Introduction

ANNA'S WEDDING

Lifting her veil and smiling gratiously, 25-year-old Anna was leaving the Fransfontein Lutheran church. With badly concealed envy and grim faces, several young women stood outside the church and watched her. Anna's expensive silvery satin wedding dress, with beautiful embroidery and lace, blazed in the bright midday sun. Josef, now her husband, walked by her side, not as triumphantly as she looked and clearly exhausted, but with a content gaze. The wedding party slowly streamed out of the church and into the courtyard outside. Four couples of bridesmaids and groomsmen, all dressed in shades of glittering purple, followed the newlyweds. Behind them walked the bride's and groom's parents. The humble dress of the husband's mother stood in sharp contrast to the luxurious textiles worn by the wedding couple and their bridesmaids and groomsmen.

Anna's wedding in late April 2004 was the fifth wedding that my husband, Michael Schnegg, and I attended in Fransfontein, a rural community of 137 households located in the semiarid former Damaraland, today Kunene South, northwest Namibia, where we conducted field research from May 2003 to September 2004 and from July to September in both 2005 and 2006. As at the other weddings before, the moment when the newlyweds left the church and proceeded into the courtyard was filled with relief, joy and triumph. They had made it! Anna's wedding pictures, my field notes and my memories of the day once again revive the exhausted happiness that reflected in the newlyweds' faces. A few months later, Anna agreed to a life story interview.

During the interview we talked about Anna's wedding day and what happened after she left church as a married woman. As is common in Fransfontein, the newlyweds proceeded to the Fransfontein fountain to take wedding pictures. Water is not only the most important resource in arid Namibia. It is also loaded with symbolic meaning and value (Hoernlé 1923). On their way to the fountain, Anna and her husband Josef passed several groups of spectators who commented on the wedding.

Anna described the scene in the following way: "While we were passing, I heard one of my mother's sister's daughters tell another girl watching: 'Oh, Anna, she is so young, and she wants to marry! She is too young! I can't see why she should marry. I am not married.'" Like the unfriendly gazes of the women watching Anna and Josef leaving the church after their wedding ceremony, the envy of Anna's mother's sister's daughter was hardly hidden. The likelihood that she might ever marry herself was small.

Today, only about 30 per cent of the Fransfontein population 15 years and older is or has been married. Yet, of those 60 years and older, the overwhelming majority (more than 70 per cent) was married. It is only with the men and women who were born in the mid-20th century that marriage rates started to decline, resulting in less than 20 per cent of men and women in the age bracket of 20 to 50 ever having married. One explanation for this change might be a steep rise in the age at marriage. We saw above that Anna's mother's sister's daughter, who is several years older then Anna, was convinced that Anna was too young to deserve marriage. Yet an elevated average age at marriage is only a partial explanation and, by itself, is of rather limited explanatory power.

Demographic variations like a later average age at marriage have to be understood as expressions of more profound underlying societal changes (Antoine 2006). Transformations in Namibian marriage practices have been framed and structured by dramatic political economic changes in the 20th century, roughly ranging from the creation of reserves by German colonialists early in the century, over the establishment of homelands during apartheid and the South African annexation of Namibia, to the celebration of independence and freedom from colonial rule since the 1990s. During this time frame, marriage has changed from an almost universal practice and collectively experienced rite of passage, creating social cohesion and community, to a celebration of difference and distinction by a small elite. Importantly, the appropriation of weddings for class distinctions commenced long before the end of apartheid and colonial rule. Since approximately the late 1960s and during the 1970s, marriage rates in Fransfontein started to decline while wedding practices became increasingly elaborate and expensive. Substantial political changes at that time, especially the establishment of homelands, resulted in an array of new constraints and burdens for the great majority of the population while the agency of a small minority was significantly enhanced and extended. This minority rather rapidly consolidated and formed a local elite.

It is this book's central aim to describe and explain these multiple transformations and their interplay (i.e. changes in marriage rates but also political, material and ideational transformations) and to reflect on their consequences for the already large but nevertheless still growing group of non-married (and probably never-to-be-married) Fransfonteiners. The book's theoretical and methodological frame draws on practice

theory and recent reflections on the dialectics between structure and agency with Pierre Bourdieu's theorizing on the reproduction of inequalities through mechanisms of distinctions (Bourdieu 1984 [1979]).

Building on the work of practice theorists, I define agency – thus an actor's capacity to reinterpret and transform relations to some degree – not as opposed to structure but as a constituent of structure (Bourdieu 1977; Johnson-Hanks 2006, 2007b; Ortner 1984, 2006; Sewell 1992, 2005). Structure – very loosely defined as the reproduction of patterns of relations including both ideational and material dimensions (Sewell 1992, 2005) – is thus to a certain degree always contested. Because structure both empowers and constraints agency, this dialectic dynamic continually questions the reproduction of structure and can modify structure and agency. Consequently, a focus on social practices is key for an understanding of structure and agency as well as their transformations.

Approaches informed by practice theory focus on the asymmetrical relationships of power (Ortner 1984: 12; Wardlow 2006: 5). Sewell (2005: 145) stresses that "structures, in short, empower agents differently, which also implies that they embody the desires, intentions, and knowledge of agents differently as well. Structures, and the human agencies they endow, are laden with differences of power". To understand the interplay between the changes in wedding practices and marriage rates on the one hand and, on the other hand, the establishment of apartheid's homelands and the emergence of localized elites, a closer look at the varying degrees of empowerment for different actors and groups of actors within specific structures and time periods seems to be especially important. By combining participant observation (which elicits information on how actors maintain, transform and reinterpret relations within structures) with life narratives (providing insight into women's and men's motivations, perceptions and legitimizations of their actions and life events), I grasp central facets of actors' agencies. I also reflect on how life narratives are not "objective" sources on the course of people's lives but are always framed by processes of memory and the current lifeworlds of the narrator.

