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Polygamy as Sentimental Da'wah in the Prophetic Model and Its Contemporary Relevance

Eta Amala Husniya^a, Abdul Basir^b, Moh. Toyyib^c

State Islamic University of Sunan Ampel Surabaya, Indonesia

^aEmail: etaamala988@gmail.com

^bEmail: abdbasir793@gmail.com

^cEmail: mohtooyibzaen97@gmail.com

**Corresponding Author

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Abstract

Polygamy in Islam is often understood as a legally permissible practice sanctioned by Sharia. However, such interpretations tend to be normative and literalistic, overlooking its deeper ethical and spiritual dimensions. This article seeks to reinterpret the polygamous practice of the Prophet Muhammad as a form of sentimental da'wah—a compassionate and strategic expression of religious outreach—rather than merely a domestic arrangement or a male privilege. Employing a qualitative-descriptive method, this study systematically examines classical and contemporary literature to explore the socio-historical, spiritual, and symbolic dimensions of prophetic polygamy. The analysis compares the Prophet's practice with contemporary cases of polygamy in Indonesia, revealing significant contrasts. Drawing on the works of Wadud, Abou El Fadl, Talal Asad, Arkoun, and Fazlur Rahman, the study finds that the Prophet's marriages were driven by a vision of social solidarity, protection of vulnerable women, and political reconciliation. In contrast, modern polygamous practices often reflect emotional rationalization and symbolic assertions of religious masculinity, diverging from the principles of substantive justice. The article argues that prophetic polygamy should be understood as a contextual expression of prophetic spirituality, not as a structural Sunnah to be imitated indiscriminately. Such a reinterpretation is crucial for promoting an Islamic marital ethic grounded in compassion, social responsibility, and community empowerment.

Keywords: Justice, Polygamy, Prophetic Spirituality, Sentimental Da'wah

INTRODUCTION

Polygamy remains a contentious issue among Muslims, both in theological and sociological domains. Although polygamy is granted legal legitimacy in Islamic law, its implementation often sparks controversy, particularly due to concerns over justice for women, as emphasized in the Qur'an (Surah An-Nisa: 3). Many Muslims perceive polygamy merely as a component of the Prophet's Sunnah, without considering the historical and socio-political contexts that informed the Prophet's actions. In reality, Sunnah should not be interpreted solely as a literal imitation of the Prophet's practices, but rather as an ethical embodiment of his values and spirit (Abou El Fadl, 2001).

In the Prophet's life, polygamous marriages began after the passing of his first wife, Khadijah. These marriages carried significant social and strategic dimensions, such as strengthening inter-tribal alliances, offering protection to widows affected by war, and providing moral education and guidance to the Muslim community (Wadud, 1999). The Prophet's polygamy was inseparable from his broader mission of da'wah, aimed at constructing a just and resilient Islamic civilization. Thus, reducing polygamy to mere sexual gratification is a simplistic and misleading interpretation.

One relevant approach to understanding this practice is through the framework of what may be termed sentimental da'wah, which prioritizes affective and humanistic aspects of religious outreach. In this context, the Prophet's marriages to women from groups that once opposed Islam can be seen as acts of cultural diplomacy and emotional da'wah—emphasizing reconciliation, empathy, and protection for the vulnerable (Asad, 1986). The Prophet's wives also played vital roles in educating the community, particularly women, by transmitting hadiths and teaching social ethics (Al-Qaradawi, 1995).

In contemporary realities, however, public understanding of polygamy is often distorted. Many justify the practice in ways that fail to reflect the Prophet's moral vision and often ignore the principles of justice and communal welfare. As noted by the Indonesian scholar Gus Baha, polygamy is permissible, but it should not be invoked as a Sunnah unless one can embody the spiritual and contextual values behind the Prophet's actions (Bahauddin, 2019). Therefore, it is essential to reposition polygamy within the framework of da'wah, rather than treating it merely as a male right or a Sharia-based privilege.

