

# STORIES OF AFRICAN POLYGAMY

By  
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Photo 01 -

It was his father who chose his wives. Personally, Ladji Djimba didn't really want to live polygamously, but according to tradition he cannot go against his father's will. He is an ethnic Fulbhe.



Photo 02 -

*"You have no choice, it is your parents who decide,"* this is what Foulematou was told when presented with an older man who already had a wife. She was barely 15 when she met her husband's first wife, who to this day has never accepted her. For the past twenty years she has never spoken with the first wife, and feels very alone.



Photo 03 -

Aminata was 14 when her father gave her to Sirima, to become his second wife. Her arrival in the household was not without pain for the first wife who, accused of jealousy, had to face the reprimands of her in-laws as well as her husband's anger.



Photo 04 -

Sirima has three wives. The first marriage was arranged by his parents. The second wife is his cousin, aged 14 when her uncle gave her away, in order to strengthen family bonds. Fanta his third wife is the love match. She had been married to a man who had left both herself and her co-wife alone to look after his parents, and who never came back. When Fanta returned to her native village she met Sirima.



Photo 05 -

Sirima is surrounded by his sixteen children, the eldest of whom, 22 years old, holds his first child in his arms. The youngest of Sirima's children is 9 months old. His three wives are standing in the back row.



Photo 06 -

Aminata is a second wife. Originally from Mauritania, she now lives in France with her seven children. In order to renew her papers after the Pasqua Law was passed, she had to file for a divorce, which she obtained in 2000. She stills lives with her husband and his first wife, who has never accepted her. She is distraught because she cannot find a place to live. The children from the first marriage beat her. Her own are too scared to intervene.



Photo 07 -

In the courtyard of the women's prison in Bolé, Bamako, Sally Ballo is incarcerated for infanticide. Badly treated by her father's first wife, she fled her village to try to earn a living in the city. Without contraception, she quickly became pregnant. With her partner gone, she killed her child when it was born.



Photo 08 -

Her parents arranged her marriage and she was forced to accept. Neïmouna refused, she felt she was too young. Her parents tied her up and beat her. Married, she rejected her husband who then raped her. After the first night, she fled into the bush to hide. She was found several weeks later and brought back home; her husband called on her father. Neïmouna thought that having fled, the marriage would be annulled and that her father had come to bring her home. On the contrary, he tied her up and threatened to kill her if she continued to refuse the marriage. It was the father's honour that was at stake.



Photo 09 -

The second wife never wanted her children to communicate with those of the first wife. The father, under pressure from his second wife, gave minimum attention to the four children from his first marriage. At the slightest hint of an altercation between half-brothers and sisters, the father would automatically jump to the defence of the second wives' children, without even trying to understand the situation. Ever since Bassili's father had a heated discussion with the eldest son of his second wife, he has stopped paying for Bassili's education. Currently Bassili is left to his own devices. Penniless, he is living at a friend's house and tries to make a living from small business ventures.



Photo 10 -

Infected with HIV, Hawa discovered this during her fourth pregnancy. Her husband had been called to the hospital to be tested, but was never willing to share the results. His second child, a two-year-old who was born to his second wife, suffers constantly from abnormal illnesses. Sometimes the husband even writes prescriptions without consulting a doctor.

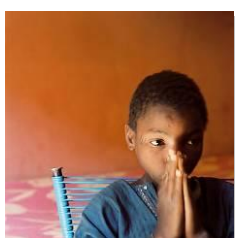


Photo 11 -

Abbas, 13, was found in the street two years ago during the night rounds of an association which looks after street kids. His mother, the second wife, was not her husband's favourite. His step-mother, his father's first wife, provoked discord between her own children and those of Abbas' mother. Abbas had a fight one day with one of his half-brothers. The step-mother intervened and tried to hit him with a wooden pestle. Failing this method, she took to Abbas with a kitchen knife, wounding his shoulder. His mother, destitute, asked him to leave and try to earn money. Abbas, feeling responsible, left to beg in the streets of Bamako.



Photo 12 -

Djénéba fell in love with her future husband at the age of 14. He wasn't yet married at the time. He remains the only man she's known. She was eight months pregnant with her third child when she learned that she had contracted HIV. Makan, her husband, had hidden his infection from his two wives. Luckily the third child of Djénéba isn't infected. But Tata is, the other wife's daughter, aged six. She receives treatment daily. Djénéba doesn't know yet whether her last child, who is 10 months old, is infected or not. Her faith in God helps her to get through this ordeal.



