

Women who shared a husband: Polygyny in southern Albania in the early 20th century

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Abstract

In Europe little attention has been paid to polygyny, though it occurred in the Balkans in the recent past. Data from an Austro-Hungarian census of two-thirds of Albania taken in 1918 give a rare opportunity to examine it. As elsewhere in the eastern Mediterranean, the extent of polygyny was modest, but it was more widespread in rural areas than in towns. This article looks at polygyny in Mallakastër, one area of southern Albania. While not specifically provided for by customary law, polygyny was accommodated within it. Marriages were contracted in the same way as monogamous marriages, and both co-wives lived as part of the family. There is no direct evidence of the reasons why some marriages were polygynous. It may have been a response to childlessness in some cases, but this was neither a universal justification nor a universal explanation. It was probably also a means by which families augmented their labour supply in the absence of an institution of servants. A law enforcing monogamy in 1929 and changes that made polygyny less acceptable and less necessary have resulted in its disappearance.

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1. Introduction

In some societies in Africa or the Middle East, polygyny, though nowhere practised by more than a minority, “seems something to take for granted” (Mair, 1971, p. 151), and it has been widely studied, arguably, to the neglect of monogamy. Where monogamy is taken for granted, as in Europe, there is virtual silence about polygyny, at least in modern times, even though it has been practised in various forms until quite recently. In the Balkans it was not only permitted for Muslims for several hundred years until legal codes adopted in the late 1920s made it illegal, but it was also practised among non-Muslims, and it is still not totally unknown.

While the silence might indicate that polygyny was not common, Todorova (1993, p. 47) found only one case in her extensive study of Ottoman Bulgaria, there is also a tendency to play it down.¹ An Albanian, in a book written in 1918 chiefly for an American readership, claimed that “(d)espite the introduction of Islamism, polygamy has never taken any roots among the Muslim Albanians” (Chekrezi, 1919, p. 199). That it was not unknown in Albania was evident when a Muslim Congress in Tiranë in 1923 decided that monogamy should be legally enforced. Even then one foreign resident

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¹ Recently produced teaching material only mentions polygamy in a negative value statement and a selective quotation from a traveller (ignoring evidence of other travellers who are quoted in other contexts), and asks students “Why did polygamy not take root in the Balkans?” (Vodenicharov, 2002, pp. 9, 13, 14).

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claimed that “polygamy had existed hitherto in principle, although seldom in practice” (Swire, 1932, p. 94), implying that the decision was little more than a formality. The philologist and folklorist, Eqrem Çabej, conceded that polygyny had occurred “in individual cases” in mountain areas in Albania, as had “concubinage” due to childlessness, and the levirate (the practice of marrying a widow to her deceased husband’s brother or cousin). He was at pains to point out, however, referring to another authority, the Austrian linguist Norbert Jokl, that these were vestiges of ancient Indo-Germanic customs and not a consequence of eastern Islamic influences (Çabej, 1935, p. 223). Elsewhere in the Balkans it has been argued that “cultural tradition” limited the adoption of polygyny even when a new religion was introduced that permitted it (Karamikhova, 1991).

Foreign visitors to the northern mountains of Albania in the early 20th century, though not without their own prejudices and preconceptions, were less reticent in commenting upon polygyny.² Their accounts alternate between disapproval and explaining, if not approvingly, that those who engaged in it did so to resolve problems they could not solve by other means. Durham was of the opinion that Albanian polygyny consisted almost entirely of the levirate. She claimed that in one kin group in Nikaj, there was a widow who had become the “concubine” of a brother or cousin in at least one-sixth of the houses (which were inhabited by extended families), but that elsewhere it was not universally practised. Most of the cases she cited were among Roman Catholics, for whom there was a conflict between religious teaching, the practical considerations of who should take care of a widow’s children (who by custom remained at their father’s home), and the need to maintain family honour (Durham, 1909, pp. 36, 66, 128, 208, 209, 210). According to another contemporary, if the widow were attractive and industrious, the family would be reluctant to lose her and it would be a dishonour if she were to be remarried to someone outside the family of the deceased (Cozzi, 1912, p. 326). Local priests were energetic in their attempts to prevent the levirate. Even though they excommunicated those who disobeyed them, they could not prevent it (Durham, 1909, pp. 193, 209).

Though Durham believed that it was otherwise rare, even among Muslims, for a man to have more than one wife, she acknowledged that men had additional consorts (Durham, 1909, pp. 36, 313). Cozzi (1912, pp. 325, 326) thought this “deplorable abuse” was most widespread in some mountain districts, but that it had declined or disappeared from other areas. He insisted there was no institution of concubinage as such in Albania, and that a man did not take a concubine “*per passione*”, but only in the “not rare” cases when he had no male heirs. It was a practice considered to be legitimated by circumstances and, he observed, not confined to Muslims (cf. Durham, 1909, p. 185; Coon, 1950, p. 23; Karamikhova, 1991; Gruber, 2002).

