



ISSN 2336-3274 (Print) ISSN 2570-7558 (Online)

<https://edu.uhk.cz/africa>

Pauli, Julia. 2019. The Decline of Marriage in Namibia. Bielefeld: Transcript . 340 pp. ISBN: 9783837643039

Author:

Stephanie Rudwick – Philosophical Faculty, University of Hradec Kralové, The Czech Republic and University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

Recommended citation:

Rudwick, S. (2019). Pauli, Julia. 2019. The Decline of Marriage in Namibia. Bielefeld: Transcript . 340 pp. ISBN: 9783837643039. Modern Africa: Politics, History and Society, 7(2), 134–138. <https://doi.org/10.26806/modafr.v7i2.291>



University of Hradec Králové
Philosophical Faculty

Pauli, Julia. 2019. *The Decline of Marriage in Namibia*. Bielefeld: Transcript . 340 pp. ISBN: 9783837643039

With this monograph Julia Pauli's long-term ethnographic research in the southern Kunene region of Namibia is beautifully captured. The book is a nuanced account of the multiple transformations of marriage practices in a rural community, called Fransfontein, through a historical-anthropological lens. While written in quite a traditional anthropological fashion, including rich ethnographic narratives, it is also an invaluable socio-historical contribution. Pauli recognises that "in order to fully comprehend the changes that had happened in terms of marriage" the life worlds of individuals had to be set "within a larger historical timeframe" (p. 58). The monograph is, to the best of my knowledge, the most comprehensive and detailed recent study on marriage in Southern Africa. It primarily tackles the lingering question of why marriage has declined to such a large degree through a holistic approach that carefully takes into account socio-political and socio-economic contexts. The thick description compellingly shows that highly expensive practices of consumption have contributed to weddings having become unattainable for "ordinary" and working-class Namibians. Pauli describes the central aim of her book as "to understand how marriage in Fransfontein has turned from an almost universal institution into a celebration of class distinction" (p. 42). Building on Bourdieu's (1984) analysis of distinction and class formation, this monograph represents a lasting contribution to the study of marriage in Africa and many scholars and students will benefit from reading it.

The book is divided into three parts which excludes an elaborate introduction section and a rather short conclusion. The divisions might be unconventional, but they make perfect sense when one starts reading. The introduction commences with a vignette of a Fransfontein woman's wedding before Pauli clarifies terminological choices (e.g., why she distinctly writes about "elites" rather than the "middle class," etc.). The introductory section covers an impressive wealth of anthropological and socio-historical works that have influenced the ways in which marriage has been studied in Southern Africa. In her own words, Pauli explains how her research is informed "through the lens of several broad anthropological perspectives," i.e., metanarratives,

which are: (1) stable African marriages; (2) destruction of “the” African marriage and family system; (3) change of African marriage; and (4) the plurality of African marriages (pp. 26–38). She then introduces her own, the fifth metanarrative which aims at understanding the rising wedding costs and decline in marriage rates through “close attention to the complex entanglements of marriage with political economic processes, (...) class formation processes, but also gender dynamics and reproductive changes” (p. 42).

The first part of the book presents the conceptual and ethnographic framework of the study. There are some painstaking details about the struggle to find and choose the research site, relationships with participants and assistants, and a European researcher’s reflections and introspections about a family in the field. Although some of these reflections might be a little tedious to read for non-anthropological scholars, this first section does provide the minute detail necessary to make sense of the socio-political and economic conditions of Fransfontein. In the penultimate part of the first chapter Pauli discusses, at length, how the concepts of cohort and generation constitute her primary analytical tools. The last section of Part I is again rich in ethnographic detail and provides many insights into the historically, politically, and socio-economically shifting conditions of the people in the Fransfontein region. Pauli also provides much valuable information about ethnicity, religion, political affiliations, and migration patterns which she gathered through an ethnographic census involving 750 individuals. We learn about household structures, inhabitants’ occupations and consumption patterns. All in all, this offers a nuanced and holistic account of the community.

In Part II – perhaps the backbone of the book – Pauli thickly describes in two chapters how Fransfontein marriage processes are constituted and have transformed over time. She shows the complexities of the changes from marriage as a common practice to marriage as reserved for the elite. She highlights how marriage as an individual and collective affair is marked by great ambiguities. In Pauli’s words, “for everybody involved in a Fransfontein marriage, triumphs, tests and traumas might be rather closely related, unraveling the different aspects of marriage” (p. 129). In the first chapter, she analyses the socio-cultural and ritual practices involved in marriage before focusing on the transformation of marriage as a result of new class formation