Based on these concerns, this study aims to examine the polygamous practice of the Prophet Muhammad through the lens of sentimental da'wah, and to reassess its relevance in the context of modern Muslim societies. The research adopts a qualitative-analytical approach,

using literature review methods that engage both classical and contemporary sources. Its central argument is that prophetic polygamy was not an expression of domination, but a moral and social strategy for building a civilized and compassionate community.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach with a library research design. Library research is a method that utilizes written sources as the primary data, including sacred texts, books, journal articles, documents, and other relevant literature (Creswell, 2014). This approach is used to gain a deep understanding of the concept of polygamy within the framework of the Prophet Muhammad's da'wah and to assess its relevance in the modern era through a comprehensive review of the literature. The data used in this study are secondary in nature and derived from a variety of textual sources, including the Qur'an, hadith, Islamic scholarly works, peer-reviewed journal articles, and other academic and religious materials discussing the social, historical, and theological dimensions of polygamy. Data collection was carried out through a process of identifying, selecting, and critically analyzing literature that aligns with the research focus.

Data analysis was conducted using a descriptive-qualitative technique, which involves systematically presenting and interpreting the findings of the literature review in order to draw conclusions about the meaning and purpose of polygamy within the Prophet Muhammad's da'wah mission. This approach enables the researcher to construct a holistic and in-depth understanding of the topic without direct engagement with field subjects. The study aims to present an objective and balanced interpretation by referencing credible sources and the perspectives of scholars and Muslim intellectuals. As such, the findings of this research are expected to contribute a strong and relevant theoretical foundation for the study of da'wah and the contemporary Islamic discourse on polygamy.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Contemporary Issues of Polygamy

In contemporary practice, polygamy often becomes a source of social conflict, particularly when its implementation diverges from the principles of justice and public welfare (maslahah) emphasized in Islam. Zulkarnain (2020) argues that polygamous practices in society

frequently deviate from the primary objectives of marriage. Imbalances in household relationships often lead to jealousy, disputes, and even chaos within families. Furthermore, Abdillah Mustari (2019) highlights that polygamy in today's social context sometimes triggers community divisions, especially when practiced by public figures who serve as role models for the Muslim community. These conflicts reveal deeper issues concerning gender relations and social cohesion that require thorough examination.

The phenomenon of polygamy as a social reality has also been addressed in several studies. Hayatunnisa and Hafidzi (2018), in their research on the interpretative approach to Qur'an Surah An-Nisa: 3, concluded that contextual interpretations of polygamy conditions actually suggest that monogamy better aligns with the principle of justice. On the other hand, Mutakabbir (2019) traced the polygamous practices of the Prophet Muhammad SAW but did not elaborate deeply on the da'wah aspect or its social relevance. Meanwhile, Wartini (2013) explored the legal and legislative aspects of polygamy by comparing classical fiqh perspectives with Indonesia's positive law. These studies collectively point to a gap in the literature regarding the connection between the prophetic polygamy practice as an emotional and social da'wah strategy rather than mere legal permissibility.

Arif (2020), in his examination of digital movements such as the Instagram account @indonesiatanpapoligami, illustrated how opposition to polygamy is often rooted in women's experiences of injustice. This finding strengthens the argument that contemporary polygamy frequently symbolizes gender inequality rather than serving as a tool for social transformation, as it did during the prophetic era. Such social media movements reveal the growing awareness and critique of polygamy's negative impact on women's rights and social harmony in Muslim societies today.