Cozzi’s description suggests that he was not referring to marriages, but to practices such as the “intermediate forms of conjugal bond” (Alexakis, 1992, p. 4)³ found and tolerated in other non-Muslim societies in the region, especially where divorce was not permitted (e.g., Vince-Pallua, 1996, p. 40). However, another observer, who visited the uplands of Shpat in central Albania at that time, had no hesitation in referring to multiple consorts in that region as wives. According to him, although monogamy predominated, men with two or even three wives were “no rarity” (Kaucký, 1916, p. 64). Regulations drawn up by the Austria-Hungarian army when it occupied the northern two-thirds of Albania (a non-belligerent) during the last 2 years of the First World War indicated that polygynous unions in some form were not uncommon. Albanians serving in the gendarmerie were entitled to a subsistence allowance for their families, but it was specified that “(e)in Konkubinatslebensschließt den Anspruch an Sustaination aus” [cohabitation with a concubine is excluded from eligibility for subsistence] (Kanzleivorschrift, 1918, pp. 6-7).⁴

Although evidence from the rest of the Balkans is sparse, it is sufficient to show that polygyny was not confined to Albania. In 19th-century Bosnia it was said to be “not widespread” (Evans, 1876); in other words, it did occur. In the late 1930s two field studies by American social scientists of the large extended families in parts of the former Yugoslavia mentioned instances of polygyny, which both implied were polygynous *marriages* but did not

² Solway (1990, p. 46) observed that, in southern Africa, “since polygyny is an institution considered by many Westerners as uncivilised, it is undoubtedly underreported by local people and perhaps over reported by observers wishing to emphasise the exotic and sensational.” In Europe “local people” consider themselves to be “Westerners” and identify with the observers. Therefore there is sensitivity, at least among those who regard themselves as sophisticated, about admitting the existence in their societies in the recent past of practices they consider associate them with the exotic and sensational.

³ Where not otherwise stated, all translations are by the author.

⁴ Nonetheless, there were cases in which both spouses were treated as legitimate wives, see “*Gesuch der hier wohnhaften Fatime und Hatidje Hanum, Witwen nach dem verstorbenen pensionierten ottomanischen Finanzdirektor Hussein Husni Effendi ... um die Erteilung der Einreisebewilligung nach Konstantinopel.*” [Application of Fatime and Hatidje Hanum, resident here, widows of the deceased, retired Ottoman Director of Finances Hussein Husni Effendi ... for the granting of permission to travel to Constantinople] (Österreichisches Staatsarchiv, 1917).

elaborate on them at any length (Ehrlich, 1966; Mosely, 1976). Vince-Pallua's examples of secondary wives date from between 1960 and 1970 (1996, p. 35), and Alexakis claimed they could still be found in parts of Greece in "recent years" (1992, p. 6). In villages in Kosova polygyny is still practised, though it is said to be rare (Huwajdi, 1981 cited by Norris 1993, p. 275; Rrapi, 2003, pp. 100–101).⁵ Mosely (1976, p. 68) also mentioned an example of the levirate, and it occurred among the Pomaks (Muslim Bulgarians) in the southern mountains of Bulgaria in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Brunnbauer, 2001, p. 237). Recent examples have been found in Kosova (Rrapi, 2003, pp. 100–101).

2. Albania in 1918

A rare instance of reliable and comprehensive evidence of polygyny is a census taken in northern and central Albania in 1918 by the Austro-Hungarian army of occupation. The manuscript enumeration schedules⁶ are a rich source of information about Albanian society at that time and give detailed data on every person present, including women, children, and servants, 524, 217 in all (Seiner, 1922a, p. 6). Taken as a whole, the census is an impressive document, which was very conscientiously compiled.⁷ The quality of legibility is high, and the manuscript has been well preserved. The entire population was required to present itself in person for enumeration (Seiner, 1922a, p. 4), and local people in several villages who were shown transcripts of the data on their families found them to be correct. The members of each family are listed in order of seniority: the master of the house was first, followed by his wife, their children (boys first), then brothers and their families, widows preceded by their children, finishing with elderly parents, more distant relatives, and non-relatives. Polygynous wives are identified by the designations "Frau I" and "Frau II."⁸ The second wife is generally entered immediately after the first, before the husband's children. Only very exceptionally is there any indication of which wife was their mother or of step relationships or adoptions. The first and family name, relationship to the reference person (the master of the house), gender, religion, birthplace, domicile, and the place where enumerated are known for each person. Ages are also given, but in many cases rather imprecisely—though probably less so than the initiators of the census believed.⁹

Instances of polygyny were recorded throughout the part of Albania covered by the census, some two-thirds of the country. Overall, 4.9% of extant marriages were recorded as polygamous, 6.2% among Muslims (Gruber, 2002; Kera, 2004).¹⁰ It is evident from occurrences among refugees from other areas, other sources (e.g. Selenica, 1928, p. CXVII; Mosely, 1976, p. 71; Elezi, 2002, p. 94), and local informants that it also occurred in much of the rest of the country. In the area covered by the census, local percentages varied from 0.5% in Shkodër, then the largest town, which had a majority Roman Catholic population, to over 10% in the inner mountain areas of the north (Gruber, 2002). Kavajë, the home of many Muslim landowners, was the town with the highest level of polygyny, 3.6%. This is broadly comparable with other cities in the Ottoman Empire, where it had been around 5% or less over several centuries (Behar, 1991, p. 479; Zilfi, 1997, p. 268; Kurt, 2002, p. 689). In Istanbul in 1906, 2.16% of married men were polygamously married (Behar, 1991, p. 477). As in Albania, in other parts of the Ottoman Empire, polygyny was more common in villages than in towns. Some 50 years before the Albanian census, over 7% of marriages in three Egyptian villages were found

⁵ A paediatrician in Albania told me that in 1999 she delivered a baby to a refugee from Kosova who was in a polygynous marriage.

⁶ *Volkszählung in Albanien in dem von den österr.-ungar. Truppen 1916–1918 besetzten Gebieten* [Census of the districts of Albania occupied by Austro-Hungarian troops in 1916–1918], kept in the archives of the Austrian Academy of Sciences, Vienna. The data used in this study come from the schedules for Mallakastër, boxes 46 and 47.

⁷ The enumeration of each village was undertaken by a *Kommissar*, an Austro-Hungarian army officer; an interpreter, who was usually an Albanian; and an Albanian commission consisting of two or three senior men from the village or its district (Nicholson, 1999, p. 9).

