars tend to adhere to monogamous practices (Pearsall, 2019).

In Indonesia, polygamy is regulated by formal legislation, namely the Marriage Law No. 1 of 1974, complemented by the Government Regulation No. 9 of 1975 and the Compilation of Islamic Law (KHI). It is important to note that the fundamental basis of these marriage laws is rooted in monogamy (Budiono, 2003). Existing legal and religious studies support the conclusion that polygamy is indeed permitted. However, it comes with specific conditions and requirements for those seeking to engage in such marriages. The divergent views and interpretations among scholars on polygamy may hold less significance for individuals who prioritize adherence to formal positive law in Indonesia and have no intention of practicing polygamy. Nevertheless, for those who rigorously follow specific scholarly perspectives and endeavor to observe Islam holistically, these discussions bear considerable importance, particularly as a basis for entering into polygamous relationships.

The existence of divergent views assumes significance due to the prevalence of specific schools of thought, sects, and socio-religious groups among Indonesian Muslims

(Aini, Utomo, & McDonald, 2019). Devotees of these groups dutifully embrace and implement the teachings propagated by their respective schools or affiliations. One prominent religious group in West Java known for its distinctive ideology and religious interpretation is Persis (Persatuan Islam or Islamic Union). The doctrinal tenets of Persis are inherently aligned with the Salafi-Wahhabi ideology, which emphasizes the purification of Islam through a strict adherence to the Quran and Hadith. Consequently, within this theological framework, the practice of polygamy, as evidenced in the Quran and the Prophet's life, assumes a specific value and purpose that warrants acceptance and emulation.

Persis, akin to other socio-religious groups influenced by Salafi perspectives, generally exhibits limited tolerance for contextual interpretations and instead adheres closely to the implied meanings of Quranic verses. The orthodoxy inherent in this religious understanding tends to foster an exclusivist mindset among adherents, resulting in a higher degree of adherence to religious teachings, whether explicitly articulated in scripture, derived from the Prophet's Sunnah, or expounded by their scholars, in comparison to other groups. Consequently, when the Quran permits the practice of polygamy, it is to be accepted and followed without questioning or subjecting it to critical contextual analysis. The infallibility of the holy scripture underpins this acceptance, and any permissible action in Islam holds not only theological value but also brings practical benefits to individuals within this worldly existence (Anas, 2015; Anas et al., 2011; Federspiel, 1996).

However, despite these characteristics, the mere presence of them does not automatically lead the followers to actively pursue similar practices. In practice, the occurrence of polygamy within the Persis community is rare, despite it being recommended as per the textual laws and teachings of Islam, albeit with specific conditions and requirements. A significant and noteworthy aspect of this phenomenon is that female Muslims who are followers of socio-religious groups like Persis do not wholeheartedly accept their husbands engaging in polygamy. While they may acknowledge the Islamic teachings regarding polygamy and strive to comprehend its underlying purpose, it does not necessarily serve as a compelling justification for them to embrace it willingly. This gives rise to what is often referred to as voluntary discrimination in the acceptance of polygamous actions by these Muslim women.

Taking these factors into account, the primary objective of this study is to analyze and explore the following aspects: (1) the conceptual framework of polygamy as constructed by Persis scholars and perceived by Persis women; (2) the understanding and interpretation of the meaning of polygamy among Persis women; and (3) the sociological and phenomenological perspective on the lived religious reality of Persis women concerning polygamy.

Literature Review

Extensive research has been conducted on polygamy, focusing on its legal aspects, interpretations, and its intersection with various disciplines such as feminism, popular culture, psychology, sociology, and religious anthropology. Consequently, the topic is well-explored, and its purpose does not lie in proposing new laws. However, pioneering research on polygamy aims to analyze the religious experiences of Muslim women who serve as the moral counterparts in polygamous relationships, particularly within the Persis community

in the Garut Regency. This socio-religious group is characterized by distinctive teachings and missionary work.

