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6. AFRICAN MARRIAGES IN TRANSFORMATION

Anthropological Insights

INTRODUCTION

In this article, I will outline central transformations of African marriages and link these changes to four broad anthropological approaches which I label as metanarratives. I use the term 'metanarrative' to stress the rather high degree of coherence within these four anthropological interpretative frameworks. Similarly, James Ferguson applies the concept of a 'metanarrative' to analyze the way anthropologists among others have perceived and constructed 'modernity' and 'urbanization' in the Zambian Copperbelt (Ferguson, 1999: 14–17). I will start with British social anthropology and classify this approach as a first metanarrative centering on the *leitmotif* of the stable African marriage. The metanarrative of the stable African marriage is only one line of thinking that is prominent in African ethnography. There are at least three other influential metanarratives framing the work on African marriages during the 20th century, i.e. the metanarrative of the destruction of 'the' African marriage and family system and the (more unspecific) metanarrative of change of African marriage and family systems.[1] Finally, the fourth and most recent metanarrative used to interpret transformations in African marriages highlights fluidity and flexibility of African marriages. In the final section of my article I will discuss the possible emergence of a new metanarrative that aims at understanding the dramatic increase in wedding costs and the parallel decline in marriage rates, especially in Southern Africa.

THREE METANARRATIVES OF AFRICAN MARRIAGE: STABILITY, DESTRUCTION AND CHANGE

Stability

African marriages have played a pivotal role for the development of anthropological theory.[2] British social anthropology viewed African systems of kinship and marriage as the central ordering principle of pre-colonial society (Radcliffe-Brown & Forde, 1987/1950). For the British structural-functionalists marriage was a stable, timeless and recursive institution, as Borneman has so convincingly shown (Borneman, 1996: 220). Although marriage does imply movement (mainly of

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women) and reification of social structure, from the level of abstraction "marriage itself remains bounded and stable as it functions to reproduce timeless structures" (Borneman, 1996: 220) in the eyes of British Social Anthropology. How then is structure reproduced through African marriage? First, marriage is described as universal. Everybody will sooner or later marry in his or her life and thus be an integral part of the reproduction and rearrangement of social structure (Barnes, 1952: vii; Fortes, 1949: 81; Radcliffe-Brown, 1987/1950: 43). The universality of marriage is vividly described by Meyer Fortes in his 'Web of Kinship among the Tallensi' (Fortes, 1949). To stay single is described as something only the most deviant members of society have to face:

> There is something wrong, by native standard, with men and women who never marry; and they are few. In the whole of Tongo I knew only knew five men who had never been married and who would, according to common belief, never marry. One was obviously mentally defective; another was an invert; two were said to be so ugly that no woman would accept them, but both were definitely unbalanced and eccentric; and the last was a gentle old man who, it was said, had never had the enterprise to find a wife. I heard of no women who had never married. Deformities which do not wholly incapacitate a person or arouse repulsion are not a bar to marriage. The blind, the deaf, and the lame find spouses if they are otherwise able-bodied and presentable. (Fortes, 1949: 81–82)

Meyer Fortes' ethnographic description leaves no doubt about the universal character of marriage.[3] However, what counts as marriage is a rather large and flexible category for the Tallensi. Meyer Fortes shows that many first unions dissolve after some time. To capture the flexible character of these marriages Fortes classifies them as 'experimental marriages' (Fortes, 1949: 84). This leads to the second important feature of African marriages described by many British social anthropologists, i.e. the procedural character of marriage: "To understand African marriage we must think of it not as an event or a condition but as a developing process" (Radcliffe-Brown, 1987/1950: 49). Marriage develops through different stages involving successive prestations (in general bridewealth in the form of cattle, payments, gifts, services) exchanged between the groom's and the bride's kin groups. Thus, marriage processes have a certain degree of flexibility and can even be reversed and dissolved. However, there is an endpoint to this process (in general after the negotiated bridewealth has been given) when a couple is being considered as married.

Finally, marriage is mainly defined in legal terms. African marriage 'legitimizes' children and manifests fatherhood publicly (Fortes, 1949: 82). Through marriage, the husband and his kin gain "certain rights in relation to his wife and the children she bears" (Radcliffe-Brown, 1987/1950: 50). Summing up Radcliffe-Brown (1950: 51) stresses that African marriage always involves two 'bodies of kin', i.e. two kin groups, that through marriage reproduce and rearrange social structure. The stability

of marriage as an institution (being universal and sooner or later involving all segments of society through kin groups) thus is essential for the general reproduction of society.

Given the dominance of social equilibrium and stability that underlines this theorizing of African marriage by the British school it is not surprising that the second prominent metanarrative of African marriage captures the opposite side of stability – destruction and decay.