⁸ Cases of polygyny among non-Muslims (see Gruber, 2002) suggest that some of the liaisons recorded might be with "secondary" rather than second, wives, but no distinction appears to have been made in the census.

⁹ The instructions for the census asserted that most people were "in complete ignorance" of their ages (K.u.K. XIX Korpskommando, 1918, p. 4). Comparisons with dates on the few tombstones that exist and could be matched with census data, and acquaintance with some of the people enumerated, suggest that most people were reasonably well aware how old they were, but did not deem it important to report it precisely. It is still not uncommon for Albanians to report ages rather approximately. With some exceptions among those in the higher age groups and marginal people such as servants, the recorded age was probably within about 5 years of the person's biological age.

¹⁰ These data are based on a 5% sample of settlements considered typical and 100% samples of those deemed to be atypical according to several criteria (Gruber, 2004). In Mallakastër the percentage of marriages that were polygynous in the sample was similar to that in the entire population, which suggests that any bias in the sample is small.

Table 1

Polygynous marriages, Mallakastër, 1918

	Abs.	%
Polygynously married women	372	8.1 (of all married women)
Existing polygynous marriages (=polygynously married men)	186	4.2 (of all marriages/married men)

Source: Census manuscript.

to be polygynous, and 20 years before that, about 8% (Cuno, 2005, p. 10; cf. Zilfi, 1997, p. 268, note 11), compared with 5% in Cairo (Cuno, 2005, p. 11). The scale of polygyny in Albania was thus comparable to the Middle East: it did occur, but at any one time only a small proportion of marriages were polygamous.

3. Mallakastër

This study looks at polygyny in one district in south central Albania, Mallakastër, an area about twice the size of the present district of the same name. It is located immediately north of the River Vjosa, which in 1918 formed the front line between the areas occupied by the Austro-Hungarian army and the Italians. The area consists of hills and a series of spurs, on which most of the hamlets that made up villages are situated, separated by deep valleys. It was one of the more densely populated and, by local standards, prosperous parts of the Austro-Hungarian occupied area (Veith, 1920, p. 15; Seiner, 1922a, p. 8); some families were regarded as well off (Seiner, 1922b, p. 22). Its population, according to the census, was 24,409, of whom 99% were Muslims (Seiner, 1922a, p. 8). Included in this total were just over 1000 people who usually resided elsewhere, most of whom were refugees (Nicholson, 2006, p. 130-1). In addition to the census, which is the main source, information has been obtained from conversations with people I have become acquainted with while doing fieldwork for other projects. Their comments are referred to as “personal communications,” and while none is attributed by name for reasons of informant confidentiality, all of them are listed in the acknowledgements.

Taking into account only the usually resident population, there were 186 polygynous marriages in Mallakastër in 1918, which was 4.2% of all existing marriages. The 372 women who shared a husband in these marriages were 8.1% of all women who were then married (Table 1). The level of polygyny was similar to most other areas in southern central Albania, but lower than in the northern mountains (Gruber, 2002, Map 36). Though their number was small, polygynous marriages were found in about 80% of the 65 or so villages and in all parts of the district. If the villages from which the wives originated are added to the total, there was only one relatively small village without a family that was connected in some way to polygyny. Yet in no case were these families more than a small minority. There were also three polygynous marriages among people present but not domiciled in the district. In two cases, they were refugees from areas affected by hostilities or occupied by the Italians. In the third, two wives and their husband were apparently on a visit to the family of the second wife. These latter are not included in the analysis and discussion that follow, which refer only to the normally resident population.

In addition, 53 widows could be identified who had shared a spouse (three of them had been married to the same husband) and were still living in his household. In two households there was a polygynous marriage in the next generation. In two cases, the two widows simply lived together without any family. There were undoubtedly other widows who could not be identified, as these women accounted for 2% of all widows (of whom there were many). Either their co-wife had died, or, especially if they were young, they had returned to their natal families and probably remarried. Only four of the widows who could be identified as having been married polygynously were under 40.

Such evidence as there is, inclines towards the supposition that most, perhaps all, the polygamous marriages considered here had come about by an unrelated woman marrying a man as his second wife. It seems unlikely that men took secondary wives who would be discarded if they bore no children. All those polygamously married were Muslims, and though a considerable number of polygynous marriages and still more second wives remained childless, the second wife continued to live in the household even after the husband's death.

Nor does it appear that many, if any, of the polygamous marriages were due to the levirate. In the neighbouring area of Labëria, both the levirate and its equivalent the sororate (when a woman marries a deceased sister's husband) were sometimes practised when a deceased man left small children, or the family was on good terms with their in-laws and did not want to break the kinship relationship (*miqësinë*) that had been created by the original marriage (Elezi, 2002,

Table 2
Age differences in polygynous marriages, Mallakastër, 1918^e

	Median	Range ^a
Polygynous marriages		
Wife 1 and wife 2	7	-20 to 35
Husband and wife 1	10	-3 to 35
Husband and wife 2	18	-3 to 45
Monogamous marriages		
Husband and wife	10	-18 to 55

Source: Census manuscript.

a Age in years of the first mentioned person minus the age of the second. A minus sign signifies that the second is the older.

p. 84).¹¹ In Mallakastër in 1918 there were eight polygamous marriages in families whose composition was consistent with the levirate, in that they included a man, his two wives, and a brother's child but no widowed mother of the child. Hence, it was possible that the last mentioned had become the second wife, but, equally, she may have died, or returned to her own family. In several families in which there were polygamous marriages (and many more in which there were not), there were one or more widowed brother's wives, suggesting that the levirate was rarely if ever practised.