An exemplary study by Siti Rohmah (2015) titled "Orthodoxy of Polygamy Fiqh in Indonesia (A Critical Study of Salafi and HTI Muslimah Towards Polygamy Regulations in Law No. 1 of 1974 on Marriage and the Compilation of Islamic Law)" investigates the methodological framework adopted by HTI Muslimah regarding polygamy regulations stipulated in Law No. 1 of 1974 and the Compilation of Islamic Law. The study endeavors to comprehend the reasons behind HTI Muslimah's rejection of these polygamy regulations.

Another significant study conducted by Zulika (2011) explores the theme of "Interactive Empathy in Polygamous Families (A Study of Polygamous Families in Javanese Culture)." This research delves into polygamous families, uncovering the initial resistance of both wives towards polygamy, eventually leading to acceptance due to the significance of harmony within Javanese culture. The study also reveals the role of reciprocal empathetic understanding, where individuals continuously adapt and accept by empathizing with others' perspectives. It emphasizes that polygamous marriages do not necessarily have negative consequences when interactive empathy is established within the family, whereas the absence of such empathy intensifies conflicts.

Likewise, Yayan Ahyana (2012) conducted a study titled "The Meaning of Polygamy (A Study of Understanding and Practice of Polygamy in Kediri Village, Subang, West Java)," which sheds light on the disapproval expressed by local residents towards polygamous practices and the prevailing discourse within the village. Furthermore, Hawa' Hidayatul Hikmiyah (2019) conducted a study titled "Social Construction of Wives' Behavior in Finding New Wives for Husbands Through Social Media (A Case Study of the 'Polygamy is Destiny' Community in Surabaya)," which highlights the voluntary discrimination experienced by wives involved in polygamous marriages.

These aforementioned studies intricately depict the complexities inherent in polygamous practices and discourses within society. Women engaged in polygamous marriages not only face constraints imposed by authoritative texts and male-dominated narratives but also encounter voluntary discrimination in the name of religious obedience, limiting their life choices. In this context, the present study aims to comprehend the perspectives of women within orthodox environments, such as the Persis group, regarding polygamy.

Methods

This study employs a qualitative approach, specifically utilizing the socio-phenomenological method. The data collection process encompasses documentation, participant observation, and interviews. Data analysis follows a socio-phenomenological framework, drawing on symbolic interactionism theory and social construction theory within Bergerian sociology of knowledge. By adopting this approach and method, the study aims to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the paradoxical phenomenon of polygamy, particularly examining the acceptance of its teachings and practices among Persis women in their lived experiences. Furthermore, the study endeavors to explore the process of meaning-making surrounding polygamy within the Persis community, with a specific focus on the perceptions of Persis women (Persistri) and the construction of religious reality pertaining to polygamy within the Persistri community.

Results and Discussion

Based on the comprehensive analysis of documents, participant observation, and interviews, this study has yielded several significant findings that shed light on the complex issue of polygamy within the Persis community. The following paragraphs present an overview of the key findings:

Construction of Persis Scholars' Thoughts on Polygamy

In order to comprehend the rationale behind the Persis scholars' interpretation of polygamy, it is crucial to acknowledge the distinctive religious orientation of the Persis community, which adopts an eclectic fiqh approach without strict allegiance to any particular school of thought, although it generally leans towards the ahl al-hadith school (Kersten, 2015). The scholars' educational backgrounds within the Persis community play a pivotal role in shaping their perspectives on polygamy. Scholars rooted in Usul al-Din or Shariah contend that the permissibility of polygamy encompasses a minimum requirement of up to four wives, rather than serving as an absolute maximum. Furthermore, these scholars assert that the concept of "justice" in the polygamy verse is primarily associated with financial provisions rather than psychological fairness. Drawing upon Surah An-Nisa: 129, scholars within the Persis community maintain that attaining psychological equilibrium in polygamous relationships is inherently unattainable. However, a contextual analysis of the verse reveals that justice, in this context, pertains to the equitable inheritance of orphaned children. Conversely, scholars specializing in Islamic Education (PI) underscore the psychological dimensions of polygamy. These PI-affiliated Persis scholars tend to accentuate the detrimental effects of polygamy over its perceived benefits. Nonetheless, despite outlining practically unattainable conditions for polygamy, such as psychological comfort, these scholars do not outrightly reject the legality of the practice.

