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Polygamy Fosters Culture Clashes (and Regrets) in Turkey



Ali Kaska for The New York Times

Aga Mehmet Arslan, a Kurdish village chieftain in Turkey, in front of one of his five houses in Isiklar, Turkey, one house for each of his five wives. If he had to do it over, he said, he would marry only one woman.

By DAN BILEFSKY
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ISIKLAR, [Turkey](#), July 6 — With his 5 wives, 55 children and 80 grandchildren, 400 sheep, 1,200 acres of land and a small army of servants, Aga Mehmet Arslan would seem an unlikely defender of monogamy.

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Yet if he were young again, said Mr. Arslan, a sprightly, potbellied, 64-year-old Kurdish village chieftain, he would happily trade in his five wives for one.

"Marrying five wives is not sinful, and I did so because to have many wives is a sign of power," he said, perched on a divan in a large cushion-filled room at his house, where a portrait of Turkey's first president, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, who outlawed polygamy in 1926, is prominently displayed.

"But I wouldn't do it again," he added, listing the challenges of having so many kin — like the need to build each wife a house away from the others to prevent friction and his struggle to remember all of his children's names. "I was uneducated back then, and God commands us to be fruitful and multiply."

Though banned by Atatürk as part of an effort to modernize

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Songul Fiktan, with one of her children, was forced into a polygamous marriage by her family.



The New York Times

Though banned, polygamy is widespread in the Isiklar region.

the Turkish republic and empower women, polygamy remains widespread in this deeply religious and rural Kurdish region of southeastern Anatolia, home to one-third of Turkey's 71 million people. The practice is generally accepted under the Koran.

Polygamy is creating cultural clashes in a country struggling to reconcile the secularism of the republic with its Muslim traditions. It also risks undermining Turkey's drive to gain entry into the [European Union](#).

"The E.U. is looking for any excuse not to let Turkey in, and polygamy reinforces the stereotype of Turkey as a backward country," said Handan Coskun, director of a women's center.

Because polygamous marriages are not recognized by the state — imams who conduct them are subject to punishment — the wives have no legal status, making them vulnerable when marriages turn violent. Yet the local authorities here typically turn a blind eye because the practice is viewed as a tradition.

Two years ago, Prime Minister Tayyip Recep Erdogan tried to attack polygamy by criminalizing adultery, after prominent members of his Justice and Development Party were rumored to have taken second wives. The European Union, even though it condemns polygamy, criticized him for intervening in the nation's bedrooms, leading him to back down.

In Turkey, polygamy experts explain the practice as a hangover from the Ottoman period, when harem culture abounded and having several wives was viewed as a symbol of influence, sexual prowess and wealth.

Remzi Otto, a sociology professor at Dicle University in Diyarbakir, who conducted a survey of 50 polygamous families, said some men took second wives if their first wives could not conceive sons. Some also take widowed women and orphan girls as second wives to give them a social safety net. Love, he added, can also play a role.

"Many men in this region are forced into marriages when they are as young as 13, so finding their own wife is a way to rebel and express their independence," he said.

Isiklar, the remote village where Mr. Arslan is the aga, or chief, can be found at the end of a long dirt road, surrounded by sweeping verdant fields. Most of the local residents share the surname Arslan, which means lion in Turkish and connotes virility.

Mr. Arslan said he regretted his multiple marriages and had forbidden his sons to take more than one wife. He is also educating his daughters.

"I have done nothing shameful," he said. "I don't drink. I treat everyone with respect. But having so many wives can create problems."

His biggest headache, he said, stems from jealousy among the wives, the first of whom he married out of love. "My rule is to behave equally toward all of my wives," he said. "But the first wife was very, very jealous when the second wife came. When the third arrived, the first two created an alliance against her. So I have to be a good diplomat."

Mr. Arslan, who owns land, real estate and shops throughout the region, said the financial burden of so many offspring could be overwhelming. "When I go to the shoe shop, I buy 100 pairs of shoes at a time," he said. "The clerk at the store thinks I'm a shoe salesman and tells me to go visit a wholesaler."

He also has trouble keeping track of his children. He recently saw two boys fighting in the

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street and told them they would bring shame on their families. "Do you not recognize me?" one replied. "I am your son."

Religious leaders in the region are beginning to question polygamy. On a recent day at the Ulu Mosque in Diyarbakir, a group of Islamic scholars washed their feet as they debated the merits of a second marriage.

Imam Camisab Ozbek said Islam permitted a man to take up to four wives, but only on the condition that each wife had her own property, assets and dowry. He said some local polygamous men were distorting the Koran's teachings.

"If a husband takes a second wife and doesn't behave equally toward her, when he dies he will be handicapped in the hereafter and go to hell," he said.

Women's groups say polygamy is putting women at risk. "These women can be abused, raped, mistreated, and because their marriages are not legal, they have nowhere to turn," said Ms. Coskun, the director of the women's center, which has opened bread-making factories in poor rural areas where women can work and take classes on women's rights.

Blind and handicapped at birth, Songul Fiktan, 31, said she was forced by her family to marry her cousin's husband because her cousin could not conceive. On the wedding night, she learned her husband was 65 years old. "I didn't know if my husband was young or old, handsome or ugly," she said, shaking and wiping her eyes with her veil.

After she produced seven children, now ages 6 months to 15 years, her husband told her he could not afford to support the family and fled, so she and her children went to Diyarbakir and became beggars. A local professor found her on the street and took her to a shelter.

Back in Isiklar, Mr. Arslan acknowledged that polygamy was an outmoded practice. "God has been giving to me because I am giving to my family," he said. "But if you want to be happy, marry one wife."

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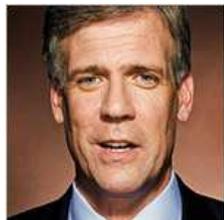
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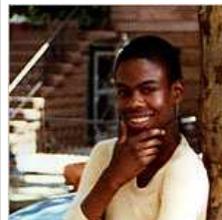
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