The proportion of women who at some time in their lives would be either a first or a second wife of a polygamous husband was undoubtedly greater than the 8.1% who shared a husband in 1918. Some marriages enumerated as monogamous in 1918 subsequently became polygamous when the man married a second wife (personal communication); others would previously have been polygamous, but one wife had died. The remaining wife would bring up her co-wife's children (personal communication; cf. Elezi, 2002, p. 76). Mortality, especially as the result of childbirth, was high (Durham, 1909, pp. 124, 125; cf. Hoche, 1937, p. 555; Ehrlich, 1966, pp. 181, 182).

It will be evident that some women who shared a husband did not do so for long.¹² Though the median age difference between first and second wives was just 7 years, some second wives were a generation younger than the first, and in one case, 35 years.¹³ So the first wife may have been the sole wife for many years (unless there had been another second wife in the meantime, which had occurred in at least one case), and, provided she did not suffer a premature death, the second wife was likely to outlive the first. Given that the median age difference between husbands and second wives was 18 years, compared with 10 years between husbands and first wives or wives in monogamous marriages, a second wife was also likely to outlive her spouse and to seek to marry again (Table 2). Some wives may already have been widows when they entered their current polygamous marriage. The ages of some of their children indicate that some polygynous husbands had had at least one wife before those recorded in the census, and some had additional wives later, following the deaths of their current wives. One of the polygamously married men subsequently had three other wives, two very briefly were concurrent (personal communication). Thus, as was the case for many who only married monogamously, for all concerned, the polygynous union may well have been just one of a succession of marriages they entered into during their adult lives.

4. Polygyny in context

On marrying, a second wife, in the same way as a first or a monogamous wife, would move to the family of her husband. She lived in the same house as her husband's other wife and all the other members of the family, that is the people related by blood or marriage and any others who lived on the same piece of land and were part of a single economic unit (Elezi, 2002, p. 66). From that moment on she came under the authority of *zoti i shtëpisë* [the master (lit. lord) of the house], like everyone else who lived there. She did not, as in some other societies, have her own dwelling,

¹¹ The importance of the institution of *krushk* [in-law] follows from the view of marriage as joining two families, and not merely two persons. It was overlooked by foreign observers in the north, who only considered the consequences within a man's family of the death of a married brother but ignored its implications for relations between families.

¹² Behar (1991, pp. 481, 482) makes a similar point (in relation to men) in another society with high mortality and speaks of "successive overlapping monogamies."

¹³ These calculations are based on the imprecise age data (see note 9) and are therefore necessarily approximate.

not even within the family courtyard. Instead, a room would be provided for her, as for each sister-in-law, in the family house, either by subdivision or addition (personal communication). Nor could a second wife choose to live elsewhere, though like all wives, she had specified rights to make visits to her parental home. Two decades later Mosely (1976, p. 68) found cases in other parts of the Balkans of two wives living in different localities, but there were none in Mallakastër in 1918.

An extended family was considered the norm. About 60% of polygynously married women lived in extended families (as did a similar proportion of monogamously married women). The remainder lived as nuclear families with their husband, with or without children, and not uncommonly with additional relatives. One in six of the extended families contained two or more generations, but no more than one nuclear family in each. The rest (just over half of those polygamously married) were in extended families with various more complex structures, which also tended to be the largest (five households had 20 or more members, the largest had 23). In five of these households there were two polygynous marriages, in four cases in the same generation (the women were married to three pairs of brothers and a pair of cousins) and in one case in different generations (the husbands were the master of the house and a nephew).

According to Goody (1976, p. 63), the practice of polygyny is “closely related to the way kin are conceptualised, to the actor’s picture of the set of kinship roles”. In Albania, however, polygyny was accommodated, if slightly uneasily, within a pre-existing conceptual structure of which it was not a part. In customary law there is an absence of rules specifically for polygynous marriages or how they fit into family structure, though the eventuality is allowed for (Elezi, 1977, p. 239; Elezi, 2002, p. 94). The way in which relationships arising from polygynous marriages are recorded in the census is consistent with this interpretation. As well as ‘Frau I’ and ‘Frau II’ (the co-wives), some of the polygynous widows are designated ‘Mutter I’ and ‘Mutter II’ of the current master of the house. There are also examples of a

mother paired with a ‘father’s wife’ and one of a mother paired with a ‘brother’s mother’. In one case one of the women was classified as stepmother, and in another, both were so classified. This variation in terminology suggests a degree of uncertainty about how two people who share a single position in the family fit into the whole. When I asked an informant if a second wife was *njerkë* [stepmother], she answered hesitatingly in the affirmative, but seemed unsure, as if the term was inappropriate. Children addressed their father’s other wife as *xhixho* (def. *xhixhja*) (personal communication), which literally means ‘old woman’ or ‘old lady’, a term of respect (Qesku, 2000, p. 770).¹⁴

As most first wives in polygynous marriages were married to the master of the house, they were themselves *zonja e shtëpisë* [mistress (lit. lady) of the house], the woman who administered the house and directed the work of the other women (Elezi, 2002, p. 72). In the census schedules, as indicated above, the wives are listed in order of seniority. In most cases the first wife is the elder. This may also be the order in which they had married, especially where the age difference is relatively large, though that cannot be ascertained. Just 15 of the 186 second wives were older than the first (and one was also older than their husband). The explanation might be that the one married first had been displaced after the second marriage, but others are possible. In one family the second wife was listed after all the other family members (as were four second wives in other families) along with a girl described as her husband’s stepdaughter, suggesting she had been a widow before the marriage. Others, such as the older second wife who had brought her elderly mother into the household, may also have been in this position. Ten of the first wives, though younger than the second, were, according to the census evidence, nonetheless mistress of the house.