The Meaning of Polygamy in the Empirical Reality of Persistri

The findings regarding the meaning of polygamy in the empirical reality of Persistri offer valuable insights into the perceptions and experiences of Persis women. The limited presence of discussions on polygamy within scholarly and religious contexts, as well as among Persis women, reflects a tendency to avoid potential controversy and emotional sensitivities. Despite being recognized as a part of Qur'anic teachings, polygamy remains largely unexplored, particularly concerning the perspectives of Persis women. Through an in-depth study, it becomes evident that Persis women generally perceive polygamy as lacking the same essence and purpose as the polygamy practiced by the Prophet. Rather than considering it a normative aspect of social life or a noble manifestation of Sunnah with lofty aims, they regard polygamy as a negative practice that inflicts emotional harm primarily upon women. This perspective highlights the absence of alternative interpretations that could provide a broader understanding of polygamy within the Persis community. These findings emphasize the need for further exploration and scholarly discourse on the subject of polygamy, particularly in relation to the experiences and viewpoints of Persis women. Such endeavors would contribute to a deeper understanding of the complexities and implications of polygamy within the context of Persistri, promoting a more nuanced and comprehensive discussion on this topic.

The Construction of Persistri's Religious Reality Regarding Polygamy

Persis women exhibit a tendency to reject the practice of polygamy for themselves. They hold an ambiguous stance, acknowledging the permissibility of polygamy while simultaneously rejecting it when it comes to their personal experience. This practical contradiction contributes to the prevailing sensitivity surrounding the issue of polygamy, resulting in its infrequent discussion and limited scholarly exploration within the Persis community. Consequently, polygamy remains confined in its interpretation and comprehension. There exists a certain trepidation when broaching the topic of polygamy, particularly the apprehension that the intended purpose of Allah's law on polygamy may not be effectively conveyed to the community. Many female religious teachers (ustadzah) within the Persistri community express their concerns that their individual preparedness and emotional disposition towards polygamy may distort the interpretation of the polygamy verses, potentially leading to misconstrued meanings. These polygamy verses are perceived as mutasyabihat (ambiguous) verses, understood by only a limited group, rather than muhkamat (clear and unambiguous) verses with definitive meanings. In practice, instances of Persis women living in polygamous households are rare and seldom discussed within the Persis women's community due to their confidential nature as private matters. Persis women still perceive the acceptance of polygamy as not necessarily indicative of religious devotion. They firmly believe that there are alternative paths of worship that hold greater virtue than entering into polygamous marriages. These observations shed light on the intricate dynamics surrounding the comprehension and acceptance of polygamy within the Persistri community. The hesitancy to engage in open discussions and the fear of misinterpretation contribute to the limited discourse on this subject. A comprehensive examination of the religious reality constructed by Persistri concerning polygamy necessitates further scholarly investigation to enable a deeper understanding of the community's beliefs, perceptions, and practices.

Discussions

In the context of the Persis community, the topic of polygamy is seldom treated with seriousness, being mostly relegated to casual conversations and light-hearted banter during specific religious gatherings. Moreover, it is a rarity to encounter members or religious scholars (ustadz) within the Persis community who choose to enter into polygamous marriages. In the instances where such cases do arise, they are typically motivated by financial stability or a willingness to bear the aforementioned social consequences (van Bemmelen, Soesman, Noya, Ploem, & Arief, 2016).

This state of affairs highlights a noticeable discrepancy between the prevailing socio-cultural values within Sundanese society and the broader Persis community's perspective on polygamy, as opposed to the permissibility afforded by Islamic teachings. While individuals theoretically possess the theological and religious allowance to engage in polygamy, they opt to adhere to prevailing social values, among other considerations. However, the character of Indonesian society, which venerates faithfulness to one's partner as a noble virtue, renders the decision to partake in polygamy a challenging one.

Consequently, polygamy remains a subject of discourse and conversation but is seldom put into practice.