processes. In defining marriage in Fransfontein, and distinguishing her research from studies on marriages in South Africa, Pauli also recognises that there are important parallels between the decline in marriage in various Southern African countries due to the increasing monetary demand involved in the marriage process. Chapter 1 of Part II discusses the initial marriage process, the *!game-#gans* or “asking ritual” in close detail. Reading about the extent of embarrassments and humiliations one has to endure as a groom and a bride before the wedding, I found myself surprised that anyone would want to get married under such circumstances. But it seems that the indignities of the initial ritual do not compare to the joys and triumphs of being a married person and, hence, a respected member of the elite. Once the couple successfully completes the “asking ritual,” the two kin groups agree to the *reng #nuis*, the engagement. During the engagement, food and drinks are provided and throughout this ceremony, the bride will be “marked” with jewellery provided by her husband and his family. Towards the end of these rich descriptions (p. 145), Pauli takes stock of the enormous costs accruing already during these initial processes. The husband-to-be finances transport and accommodation costs, jewellery for the marking as well as generous catering for the engagement ceremony and this all needs to be paid before the actual wedding takes place. There are some similarities, for instance, to the extensive costs involved in the various ceremonies leading up to the actual wedding in the Zulu context (Rudwick and Posel 2015).

In Fransfontein the wedding can be divided into seven stages (p. 145ff) and each of these is described in detail throughout the next pages of the book. While ceremonies seem to vary to some degree, they all require a distinct amount of money. In the following section the author describes marriages according to three distinct generations, which is rather central to her argument (p. 157ff). Through these age distinctions the reader begins to grasp how in previous generations marriage was a common good which the overwhelming majority of people had access to while, more recently, it has become reserved for a small “lucky” or “wealthy” group. Pauli’s “analysis of marriage in terms of generation thus demonstrates how marriages have gotten more lavish and expensive over time, and with that a clear marker of elite status within the community” (p. 160).

Part III provides more intimate life stories of individuals in the Fransfontein community and sheds light into the consequences of the documented marriage decline. In the first chapter of this part, “Forming Families,” Pauli shows how ideas about marriage, sexuality and reproduction are (dis-)entangled and have been so for various generations, and she poses a primary question: When does and when doesn’t marriage provide a frame for reproduction (p. 205). In her response Pauli skilfully draws from her rich empirical data to formulate her claims. The second chapter, then, portrays how intimate relationships are currently constituted in complex ways outside and beyond marriage. The chapter also scrutinises the potential stigmatisation of children born out-of-wedlock and under certain conditions. In the last chapter, Pauli unravels how the decline of marriage in Fransfontein has markedly reconfigured the nuclear family, how the practice of multiple partners is widespread and how during the past sixty years most children (85%) have been born out-off-wedlock. Of central importance is Pauli’s description of the significance of “the key” and how this symbol “connects the first birth to age and not to marriage” (p. 218). This means that Fransfontein women are rewarded for first pregnancy at a later age rather than for childbirth in marriage. “Giving birth outside of marriage is thus the norm in Fransfontein” (p. 250).

Throughout this compelling chapter I was wondering whether it is not also important to Fransfontein men that their children carry their surnames as is the case in South Africa. In Zulu society the practice of *inhlawulo* enables a man to claim rights to the child and it also results in the child adopting his surname. While this clearly is not the focus of the monograph, I found myself wondering why absent fatherhood finds no attention here. Pauli writes about the “increasing stigmatization of children out-off-wedlock” (p. 40, p. 227) in a general sense but she also clarifies that this stigma is only attached to children perceived as “illegimate,” i.e., whose fathers are married to another woman, not their mother. However, I found the example of Eulilia (and women in similar situations) not sufficiently convincing as general evidence for an “increasing stigmatization of out-of-wedlock birth.” What is described (p. 251ff) are very particular circumstances and, at least from my perspective, most “officially” monogamist and patriarchal societies would evaluate these two births (and by extension the mothers) in very different ways.

In the conclusion Pauli reviews the four metanarratives (stability, destruction, change and plurality) of African marriage and asks – in her fifth narrative – why marriage has been so markedly declining in the past sixty years and what “marriage” means when it has become an elitist institution. She argues that the exclusiveness of marriage constitutes a boundary in the Fransfontein community in such a way that cohabitation, “illegitimate” children and early pregnancy have transformed from constituting symbolic boundaries to “real-life” social class boundaries. These boundaries “manifest how unmarried Fransfonteiners are excluded from material and nonmaterial resources and opportunities” (p. 263). In concluding, Pauli also alludes to other performance fields of class distinctions that are emerging, such as funerals, in house construction, and the ownership of livestock (p. 263ff). Earlier in the book, the author had announced (p. 44) that her conclusion would discuss the “main findings in global comparison, investigating the specificities of the Namibian situation” but on this subject I found the book less instructive. Is it not indeed a global phenomenon that marriage is on a decline and that many couples have children before they get married? Some aspects of the specificities of the Namibian situation could have been discussed in a global context in more detail.

On the whole, however, this monograph provides a superb ethnography and a fruitful resource for understanding most of the core issues that revolve around marriage and the lack thereof in a Namibian community. It has much value as an anthropological study that indicates how new consumption patterns affect “traditional” institutions.

Stephanie Rudwick

References

- Bourdieu, P. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Rudwick, S. and Posel, D. 2015. “Zulu bridewealth (*ilobolo*) and womanhood in South Africa.” *Social Dynamics* 41(2): 1–17.