The term for a second wife or co-wife, which is sometimes used for both, was *shemër* (def. and pl. *shemra*), a feminine noun (Musaj, 2002, p. 179). The masculine form of the same word means ‘rival’. The sayings *Shkojnë si shemra*, or *Shko si shemër*, which mean ‘to lead a cat-and-dog life, to be constantly bickering, to compete, or to be on bad terms with one another’, presumably refer to the supposed nature of the relationship (Qesku, 2000, p. 633; Newmark, 1999, p. 814). In southern Albania co-wives were also known as *cingra* [people who quarrel] (personal communication).¹⁵ Opinions now vary as to the kind of relationship the wives had. Some think they quarrelled, others, more optimistically, think that co-wives were able to get along. A woman from northern Albania, who was married as a second wife at 17 in 1936 and was interviewed some 60 years later, said, ‘It was difficult at first, but we got used to

¹⁴ In the Peloponnese, children of the second wife called the first wife ‘*mana trani*’ [big mother], a term also used to address a grandmother (Alexakis, 1992, p. 9).

¹⁵ There is an apparent similarity with the terminology used in northwestern Greece for the wives of Greek Muslims who practised polygamy (Alexakis, 1992, pp. 4–5, 16, n22). In several other languages the term used for co-wife has the same meaning (e.g. Solway, 1990, p. 48; Meekers & Franklin, 1995, p. 316) or has acquired it (Verger, 1997, p. 201). Likewise, *kuma*, the term for the second wife used in some Turkish villages, carries derogatory overtones (Stirling, 1965, p. 110).

it” (Post, 1998, p. 64). There were pressures to at least reach a *modus vivendi*, as customary law sought to ensure harmony within a house. A man with two wives was supposed to treat both of them equally. In Mallakastër it was customary for him to sleep with them in turn, two nights with each (personal communication). They also had to get along with everyone else, for if a woman habitually quarrelled with others in the family (and not just her husband), it gave grounds for divorce (Elezi, 2002, p. 94). Wives, like everyone else, had to obey the master of the house and respect the mistress of the house, but the way they were treated was also governed by rules. In an extended family co-wives who were not themselves the mistress of the house shared the same structural relationship as other sisters-in-law,¹⁶ and the mistress of the house was required to treat all of them equally (Elezi, 2002, p. 73).

5. Becoming a second wife

Explanations for polygyny are invariably couched in terms of why men take second wives, but questions of how or why a woman comes to be a second wife are more rarely asked. The marriages we find in the census were all *fait accompli*; we are not told why they came about, but we can examine the possibilities.

Marriage was the final part of bringing up children, who expected to be taken care of in this way, but it was also a joining together of two families that linked their kin groups. It was the same for all marriages, whether monogamous or polygamous. It was the responsibility of the master of the house to arrange the betrothals and marriages of children in a family, over which he traditionally had complete control, though by the time of the census the mistress of the house also had some say in these decisions (Elezi, 2002, pp. 70, 72).¹⁷ The arrangement would be brokered by a matchmaker (*shkues* or *lajmës*) (Elezi, 2002, pp. 78, 79) through networks of kin and affines. The betrothal was a binding legal agreement entered into by the heads of the two families (Elezi, 2002, pp. 77-78), not the man and woman to be married. A son might be asked for his consent to the spouse the master of the house chose, but a daughter was not. She had to accept the spouse chosen by her father, or, if he was no longer alive, her brothers or male relatives (Elezi, 2002, pp. 74, 79). The couple did not see one another until their wedding, which was the closing act of the process that started with the betrothal (Elezi, 2002, p. 83).

The marriages a family made for its children, especially its daughters, affected its reputation, which it was the duty of the master of the house to protect. He also had to ensure they married. It was customary that, it was obligatory to marry (Elezi, 2002, p. 84). Marriage was a practical not a personal arrangement and for a woman, a virtual necessity. Not to marry left her with no position in society (cf. Ehrlich, 1966, p. 179). If a request (*kërkesë*) was received for the hand of one of the house's daughters, the master of the house might not be inclined to refuse, even if she were going to be a second wife. It was no less significant that the match might be beneficial to a woman's family and its reputation. Just as men's families sought second wives to forge alliances, whether economic or political (e.g. Coon, 1950, p. 26; Jacoby, 1995, p. 942), so too did women's families (Elezi, 2002, p. 78).¹⁸ Elderly people still say that if the man were rich or from a strong or “good” kin group, people were glad to give him their daughter (personal communication).

Men who were polygamous are often said to be those who were rich (though in Albania the highest levels of polygyny were in the poorest areas), and one woman was happy to give wealth as the reason her father had had two wives. Since the families of men who married two wives incurred extra expense—for a second wedding and gifts for an additional set of in-laws, this option was not open to all families. The only indication of wealth in the census is the presence of servants in a household. There was no institution of farm servants corresponding to that in western Europe. Muslim families would not allow an unescorted daughter to live in another household as it would compromise her honour and their reputation. Servants were not numerous; though some were undoubtedly employed for the work they did, others were children from poor families, elderly people, or war evacuees who had been taken in or kept in the

¹⁶ Solway (1990, p. 49) gives the example of the Bakgalagadi in Botswana, who use the same term for co-wives and for wives of the husband's brothers. This usage is also reported from Greece in the context of secondary wives (see Alexakis, 1992, p. 5).

¹⁷ Many men would not yet have reached this position when they married. Some of the polygynously married men (37 in all) were still not masters of the house (and some were never likely to be). In all except four of these cases, the master of the house was himself monogamously married (or a widower).

