



## Marriage as an end or the end of marriage? Change and continuity in Southern African marriages

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## **SPECIAL SECTION: Change and continuity in Southern African marriages**

### **INTRODUCTION**

## **Marriage as an end or the end of marriage? Change and continuity in Southern African marriages**

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Marriage used to be widespread and common throughout Southern Africa. However, over the past decades marriage rates have substantially declined in the whole region. Marriage has changed from a universal rite of passage into a conspicuous celebration of middle class lifestyles. Bridewealth or *lobola* remains important and is supplemented by a plethora of new rituals and expenditures. Yet, despite marriage's recent turn towards exclusivity, the institution nevertheless continues to be an important frame of reference for most people. The contributions in this special issue explore reconfigurations of marriages and weddings in South Africa, Botswana and Namibia through the last decades. While there are numerous anthropological studies on marriage in Southern Africa for the period up to the 1980s, a remarkable paucity of studies has to be noted for the time since then. The ethnographic and comparative findings on Southern African weddings and marriages compiled in this special issue pick up an important anthropological legacy and stimulate future research and theorising.

**Keywords:** consumption rituals; marriage; middle class; Southern Africa; weddings

### **Introduction**

For long, structural-functionalist approaches emphasised the centrality of the institution of marriage for the anthropological understanding of kinship systems, socio-economic relations, ethnicity and religion, and for the functioning of political systems. Decades of research in Southern Africa, inspired by British social anthropology and in particular the work of the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute, demonstrated the pivotal nature of marriage, marital arrangements, obligations and reciprocities in these societal structures. Considered “the fundamental social building block” (Geertz 1973),<sup>1</sup> the institution of marriage was seen to organise the relations between individuals, couples and their families, as well as the means of production and exchange, rights over children and inheritance, positioning of “office” in formal relations of authority (such as that pertaining to the role of the “mother’s brother”), and relation between the genders. Marriage was seen not only as organising and constituting intra-ethnic social relations, such as those pertaining to the reciprocal relations between different families, but also inter-ethnic ones. Exogamy and bridewealth exchanges were perceived to be crucial for societal formations and for the creation of interdependencies, which in the context of the region’s long-term and extensive forms of labour migration also seemed to produce notions of socio-structural cohesion across space and time.

An extensive literature documents the centrality of the institution of marriage for the region over time. This was marked in the early 1980s by the appearance of several influential comparative volumes on marriage in Southern Africa, such as John L. Comaroff’s *The Meaning of Marriage*

*Payments* (1980), Adam Kuper's *Wives for Cattle* (1982), and John L. Comaroff and Eileen Jensen Krige's *Essays on African Marriage in Southern Africa* (1981).

Because marriage was seen to be such a fundamental social building block, any change in the institution was taken to imply rupture and even destruction for society as a whole. Mark Hunter (2007, 654) has termed these perceptions the "teleological narratives of 'family breakdown' in Africa." He argues that, despite the presence of very complex ethnographic data, several South African ethnographic studies since the 1930s (e.g. Krige 1936; Longmore 1959; Ngubane 1987) fuelled the conviction that "African families were in slow but steady decline" (Hunter 2005, 396; see also Pauli 2016). Other researchers were more cautious, highlighting both continuity and change in African marriages (Parkin and Nyamwaya 1987). Within the Southern African context, Isaac Schapera's work on married life among Kgatla families in the former Bechuanaland Protectorate (present-day Botswana) provides a good example. He summarises the dynamics of change in marriage and family life as follows:

It will have been gathered already that there has been no uniformity of change, and that the family is to-day not nearly as homogeneous as before. Some of its traditional features have disappeared completely, or else have become much common. Others persist strongly, or perhaps have been modified only slightly. (Schapera 1939, 333)

These publications explored important changes in marital arrangements in terms of elements such as the value, composition, kind or importance of bridewealth exchanges; the impact of long-distance labour migration; the rise of a monetised economy; and the emergence of colonial and postcolonial states establishing new (legal) frameworks for the acknowledgement and constitution of the institution. None of them, however, disputed the centrality of the institution as such. Marriage stood unquestioned. Even studies that went into the exploration of such social forms as single-headed households, divorce or concubinage perceived such arrangements to be "deviations" from the norm of marriage (Griffiths 1997; Mayer 1961; Preston-Whyte 1978; van der Vliet 1984).

