

Synopsis:

# STORIES OF AFRICAN POLYGAMY

By  
**Frédérique JOUVAL**

Mali 2006

Polygamy has not been tolerated in France since the introduction of the 1993 Pasqua law which prohibits legal foreign workers from sending for their families. For an entire generation of Africans, particularly from Western Africa, polygamy is so deeply rooted in their way of life that they continue the practice in France like « back home » even at the risk of breaking the law. The women themselves say, « It's like that at home », but that hides some of the reality.... Polygamy is « an ancestral custom » and a sign of wealth dating from a time when it was necessary to increase the productivity of the life-sustaining activities of agriculture and fishing. The custom has had the practical effect of increasing the number of hands by developing the local economy. After having started my work in France and running into the difficulties inherent in photographing an illegal activity, I decided to actually go to Mali to better understand the reality and the consequences of polygamy from the ground.

In France and in Mali, I met polygamous families in order to explore the different facets of their reality: forced separation of wives and families, economic difficulties, rejection of children, HIV transmission, children who are lost in parental conflicts. But I saw something else, more difficult to define, which goes beyond any notion of judgement or condemnation, because I also witnessed families living happily within this cultural tradition. At least in olden times, this tradition would appear to have taken into account the wellbeing of women and children. "Olden times"...a period perhaps somewhat mythical, centred upon hunting and tribal warfare. A period when death could strike down in an instant the head of a family, leaving women and children to fend for themselves. Polygamy was something of a safety guarantee for the family of the deceased, being systematically brought under the protection of a brother or any other man close to the family. This notion of communal well-being exists still today, even though living conditions are profoundly different and don't really justify the same approach.

*"Having begun my work in France", explains Frédérique Jovial, "I decided to go to Mali to understand better the reality and consequences of polygamy. A personal story is attached to each portrait, whether it be happy or sad".*

This cultural tradition is the source of a great deal of suffering in many cases. The family conflicts are fanned by the rivalries between wives which in turn have an impact on the childhood experiences of the children who often end up used as pawns in the battles.