Destruction

Following Radcliffe-Brown's and Forde's central aim to describe African systems of kinship and marriage as they exist at a certain time and "abstracting as far as possible from any change" (Radcliffe-Brown, 1987[1950]: 3) any reflection on change is restricted to a few lines in Radcliffe-Brown's introduction of the volume:

> African societies are undergoing revolutionary changes, as the result of European administrations, missions, and economic factors. In the past the stability of social order in African societies has depended much more on the kinship system than on anything else. In the new conditions kinship systems cannot remain unaffected. The first changes are inevitably destructive of the existing system of obligations. (Radcliffe-Brown, 1987[1950]: 84–85)

Because kinship and marriage are so central for the organization of African society as such any change in kinship and marriage is perceived as more or less 'destructive' for the whole society. Mark Hunter has termed these constructions of change as "teleological narratives of 'family breakdown' in Africa" (Hunter, 2007: 654). Hunter stresses that albeit their ethnographic richness a number of South African ethnographic studies since the 1930s (e.g. Krige, 1936; Longmore, 1959) have fueled the perception that "African families were in slow but steady decline" (Hunter, 2005: 396; 2007: 694).

Harriet Ngubane's research on Zulu and Swazi marriage and kinship is an example of both the ethnographic richness attributed by Mark Hunter to these South African ethnographic studies and the construction of a metanarrative of destruction of the African family (Ngubane, 1987). Many researchers have analyzed the centrality of bridewealth and cattle for Southern African marriage and kinship systems (for excellent discussions cf. Comaroff, 1980a; Kuper, 1982). Marriage payments among the Nguni (to which both Zulu and Swazi belong) are expressed by the term *lobolo* (Ngubane, 1987: 173). In great detail Ngubane shows how through the exchange of cattle between the bride's and groom's kin groups a complex web of economic and social rights and duties is built and maintained. Ngubane argues that this form of social organization is of special importance to women because it reduces their social and economic vulnerabilities. However, on a more general level, and very much in line with Radcliffe-Brown's and the British school's perception of the centrality of kinship for societal organization, Harriet

Ngubane stresses the fundamental importance of kinship for the general social, economic and political organization (Ngubane, 1987: 177). Consequently, if kinship and marriage are so central for the general societal organization any change has to be perceived as catastrophic. According to Ngubane, because of the monetization of *lobolo*, i.e. the substitution of cattle for cash in bridewealth prestations, marriage as an institution is substantially weakened. This of course has severe effects for both the kinship structure and society in general: "To undermine the structure of a kinship-based society, which by definition is one in which rights and obligations derive primarily from bonds of agnation and consanguinity, as in the institution of *lobolo*, is to undermine the whole social fabric" (Ngubane, 1987: 180). The language used by Ngubane very tellingly expresses the metanarrative of destruction: Ngubane writes that there will be 'social disorganization'; the consequences of change are 'devastating'; women are 'victims' and families 'suffer' (all citations Ngubane, 1987: 180–181). Main triggers behind these changes are processes associated with 'cultural contact' (Hunter, 2007: 694) and colonization, i.e. monetization and commercialization, urbanization, Christianization, Apartheid, migration and industrialization. However, Hunter (Hunter, 2004, 2005, 2007, 2010) and other researchers (Moore & Vaughan, 1994) have questioned the myth of the destruction of African families and marriages as misleading to appropriately understand the complex social dynamics observable in kin, family and marriage transformations.

Change

The metanarrative of 'change' is much more difficult to summarize than the two other metanarratives. Nevertheless, a closer look at anthropological work focusing on change of African marriages reveals that the change conception is a variation of the destruction metanarrative. Similar to the destruction conception of African marriages, research on change constructs pre-change phenomena and time, in general labeled 'traditional', i.e. traditional marriage, traditional society, traditional social organization etc., and contrasts these with phenomena representing change, often labeled 'modern', e.g. modern marriage, modern families, etc. There are numerous examples for this kind of conceptualization of the dynamics of African marriage (Barnes, 1952; Bledsoe, 1980; some articles in Comaroff and Krige, 1981; and also some articles in Parkin and Nyamwaya, 1987b; Pauw, 1963; Schapera, 1939). Some topics are especially prominent in this literature on change of African marriages, namely the decline of polygyny and the rise of monogamy; the monetization of bridewealth and the commercialization of gender relations; an increase in the number of children born out-of-wedlock; an expansion (or loss) of female autonomy and changes in household structures, especially an increase in female headed households.

What distinguishes the change metanarrative from the other two metanarratives, however, is a lesser degree of generalization and a higher degree of internal variation. While in the metanarratives of stability and destruction large social entities are

pictured as rather homogeneous, the change perspective allows for variation and internal differentiation. But often these variations are only seen as consequences of change, while the pre-change time is constructed as relatively homogeneous. Isaac Schapera's work on 'Married Life in an African Tribe' (1939), i.e. Kgatla families in the former Bechuanaland Protectorate (today Botswana), provides an example. Schapera summarizes 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). The tendency to imagine a past, i.e. to project contemporary ideas on past situations, has been thoroughly analyzed by historically oriented research, most prominent the work concentrating on the 'invention of tradition' (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 2003/1983). Equally, Jane Guyer (1994) has cautioned researchers of African marriage and family against the perception that present configurations always represent sharp transformations of the past. Much more, they may also be seen as "continuities with shifting emphasis" (Guyer, 1994: 249).