From a juridical perspective, polygamy is indeed permitted under Indonesian law through Law No. 1 of 1974 and the Compilation of Islamic Law (KHI), with specific conditions such as when the wife is unable to fulfill household duties, is infertile, or seriously ill. However, there are significant imbalances in its application. A critical question arises: if such conditions were to occur on the husband's side, could he be "replaced" in a similar manner? If wives are expected to be patient with the husband's shortcomings, why should the reverse not apply? Qur'an Surah An-Nisa: 19 emphasizes the importance of good treatment toward one's spouse even in unpleasant circumstances:

“If you dislike them, perhaps you dislike a thing and Allah makes therein much good.” (QS. An-Nisa: 19)

Similarly, Surah Ar-Rum: 21 highlights that marriage in Islam is a mitsaqqan ghalizhan, a solemn covenant to build a household filled with tranquility (sakinah), love (mawaddah), and mercy (rahmah). Therefore, positioning polygamy as a unilateral right without spiritual reflection contradicts the core purpose of the marriage law itself (Hasani, 2015). This legal and ethical complexity demands that polygamy be understood within a framework that honors both rights and responsibilities.

The issue becomes even more complicated when the media highlights polygamous practices of prominent religious figures such as Abdullah Gymnastiar (Aa Gym). Public reactions reveal a gap between normative understandings of Islamic teachings and actual social practices. Polygamy is no longer understood within the framework of maslahah or da'wah but rather becomes a symbol of patriarchal power that diverges from the prophetic example. This discrepancy fuels debate and challenges the legitimacy of polygamy in the public eye.

Meanwhile, conservative Muslim groups often uphold polygamy as a symbol of commitment to the Sunnah but tend to overlook the spiritual and social dimensions accompanying the Prophet's practice. Notably, in significant events such as when Ali bin Abi Thalib intended to marry Sayyidah Fatimah, the Prophet Muhammad SAW explicitly forbade it out of concern for his daughter's feelings and to prevent social discord among the Muslim community. The Prophet stated:

“Fatimah is part of me. Whoever harms her harms me.” (HR. Bukhari, No. 5230)

This refusal signals that although polygamy is permitted, it is not an absolute Sunnah to be emulated in every context. Ali eventually abandoned his intention, unwilling to hurt Fatimah or disappoint the Prophet. This incident highlights that the spirit of justice, empathy, and social welfare takes precedence over literal imitation. It reflects the need to prioritize ethical values in the practice of polygamy. Thus, the contemporary problematics of polygamy do not lie in its legal validity but rather in the distortion of its meaning and the inconsistency of its practice with the ethical values exemplified by Prophet Muhammad SAW. This calls for a critical re-examination of polygamy as a social and moral institution rather than a mere legal entitlement.

Rationalization of Polygamy: Between Legal Legitimacy, Emotional Demands, and Representations of Justice

Polygamy in contemporary Muslim societies is often framed by a combination of legal, emotional, and spiritual rationales. In Indonesia, this practice is tightly regulated by positive law, specifically Law No. 1 of 1974 concerning Marriage and Government Regulation No. 9 of 1975. These legal provisions stipulate that a husband may practice polygamy only if he obtains consent from his first wife, is capable of maintaining justice among wives, and can financially support all wives and children adequately (Sudarsono, 2012). Courts serve as the institutional bodies verifying these criteria, particularly to assess justice and financial sufficiency as absolute prerequisites for lawful polygamy. This legal framework reflects a formal attempt to regulate the institution while addressing potential abuses.

Despite appearing strictly legal and administrative, the process frequently intersects with emotional dimensions that are not explicitly captured within the regulations. Common reasons cited by husbands include the wife's inability to bear children, emotional incompatibility, or unmet sexual needs (Jannah, 2020). Such arguments are not solely grounded in religious doctrine but also reflect a rationalization of personal needs framed in religious rhetoric. At this intersection, polygamy becomes a contested space between legal logic, spiritual reasoning, and the emotional realities of marital relationships. This complex dynamic challenges simplistic legalistic interpretations of the practice.

From a sharia perspective, polygamy is often referenced in Surah An-Nisa [4]: 3, which permits a man to marry up to four women on the condition that he acts justly. However, this verse does not stand alone. Verse 129 of the same surah emphasizes that perfect justice is nearly impossible to achieve (Abou El Fadl, 2001). This highlights the tension between ideal norms and ambivalent real-world practices. Therefore, justice in polygamy is not merely an administrative matter but also involves internal, emotional aspects that are difficult to measure objectively. Such spiritual and psychological complexities call for nuanced understanding beyond formal legality.