While the institution of marriage used to be widespread and common throughout Southern Africa, today the majority of people in these countries never marry.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, marriage still seems to be the "norm" in terms of aspiring to — or acknowledging — a relationship. But there is a definite paucity of anthropological studies concerned with understanding the present-day context and the significance of marriage and its decline. In this special issue, we aim to correct this paucity.

This paucity may also be linked to wider developments within kinship studies. The critique of structural-functionalist approaches to kinship in the 1970s and 1980s (Schneider 1984) was followed by a decline of research on kinship and marriage within anthropology. Since the late 1990s, a revival under the rubric of "New Kinship Studies" has taken place (Carsten 2004; Sahlins 2013; Strathern 2006). Novel concepts such as "relatedness" (Carsten 2000) have been introduced. In-depth analyses of new reproductive technologies, fosterage and adoption have become central topics. Boldly stated, it seems that the study of kinship and marriage has shifted from focussing on the exchange of wives to analysing the exchange of babies. At the recent European Association of Social Anthropologists' meeting in Milan, Italy, Carsten (2016) argued in her keynote address that the new kinship studies failed to conceive the institution of marriage in the same way in which other kinship-related institutions and practices have increasingly been analysed: not simply as "building blocks" of society and reflecting a particular social order, but as drivers of change, innovation and even disorder. Whereas fosterage can disrupt and fundamentally change kinship-relations (especially in situations where a formidable international intervention has taken place in the creation of new forms of fosterage, such as in the Aids crisis), the new kinship studies have overlooked the potential of (societal) change that marriage may harbour and produce. Not only have recent kinship studies hardly focused on marriage, they have also ignored developments in other emerging fields that have produced important insights into the global spread of romantic ideas and companionate marriage, such as in the anthropology of love and globalisation (Cole

and Thomas 2009; Hirsch and Wardlow 2006; Padilla et al. 2007). The ideals of romance, companionship, and emotional involvement and attachment have indeed become much more significant in the understanding of changing marital patterns in Africa, as van Dijk (2015) has recently shown.

This line of research has also touched upon one of the longest-standing questions in the study of African marriages, namely the problem of defining marriage. The difficulties in defining certain types of unions as marriage are closely connected to two central characteristics of marriages in major parts of Africa, polygyny and the procedural character of marriage (Bledsoe and Pison 1994; Claassens and Smythe 2013; Comaroff 1980; Comaroff and Roberts 1977; Murray 1976). The marriage process is often not linear, but instead resembles a continuous mix of movements, exchanges and temporalities during which relationships can be deepened, dissolved or renegotiated. As several of the papers in this special issue demonstrate, a range of conjugal relationships exists in Southern Africa, dynamically combining customary practices, residence arrangements, state and religious laws, and sexual and other types of exchanges. Depending on the definition, some of these relations will be classified as marriage and others not. This fluidity of conjugality and marriage can also enhance female agency (Cole 2004; Cornwall 2002; Lewinson 2006).