Structures that frame the agencies elicited in such a way are multidimensional, that is historical, economic, political, social, normative, demographic and ritual. The attempt to pay attention to multiple structures and their entanglements has been inspired by Bourdieu's (2008) analysis of French bachelors in rural Béarn and their difficulties of marrying. I try to capture the historic dimensions (and the differences of power within these) through the elicitation of the political economic history of the region and of how these macrostructures are reflected at the level of the household and the individual as, for example, in terms of the distribution of wealth and education. I also consider normative and social structures, especially in terms of gender, reproduction, family and kinship. Further, and in this I follow Emile Durkheim (1930) and Jennifer Johnson-Hanks (2007a), demographic rates like marriage rates are also

considered as structures "evoking certain forms of action from individuals without individuals necessarily being aware of the rates or explicitly orienting their action toward them" (ibid: 3). However, similar to all other structures mentioned above, the reproduction of demographic structures is again dialectically interwoven with agency, thus demographic structures both shape and are shaped by individual agency. Consequently, my differentiation between the information I explicitly elicited on agency and the data I gathered on structure is somewhat artificial.

Lastly, I carefully analyze ritual structures. Wedding practices have changed tremendously in Fransfontein over the past 40 years.[1] Until the late 1960s, wedding and engagement practices had a relatively simple and inexpensive structure. From the 1970s onwards, these ritual structures have been successively appropriated by emerging elites and thoroughly transformed in the process. Today, engagements and weddings have become the most important social sites to publicly demonstrate class distinction. Weddings are now indicators of social class and stratification.

SOCIAL CLASS AND CLASS DISTINCTIONS

Bourdieu (1984 [1979]) has thoroughly analyzed the mechanisms of distinction used to sustain the reproduction of ruling classes, especially in his "ethnography of France", a book on "distinctions" based on expressions of "taste" in France. Bourdieu distinguishes social position based on both cultural and economic capital and expressed through different types of occupation from what he terms lifestyles. On a more abstract level, Bourdieu further differentiates three large social classes (encompassing social positions) which he dynamically constructs using a range of information, especially occupation, but also other data such as place of residence: the ruling or upper class, the middle class and the popular class. Social positions and lifestyles are densely intertwined but not equal, allowing for change and variations. The varying lifestyles are accumulations of different dimensions of tastes, such as tastes for music, sports or furniture. Through their tastes, social classes produce and

1 In popular discourse, people in Fransfontein often distinguished a wedding from a marriage: while they used the word "wedding" to describe the ritual practices that publicly turn two individuals into a married couple, they used "marriage" to denote a state of being. In anthropological discourse, such a distinction is often not undertaken, demonstrated by the two influential anthropological encyclopedias by Seymour-Smith (1986) and Barnard and Spencer (1996): while both have entries for "marriage", "marriage payments", "marriage classes" and "marriage rules", they have none for "wedding". In this book I use both terms, with the term "wedding" used more specifically for the ritual practices of becoming married and "marriage" more generally for both practices, processes and the state of being.

legitimize distinctions. Bourdieu's (1984 [1979], 1990) concept of the habitus is central for the understanding of these processes.

The habitus of a person connects a person's social position to the person's lifestyle. According to Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant (1992: 136), the habitus is the internalization of a specific type of economic and social condition. As such, the habitus is a socially constructed system of structured and structuring dispositions acquired through social practices. Based on his research in France, Bourdieu (1984 [1979]) states that all classes have a characteristic habitus. While the habitus of the ruling class is characterized by distinction and the construction of legitimate taste, the middle class hopes to strive ahead through education and appropriation of the ruling class' tastes, while the popular class constructs a popular taste. Taste can thus be grouped into three categories, each linked to social position and class: legitimate taste, middle tastes and popular tastes. Importantly, legitimate taste legitimizes power, as Bourdieu (1984 [1979]) is able to show with an impressive amount of statistical data. Thus the knowledge of a certain lifestyle (e.g. specific pieces of music, fashion or art) publicly legitimizes and reproduces social and economic inequalities. However, only if the different dimensions of legitimate taste remain exclusive do they serve as markers of distinction. As soon as cheap copies are available to the mass population, the marker of distinction looses its potential to create distinction. It changes from a sign of sophisticated taste into a mass product. These processes of taste appropriation create a paradox situation for the upper class: on the one hand, their taste legitimizes their position or power yet, on the other, their taste is under constant threat of appropriation by (mainly) the middle classes. Consequently, legitimate taste has to appear stable and justified while continuously creating new markers of distinction.

Bourdieu's (1977, 1990) treatment of French reproduction and legitimization of class distinctions has to be viewed and also criticised against the background of his wider theoretical approach (see Calhoun et al. 1993). Three concepts are especially important for Bourdieu's general theorizing: the previously mentioned habitus, conceptions of capital, and field (Calhoun 1993; Postone et al. 1993). All three are interlinked. Capital, thus different forms of accumulable social-symbolic resources, and habitus, namely embodied social structures, lead to positions within specific social fields: "The position of a particular agent is the result of an interplay between that person's habitus and his or her place in a field of positions as defined by the distribution of the appropriate form of capital". (Postone et al. 1993: 5) Fields are semi-autonomous, with agents and their own accumulation of history, forms of capital and logic of actions. Their autonomy is restricted insofar as capital can be transferred between fields. Fields are hierarchically ordered on three levels (LiPuma 1993: 16). The first and most specific level comprises the distinctive fields. On a second level, these fields are located within a "field of power" defined by class dynamics. Finally, classes are located within these general fields of class relations. Edward LiPuma

(1993: 16) summarizes Bourdieu's conceptualization in the following way: "This view of social structure tries to link class and status, relate both to action and practice through the habitus, and provide an account of the reproduction of hierarchy".