Nevertheless, despite these sometimes problematic constructions of past marriage, family and kin constellations that can be found in some of the above cited works, the attempt to understand internal variations clearly extends the limited perspectives of the 'stability' and 'destruction' metanarratives. Caroline Bledsoe's research on marriage in Kpelle society, Liberia, is a good example for this opening up of perspectives and complexity (Bledsoe, 1980). Bledsoe compares the options available and strategies applied by Kpelle women (and to a lesser degree Kpelle men) within what she classifies as more traditional and more modern arenas. Underlying her analysis is the 'wealth-in-people' system which binds people to superiors in ties of marriage, clientship, and filial obligation. Bledsoe argues that the 'wealth-in-people' system continues to be of central importance for the understanding of Kpelle marriage and other social relations (Bledsoe, 1980: Chapter 3). However, because of political economic transformations, especially the emergence of a cash economy and the creation of new income opportunities through wage labor, marketing and cash cropping, the 'wealth-in-people' model is being transformed – but not destroyed. Bledsoe's approach thus clearly fulfils Jane Guyer's request to study 'continuities with shifting emphasis'. Bledsoe shows the ambiguous consequences of the monetization process: while new opportunities may open for some women (based on combinations of generation, location and class), e.g. the choice to stay single, other women's agencies are further constrained. This complex perspective stands in sharp contrast to Harriet Ngubane's (1987, see above) approach. Ngubane's account does not distinguish between different groups of women but lumps all women into one category of 'victims' (for comparable insights about the problematic construction of the categories 'women' and 'gender' cf. Cornwall, 2005; Di Leonardo, 1991; Oyewumi, 1997; Sudarkasa, 1986). Bledsoe's approach goes beyond the narratives of destruction, victimization

and simple conceptions of change and also expands the narrow normative and categorical perspective of marriage, e.g. expressed in descriptions of Kpelle society as 'patrilineal with brideservice and bridewealth', through an analysis of "how people's acts create and change institutions such as marriage" (Bledsoe, 1980: 47). Agency, social practice and the dialectic of agency and structure, while not named explicitly, are nevertheless very present in her work. Hence in several respects, Bledsoe's ethnography, although still using the metanarrative of change and concepts like 'traditional' and 'modern' arenas, anticipates contemporary approaches highlighting negotiation, contestation and ambiguity of marriage.

Around the same time as the publication of Bledsoe's ethnography a number of other researchers equally started to theorize African marriages in more ambiguous and complex perspectives. For example, in Southern Africa, the effects of labor migration on marriage have been studied in comparable innovative ways as Bledsoe's research (Gulbrandsen, 1986; Murray, 1981a,b; Sansom, 1981; Spiegel, 1975). The theoretical movement from models of African marriage focusing mainly on structure to more dynamic models including actor's agency and the interplay between agency and structure can also be traced in the publication of three influential volumes on African marriage during the 1980s (Comaroff, 1980b; Comaroff & Krige, 1981; Parkin & Nyamwaya, 1987b). In the early 1980s, John L. Comaroff edited two volumes on marriage, one on the meaning of marriage payments (comparing cases from Asia, Africa and Europe), and one, together with Eileen Jensen Krige, on marriage in Southern Africa (Comaroff, 1980b; Comaroff & Krige, 1981). In the introductory remarks of both volumes Comaroff underlines that "the main thrust of research has been directed at the jural and structural aspects" (Comaroff, 1981: xii) of marriage and marriage payments. At length, Comaroff shows the deficits of the three variants of 'structure-focused' (in a broader sense) explanations, i.e. structural-functionalist, Marxist and structuralist approaches, to understand marriage payments. The contributions to his two volumes all try to go beyond these limits, as do the contributions to the volume edited by David Parkin and David Nyamwaya (1987b). Tellingly, Parkin and Nyamwaya have subtitled their introduction 'change and choice' stressing both structural dynamics and agencies (1987a). Several years after the publication of Parkin's and Nyamwaya's influential 1987 collection Parkin was invited as a discussant at a symposium on demographic and anthropological perspectives on African marriages (Bledsoe & Pison, 1994). Again, Parkin stressed that anthropological research on African marriage has moved away from normative approaches and towards 'interactional' approaches emphasizing process, strategy, and negotiation of conjugality (Bledsoe & Pison, 1994: 9).