### **Exceptional normal: change and continuity in southern African marriages**

Although marriage has truly become exceptional as an end-goal in life for many in the Southern African region, its ideological “normality” in terms of arranging relations between couples and between families appears to live on unscathed. To understand this conundrum it is important to establish why marriage rates have declined in the region. We can easily identify a number of important explanations for the decline in marriage. One is a strong rise in the costs of marrying, in particular due to a substantial increase of the cost of bridewealth and the growth of expensive wedding celebrations. Several studies have indicated that marriage has changed from being a universal rite of passage into being a conspicuous celebration of middle class lifestyles and aspirations (Mupotsa 2014; Pauli 2011; van Dijk 2012). Marriage thus appears to have been transformed into the means by which to achieve and signal a particular (class) distinction and economic success. A second reason for the decline in marriage rates is the changing pattern of gender relations, with increasing numbers of women entering tertiary education and the job market and achieving independence from family ties (Kuper 1987, 134–148; Preston-Whyte 1978; Solway 1990; van der Vliet 1984). A third important reason is the rising concern with the quality of relationships and the expectation that affectionate bonding and romance are central to that (Cole and Thomas 2009; van Dijk 2015). More than ever before, couples pursue success in relationships and fashion marital relationships in terms of shared ideas of intimacy and commitment. These demands speak to the often enormous costs of weddings and of satisfying the expectations of families, peers and colleagues; but especially they speak to new levels of communication. Couples are increasingly required to talk with each about the issue of disclosing their bio-medical status, in particular regarding Aids (Hunter 2010); to share their involvement and intentions through the social media; and to communicate their desires to their elders. Marital counselling has become an important industry in the Southern African region precisely in order to acquire these necessary communicative skills (van Dijk 2013). These new pressures of being communicative and forthcoming do not make the marital process any less complicated.

Yet, despite these developments in the marital economy, marriage’s recent turn towards exclusivity and the changing meaning of gender relations, the institution nevertheless continues to be an important frame of reference for most people. These continuities are as important for an understanding of contemporary Southern African marriage as are the institution’s transformations. Some time ago, Jane Guyer cautioned researchers of African marriage and family against the perception that present configurations always represent sharp transformations from the past. She suggested that they could also be “continuities with shifting emphasis” (Guyer 1994, 249)

or, as Kirsch and Turner (2009) have called it, a “permutation of order.” Explanations for this *normative continuity* point to the relevance of religious or cultural moralities, such as the rise of Pentecostalism and its strict dogmas concerning marital life, or indicate the influence of the public media in profiling happy nuclear family life in all sorts of advertisements or public health campaigns (Mupotsa 2015; van Dijk 2012).

Marriage in Southern Africa thus seems to be both normal and unattainable at the same time. The anthropology of the region is required to acknowledge and engage this paradoxical complexity when examining how precisely the institution of marriage has changed. This complexity is further intersected by rapidly changing notions of love, romance, intimacy and sexuality and their influence on relational ideals (Thomas and Cole 2009; van Dijk 2015). In recent years a number of anthropological studies have investigated these relational ideals, their histories, their public expression and, importantly, their significance in particular in the context of the HIV/Aids crisis in the region (Hunter 2002; Pauli and Schnegg 2007; Wojcicki 2002; van Dijk 2013). The latter led to the development and implementation of a gamut of public health policies in Southern African countries, geared towards creating so-called stable, one-partner relationships, promoting safe sex, abstinence for single people and faithfulness in intimate relationships, and curbing what became known as “multiple concurrent partnerships.” Such public campaigns and the institution of (marital) counselling have promoted monogamous marriage as the ideal relationship again, with faithfulness in the marital relationship projected as a “social panacea” against the spread of disease (van Dijk 2013). In this manner, an ideal of marriage has come to function not only as a (socio-economic) marker of status, the epitome of societal success and prestige, but also as a (moral) safe haven in the context of public health, prevention, sexuality and care for the body.

Hence, while the significance of marriage has not dwindled from the time of the earlier anthropological record of the institution, its attainability has, tremendously so. Living up to its expectations, in terms of finance, glamour, moral qualification and correctness, has become a tall order, making the predicament in which the institution currently finds itself qualitatively very different from what the older anthropological record could ever have predicted.

Yet, obviously continuities do exist and will remain. One of the most important continuities is the exchange of cattle (or its equivalent in money) in the marital arrangement, known as *lobola* (Hunter 2009; Posel and Rudwick 2014; Rudwick and Posel 2015; White 2015). As Fardon (1990) argued, the term *lobola* can be viewed as part of a “localising strategy” in ethnographic writing that contributed to the formation of a sense of a “regional tradition” by and through which over time and space a level of continuity and coherence of this Southern African region can be postulated. Far from being anachronistic, such important continuities amidst a sea of change require investigation in their own right, especially as it is not self-evident which continuities surface where and how they add to the complexities under study. If these kinds of continuities, such as of the *lobola* requirement, also contribute to the unattainability of the institution, preventing people from getting married while they desire to do so, the permanence of such continuities becomes a deeply complicating factor in its own right.