The significant influence of socio-cultural values on individuals' choices, notably observed in the behavior of congregants and religious scholars within the Persis community who abstain from polygamous relationships, attests to the impact of socio-cultural constructs even within puritanical organizations such as Persis, which emphasize strong religious teachings(Lawan & Zanna, 2013). Even actions that are perceived as acts of worship are avoided if they result in adverse social consequences or are regarded unfavorably by society. However, it is important to note that these socio-cultural values do not serve as a basis for reevaluating the religious legality of polygamy itself. Persis scholars and their congregants continue to uphold the belief in the permissibility of polygamy, despite personal decisions to refrain from practicing it due to socio-actual circumstances.

In the context of symbolic interactionism, this situation encompasses three fundamental concepts: mind, self, and society. Mind refers to the capacity to utilize symbols that hold shared social meanings, whereby individuals develop their cognitive faculties through interactions with others. Self pertains to individuals' ability to introspect and evaluate themselves based on the perspectives and opinions of others. Society represents the social framework that is created, constructed, and molded by individuals within a community, with each person actively and voluntarily participating in selected behaviors, ultimately shaping their roles within the broader social structure. Persis constitutes an exclusive group; nonetheless, the patterns of interaction and communication within the Persis community demonstrate openness and egalitarianism. Respect for teachers within this community is predicated on their knowledge and contributions, rather than their personal attributes or charisma. In comparison to other religious collectives, Persis exhibits a more equitable power dynamic.

Notwithstanding, akin to other religious social groups, Persis inevitably influences the individual interpretations of its members concerning various facets of life, including polygamy. The Persis community constructs the meaning of polygamy in accordance with the interpretations found in the Qur'an and Hadiths. The understanding of polygamy as derived from these religious texts is primarily textually oriented. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that although the community's interpretation may possess a textual and superficial character, the textual object itself is not inconsequential but rather holds a sacred and transcendent nature. The ontological status attributed to the Qur'an within this community transcends its role as a mere text. This ontological positioning influences the assimilation of its meaning, and only the infallible prophet is truly capable of comprehending and applying it in real-life situations. The mortal human's comprehension of the meaning of polygamy undergoes substantial reduction due to the incomparable ontological standing of the Qur'an as the divine Word of Allah, juxtaposed with the ephemeral existence of humanity.

Drawing from the ideas put forth by Berger and Luckmann (1991), the interpretation of polygamy must be understood as a crucial endeavor to establish a conceptual framework that bridges the subjective and objective realms, employing the dialectical concepts of externalization, objectivation, and internalization. Externalization encompasses the process by which individuals adapt to the socio-cultural external world as active contributors. Objectivation involves the intersubjective interactions wherein societal values become institutionalized within the individual's social interactions. Conversely,

internalization refers to individuals identifying themselves within social institutions or organizations as members.

Within this dialectical process, women affiliated with the Persatuan Islam (Persis) do not uncritically embrace the doctrine of polygamy found within Islamic teachings, adhering to a credo ut intelligam approach. The doctrine of polygamy is presented as a dzhanny fiqh doctrine, distinct from the unequivocal qath'i doctrines of faith that are imparted rigorously, cautiously, and seriously. Instead, discussions surrounding polygamy often adopt a light-hearted and humorous tone. The meaning of polygamy itself is deemed ambiguous, particularly due to its sensitive nature, especially for women. Inaccurate or misguided explanations about polygamy can have subjective-psychological ramifications for women who are exposed to them, engendering a conflict between their psychological inclination to resist being subordinate in a marital relationship and the doctrinal imperative to accept polygamy as a permissible practice within Islamic teachings.

In the realm of social interactions and communication within the Persatuan Islam (Persistri), which constitutes an integral part of Sundanese cultural values and norms, an intriguing observation emerges regarding the internalization of doctrine and externalization of actions within the framework of ideological values and cultural norms—namely, the infrequent actual practice of polygamy. The prevailing uniliteral family structure in Sundanese society, characterized by a leaning towards matrilocal arrangements and the strategic position of women, appears incongruous with the dynamics of polygamous family life. The structure of a polygamous family typically entails a highly dominant and economically secure husband assuming a prominent role as the head of the household, accompanied by elevated social mobility.