The three metanarratives of African marriage I have discussed here, however, cannot be placed in a chronological order, i.e. from stability over destruction to change and complexity. Although stability conceptions following the British tradition have become rare, they are nevertheless still present, as a recent publication on African families shows: "Because African women and men are

expected to marry and have children, it has been suggested that marriage is nearly universal" (Oheneba-Sakyi & Takyi, 2006: 9). Also the metanarrative of destruction and the metanarrative of change continue to be influential. With the emergence and dramatic spread of the HIV/AIDS pandemic the 'destruction of African families' theme has certainly gained a new momentum (e.g. Gronemeyer, 2002). Yet, while on the one hand the tragic effects HIV/AIDS does have on social relations should not be underestimated one should on the other hand also acknowledge the resilience of kin and family ties in the midst of such a crisis.[4] Again, crisis and change do not have one linear effect, i.e. destruction of family and kin ties, but trigger various and complex reactions by individuals and groups of individuals. Thus, to understand African marriages and other types of conjugal and family relations as fluid and plural social fields of negotiation, ambiguity and hybridity is probably the dominant contemporary metanarrative.

PLURALITY AND DYNAMIC OF AFRICAN MARRIAGES

Plurality and dynamic of marriage types are central topics of recent research on African marriages (for instance Cole, 2004; Cornwall, 2002; Helle-Valle, 1999; Johnson-Hanks, 2006, 2007; Lewinson, 2006; Masquelier, 2005). These issues are not entirely new, though. Throughout the 20th century attempts to define and classify dynamic African marriages have been made. However, more recent approaches like Jennifer Johnson-Hanks' (2007) research on marriage, love and the Internet in Southern Cameroon or Jennifer Cole's (2004) work on sexuality, marriage and consumerism among Malagasy youth have shifted emphasis away from issues of classification and towards questions tackling the intermingling of love/sex/marriage and money/consumerism.

The two related questions 'What is a marriage?' and 'When is a union a marriage?' are recurrent themes in most research on African marriages up to today. They are already mentioned by Meyer Fortes in his reflections of what he classifies as 'experimental marriages' (Fortes, 1949: 84). Some decades later, Philip Burnham suggests to consider marriage not as a stable category but as a "bundle of interactional possibilities" (Burnham, 1987: 50). Burnham places marriage as just one among several types of conjugal unions (informal cohabitation, or church, registry, or customary marriage) open to men and women, and their respective kin, for interaction. In their introduction to the same volume Parkin and Nyamwaya underline Burnham's approach and state: "This idea of all types of 'marriage' as representing a range of interactional possibilities for individuals and their groups complements that which sees marriage as the product of strategies: the logical possibilities are there, and people can strategize within them" (Parkin & Nyamwaya, 1987a: 4). Burnham, Parkin and Nyamwaya stretch their use of the term 'marriage' very far, virtually including most conjugal unions.

The difficulties in defining certain types of unions as marriage (and others perhaps as not) are closely connected to two central characteristics of African

marriages: (1) polygyny and its transformations; and (2) the procedural character of marriage already mentioned by Radcliffe-Brown (1987[1950]) and then repeated in much research on African marriage (e.g. Bledsoe, 1980; Bledsoe & Pison, 1994; Comaroff, 1980b; Griffiths, 1997; Helle-Valle, 1999; Lewinson, 2006; Murray, 1976; Solway, 1990). I will first discuss the dynamics of polygyny.

Although polygyny has declined in many parts of Africa and some African countries even have prohibited polygyny the practice and transformations of the practice are nevertheless vital, as many studies indicate (Anderson, 2000; Blanc & Gage, 2000; Bledsoe & Pison, 1994; Comaroff & Roberts, 1977; Spiegel, 1991; Timaeus & Reynar, 1998; Van der Vliet, 1991). As early as in 1977, Comaroff and Roberts have argued for an understanding of changes in polygyny not as a decline of the practice but as its transformation. Restudying Schapera's earlier descriptions of Kgatla premarital sexuality (Schapera, 1933) Comaroff and Roberts found that "the practice of polygyny has been replaced by an emergent social form with an essentially similar cultural logic" (Comaroff & Roberts, 1977: 121). The emergent social form mentioned by Comaroff and Roberts is the practice of serial monogamy. Thus, men continue to have multiple partners yet the timing differs (for a related argument about women and their practice of 'polyandrous motherhood' cf. Guyer, 1994).