Firstly, the unattainability of the institution can become a factor in the shaping of regional tradition once again. Secondly, this unattainability seems to play an important role in how young couples often feel crushed between the expectations of their families and a lack of means and resources to live up to them. Alcinda Honwana coined the term “waithood” to describe the situation in which younger people tend to find themselves in many places in Southern Africa (Honwana 2012). Despite pressures, expectations and aspirations, many young men and women will never complete the requirements to become an acknowledged, responsible adult; they will never be able to engage in a formal relationship and will never be given “voice” in the family-circle or other contexts where authority matters (Honwana 2012). The study of marriage in the current context of Southern Africa thus brings into relief the sharpness of this generational conundrum and the

enormous personal impact that the unattainability of marriage can have in terms of destitution, despair, frustration and disappointment.

The central aim of this special issue is to bring together research on the changing meanings and practices of marriage in Southern Africa, and how these in turn appear to change societal formations of kinship, economic relations and affective bonding. At the very same time that marriage is becoming a means to social prestige, authority and distinction, it also seems to be coming to an end. We compare these dynamics in and across different countries, ethnicities and social classes within the region. The case studies discuss recent transformations with reference to long-term historical trajectories. The central goal of this double special issue is to publish new findings on the changing practices of marriage in a comparative volume, based on original empirical and historical research. Additionally, we want to link the more recent dynamics to older trajectories and thus offer — at least in parts — a *longue durée*. The work of anthropologists like Kuper (1982), Comaroff (1980), Krige (1936) and Comaroff and Krige (1981) are important as background in which to root the marriage transformations analysed in the papers presented here. Although our aim is comparative and broad, several important topics are not tackled. First of all this concerns research on same-sex marriage (for a general account, see Borneman [1996]; for Namibia, see Lorway [2014]). Secondly, marriages between a living individual and spiritual entities, such as those referred to in spirit possession rituals or those that relate to the spirit-spouse complex, are not addressed either. The issue also does not present local voices directly, except for one paper (Pauli and Dawids); they are rather heard through the translations by the anthropologists. All these issues are of course very important and should be considered in future comparative explorations of the topic of marriage.

To facilitate comparison between the ethnographic and historical cases presented in this special issue, we focus on three dimensions in particular. The first is the normative/ideational dimension: here we explore the continuous importance of *lobola* in the region. We also examine the relationship between changing cultural ideas about a “good life” and a “normal life course,” and the relationship between changing marriage and kinship structures and conjugal patterns of interaction. The second is the material dimension. Here we question the entanglements between marriage and processes of class formation. And lastly, we examine the power dimension which analyses the ways in which the transformation of marriage practices links to experiences of crisis and social re-ordering.

### **The normative/ideational dimension: exploring *lobola* as ideology**

In this section, we bring together four pieces: Adam Kuper on “Traditions of Kinship, Marriage and Bridewealth in Southern Africa,” Mark Hunter on “Is it Enough to Talk of Marriage as a Process? Legitimate Co-Habitation in Umlazi, South Africa,” Hylton White on “The Materiality of Marriage Payments,” and Jacqueline Solway on “‘Slow Marriage’, ‘Fast *Bogadi*’: Change and Continuity in Marriage in Botswana.” These pieces both present and challenge the longitudinal approach to the study of marital arrangements in the region by arguing for a critical analysis of the structural processes that are implied and involved in these arrangements. Structures of obligation and reciprocity do change over time, and especially the fundamental arrangement of “wives for cattle” appears to be re-invented across different historical times and circumstances. Adam Kuper’s contribution sets the stage by summarising his work on marriage, kinship and households. It is an assessment of some of the most important long-term dynamics. While taking *lobola* as a nexus for analysis, these authors trace major shifts in the practice as “*lobola* moved to town,” became part of a rural-to-urban transition, and became part of a realignment of infra-ethnic relations between families and their diverse positionings in economy, geography and upward (social) mobility. Perceiving *lobola* as praxis and not as structure allows for an analysis of the inclusion of such and similar exchange practices in the establishment and recognition of “not quite” marital relations as well, as Hunter and White demonstrate. In other words, despite structural changes, the “morphology” of relating relationships to formalised forms of reciprocity seems to have continuing currency, even if marriage is not achieved. Through the highly performative nature of bridewealth transactions,