Within the fiqh tradition, scholars have diverse opinions regarding the standards of justice in polygamy. Classical jurists emphasize equitable distribution of time and wealth, while contemporary scholars stress the psychological and ethical dimensions of household relationships (Ali, 2006; Wadud, 1999). Consequently, when polygamy is reduced to a husband's right without evaluating relational quality and the wives' psychological well-being, the practice

risks perpetuating injustice that is nonetheless legitimized under religious authority. This discrepancy raises critical questions about the ethical limits of polygamy.

On the other hand, some contemporary polygamists claim that their actions are motivated by da'wah and worship intentions. In this narrative, polygamy serves as a means to assist women who are widows, orphans, or unmarried due to social conditions. Although this argument seemingly reflects the prophetic model, in practice it often fails to demonstrate the spiritual and social responsibilities intrinsic to the example of Prophet Muhammad SAW (Hidayat, 2014). This reveals a significant gap between the prophetic, ethical ideal and contemporary practices that tend to be selective or opportunistic.

Polygamy may also be understood as a symbolic arena for performing masculine piety. A husband who is able to "practice polygamy justly" is frequently associated with the image of a financially and spiritually successful man. This narrative appears in various religious sermons, testimonies of public figures, and social media content. Within this framework, polygamy is not merely a household practice but also part of the politics of representing religious masculinity within Muslim societies (Nisa, 2012; Feener, 2007). It thus embodies broader social dynamics and gender constructions beyond the marital context.

Therefore, it is imperative to reassess polygamous practices not only from legal and doctrinal perspectives but also through ethical, emotional, and symbolic lenses. Is polygamy today genuinely practiced as a form of sentimental da'wah and elevation of women, as exemplified by the Prophet? Or has it become a vehicle for fulfilling personal desires cloaked in religious legitimacy? This question opens critical space for reflection on the meanings of justice, spiritual responsibility, and power relations within the institution of modern Islamic marriage.

The Polygamy of Prophet Muhammad SAW as a Sentimental Da'wah Strategy: A Socio-Historical Review and Its Relevance for Contemporary Muslim Men

In the early Islamic historical context, the polygamous practice of Prophet Muhammad SAW cannot be separated from its social, political, and spiritual dimensions. This practice was not merely driven by biological urges or personal desires but rather constituted part of a da'wah strategy that appealed to the heart, cared for vulnerable communities, and strengthened the social structure of the nascent Muslim ummah. Within the framework of sentimental da'wah, as explained by Rahmat (2008), emotional and affective approaches form an integral part of reaching audiences who are difficult to engage solely through rational discourse. Prophet

Muhammad SAW utilized marriage as a means to convey messages of compassion, solidarity, and protection toward widows, orphans, and minority groups. This approach reflects the multifaceted role of marriage beyond the personal sphere, encompassing communal welfare and spiritual outreach.

Historical records indicate that many of the Prophet's wives were widows left vulnerable by war, such as Ummu Salamah and Zainab binti Khuzaimah. Marriages with these women not only elevated their social status but also provided emotional support and protection within a patriarchal and precarious society (Wadud, 1999). Through these unions, the Prophet's practice of polygamy served as a form of da'wah that empowered marginalized women and addressed social inequalities. This practice simultaneously critiques modern interpretations that reduce polygamy to merely an expression of male domination over women (Engineer, 2008). Thus, the prophetic model offers a nuanced understanding that foregrounds care and responsibility.

This perspective is reinforced by contemporary Islamic scholars such as KH Ahmad Bahauddin Nursalim (Gus Baha), who emphasizes that the Prophet's polygamy occurred after the death of Khadijah and was motivated by social concerns rather than personal desire. Gus Baha cautions those who seek to practice polygamy against hastily claiming to follow the sunnah, noting that the Prophet's marriages took place within a complex context requiring significant moral and social responsibility (NU Online, 2019). This underscores the importance of comprehending the historical and ethical context behind the Prophet's actions before asserting their legitimacy in contemporary settings. It also invites a critical reflection on the meaning of following prophetic precedents.