Bourdieu's conception of habitus, field and class has been criticised, for example, by LiPuma (1993) and Michèle Lamont (1992). Lamont points out that Bourdieu's theory of fields and classes assumes rather closed and homogeneous structures. However, as her research on French and US-American upper middle class men shows, the markers of distinction and the relative positions of her respondents are defined by open, changing, and interpenetrating semiotic and social fields and not by stable and closed ones (Lamont 1992: 183). Instead of presupposing fields and classes, Lamont calls for empirical research that analyzes how boundaries are established and vary across groups (not only classes), who is excluded by these boundaries and how they affect inequality. Lamont (1992: 188) further criticises Bourdieu's habitus concept as focusing too exclusively on proximate structural conditions and not reflecting enough on the fact that "people do not always perceive the world only through their own experiences and that they often borrow cultural models that are decoupled from their own lives". Thus, according to Lamont, processes of change and dynamic of the habitus remain unclear (see also Lash 1993).

Like Lamont, LiPuma (1993) questions the pre-existence and the boundaries of Bourdieu's fields and classes. He interrogates the existence of distinct classes as a necessity for Bourdieu's thinking (since they are what is being reproduced and legitimized): instead of taking classes and fields for granted, one has to scrutinize the specific cultural formations that produce these categories in the first place. While for Bourdieu the cultural formations and categories of distinctions are in the end arbitrary – it is not the categories themselves that interest Bourdieu but their use as markers of distinction – LiPuma explicitly calls for a cultural analysis of these cateogries.[2] Similar to Lamont (1992: 180) and Sewell (1992), LiPuma stresses that resources and classes are only meaningful within their cultural context. Critique thus concentrates on Bourdieu's too homogeneous, fixed and stable notion of class, the little attention he has paid to processes of change of habitus, and his lack of attention for the cultural formation of categories such as field and class.

How then can Bourdieu's theoretical insights and the critique of his thinking be fruitfully applied to the Namibian lifeworlds analyzed here? First of all, one might argue that Bourdieu's theoretical approach in *Distinctions* (1984 [1979]) is not suited for this ethnographic context and that his reflection on precapitalist societies as outlined in his work on Algeria provides a more appropriate theoretical frame (Bourdieu 1977). Bourdieu theorizes that in precapitalist societies, elites directly and constantly re-create

2 If this is not done, then it would remain unclear "what sorts of categories should be taken as historically specific and which as trans-historical" (Calhoun 1993: 82).

relations of dominance while in capitalist societies (such as the French one) elites depend on institutional orders to express and reproduce their interests. However, George Marcus (1983: 46) has observed that "most anthropological studies of elites […] are mixtures of both modes of domination discussed by Bourdieu". Thus, just like most ethnographic cases discussed by Marcus (ibid: 47), in Fransfontein there are both "powerful families and powerful institutions". In many instances powerful families and powerful institutions, such as the bureaucratic structures of apartheid's homelands, are indeed interwined. This already indicates a high level of heterogeneity and fluidity regarding the production and reproduction of distinction and class in Fransfontein.

I follow Bourdieu's critics insofar as the concept of rather closed class boundaries and the notion of a stable and durable habitus are not well suited to the dynamics of Fransfontein's class formation processes. Bourdieu analyzes a society, France, that is marked by very pronounced and long-term class differences.[3] The Namibian postcolonial situation is more fluid and heterogeneous, with classes and habitus in the making. Nevertheless, despite this justified critique of Bourdieu's construction of groups and habitus, I want to show that Bourdieu's dynamics of distinction – the continuous demand for new markers of distinction elites produce in order to legitimize their positions – are at the heart of the class formation process in Fransfontein. Here I also take inspiration from Abner Cohen's (1981) seminal work on Creole public servants and professionals in Sierra Leone. Cohen unravels how through their cults, practices and symbols, including wedding rituals, Creole elites justify and legitimize their privileged class position. In Fransfontein, elites and their markers of distinction have recently emerged, albeit out of older cultural forms and practices that render a cultural analysis of these previous formations necessary. Wedding celebrations are one of the central arenas to express these distinctions and to introduce new markers of distinction. Following LiPuma and Lamont, I analyze the cultural production of marriage into a valuable resource and, following Bourdieu, how this culturally transformed resource is being used and reproduced to manifest class distinction. This does not imply that marriage has been of no value before the emergence of these elitist dynamics of distinctions. Bridewealth is a characteristic element of many "African" marriages. However, the scale of expenditure and the forms of ritual expressions have thoroughly changed, mainly serving the desire for distinction of the new elites (Pauli/ van Dijk 2016).

So far, I have used the concept of "elite" to describe the group of people in positions of power, wealth and influence. In some recent work, however, the concept "emerging African middle class" has partly replaced this older terminology. I examine this in the next section.

3 However, LiPuma (1993: 23) stresses that this homogeneity is probably a partial artifact. Internal divisions of social structure and class along racial and ethnic lines are not considered and Jews, Algerians and Moroccans do not appear in *Distinctions*.