as White unravels in his paper, a social consequentiality is established that materialised itself independently of the finalisation of the process. Solway also demonstrates the varied “tempi” in the development of marital relations as against the development of *lobola* (also known as *bogadi* in Botswana). Developments in *lobola* practices may continue to constitute a normal life course, and innovations and adaptations of its practice and process do not diminish the value it has in establishing a “good life” as defined within the moral understanding of local societies. The transformations of the interlinkage between relationships and (formal) reciprocity continue to shape gender roles in the household, the family or the wider community. Although the end stage of marriage may perhaps never be reached or fulfilled, the normative understanding of the relationship and its reciprocities appears to have remarkable resilience in the region. In a way, therefore, *lobola* should not simply be understood as a practice and phenomenon, but more as an ideology of a particular form. Its ideation seems to turn it into an ideal, producing (social) imaginaries and ambitions that act as idealised contours for action even though they may never be completely fulfilled.

### **The material dimension: exploring marriage as consumption**

In this section we bring together three contributions, one by Deborah James on “Not Marrying in South Africa: Consumption, Aspiration and the New Middle Class,” one by Julia Pauli and Francois Dawids on “The Struggle for Marriage: Elite and Non-Elite Weddings in Rural Namibia,” and one by Rijk van Dijk on “The Tent versus *Lobola*: Marriage, Monetary Intimacies and the New Face of Responsibility in Botswana.” These papers share an understanding of the impact that a new (neoliberal) economy is having on what can be called a local marital economy, present in the three countries concerned. Whereas the previous section highlighted the singular, transformed and transforming importance of the *lobola* nexus, this section balances that dynamic against a range of new — largely financial — structures, ambitions and obligations that have come into play as well. This is partly the result of an economy of desire in which, as Illouz (1997) aptly called it, a commodification of romance and a romanticisation of commodities has taken place. Marriage has thereby become the object of consumer driven appetites of conspicuous consumption, such as for the “white wedding,” in terms of the resources required to create glamour, grandeur and prestige, and of the ways in which this has an impact on gender roles, masculinities and femininities. Marriage has become deeply interlocked with banking systems, loans and debts, with access to various financial resources and the manner in which elite and middle class distinctions play out in a world of “Peter Stuyvesant” (Southall 2016, 169–176). Many cannot live up to these expectations and many can never access such financial resources. Yet those upwardly mobile who have and who can suddenly face new challenges of handling finances, resources, obligations and responsibilities. Often this involves balancing “old” reciprocities and obligations such as pertain to the *lobola* exchange against “new” requirements that a financialisation of the marital relationship seems to bring. Careful preparations are required as risks are enormous and the depletion of resources a gloomy but all too real possibility. Marriage has become a paradigm of calculation. Firstly, this means that, contrary to the past, the institution has become both a marker and a producer of class-formation; it is squarely placed in processes of social stratification, signalling a situation in which not everyone will in principle marry. This “glass ceiling” through which the lower socio-economic classes can see and observe the glamour and prestige of the better-off is indeed forming what Ferguson (2006) called a “global shadow.” Secondly, while the glamour of the wedding event often far outstrips the resources required for fulfilling the “traditional” requirements of marriage, such as completing the *lobola* payment, dynamics of accumulation begin to play out as well. Envy, jealousy, misfortune and mishap all belong to an older repertoire of what Geschiere (2003) termed the “dark” side of the morality of accumulation and wealth, and often finds expression in manifestations such as witchcraft, healing and ritual protection. This section of the new material dimensions of marriage also discusses the changing moralities of the marital economy and the contestations and conflicts that seem to emerge in the life of couples, families and communities because of them.