¹⁸ A non-resident second wife, who was enumerated with her husband and her co-wife at her birthplace in Mallakastër, had married a man in Berat, the main town of the region (his first wife was also from the town). Research elsewhere suggests that women did not enter into polygynous marriages with men below their status; therefore a man would be unable to use a polygynous marriage to forge an alliance with a family whose status was higher than his (e.g. Cuno, 2003, p. 257). The only information in the census about the origins of wives is their place of birth.

household as an act of charity (Vlora, 1968, p. 20).¹⁹ This could only be done by households of some means. However, while a higher proportion of households in which there was a polygynous marriage had servants compared with those in which there were only monogamous marriages, the proportion in both, 9% compared with less than 5%, was low. Some of the men who were polygynous did indeed have prominent and respected positions in the community; just over a quarter of the *hoxhës* had two wives, but many did not, and one had even hired himself out with his family as a servant. No members of the households of bey Cakran and his relatives, the richest family and the only one to have a large number of servants, were polygynous. All this suggests that, as in rural areas elsewhere in the Ottoman Empire, polygyny was not limited to the upper social strata (cf. Cuno, 2005, p. 11).

A first wife was unable to prevent her husband taking a second wife. Nor were women allowed to divorce their husbands under customary law, though in certain circumstances men were allowed to divorce their wives (Elezi, 2002, pp. 93, 94). A woman therefore had to accept that she would have to share her husband with another, usually younger, woman. It is sometimes said that a woman, realising her husband wanted to marry again, would herself seek out another woman she would be able to get along with. Some have pointed to a sparsity of reliable evidence to cast doubt on this suggestion (Fainzang & Jourmet, 1988, p. 54), but Mosely (1976, p. 67) and Alexakis (1992, p. 9) both cite cases elsewhere in the Balkans and others have been reported from Egypt (Shahd, 2003, p. 26). If it was the master of the house who took a second wife, it is conceivable that the first wife, the mistress of the house who had some influence over other marriages (see above), might have had some say in the choice of a co-wife, but no evidence has been found that she did.

6. Polygyny and children

One of the most important purposes of all marriages in Albania is to have children (Elezi, 2002, p. 83), especially sons, who stay in the household and whose wives care for the elderly parents as well as bearing children. Daughters move to another family on marriage. Most commonly in the past (Durham, 1909, p. 185; Kaucký, 1916, p. 64; c.f. Ehrlich, 1966, pp. 301, 302), as now in retrospect, the explanation given for polygyny was childlessness or the failure to produce sons.

The census does not indicate how many children had been born in each family, only how many were alive and resident in their parents' household on the census date. In the national sample 37.2% of couples had no resident children (Gruber, 2001). Either they had not had children, their children had not survived, or they only had daughters, who had left on marriage. Many children did not survive beyond infancy. Standards of hygiene were poor, there was no public health service, and there were too few midwives (Haigh, 1925, p. 11; Hoche, 1937, p. 555). Women who married young would give birth before they were sufficiently mature and suffer damage as a result. Inept treatment also impaired women's ability to have more children after their early pregnancies (Hoche, 1937, p. 555). Both men and women were made infertile by syphilis, which was widespread in many rural areas and went untreated (Hoche, 1937, p. 554; Haigh, 1925, p. 11; Durham, 1909, p. 125). Hoche ascribed it to a blatantly orientalist view of Albanian men's sexual behaviour. Yet even though the imposition of marital fidelity by customary law was not applied to men as rigorously as to women, this suggestion is not altogether plausible (Elezi, 2002, p. 91; c.f. Ehrlich, 1966, pp. 164, 317). Nor is it likely that the presence of several foreign armies in the country in the preceding 6 years was a major factor. While a few Albanian women were infected (and treated), it is evident from soldiers' complaints that they had minimal opportunity to consort with Albanian women (Nicholson, 2006, p. 136). Many cases were due to congenital infection (Haigh, 1925, p. 11).

If a couple (more precisely, a man) had no children, there were ways within customary law to seek a remedy. One was adoption (Elezi, 2002, p. 75), though it seems to have been little used. In the census 12 cases (six sons and six daughters) were recorded in only two villages, both relatively prosperous. Just half the adoptive parents were childless, in one case also polygynous, or had been when the adoption took place. (The man had apparently been widowed and married a younger wife, who bore him children.) The remaining adoptive parents already had children, and the position of the adoptees appeared more akin to servants, or possibly daughters who were "sold" (see note 19), suggesting adoption may have been understood in terms of this practice.

¹⁹ There was a practice, not, to my knowledge, researched, of poor families "selling" their daughters, handing them over for an agreed sum to better-off families, for whom they would work as unpaid servants. After several years the family would arrange their marriages (Vlora, 1968, pp. 19–20; cf. Durham, 1905, p. 294–295).

When a couple was childless, the wife was assumed to be at fault. Therefore, another solution was to marry an additional wife. Failure to bear a child was one of the few grounds on which a man was permitted to divorce his wife, but it necessitated considerable expense (Elezi, 2002, p. 93) and apparently happened rarely. Only a small number of divorced women appear in the census (just 54 women, and 31 men), compared with over 2000 widows (almost 10% of the enumerated population). Instead, if a man married a second wife in the hope of having children, he would remain married to the first and she would stay in his household (Elezi, 2002, p. 94).

In 48.9% of polygynous families, we cannot allocate any child to a particular biological mother; in another 14.5% not all can be so allocated (nor do we know if children had been born to mothers who had since died). Thus, in only a relatively few cases can we assess the role of childlessness. In at least 4.8% of families, we can reasonably assume there were no children before the polygynous marriage took place, and in a further 3.8% that there were only daughters. The desire for children (or sons) was thus a plausible reason for the second marriage. To these may be added the 22.6% of polygamous marriages that were still childless, and there may be further cases that could not be identified.