From elites to emerging middle classes

In her in-depth treatment of the use of the concepts of elite and (middle) class in Africa, Carola Lentz (2016: 25) observes: "Since the 2000s, interest in the middle classes, once heralded as the main forces behind industrialization, urbanization and bureaucratization but then somewhat neglected by social scientists (albeit not by historians), has experienced a renaissance, this time on a global scale". Up to then, African elites and working classes had been at the center of research interests, to be interrupted by a period of little class analysis in the late 1980s and during the 1990s (Spronk 2014). Lentz (2016: 24) emphazises that a lot of the research now running under the lable "emerging middle classes" has strong thematic overlaps with older studies of African elites. Education, modernity and progressiveness are central to both terminological approaches. But unlike middle classes, elites have more often been seen in moralizing terms, condemning them as corrupt and exploitative (Behrends/Pauli 2012). This might also help to explain why many recent studies prefer the seemingly more "neutral" term "emerging middle classes". Since the 2000s, several edited volumes and monographs have revived the study of class through the lens of the middle class, both on a global scale (Heiman et al. 2012a; López/Weinstein 2012) and in the African context (Kroeker et al. 2018; Melber 2016; Southall 2016).

Not surprisingly, almost all of this research builds on Pierre Bourdieu's (1984 [1979]) analysis of distinction. Consumption and lifestyle are central practices through which the new or emerging African middle classes are being scrutinized. But unlike Cohen's (1981) political analysis of an African elite through its conspicuous consumption (see also Veblen 1994 [1899]) and elitist celebrations, a thorough ethnographic analysis of the symbolism and practices of the nature of the African middle class is still outstanding.[4] Here, I use consumption, habitus and lifestyle as central modes by which to understand class formation. I clearly share this approach with recent African middle class studies. But I will not use the term "middle class" to describe and analyze the group of people who came into office and power in Fransfontein since the 1970s and who have changed marriage practices so thoroughly. Instead, I classify them as "elite". I have two reasons for this decision.

My first reason concerns regional research traditions. In Namibia, recent ethnographic and historic work on class formation uses the concept of elites (see Tötemeyer 1978 for an older work that retains its importance). Gregor Dobler (2014) meticulously describes elite traders in colonial Ovamboland. Mattia Fumanti (2016) analyzes different generations of elites in the northern Namibian town of Rundu. And

4 Rachel Spronk's (2012) work on young professionals in urban Nairobi certainly goes in this direction. Yet her focus is not on the analysis of (middle) class but of gender and sexuality.

in neighboring Botswana, Richard Werbner (2004) has fruitfully used the concept of the elite to study the upper strata of Kalanga society.

My second reason is more complex. Namibian class formation and the resulting social classes have to be historically situated. They have to be understood against the background of the country's complex colonial and postcolonial history. During its liberation struggle against apartheid, the South West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO) followed a socialist ideology. After Namibian independence in 1990, SWAPO's ideology became increasingly neoliberal and market friendly (Melber 2014). The extent of the subsequent spread of an emergent "black" Namibian middle class is contested. According to a recent study by the African Development Bank, which defines the middle class as those living on USD4-20 a day, only 9 per cent of the Namibian population falls into this category (*The Namibian*, May 11, 2015). Thus, some observers perceive SWAPO's turn towards capitalism, neoliberal politics and nepotism through affirmative action programs as a central reason for the persistence of dramatic economic inequalities (Dobler 2012; Melber 2011).

During apartheid, the vast majority of the Namibian "black" population was excluded from any form of wealth accumulation. After Namibia's full administrative "integration" into the Republic of South Africa in the late 1950s, the country was administered as a *de facto* fifth province by South Africa, with apartheid structures (Wallace 2011: 261-271). A boundary was drawn between "whites" and "blacks", with "blacks" excluded from almost all access to power and privilege. One of the apartheid "homelands" created in the wake of this move was "Damaraland", which included the Fransfontein region. The establishment of "ethnic" homelands also initiated processes of internal stratification. For a happy few, the establishment of infrastructure and bureaucracy within the homelands meant new and long-lasting possibilities of enhancing one's living conditions (Rohde 1997; Tötemeyer 1978). A local, "modern" elite of "style-setters" (Plotnicov 1970: 293), such as administrators, businessmen, politicians and teachers, emerged in Damaraland and the other homelands (Dobler 2014; Tötemeyer 1978). This was a small, regional elite, which enjoyed its status only within an artificial, local context; it was not a national middle class. During the apartheid period, national elite and middle class positions were occupied by the "white" minority.

Following Chris Shore and Stephen Nugent (2002: 2), I define elite as a "privileged minority" occupying the most influential positions and roles in the governing institutions of a community. Such a definition is always context dependent (Fumanti 2004): the local elites of the apartheid era were clearly a privileged minority, and only existed "on top" of their respective local strata and the respective homelands. Recently, Carola Lentz (2016: 24, 40) has suggested a more restricted definition of elites as "persons or small groups with leadership roles". To a large extent this definition also applies to the apartheid-period homeland elites. Many of them were indeed

in leadership positions within the homeland. With the end of apartheid in 1990, these local homeland elites became part of a newly emergent national, "black" urban middle class. Affirmative action programs aimed at promoting the previously disadvantaged "black" population fostered the growth of this class, as did new investments in the mining, fishing, construction and telecommunication industries.

Much anthropological work on middle classes is reluctant to define the concept of the middle class (Brosius 2010; Heiman et al. 2012b; Scharrer et al. 2017). Nevertheless, some conceptual overlaps between the various understandings can be detected. Thus, people belonging to the middle classes have acquired a certain level of social and economic security, albeit one that is heavily context and culture/lifestyle dependent. Importantly, people who see themselves as belonging to the middle class perceive difference between themselves and those above and below them (Lentz 2016: 41). These perceptions of boundaries and distinctions are both symbolic and social (Lamont and Molnár 2002).