Within the confines of a polygamous family structure, wives are often depicted as passive and lacking in competitiveness, necessitating their husbands' protection as the sole heroic figures responsible for safeguarding their well-being. Conversely, Sundanese women, particularly those immersed in agrarian cultures like Garut, enjoy access to economic resources that enable them to possess equal competitiveness and bargaining power as men, especially as they are self-sufficient in meeting their own needs. The polygamous family structure also implies relatively restricted and regulated mobility for wives. However, within the Sundanese community's ngahuma bareng framework, women enjoy equal mobility to men and have the right to actively participate in public life. These factors collectively impede the widespread acceptance of polygamy within the Persis community, despite its religious endorsement as a doctrine.

Recurring patterns of interaction and communication pertaining to polygamy solidify over time, giving rise to the process of habitualization and the development of negative typifications associated with polygamy. These negative typifications manifest in popular discourse through phrases such as, *"Polygamy is permissible, but not for me,"* or *"Polygamy may be a recommended practice, yet there are other commendable practices... (that do not burden women),"* or other similar expressions like, *"Do you want to embrace polygamy (in adherence to the Prophet's example)? Then conduct yourself (first) like the (infallible) Prophet!"* These typifications, whether on a social or personal level, further complicate the decision-making process for men contemplating polygamous unions. How can they possibly meet such stringent requirements? It appears highly unlikely for individuals to possess the intention and successfully emulate the polygamous lifestyle exemplified in the Prophet's household.

Drawing upon the processes of habitualization and typification discussed above, it becomes evident that polygamy undergoes a transformative phenomenon known as reification, as elucidated by Berger and Luckmann (1991). Reification entails the human tendency to perceive products of human activity as though they were detached from human agency, akin to natural facts, cosmic repercussions, or divine manifestations. This cognitive process implies that individuals can overlook the reality that they themselves have constructed the social world, ultimately blurring the dialectical relationship between human agents and the products they create. Consequently, polygamy assumes an externalized existence, an alien *opus elienum* beyond individual control, rather than being recognized as an inherent manifestation of their own productive endeavors, an *opus proprium*.

The evolution of meaning and interpretation within religious doctrines, particularly in the context of polygamy, cannot be disentangled from the prevailing socio-cultural factors. Individuals are incessantly shaped by the dominant values that serve as guiding principles and truths within their society. Opposition to these values may yield social repercussions, compelling individuals to reassess their behavior, even when such actions are deemed permissible from a religious standpoint. The teachings and practice of Islam regarding polygamy exemplify this phenomenon. While polygamy is advocated as an integral part of Islamic doctrine with religious significance, it does not automatically elicit widespread adherence. Various considerations contribute to the interpretation of polygamy, diverging from its fundamental understanding as a religiously sanctioned practice.

Conclusions

The findings of this study shed light on the diverse perspectives held by the ulama (religious scholars) of Persatuan Islam (Persis) regarding the doctrine of polygamy. A notable factor contributing to this divergence is the variation in educational backgrounds among the ulama (*asatidz*) of Persis. Key points of contention revolve around the interpretation of justice within the context of polygamy, the criteria for entering into polygamous marriages, the understanding of the permissible number of wives, and the nuanced interpretations of Quranic verses that discuss polygamy, including whether they are considered *mutasyabihat* (ambiguous) or *muhkamat* (clear and definitive).

When examining the perspectives of women within the Persis community on polygamy, it becomes evident that socio-cultural influences specific to the Sundanese context significantly shape their outlook. In Garut, women enjoy an equal status to men, thereby influencing their inclination to personally reject polygamy despite acknowledging its permissibility within Islamic teachings. In practice, it is uncommon to find women in the Persis community involved in polygamous marriages, primarily due to the prevailing perception that polygamy entails almost unattainable requirements, leading to the idealization of polygamy as an impractical ideal (suprahumanizing polygamy).

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