Another indication of how childlessness entered into decisions can be found in extended families in which there was more than one set of spouses, including at least one that was polygynous, 77 in total. This analysis necessarily builds on some conjecture and cannot take into account changes in the household, such as deaths of older children, which might have occurred after the second wife was acquired. In the majority of cases (62.3%), the master of the house was the polygynous husband, which could suggest that he used his power of decision to indulge his own desires (though not all masters would have reached their position at the time of their second marriages). Inspection of the composition of these households, however, points to a different interpretation: in more than half the cases, the master of the house had been the sole married man without children. Overall, this appeared to have been a decisive factor in just over 60% of the polygynous marriages in these households. Where the master of the house might have exercised an advantage was in obtaining his additional wife before others who might also have been childless. There were three pairs of childless brothers in which, by the time of the census, only the brother who was the master of the house had taken a second wife. Apparent deviations from an implied rule that those lower in status and age had to wait their turn were rare.²⁰

Yet, while polygyny was undoubtedly seen as a means to overcome childlessness for some, it was neither a universal justification nor a universal explanation. In at least 18.3% of marriages, it was reasonably certain that the first wife had children before her husband took a second wife; in 14.5% (and in a monogamous marriage with children of both sexes in which the husband later married a second wife), they included sons. In none of these, (and probably considerably more that cannot be identified) could childlessness explain the polygynous marriage nor, in the majority, the lack of sons. They include families with six or seven children in which a man had taken or been provided with a second wife. Among them are two cases of brothers in extended families who had more sons than any of the other married men, including the master of the house who had made the decision, and yet were provided with additional wives. The ever-present fear that children might not live to adulthood may have played a part. The continued growth of some of these families suggests there was a desire for still more children, and the possibility cannot be excluded that some masters of houses were inclined to use their position to obtain new and young wives for themselves.

7. Polygyny and family labour power

As well as the taken-for-granted reason of producing children and considerations such as creating alliances, one of the explicitly recognised functions of marriage was to maintain a family's labour power (Elezi, 2002, p. 83). The economy of Mallakastër was based on herding sheep and goats, which was men's work, as well as the cultivation of crops, notably olives. Some men, including two of those polygynously married, went on *kurbet* [labour migration] to Turkey or America. Women worked in the fields and olive groves; they took fodder to the animals, collected wood, and fetched water. These were all heavy and time-consuming tasks in terrain where dwellings were built high on ridges to avoid the risk of malaria. Fetching water alone for a large family was said, in some villages, to have occupied one person for the whole day. Women were also responsible for preparing food, making much of the family's clothing, raising and educating children, caring for old people, and, of course, bearing children. All women, except the very

²⁰ In the late 1930s in the former Yugoslavia and bordering areas of southwestern Albania, "the second wife was acquired only after the younger males had each been provided with his wife" (Mosely, 1976, p. 67). In Albania this also seemed to be the case, but young men not yet of marriageable age were not taken into account.

oldest and the very youngest, worked extremely hard. If there was just one woman in the house she was obliged to do all the work allocated to women, inside and out (Durham, 1909, p. 65; Elezi, 2002, p. 72).

A household's well-being depended on having an adequate supply of men's and women's (and children's) labour. As the use of servants was limited, it was necessary to use other means to overcome labour shortages over the family cycle. One of these was to marry children at very young ages, sometimes before puberty, either to others of a similar age or to an adult (cf. Durham, 1909, pp. 62, 163; Ehrlich, 1966, pp. 220, 224). Children as young as 10 (the youngest second wife was 13), boys as well as girls (though fewer of the former), were listed in the census as married and living with a spouse.²¹ It has also been suggested that the higher levels of remarriage in some societies than in others (Duben & Behar, 1991, p. 130) are associated with the need for labour power.

As in other societies where there were no markets for female agricultural labour, polygyny also played a part (Kaucký, 1916, p. 64; personal communication; Jacoby, 1995, p. 941; cf. Shahd, 2003:21). In a household where there were no young men of normal marriageable age, an alternative to marrying a son who was still underage was for a second wife to be procured for a man who was already married. In barely half a dozen of the households with polygynous marriages were there young men who would have been of marriageable age when the second wife was likely to have been added to the household. These exceptions may be explained by factors not apparent in the available data. The value of a woman's labour might also be a reason why a man who obtained a second wife for other reasons preferred not to divorce the first.

One of the explanations why rich men in particular took two wives probably also lies in the value of their labour. A rich man was better able than others to bear the extra expense of marrying a second wife, but equally she was likely to add to his wealth. All the income from the work of his spouse and the other women in the household belonged to the master of the house (Elezi, 2002, p. 73). 'Rich' in this rural context did not imply that wives could lead lives of leisure (c.f. Cuno, 2005, p. 11). For a man with a lot of land, the major source of wealth, a second wife, who worked for him or supported the work of others by working in his household, would be less an expense than an investment (cf. Jacoby, 1995, p. 966). Besides providing for their own needs, in Mallakastër families could add to their wealth by selling their surplus at the market in the administrative centre of Ballsh or to merchants from the towns of Berat and Fier at the bazaar in the village of Cakran. It is, perhaps, not a coincidence that several villages near the River Vjosa, where olive groves flourished on the slopes overlooking the river, were among those with the highest levels of polygyny—between 11% and 18% of all marriages.