After apartheid and with independence, the political-economic landscape of Namibia has become more diverse and fluid. An urban, "black" middle class has emerged in the national capital of Windhoek and in other urban areas (Melber 2014). This new middle class is still strongly linked to the rural areas. It largely consists of successful migrants from rural areas like Fransfontein "commuting" between urban middle class and local elite livelihoods (Pauli 2018). Although I will mention this group of migrants, my focus here is not on them but on the local elites living in Fransfontein. By and large this group has continued to be "on top" of the local social strata, often but not always in leadership positions, since the apartheid period. Given this continuity, it thus seems to be appropriate to classify them as a local elite and not as an upper or an emerging middle class.

This terminological decision should not, however, conceal that the Fransfontein elite is heterogeneous. The differences in wealth and lifestyle of the families of the wedding couple mentioned above show this. While Anna and Josef earn a stable income and both of Anna's parents are also permanently employed, Josef's unmarried mother never had the luck of enjoying a secure income. Her dress was much humbler than the expensive garments worn by the wedding couple and their bridesmaids and groomsmen. Class distinctions thus divide families. But the wedding also shows that the Fransfontein local elite is still densely connected to the non-elite, especially through such kinship ties. Lentz has repeatedly emphazised this heterogeneity in processes of African class formation (Behrends/Lentz 2012; Lentz 1994: 45, 2016).

THEORIZING AFRICAN MARRIAGES

The multiple entanglements of marriage with class formation processes make it an especially apt topic to study colonial and postcolonial lifeworlds. It is thus surprising that from the mid-1980s onwards hardly any research on marriage and weddings has been conducted in Southern Africa. This paucity stands in remarkable contrast to the centrality of the institution until the 1980s, documented in several influential volumes (Comaroff 1980b; Krige/Comaroff 1981; Kuper 1982; Mair 1969). Rijk van Dijk and I (Pauli/van Dijk 2016) have argued that the paucity of anthropological studies of marriage in the 1980s and 1990s is very likely an outcome of David Schneider's 1984 critique of structural-functionalist approaches to kinship and marriage. Since the late 1990s, a revival under the lable "New Kinship Studies" has taken place (Carsten 2004; Sahlins 2013). This has introduced novel concepts such as relatedness (Carsten 2000) to emphazise the dynamic character of kin ties. Yet so far, marriage has hardly been studied within this new research agenda to kinship.

In Southern Africa, marriage has recently re-emerged as a central topic in anthropological research. Since the beginning of the new millennium, a number of studies have focused on marriage and kinship. Van Dijk (2010, 2012a, 2012b, 2017) has studied the institution in depth in Botswana, Danai Mupotsa (2014), Hylton White (2016) and Jaco Smit (2017) have analyzed marriage in South Africa, and I have examined marriage and weddings in Namibia (Pauli 2011, 2017a, 2018; Pauli/ Dawids 2017). Some authors have discussed the meaning of marriage in situations where it is largely absent (Hunter 2010, 2016; James 2017; Schaumburg 2013). Aninka Claassens and Dee Smythe (2013) edited a volume on the decline of marriage and land issues in South Africa, including work on bridewealth and marriage rates by Stephanie Rudwick and Dorrit Posel (see also Posel/Rudwick 2014; Posel/Rudwick/Casale 2011; Rudwick/Posel 2015) and on the problem of defining marriage by Victoria Hosegood (see also Hosegood/McGrath/Moultire 2009). Several of the authors of a special issue on marriage in *Anthropology Southern Africa*, which van Dijk and I edited (Pauli/van Dijk 2016), have done research on marriage and kinship for decades. This allowed the special issue to take a long-term perspective on the continuities and changes of the institution (Kuper 1982, 2016; Niehaus 1994, 2017; Solway 1990, 2016).

This book builds on this research and discusses the transformations in marriage through the lens of several broad anthropological perspectives that I label as "metanarratives".[5] I use the term to stress the rather high degree of coherence within these

5 This brief overview of some of the main arguments of anthropological thinking about African marriage in the 20th century is, of course, not at all comprehensive. The sketch aims to show how selected anthropologists have theorized African marriage, that is what models

interpretative frameworks. Similarly, James Ferguson (1999: 14-17) applies the concept of a "metanarrative" to analyze the way anthropologists, among others, have perceived and constructed "modernity" and "urbanization" in the Zambian Copperbelt. I start with British social anthropology and a metanarrative that centres on the *leitmotif* of the stable African marriage, examined in the next section.[6] This metanarrative is only one among at least four metanarratives to describe change and continuity in African marriages (Pauli 2016), the following three discussed in the subsequent sections. The second metanarrative is that of the destruction of "the" African marriage and family system and the third (and most unspecific) one is that of change of African marriage and family systems.[7] Finally, the fourth and most recent metanarrative used to interpret transformations in African marriages highlights fluidity and plurality of African marriages. I then discuss the possible emergence of a new, fifth metanarrative that aims at understanding the dramatic increase in wedding costs and the parallel decline in marriage rates, especially in Southern Africa.

Stability of African marriages

African marriage has played a pivotal role for the development of anthropological theory and thought. British social anthropology viewed African systems of kinship and marriage as the central ordering principles of pre-colonial society that lacked a centralized political power: it viewed the political, economic, religious, social and legal as being channeled and structured through kinship and marriage. Indeed, Alfred Radcliffe-Brown (1987 [1950]: 1) commenced his famous introduction to African systems of kinship and marriage by stressing how essential kinship and marriage are to all aspects of African life: "For the understanding of any aspect of the social life of an African people – economic, political, or religious – it is essential to have a

and narratives they have constructed to understand, interpret and explain the institution and its transformations.