Moreover, the Prophet's marriages to women from tribes formerly hostile to Islam, such as Juwairiyah binti al-Harith and Shafiyah binti Huyayy, were diplomatic efforts aimed at easing intertribal tensions and fostering social reconciliation. In this context, polygamy functioned as an instrument of social and political alliance-building. Abu Zayd (2006) notes that in pre-Islamic Arab society, marriage often served as a mechanism for forging alliances and loyalty across tribes. The Prophet strategically employed this cultural tradition to consolidate Islam's political position in the Hijaz region. This dimension illustrates the intersection of personal, social, and political objectives embedded within his marital practices.

The educational aspect of the Prophet's polygamy is also significant. His wives, particularly Aisyah RA, became principal transmitters of Islamic knowledge and religious rulings, especially regarding family law and domestic life. They played a vital role in shaping the early generation of Muslim women (al-Qaradawi, 1994). Consequently, the Prophet's polygamy

was not merely a domestic arrangement but also an arena for education, spiritual development, and the dissemination of Islamic jurisprudence. This educational function contributes to a deeper understanding of the institution's social and religious significance.

In the contemporary context, some Muslim men attempt to emulate the Prophet's polygamous practices without fully considering the underlying social structure, moral responsibilities, and da'wah mission that informed them. This often triggers controversy, especially when such practices harm women or are carried out without justice. Research by Salim (2015) reveals that modern polygamy frequently leads to domestic conflicts and infringements on women's rights when detached from the vision of da'wah and social justice. Such findings call for careful evaluation of polygamy's implementation in today's societies.

Nevertheless, polygamy does not lose all relevance in modern society. In specific situations, such as gender imbalances following conflict or social circumstances requiring the presence of a social father figure, polygamy may be considered a value-based solution, provided it is practiced with justice and high spiritual readiness (Syamsuddin, 2007). Thus, polygamy can serve as a form of da'wah if conducted proportionally, empathetically, and with a communal vision in mind.

Therefore, men in the modern era must view polygamy not as a privileged right to be claimed indiscriminately but as a da'wah trust that carries social, spiritual, and moral burdens. Emulating the Prophet means imitating the essence of his intentions and strategies, not merely their formal manifestations. Accordingly, discourse on polygamy should be redirected toward the values of sentimental da'wah: embracing the vulnerable, strengthening communities, and spreading compassion rooted in faith in Allah SWT.

The Transformation of the Meaning of Polygamy: From Social Practice to Da'wah Spirituality

The polygamous practice of Prophet Muhammad SAW has long been the subject of discourse in Islamic studies, examined from both legal and socio-historical perspectives. However, interpretations of this practice often fall into literalist and normative readings that overlook the profound spiritual and ethical dimensions that underpin it. In this regard, a reinterpretation of prophetic polygamy is necessary—not as a legal precedent to be casually replicated by contemporary Muslim men, but as an expression of sentimental da'wah and prophetic spirituality.

In the framework of da'wah, the Prophet did not merely convey divine revelations verbally but also embodied them through social acts of compassion toward vulnerable groups, including widows, orphans, and marginalized women. One such manifestation was his marriage to women who were socially disadvantaged due to their economic status, ethnicity, or trauma from war (Nasr, 2006). Thus, polygamy in the prophetic context should be viewed as part of a da'wah strategy centered on sentimental values—empathy, compassion, and sacrifice—rather than lust or worldly ambition.

The transformation of polygamy from a social practice to a form of spiritual da'wah demands a broader ethical lens. Talal Asad (2003), in *Formations of the Secular*, emphasizes the importance of viewing religion as a project of moral subject formation. Applying this approach, the Prophet's polygamy can be understood as an effort to build a spiritually inclusive community, rather than merely forming household relationships. Here, polygamy functions not as a fixed legal norm (*shari'ah*), but as a prophetic tactic responding to a context of social crisis.