Another variation of polygyny is described by Kristin Mann in her historical study of elite settlers in the 19th and early 20th century colonial Lagos (Mann, 1985). 'Outside marriages', i.e. long-term unions contracted outside church or statutory codes, caused much conflict among elite men and women. These unions gave non-elite women access to resources and probably upward mobility but at the same time threatened the position of 'inside wives' and their children. Similar conflicts about 'outside marriages' are portrayed by Barbara Harrell-Bond for conjugal unions in Sierra Leone (Harrell-Bond, 1975) and by Wambui Wa Karanja for the contemporary upper classes of Lagos and Ibadan (Karanja, 1987, 1994). Other polygynous variations are the so called 'little houses' analysed by Anne Lewinson in her Tanzanian research (Lewinson, 2006), the *bobolete* described by Jo Helle-Valle for a rural community in Botswana (Helle-Valle, 1999) and the tavern women of Gauteng province, South Africa, Janet Maia Wojcicki investigates (Wojcicki, 2002). Thus, Bledsoe and Pison conclude in their review of multiple partner unions: "Many of the new marriage forms that outwardly resemble monogamy actually follow patterns of *de facto* polygyny" (Bledsoe & Pison, 1994: 7). Consequently, a range of conjugal relationships exists, dynamically combining customary practices, residence arrangements, state and religious laws, and sexual and other types of exchanges. Depending on one's definition, some of these relations will be classified as marriages, others not.[5]

The continuity of polygyny is also connected to the procedural character of marriage, the second characteristic of African marriages that renders a definition of the institution difficult (some argue maybe even impossible e.g. Ekong, 1989: 40). Marriage in many parts of Africa is a long, ambiguous process rather than

a discrete single event established by a legal, ritual or economic transaction (e.g. Bledsoe, 1980; Bledsoe & Pison, 1994; Comaroff & Roberts, 1977; Guyer, 1994, 2000; Murray, 1981b). Marriage payments, commonly in the form of bridewealth, are seldom transferred at once but through a process of events, thus negotiation of bridewealth has also implications for notions of legitimacy and personhood (Comaroff, 1980b: 30). Bledsoe and Pison describe the sequences of events that may finally lead to marriage: "The process transpires through a sequence of events that might include the exchange of symbolic tokens, making instalments on bridewealth payments, establishing a joint residence, or even the birth of a child. This process may extend over a period of months or even years" (Bledsoe & Pison, 1994: 4). Further, the marriage process is often not a linear process but resembles more a continuous mix of movements in which relationships can also be dissolved or renegotiated. Thus, it can be very difficult to define at what point in time someone is married and when a union begins. Additionally, Bledsoe has noted in her ethnography of Kpelle marriage, Liberia, that the marital status is neither visibly nor audibly expressed. There are no special clothes for married folks and the words for woman or man are the same words as for wife and husband (Bledsoe, 1980: 7). This fluid construction of marriage has caused some headaches for social scientists, especially demographers who want to compare, for instance, the average age at first marriage or the percentage of a population married (Bledsoe and Pison, 1994; van de Walle, 2006).

What then are the effects of these flexible structures for individual actors? Research written from a gendered perspective clearly stresses the enhanced agency some women may gain through the fluidity of the situation (Cole, 2004; Cornwall, 2002; Helle-Valle, 1999; Johnson-Hanks, 2007; Lewinson, 2006; Pauli, 2010b; Van der Vliet, 1984). As some rather fluid and flexible relations do eventually end in marriage this may justify that women also behave rather flexible. Further, because the exchange of gifts, money, and consumer goods is also an important aspect of betrothal and marital relations the mixing of money, sex and love described in much recent ethnography (e.g. Cole, 2004; Cornwall, 2002; Helle-Valle, 1999; Lewinson, 2006; Pauli, 2010b, 2012) is not necessarily condemned. This has also resulted in some puzzlement and confusion by Western observers, e.g. missionaries, early ethnographers and colonial administrators, if this intermingling may not be some type of prostitution (Gordon, 2002; Hunter, 2002).[6]

However, Jennifer Cole has stressed that while some women may profit from flexible conjugal notions, other women, especially those who have lost their 'reputation' and may even be perceived locally as 'prostitutes', experience severe downward mobility (Cole, 2004: 580–581). Reputation and its ambiguities are tightly intertwined with economic issues and the flexible character of conjugal relations. As Cole notes for her Malagasy informants: "All girls who engage in the game of sex for money are constantly involved in a politics of reputation" (Cole, 2004: 581). Cole demonstrates that the reputation of economically unsuccessful

women is especially threatened (Cole, 2004: 580). In other settings, the reputation of economically successful and independent women is questioned as well. In her research on gender relations in Ado-Odo, a small Yoruba town in Southwestern Nigeria, Andrea Cornwall shows that economically independent women are classified as wayward and troublesome (Cornwall, 2002). Similarly, in her 1970s Grahamstown research, a Southern African township, Virginia van de Vliet observes a high degree of moral resentment against economically independent women: "Men seemed aware that these independent women were a nail in the coffin of patriarchy. They often reserved a special scorn for them and their offspring" (Van der Vliet, 1991: 237).