6 This does not mean that divorce is not mentioned in the contributions; quite the opposite (e.g. Fortes 1949: 84-87). However, the metanarrative of the stability of African marriage focuses on the societal level and does not necessarily mean durability of individual marriages.

7 My classification of the literature into these four "metanarratives" is only one possibility of ordering the thinking and findings on African marriage. One might also differentiate between studies following British descent theory and those based on French alliance theory (Parkin/Nyamwaya 1987a). However, for the development of my argument (understanding the decline in marriage rates), a closer look at alliance theory would not add any new thoughts beyond the British school as both alliance and descent theory treat marriage as a stable universal (Borneman 1996).

thorough knowledge of their system of kinship and marriage". Thus at least in British social anthropology of the first half of the 20th century, studying kinship and marriage was the thing to do. Several now-classic studies of kinship and marriage stem from this period (for Africa, see especially Evans-Pritchard 1951; Fortes 1949).

The 1950 collection entitled *African Systems of Kinship and Marriage*, edited by Radcliffe-Brown and Daryll Forde (1987 [1950]), presents a good overview of the general approach of British social anthropology to the study of kinship and marriage at that time. After Radcliffe-Brown's introduction, in which he defines terms, classifications and structures for a study of kinship and marriage, nine anthropologists present their ethnographic findings. The contributions, as for example by Hilda Kuper on the Swazi of Southern Africa or Meyer Fortes on the West African Ashanti, are all written in present tense. Social features, to borrow Radcliffe-Brown's term (1987 [1950]: 3), like divorce or levirate, are discussed in relation to their function(s) within social systems. The central aim of the collection is thus to understand "a system as it exists at a certain time, abstracting as far as possible from any change that it may be undergoing" (ibid). Radcliffe-Brown and all other contributors to the volume of course clearly realized the dramatic influences and changes African systems of kinship and marriage were undergoing. Yet despite or perhaps even because of these changes, they perceived an urgent need to thoroughly describe the "pure" or "abstract" (i.e. pre-colonial) kinship and marriage systems and their functioning before they would vanish: "To understand a process of change we must make a diachronic study. But to do this we must first learn all that we possibly can about how the system functioned before the changes that we are investigating occurred". (ibid)

For the British structural-functionalists, marriage was a stable, timeless and recursive institution, as Borneman (1996: 220) has so convincingly shown. Although marriage does imply movement (mainly of 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). How then is structure reproduced through African marriage? First, marriage is described as universal. Everybody will marry sooner or later 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 Fortes (1949) in his *Web of Kinship among the Tallensi*. To stay single is described as something that only the most deviant members of society would attempt:

> 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)

Fortes' ethnographic description leaves no doubt about the universal character of marriage.[8] However, what counts as marriage is a rather large and flexible category for the Tallensi. Fortes shows that many first unions dissolve after some time. To capture the flexible character of these marriages, he classifies them as "experimental marriages" (Fortes 1949: 84). This leads to the second important feature of African marriage described by many British social anthropologists, namely 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 considered as married.

Finally, marriage is defined in mainly legal terms. African marriage "legitimizes" children and publicly manifests fatherhood (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 (ibid: 51) stresses that African marriage always involves two "bodies of kin", that is two kin groups that reproduce and rearrange social structure through marriage. 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 in the British school's theorizing of African marriage, it is not surprising that the second prominent metanarrative of African marriage captures the opposite side of stability, namely destruction and decay, the focus of the next section.

8 Fortes' generalization focuses on the Tallensi. However, the same argument is made by Radcliffe-Brown (1987 [1950]: 43) for African marriage in general, Henri Junod (1962: 182) for the Tsonga of South Africa and John Barnes (1952: vii) for the Ngoni of Zambia (then 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 (ibid) concludes that both "traditional" *and* "modern" marriage among the Ngoni is of "universal and permanent character".

Destruction of African marriages

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), Radcliffe-Brown limits his reflections on change to a few lines in his introduction to 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. (ibid: 84-85)

Because kinship and marriage are so central for the organization of African society, any change in kinship and marriage is perceived to be more or less "destructive" for the whole society. Mark Hunter (2007: 654) has termed these constructions of change "teleological narratives of 'family breakdown' in Africa". He 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; see also 2007: 694).

Harriet Ngubane's (1987) research on Zulu and Swazi marriage and kinship is an example of both the ethnographic richness attributed by Hunter to these South African ethnographic studies and the construction of a metanarrative of destruction of the African family. Many researchers have analyzed the centrality of bridewealth and cattle for Southern African marriage and kinship systems (for excellent discussions, see 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). Ngubane shows in great detail how a complex web of economic and social rights and duties is built and maintained through the exchange of cattle between the bride's and groom's kin groups. She 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, Ngubane stresses the fundamental importance of kinship for the general social, economic and political organization (ibid: 177). Consequently, if kinship and marriage are so central for the general societal organization, any change to it has to be perceived as catastrophic. Ngubane puts forward the position that marriage as an institution was substantially weakened by the monetization of *lobolo*, that is the substitution of cattle for cash in bridewealth prestations. This, she noted, had 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". (ibid: 180) Her language very tellingly expresses the metanarrative of destruction: she writes of "social disorganization"; that the consequences of change are "devastating"; and that women are "victims" and families "suffer" (ibid: 180-181). Main triggers behind these changes are processes associated with "cultural contact" (Hunter 2007: 694) and colonization, thus processes of monetization and commercialization, urbanization, Christianization, apartheid, migration and industrialization. However, Hunter (2004, 2005, 2007, 2009a) and other researchers (see, for example, Moore and Vaughan 1994) have questioned the myth of the destruction of African families and marriage as misleading and insufficient to appropriately understand the complex social dynamics observable in kin, family and marriage transformations. The next section focuses on the third metanarrative, that of change, which to some extent responds to Hunter's and Moore and Vaughan's concerns.