### **The power dimension: exploring marriage and crisis**

The third section comprises two studies on marital relations, one by Isak Niehaus on “Marriage, Kinship and Childcare in the Aftermath of Aids: Rethinking ‘Orphanhood’ in the South African Lowveld” and the second by Jaco Smit on “Rights, Violence and the Marriage of Confusion: Re-emerging Bride Abduction in South Africa.” The section questions power in relation to marriage and debunks romantic, harmonious notions of marriage that tend to place it in too positive a light. Marriage as crisis or as shaped by (social) crisis is its analytical focus. Marriage in the Southern African region remains to be shaped by at times highly unequal relations between the genders, often privileging the power and authority of the man and the patri-clan above that of the woman and her affines. This has led to numerous kinds of social re-ordering. In a context where Aids has been the single most serious crisis affecting this region over the past twenty-five years, marital relations, arrangements, care and support have not remained the same. Niehaus argues that, in the inter-change between marital arrangements and the Aids-crisis, the position of dependents of marital relations, and children in particular, has been grossly overlooked. In the South African context, nation-state arrangements in the form of welfare programmes have in a sense *replaced* and made obsolete marital arrangements for the care of children. The Aids crisis has aggravated marriage as women in particular try to remain outside and independent of *lobola* arrangements, rather replacing them with what welfare programmes have to offer. Smit points at yet another dimension of marriage in crisis, namely human-rights concerns about individual autonomy, ethics and policy-making. Here the crisis concerns the rise of forced marriage of under-aged girls and the ways in which a difficult dialogue is developing between (inter)national pressures relating to the promotion of human rights and local anxieties about the reproductive capacities of a community. Importantly, Smit addresses legal issues and analyses the negotiation of different legal discourses surrounding the varying marriage practices.

### **Conclusion**

Marriage offers an intriguing perspective into local and global processes. It is at the same time a highly local and a universal institution. This hybridisation of the institution is evident in all of the papers of this special issue. This peculiar condition invites an even broader comparative perspective than we have been able to pursue here, including reflections on marriage in other parts of Africa and beyond. Southern Africa is not unique in the way in which marriage has become both normal and exceptional, and for the manner in which global developments of consumerism, financialisation, Aids and shifting gender dynamics are affecting the institution. An increasing unattainability of the institution and a strong connection to middle and upper class lifestyles seems to be a trend not only in Southern Africa, but globally (Donner 2016; Kendall 1996; Singerman 2008; Zavoretti 2016). To fully access changes and continuities in Southern African marriages, rigorous attention both to specific regional trajectories and to global trends is needed.

Placing itself in dialog with older anthropological studies of the institution and its emerging global entanglements, this special issue aspires to propose a number of new perspectives that may help to overcome the paucity in the study of marriage in Southern Africa. While strongly oriented towards understanding marriage as praxis, it opens a perspective on the many developments that are taking place in view of new economic conditions, relations and prospects that the older literature did not and could not cover. The study of kinship and marriage is one of the great legacies of anthropology and lies at the heart of the discipline. After a time of neglect, a renewed interest in kinship and marriage has emerged in anthropology. It is time to recapture and revamp debates that had silently come to a standstill. The special issue thus aims not only to stimulate research on social and kinship transformations within Southern Africa, but also to engage and enrich current debates on global dimensions of changing kinship and marriage practices.



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## Notes

1. In *The Interpretation of Cultures* Geertz (1973, 376) states: “This husband-wife — or, more accurately, father-mother — pair has very great economic, political, and spiritual importance. It is, in fact, the fundamental social building block.”
2. There exists clear evidence for a decline in marriage rates in the various Southern African countries. For South Africa, see Claassens and Smythe (2013); Hosegood, McGrath, and Moultrie (2009); Hunter (2007, 2010); Kuper (1987, 134–148); Niehaus (1994); Posel, Rudwick, and Casale (2011); Rudwick and Posel (2015). For Namibia, see Pauli (2010, 2011); Tersbøl (2002). And for Botswana, see Gulbrandsen (1986); Solway (1990); Van Dijk (2010, 2012).

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