To access the reputation and character of conjugal and sexual partners varying practices of 'testing' a partner have been described for both women and men (Bledsoe & Pison, 1994: 5; Dilger, 2003; Gulbrandsen, 1986: 13; Johnson-Hanks, 2007; Lewinson, 2006; Pauli & Schnegg, 2007; Smith, 2003). These may range from evaluations of the public reputation of a person, tests on how a partner behaves in certain crucial situations (e.g. providing money in times of need), cohabitation, and the birth and support of children. In times of AIDS, other dimensions of 'testing' have been added, e.g. 'examinations' of the partner's bodily surface in search of 'suspicious' bodily marks. Love is often constructed as the result of successful testing (Johnson-Hanks, 2007; Lewinson, 2006; Pauli & Schnegg, 2007), i.e. love is perceived as the central expression of a partner's involvement, caring and investment into a relationship that becomes visible through 'testing'. As Bledsoe and Pison remark (1994: 5) the sometimes yearlong liminal phase of 'testing' a partner is a central aspect of the procedural character of marriage. Consequently, it is important to stress that the above noted flexibility of conjugal relations is tightly embedded into a not so flexible moral and economic structure.

Yet there are limits to the metanarrative of flexible and dynamic conjugal and marital structures. I want to conclude this section with reflections on these limits. I argue that there are at least three central problems associated with the notion of flexible, plural African marriages: (1) To more or less classify most conjugal relations as 'marriages' results in an inflationary use of the term and a significant loss of differentiation and meaning; (2) The inflationary use of the term marriage discloses emerging mechanisms of marginalisation and new forms of exclusion; (3) A focus only on the flexibility of conjugal relations ignores that the construction of marriage as a process has ideally an endpoint when a couple is finally considered as married. My first argument has been inspired by a recent, undoubtedly controversial article by Warren Shapiro on the new kinship studies (Shapiro, 2008). Although I do not follow Shapiro's fierce critique of feminist and constructivist theory, I nevertheless think that Shapiro's objection that not all types of relatedness can be taken as equivalent to kinship ties is justified. There are limits to the construction of kin relations. Based on results from cognitive science, Shapiro highlights the distinction between focal notions of kin concepts, e.g. prototypes, from variations of these notions. Thus although concepts like

'father' are transferable, e.g. God as father, this does not mean that all relations subsumed under the concept have the same quality. Much more, certain aspects of the prototypical relation are taken while other aspects vary or are ignored. These thoughts may also be fruitfully applied to the study of African marriages. While there is no doubt a great amount of flexibility, plurality and dynamic in the construction of African marriages, this does not justify the conclusion that there might not be something like an emically defined 'prototypical marriage' or that all conjugal relations are de facto marriages. What exactly constitutes a 'prototypical marriage' will certainly vary from context to context (Pauli, 2011). This does not mean that the current prototype is fixed and has clear boundaries – quite the opposite, the edges are fuzzy and new elements are continuously added. But the marriage prototype acts as a baseline against which other types of relations are evaluated. This leads to the second problem associated with the flexible and plural notion of African marriages.

A strong focus on flexible constructions of marriage ties might potentially ignore mechanisms of exclusion underlying seemingly fluid structures. This point has been made by Claude Meillassoux in his role as discussant at a conference on anthropological and demographic approaches to African marriages:

> Claude Meillassoux, a discussant at the seminar, drew forceful attention to these sweeping changes in nuptiality and to their economic underpinnings. He stressed that these criteria become encoded into the marriage system, making conjugal hierarchies more entrenched: élite women are more likely to become 'legitimate' or 'insider' wives, while the status of other women deteriorates. (Bledsoe & Pison, 1994: 19)

Finally, to focus only on the procedural character ignores that there is an ideal endpoint to the negotiations and flexibilities and that this endpoint, i.e. formally and publicly being considered as married, is increasingly not being reached by more and more people. The decline in marriage rates is especially strong in Southern Africa (Bongaarts, 2007; Pauli, 2010a, 2011; Van Dijk, 2010).

DECLINING MARRIAGE RATES

For some time now, both demographers and anthropologists have noted significant changes in marriage rates and family relations (for an overview cf. Pauli, 2011). Discussing the effects of labour migration on Southern African systems of family and marital relations, from the 1930s onwards several anthropologists became increasingly aware of rising rates of children born premarital. An early example is Schapera's 1930s work on premarital pregnancies among Tswana communities heavily involved in male labour migration (Schapera, 1933). Two decades later and based on urban research from the 1950s and the 1960s, a number of South African anthropologists reported similar rising numbers of children born out-of-wedlock and an increase in unmarried female-headed households for several South African