Change of African marriages

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 in African marriage reveals that the conception of change is but a variation of the destruction metanarrative. Similar to the latter, research on change sets up how things were before the change, in general labeled as "traditional", such as traditional marriage, traditional society or traditional social organization, and contrasts these with the changed phenomena, often labeled as "modern", such as modern marriage or modern families. There are numerous examples for this kind of conceptualization of the dynamics of African marriage (Barnes 1952; Bledsoe 1980; some articles in Krige/Comaroff 1981; and also some articles in Parkin/Nyamwaya 1987b; Pauw 1963; Schapera 1939). Some topics are especially prominent in this literature, 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; and 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 preceding two, however, is a lesser degree of generalization and a higher degree of internal variation. While the metanarratives of stability and destruction picture large social entities as rather homogeneous, the change perspective allows for variation and internal differentiation. But often these variations are only seen to apply as a consequence of change, while the period before the change is assumed to be relatively homogeneous. Isaac Schapera's (1939) work in *Married Life in an African Tribe* on Kgatla families in the

former Bechuanaland Protectorate (today Botswana) provides an example. He 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 today 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. (ibid: 333)

The tendency to imagine a past, that is to project contemporary ideas on past situations, has been thoroughly analyzed by historically-oriented research, most prominent in the work on the "invention of tradition" (Hobsbawm and 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 be seen as "continuities with shifting emphasis" (ibid: 249).

Nevertheless, despite these sometimes problematic constructions of past marriage, family and kin constellations that can be found in some of the works cited above, the attempt to understand internal variations clearly extends the limited perspectives of the stability and destruction metanarratives. Caroline Bledsoe's (1980) research on marriage in Kpelle society, Liberia, is a good example for this opening up of perspectives and complexity. Bledsoe compares the options available to 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. She argues that the "wealth-in-people" system continues to be of central importance for the understanding of Kpelle marriage and other social relations (ibid: Ch 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 call to study "continuities with shifting emphasis". Further, Bledsoe's detailed analysis of the varying effects that structural (especially economic) transformations have on the agency of different actors and groups of actors is also visionary for her time. Without using any of the terminology of practice theory,[9] her combination of structural analysis with the actions and perceptions of individual actors and groups of actors is an early example of this theoretical and methodological perspective. 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), as for example the choice to stay single, other

9 Major works of practice theory, such as Bourdieu's *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977), were being published around the same time as Bledsoe's book.

women's agency is further constrained. This complex perspective stands in sharp contrast to Ngubane's (1987) approach, discussed above. Ngubane's account does not distinguish between different groups of women but lumps all into one category of "victims" (for comparable insights about the problematic construction of the categories "women" and "gender", see Cornwall [2005]). Bledsoe's approach goes beyond the narratives of destruction, victimization and simple conceptions of change. It also expands the narrow normative and categorical perspective of marriage, thus one 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 Bledsoe's ethnography, a number of other researchers began to theorize African marriage in more ambiguous and complex ways. For example, in Southern Africa, the effects of labor migration on marriage were studied in comparably innovative ways as Bledsoe approached her research (Gulbrandsen 1986; Murray 1981a, 1981b; Sansom 1981; Spiegel 1975). The theoretical movement from models of African marriage that focused mainly on structure to more dynamic models that included actors' 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; Krige/Comaroff 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 the other, together with Eileen Jensen Krige, on marriage in Southern Africa (Comaroff 1980b; Krige/Comaroff 1981). In the introductory remarks to both volumes, Comaroff (1981: xii) underlines that "the main thrust of research has been directed at the jural and structural aspects" of marriage and marriage payments. At length, Comaroff shows the deficits of the three variants of "structure-focused" (in a broader sense) explanations – structural-functionalist, Marxist and structuralist – to understand marriage payments. The contributions to both 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 subtitled their introduction "change and choice", thus stressing both structural dynamics and agency (1987a). Acting as discussant at a symposium on demographic and anthropological perspectives on African marriage a few years later, Parkin again stressed that anthropological research on African marriage has moved away from normative approaches and towards "interactional" approaches that emphasize process, strategy and negotiation of conjugality (Bledsoe/Pison 1994: 9).

The three metanarratives of African marriage, however, cannot be placed in a chronological order. There is no evolution 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). The metanarratives of destruction and of change equally continue to be influential. With the emergence and dramatic spread of the AIDS pandemic, the theme of the "destruction of African families" has certainly gained a new momentum (e.g. Gronemeyer 2002). Yet, while clearly acknowledging the tragic effects AIDS has on social relations, one must also consider the resilience of kin and family ties in the midst of such a crisis.[10] Again, crisis and change do not have one linear effect, such as the destruction of family and kin ties, but trigger various and complex reactions by individuals and groups of individuals. To understand African marriage and other types of conjugal and kin relations as dynamic social fields of negotiation, ambiguity and hybridity is probably the dominant contemporary metanarrative, the focus of the next section.

Plurality of African marriages

The plurality and dynamic of marriage forms are central topics of recent research on African marriages (for instance Cole 2004; Cornwall 2002; Helle-Valle 1999; Johnson-Hanks 2006, 2007b; Lewinson 2006; Masquelier 2005). These issues are not entirely new, though. Throughout the 20th century, attempts have been made to define and classify dynamic African marriages. However, more recent approaches – like Johnson-Hanks' (2007b) 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 the emphasis away from issues of classification and towards questions on the intermingling of love/sex/marriage and money/consumerism.[11]

The two related questions "What is a marriage?" and "When is a union a marriage?" are recurrent themes in most research on African marriage up to the present.