As well as adding numbers to the family labour supply, polygyny also filled gaps in its structure. If a first wife was beginning to age, a younger second wife would relieve her of her burden of work, especially if the latter were in poor health or the family had onerous responsibilities. In some families, for example, there were elderly relatives who may have needed care, but no children to help in the work or sons who could be provided with a bride. In others there were several small children, in some cases also very elderly parents, but no sisters-in-law to share the work. Almost half of the second wives were 10 or more years younger than the first wife. Their position was not unlike that of *nuse* (a son's wife, lit. bride), who by custom takes over a major part of the work for her mother-in-law (Mosely, 1976, p. 67; cf. Gündüz-Hosgör, 1999, p. 10). Albanian women still try to ensure they have a live-in daughter-in-law to take over this role and to ensure they are cared for in their old age. For childless couples, as well as bringing the possibility of children, a second wife was a substitute for the daughter-in-law they would never have.

8. The end of polygyny

Albania in the early 20th century was by no means a 'polygynous society', if such a thing exists, but a society in which there was polygyny on a modest scale. It co-existed with the predominant monogamy not only within the society, but also within families and over the course of individual lives. It was part of a society in which it was taken for granted that the desires of individuals had to be subordinated to the needs of the family as a whole. Within the family everyone had entitlements, but they did not extend to making decisions about their own marriages, whether monogamous or polygamous,

²¹ The practice of marrying a child to an adult, in this case a woman who would work in the household, is the subject of a drama by Andon Çajupi, *Katërbëdhjetëvjeç dhëndër* [Bridegroom at fourteen], which is referred to as a comedy, but is, perhaps, thinly disguised social critique (Çajupi, [posthumous] 2001). There were no cases so extreme among boys in Mallakastër, but a dozen or so girls aged 15 or younger had husbands at least twice their age; one girl of 10 had a husband of 25; a girl of 15 was married to a man who was 70, and another, to a man of 53.

and still less for women than for men. Opinions about polygyny have become so clouded by more recent disapproval and outright condemnation that it is difficult now to assess how contemporaries viewed it. Such evidence as there is suggests there was pragmatic acceptance; while it was not ideal and some families may have refrained from it, it was not shameful or embarrassing. For example, in Mallakastër a higher proportion of polygynous men, one in five (and about half that proportion of their wives), than those monogamously married belonged to the Bektashi sect, a liberal and respected Sufi Order to which only people of good character were admitted.²² Though they no longer approve of it, local people are uninhibited about volunteering instances of polygyny in their own families in the past, which they would not do if it harmed their family's reputation.

The decision taken by religious leaders in 1923, that monogamy should be enforced in Albania, can be seen as part of a wider movement for women's rights, which had been gathering momentum in other parts of the old Ottoman Empire (notably Turkey itself and Egypt). Among the small urban educated elite polygyny had come to be viewed as a "bad custom" that was condemned as "destroying family life to serve the man's pleasure", and men who practised it were accused of lacking decency and morals (Selenica, 1928, p. CXVII). When the Civil Code was drawn up in 1928, 2 years after its Turkish equivalent (Behar, 1991, p. 478), polygyny was indeed outlawed. Article 123 stated "*Nuk mund të lidhet një martesë para se të zgjidhet e mëparshmjë*" [a marriage cannot be entered into before the previous marriage has been dissolved] (cited by Musaj, 2002, p. 179). As elsewhere polygyny did not cease immediately (Post, 1998, p. 64; Stirling, 1965, pp. 110-111, 195-199; Gündüz-Hosgör, 1999, pp. 9-10). In the short term Musaj's claim that from then on women would be spared from having to live with a *shemër* [a co-wife] (or, she might have added, having to become a *shemër*) was too optimistic, but their numbers declined as polygyny increasingly became the object of disapproval. After the Second World War under the communist regime, which forbade customary practices such as child betrothal and underage marriage, polygyny was severely condemned as immoral, a condemnation that did not spare women (see Elezi, 1970, p. 264), and stigmatised polygyny as a practice of the rich. In their neighbourhoods the dwindling number of polygynously married men (though, it appears, not the women) became objects of ridicule, as a rhyme about a fellow inhabitant recited in the 1970s by children in the village of Çorush in Mallakastër reveals:

*Sadiku me dy gra
Një puthë e njëra mba
njera puthë në faqe
tjetra shkule mustaqet*

[Sadik with two wives/one kisses and the other holds him/one kisses him on the cheek/the other pulls his moustache.]²³

As well as opinion, the conditions that sustained polygyny also changed during the second half of the 20th century. Improvements in health care reduced the causes of infertility and began to lower child mortality. In 2001, only about 11% of couples were childless, and no more than 4% of the women who had completed their childbearing period in the previous decade had no living children (Instituti i Statistikës, 2004, pp. 93-96, 97-99). For two generations nationalisation of land removed the household's function of providing its own labour force. When it was reprivatised, holdings were smaller, more people worked outside agriculture, and women's work in the household, while still hard, was not as arduous as before. In 1918, patriarchal control was already showing signs of becoming less monolithic (Elezi, 2002, p. 72), and, slowly this trend continues. The reputation of the family is still an important consideration in marriage, but it is a factor that precludes polygyny. Most marriages continue to be arranged, but coexist with an idealisation of romantic love in popular culture. The prospective bride and groom meet before they become engaged, and the consent of the woman as well as the man is sought. Some young people find their own partners. There are few people now who do not condemn polygyny, but it is no less significant that the structure within which it was practised is no more.

²² A contemporary tried to bolster his opposition to polygyny by claiming that among the well-respected Bektashis it was especially rare and usually forbidden (Selenica, 1928, p. CXVII note), but this was not so. According to a leading authority of the time, Bektashis "*me nevojë të keqe mund të miret' e dyjtë*" [in (case of) extreme need may take a second (wife)] (Frashëri, 1910, p. 6).

²³ Donika Alkaj, who is originally from the village of Çorush, recited this verse and wrote it down for me.

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