townships (Mayer, 1961; Preston-Whyte, 1978). However, these developments were largely attributed to the effects urban life and migration has had on family composition in towns. Despite Schapera's earlier work, rural areas were seen as virtually untouched by these changes (Preston-Whyte, 1978: 82). But this changed soon. About another decade later and based on rural research from the 1970s and 1980s, both Adam Kuper and Ørnulf Gulbrandsen described tremendous changes in marital and family relations for rural Southern African communities (Gulbrandsen, 1986; Kuper, 1987). Kuper, who with his ethnographic comparison of four Southern African marriage systems titled 'Wives for Cattle' described in detail the universal marriage as part of the political and economic system (Kuper, 1982), observed in 1987 "dramatic changes in the incidences of marriage and in the incidence of illegitimacy" (1987: 141). In a 1978 restudy of the Botswana village Isaac Schapera had researched in the 1930s one of Adam Kuper's graduate students, Marja Molenaar, found "substantial increase in the number of unmarried women and in the number of children born out of wedlock. The decline in polygyny only partially accounts for these changes" (1987: 141). As recent anthropological and demographic work on Botswana shows these trends, i.e. declining marriage rates and an increase in children born out-of-wedlock and couples cohabitating without being married, continue until today (Griffiths, 1997, 1998; Helle-Valle, 1999; Mokomane, 2005, 2006; Upton, 2001; Van Dijk, 2010, 2012). Similar dynamics have been described for Namibia (Fuller, 1993; Gordon, 1972; Iken, 1999; Pauli, 2007, 2009, 2012; Tersbøl, 2002).

For South Africa comparable macro and micro level trends are described (Hosegood et al., 2009; Hunter, 2004, 2007). Based on long-term ethnographic fieldwork in South Africa's Kwazulu Natal province, Mark Hunter shows that "throughout the 20th century a growing number of women gave birth out of wedlock" (Hunter, 2007: 692). To further extend his ethnographic findings Hunter incorporates macro level national census data into his analysis. Despite a number of data problems[7] Hunter is able to present chronological data on marriage status for the South African population classified as 'African'. He shows that from 1936 until the 1980s between 50 to 60 percent of the 'African' population 15 years and older has been married (including both civil and customary marriages). Then the number of people classified as married declines to 42 percent in 1980, 38 percent in 1991 and 30 percent in 2001. Hunter concludes: "Census data support the claim that there has been a quite dramatic decline over the last four decades" (Hunter, 2007: 695). Hunter stresses that the factors behind the decline are complex and only summarizes the following ones: women's increased economic independence and with rising unemployment rates since the 1970s men's inability to secure bridewealth (*ilobolo*) and to act as provider (cf. also Hunter, 2002, 2004, 2005, 2007, 2009, 2010). Hunter states that in South Africa "marriage today is, in many respects, a middle-class institution" (Hunter, 2007: 695).

Although these developments are especially pronounced in Southern Africa, some of the trends can also be observed in other African regions. For example Uche Isiugo-Abanike has shown for highly educated Igbo-speakers in Nigeria that marriage is being delayed, age at first marriage increases and the proportion of never-married individuals rises (Isiugo-Abanihe, 1994). Isiugo-Abanike concludes that marriage is not early and universal anymore. According to Isiugo-Abanike the main reason for these marriage changes are exploding bridewealth costs far beyond reach for the majority of men. He even speaks of an 'inflation of bridewealth'.

Very similar developments are presented in a recent study of Dogondoutchi, a Hausaphone and predominantly Muslim town in rural Niger (Masquelier, 2005). As Adeline Masquelier shows there exists a common perception that today's youths are facing a crisis of unprecedented proportions: "The 'crisis' centres on their inability to marry and to achieve full social seniority" (Masquelier, 2005: 59). Marriage in Mawri society is central for social maturity and without marriage the young do not become adults. Bridewealth and wedding costs have increased tremendously and "young men without the means to marry find themselves condemned to a kind of limbo life" (Masquelier, 2005: 60). Adeline Masquelier provides further explanations why bridewealth and wedding costs have exploded so much. According to her there is "a widespread sense in Niger that a growing thirst for the prestige earned through the staging of extravagant wedding celebrations has contributed to the spiralling bridewealth inflation and, by implication, the postponement of marriage for many" (Masquelier, 2005: 62–63).[8]

Another West African example is Jennifer Johnson-Hanks research on marriage changes in Southern Cameroon (Johnson-Hanks, 2007). Johnson-Hanks demonstrates that age-specific marriage probabilities in Southern Cameroon have fallen markedly. Like Uche Isiugo-Abanike and Adeline Masquelier Jennifer Johnson-Hanks focuses on the entanglement of marriage rates and economic dynamics to explain these demographic trends: "Of course, there are many reasons for this decline; however, the disjuncture between aspirations for marriage and real-life opportunities plays a central role" (Johnson-Hanks, 2007: 652). Importantly, Johnson-Hanks stresses that a decline in marriage rates does not necessarily mean a decline in the meaning and relevance of marriage (for a similar observation cf. also Hosegood et al., 2009: 299). Indeed, it may just mean exactly the opposite:

> That is marriage rates are not declining because marriage is becoming irrelevant or because it is less systematically valued than in the past. Rather, marriage is becoming more rare precisely because it is so terribly important to women's status that it be done well. (Johnson-Hanks, 2007: 652)

Hence, marriage is hardly an option anymore for an increasingly larger group of people. Men and women who because of their vulnerable and meagre economic

and ‘real-life opportunities’ are unable to marry have been degraded to spectators of weddings of those privileged enough to afford them. The celebration of distinctions through luxurious weddings has become a central arena of class expression and legitimization in Southern Africa and beyond (Pauli, 2011).