The moral eligibility of contemporary men to emulate the Prophet's polygamy is a crucial issue. As Abou El-Fadl (2001) argues, following the Prophet must be based on substantive justice, not merely formal legalism. Very few Muslim men today possess the spiritual, emotional, and moral capacities required to authentically replicate the Prophet's actions. Consequently, treating polygamy as a “revivable sunnah” without considering its *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah* and historical context constitutes a narrowing of Islam's vision as a mercy to all creation (*rahmatan lil-‘ālamīn*).

Furthermore, Amina Wadud (1999) contends that Qur'anic verses on polygamy should be interpreted through the lens of gender justice and the protection of women's rights. In this progressive reading, polygamy is not categorically rejected but is subject to critique when practiced within a patriarchal and exploitative framework. This perspective is crucial in curbing abusive implementations of polygamy and affirming that Islamic spirituality demands justice as a core value in all social relationships.

This approach aligns with the spiritual ethics of Muhammad Arkoun (2006), who rejects scripturalist methods that freeze the meaning of Islam. He advocates for a critical humanist reading of Islamic values. From this standpoint, polygamy is not a normative doctrine to be enforced but a prophetic expression of compassion under historically specific, crisis-laden conditions. Such a transformation encourages Muslims to view polygamy not as a right but as a moral and spiritual burden that must be consciously and responsibly borne.

In addition, from the perspective of Islamic sociology, prophetic polygamy may be interpreted as a strategy of social and political integration. As Fazlur Rahman (1982) observes, Prophet Muhammad SAW married women from various tribes not for the satisfaction of personal desires but to foster social reconciliation and strengthen inter-tribal solidarity. In this way, the Prophet's polygamy constituted a form of soft diplomacy in a society fractured by conflict and tribalism.

The transformation of the meaning of polygamy also involves the spiritual dimension of the household. As al-Ghazali (2004) explains, the household in Islam is a field for spiritual training, demanding sincerity, patience, and justice. Understood in this way, polygamy is not a site of pleasure but a space for cultivating obedience, empathy, and sacrifice. Therefore, adopting prophetic polygamy requires not only legal compliance but also a high degree of spiritual readiness.

In conclusion, prophetic polygamy is best understood as a contextual sunnah rather than a structural one. It is not meant to be mechanically imitated but to be deeply reflected upon as a spiritual and ethical model. In the modern context, framing polygamy as part of da'wah spirituality necessitates that its practice be oriented toward substantive justice, rather than personal gratification or existential dominance. This transformed understanding is essential for a wise and ethical engagement with the legacy of Prophet Muhammad SAW in today's world.

CONCLUSION

Polygamy in the context of Prophet Muhammad SAW is not merely a personal practice or normative legality; rather, it constitutes a sentimental da'wah strategy aimed at strengthening the community, protecting vulnerable groups, and fostering socio-political reconciliation. Historically, the Prophet's polygamous marriages were responsive acts addressing humanitarian and social crises, rather than expressions of patriarchal domination.

Conversely, contemporary polygamy tends to be reduced to legal issues or commodified as a performance of masculine piety, often neglecting spiritual and moral responsibilities. This study emphasizes that emulating the Prophet's polygamy requires ethical exemplarity, contextual awareness, and profound spiritual readiness.

The transformation of polygamy's meaning—from a mere social structure to a spirituality of da'wah—demands an understanding beyond scriptural literalism. From the perspective of *maqāṣid al-shari'ah*, justice, compassion, and the dignification of women are

central to the prophetic practice of polygamy. Therefore, adopting polygamy as a sunnah must be accompanied by critical reflection on contemporary social contexts and the ethical orientation of Prophet Muhammad SAW as *rahmatan lil-‘ālamīn* (mercy to all worlds).

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