Photo 13 -

Makan is married to two women and has seven children. He discovered his seropositivity after tests for an unrelated illness. For almost a year, fearing his wives' reaction, he kept it quiet. Both his wives and one of their daughters (aged 6) have contracted the virus. Makan and his second wife take daily treatment.



Photo 14 -

Fatou, a widow, was the second wife of her husband who died four years ago from serious lung problems, but the hospital never gave them a specific cause. After an AIDS information and detection campaign, she decided to get tested. She discovered that she was seropositive and realised that her husband had been also. The youngest of her five daughters is also seropositive. Fatou is an active member of the association for the fight against AIDS, with whom she helps to create AIDS education programs in the Kayes region. She doesn't know what's become of her co-wife, who moved out before the death of their husband.



Photo 15 -

Fanta, married at 17, watched her husband distance himself from her with the arrival of a second wife. Since he ignored her totally, she began to earn a living selling things in the market. When he fell ill, the husband asked for Fanta's forgiveness. Without income, he relied on her to pay the medical bills. Fanta generously supported him until his death, and now takes care of his other wife and their 14 children. Their meagre income is insufficient to buy enough rice for everyone.



Photo 16 -

Aïssetou grew up in Burkina Faso at the home of one of her uncles, where she was happy. At 16, her family organised an arranged marriage for her in Mali. When summoned to join her husband she fled into the bush. Recaptured by her uncles, her husband raped her in front of them. Today, her co-wife accuses her of murdering one of her daughters who was left in Aïssetou's care. She is awaiting trial and risks a 20-year prison sentence. She proclaims her innocence, and claims that the accusation was made out of pure jealousy.



Photo 17 -

Fanta lived monogamously with her husband for five years until the day that his father chose a second wife for his son, who had no choice in the matter. The husband was seduced by the youth of his new wife, and no longer paid attention to Fanta. The co-wife didn't try to take advantage of this situation, so the two wives were able to live together tolerably well. The husband, now deceased, left them impoverished.



Photo 18 -

His first wife was the love match. The next three are the wives of his brothers who he had to marry following their deaths.



Photo 19 -

Married with three wives, Brahima Ba is an ethnic Fulbhe.



Photo 20 -

Fatoumata had been living in France for 15 years when her husband decided to bring a second wife back from his country. She feels "betrayed in her heart". Not only has she lost her place in the home, but the three bedroom apartment is too small to house two women, the husband and 10 children. She refuses to live this way, and decided to get out. She left with her five children, leaving everything behind and filed for divorce. Because of this she was rejected by her community. Little by little she is picking up the pieces of her life.



Photo 21 -

Fatoumata is a second wife who has moved out of the familial home. Some precincts (Mantes-la-jolie, les Mureaux...) help families in a polygamous situation to obtain housing for the second wife and her children. Often she is then obliged to get a divorce. Naturally, according to tradition, the husband continues to share his time equally with each of his wives.



Photo 22 -

Diarra was 20 in 1968 when he went to France to find work. In 1974, he returned to Mali and married his first wife. He left again for France, leaving her alone with the children and under his parents' responsibility. A decade later he suggested to his first wife that he remarry so that she would have some help in the home. His third wife was the wife of a deceased friend. He currently lives in a hostel in Montreuil. For 8 years he worked 16 hours a day, which allowed him to finance the construction of a new solid-wall home. Every year he returns to Mali to spend three or four months with his family.



Photo 23 -

Séga lived for 12 years with a man with whom she had five children before he died. She had refused to marry him because an African woman can no longer work once married. She was studying nursing at the time. At 29 she met her second husband who already had a wife. Strong-minded, she fought a lot with him. Finally she filed for divorce after one year of communal life. Several years later, her second husband proposed to her again. She accepted, but since in the meantime he had married again, she became the third wife.



Photo 24 -

Coumba, 60, is the widow of her first husband. After the usual one-year period of mourning, she accepted to become the second wife of a man from her village who had left to settle in the city. To earn some money she cultivates her corn field. It is common to propose to a young widow so that she's not left alone and penniless. Occasionally her husband comes back to the village to spend several days with her.

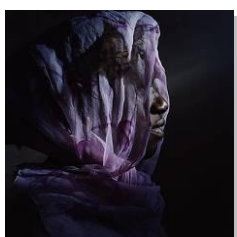


Photo 25 -

Aminata is a second wife. Originally from Mauritania, she now lives in France with her seven children.