CONCLUSION: TOO POOR TO MARRY

Much research has noted a strong increase in wedding costs and an ‘inflation’ of bridewealth (Gulbrandsen, 1986; Isiugo-Abanihe, 1994; Masquelier, 2005; Murray, 1976, 1981a; Tersbøl, 2002). This increase in wedding costs runs parallel to growing unemployment rates and increasing numbers of economically marginalized men and women (Hunter, 2005, 2007, 2009; Pauli, 2012). In many regions of Southern Africa today, marriage celebrations are beyond reach for the majority of the population. People who want to marry, actually the majority, are unable to do so. While the economic basis for survival of the majority is getting more and more meagre, emerging elites and middle classes have appropriated wedding celebrations to express their distinctions, increasing the symbolic and economic divide even further.

Following Ferguson (1999) I have labelled the different interpretations of African marriage transformations as ‘metanarratives’. Especially anthropologists from or influenced by the British school of social anthropology have stressed the transition of marriage from a universal, virtually all aspects of life embracing institution before the rise of colonialism to an institution in ruins during colonialism. The two interrelated metanarratives ‘pre-colonial stable/universal marriage’ and ‘decay of marriage during colonial times’ perceive the decline of marriage rates thus as a logic consequence of larger macro dynamics. These approaches need to be supplemented with more agency based approaches that I have summarized under the two metanarratives of ‘change’ and ‘plurality/fluidity’ of African marriages. While the ‘change’ metanarrative basically stresses and empirically demonstrates that the metanarrative ‘decay of ‘African’ marriage’ is too simplistic for a nuanced understanding of the changes (which are perceived not as linear processes but complex dynamics with multiple outcomes for different actors) the currently dominant metanarrative ‘plurality/fluidity’ focuses on the great flexibility and adaptability of marriage (and also kinship) in both past and present times. Yet this metanarrative does also have limits, especially its non-theorizing of the strong increase in wedding costs and the parallel decline in marriage rates.

This transformation of costs and practices of weddings has been observed for several parts of Southern Africa. In general, these dynamics have to be linked to class formation processes and a strong increase in economic and social stratification. Weddings have become central arenas of distinction for the emerging elites and middle classes. Interestingly, the metanarrative capturing these dynamics is still in the making and not yet very common in the thinking about African marriages.

This metanarrative could be summarized as 'low rates, high value of marriage': it tells us that in many parts of Southern Africa marriage rates are historically unparalleled low while marriage as an institution is extremely valued.

NOTES

[1] My classification into these four 'metanarratives' is only one possibility to order thoughts and findings on African marriage. One might also differentiate between studies following British descent theory and studies following French alliance theory (cf. Parkin & Nyamwaya, 1987a).

[2] This brief review of some of the main arguments of anthropological thinking about African marriage in the 20th century is of course not at all comprehensive. I only want to show how selected anthropologists have theorized African marriage, i.e. what models and narratives they have constructed to understand, interpret and explain the institution and transformations of the institution they observed.

[3] Meyer Fortes' generalization focuses on the Tallensi. However, the same argument is made by Radcliff-Brown (1987 [1950]: 43) for African marriages in general and by John Barnes for the Ngoni of Zambia (at the time of research still Northern Rhodesia):

> "Adults are assumed to be married, and the assumption is justified. Marriage is seen by the Ngoni as part of the natural order. Unmarried adults cannot fill important roles and are regarded as overgrown children whose anomalous condition must be explained by reference to malady or a physical or moral defect" (Barnes, 1951: vii). Barnes concludes that both 'traditional' *and* 'modern' marriage among the Ngoni is of "universal and permanent character." (1951: vii)

[4] A similar reasoning has been suggested two decades earlier by Gulbrandsen (1986) in his reaction to Schapera's perception of the destructive character labor migration has had on Tswana family life. Gulbrandsen wrote:

> Although abandonment of polygyny and circular labor migration in combination have fundamentally transformed the systems of marriage and family relations, it can be argued that a pattern has evolved which ensures links of mutuality and support between productive and dependent family members. (1986: 25)

[5] E.g. a definition focusing on shared residence might include 'outside marriages' while a definition based on church or statutory codes will exclude these unions.

[6] The difficulties (impossibilities maybe) in transferring the Western concept of 'prostitution' to African contexts have been discussed at length by Helle-Valle (1999).

[7] Especially measurement difficulties, e.g. African marriages as processes and not single events, different systems of marriage co-existing and unreliability of Apartheid statistics.

[8] Masquelier further differentiates the varying responses by men and women of different generations to highlight how social reproduction is experienced under the combined effects of neo-liberal economics and reformist Islam.

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