10 Gulbrandsen (1986: 25) suggested a similar reasoning two decades earlier when he reacted to Schapera's argument for the destructive character that labor migration has had on Tswana family life: "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".

11 Remarkably early, Schapera (1939: 15-17) also commented on these issues.

They are already mentioned by Fortes (1949: 84) in his reflections of what he classifies as "experimental marriages". Some decades later, Philip Burnham (1987: 50) suggests considering marriage not as a stable category but as a "bundle of interactional possibilities". He 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 volume in which Burnham's essay appeared, Parkin and Nyamwaya (1987a: 4) 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". All three authors stretch their use of the term "marriage" very far, virtually to the point of 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 marriage: polygyny and its transformations, on the one hand, and the procedural character of marriage, already mentioned by Radcliffe-Brown (1987 [1950]) and often repeated in subsequent research on African marriage (e.g. Bledsoe 1980; Bledsoe/Pison 1994; Comaroff 1980b; Helle-Valle 1999; Lewinson 2006; Murray 1976; Solway 1990), on the other. I first discuss the dynamics of polygyny.

Although polygyny has declined in many parts of Africa and some African countries have even prohibited it, the practice and its transformations nevertheless continue to exist, as many studies indicate (Anderson 2000; Antoine 2006; Blanc/Gage 2000; Bledsoe/Pison 1994; Comaroff/Roberts 1977; Spiegel 1991; Timaeus/Reynar 1998; van der Vliet 1991). As early as 1977, Comaroff and Roberts already argued that the changes in polygyny did not mark a decline in the practice but rather its transformation. Restudying Schapera's 1933 descriptions of Kgatla premarital sexuality, Comaroff and Roberts (1977: 121) found that "the practice of polygyny has been replaced by an emergent social form with an essentially similar cultural logic". The emergent social form they identified 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", see Guyer [1994]).

Another variation of polygyny is described by Kristin Mann (1985) in her historical study of elite settlers in 19th and early 20th century colonial Lagos. She recorded how "outside marriages", that is long-term unions contracted outside church or statutory codes, caused much conflict among elite men and women. While these unions gave non-elite women access to resources and probably upward mobility, they threatened the position of "inside wives" and their children. Similar conflicts about "outside marriages" are portrayed by Barbara Harrell-Bond (1975) for conjugal unions in Sierra Leone and by Wambui Wa Karanja (1987, 1994) for the contemporary upper

classes of Lagos and Ibadan. Other polygynous variations are the so-called "little houses" in Tanzania (Lewinson 2006), the *bobolete* in a rural community in Botswana (Helle-Valle 1999) and the tavern women of Gauteng province, South Africa (Wojcicki 2002). Thus, Bledsoe and Pison (1994: 7) conclude their review of multiple partner unions with the following words: "Many of the new marriage forms that outwardly resemble monogamy actually follow patterns of *de facto* polygyny". 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. Definitions focusing on shared residence might include "outside marriages" while definitions based on church or statutory codes will exclude these unions.

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, with negotiations of bridewealth having implications for notions of legitimacy and personhood (Comaroff 1980b: 30). Bledsoe and Pison (1994: 4) 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". Further, the marriage process is often not a linear process but more closely resembles a continuous mix of movements in which relationships can be maintained, but also dissolved and renegotiated. Thus, it can be very difficult to define at what point in time someone is married and when a union begins. Bledsoe (1980: 7) has also noted in her ethnography of Kpelle marriage in Liberia that 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. The same applies to the situation in Fransfontein: *taras* refers to woman, wife and female conjugal partner, while *aob* refers to man, husband and male conjugal partner. 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 that is married (Antoine 2006; Bledsoe/Pison 1994; van de Walle 2006a).

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 2007b; Lewinson 2006; van der Vliet 1984). As some rather fluid and flexible relations do eventually end in marriage, this may justify that women also behave rather flexibly. 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; Thomas/Cole 2009) is not necessarily something that is condemned on the ground. This situation has also resulted in some puzzlement by and confusion among Western observers such as missionaries, early ethnographers and colonial administrators who were concerned that this intermingling was a form of prostitution (Gordon 2002; Hunter 2002).[12]

However, Cole (2004: 580-581) 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. 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". (ibid: 581) She demonstrates that the reputation of economically unsuccessful women is especially threatened (ibid: 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 (2002) shows that economically independent women are classified as wayward and troublesome. Similarly, Virginia van der Vliet (1991: 237) observes a high degree of moral resentment against economically independent women in a 1970s Grahamstown town in South Africa: "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".

To access the reputation and character of conjugal and sexual partners, men and women engage in varying practices of "testing" a partner (Bledsoe/Pison 1994: 5; Dilger 2003; Gulbrandsen 1986: 13; Johnson-Hanks 2007b; Lewinson 2006; Pauli/Schnegg 2007; Smith 2003). These may include evaluations of a person's public reputation or 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, such as the "examination" of the partner's physical body for "suspicious" marks that could point to the disease. Love is often constructed as the result of successful testing (Johnson-Hanks 2007b;

12 Helle-Valle (1999) has discussed the difficulties (and perhaps even impossibilities) of transferring the Western concept of "prostitution" to African contexts.

Lewinson 2006; Pauli/Schnegg 2007), that is love is perceived as the central expression of a partner's involvement in, caring for and investment in a relationship that becomes visible through "testing". As Bledsoe and Pison remark (1994: 5), the sometimes year-long liminal phase of "testing" a partner is a central aspect of the procedural character of marriage. Consequently, it is important to stress that the flexibility of conjugal relations (as noted above) is tightly embedded in 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 a reflection on these limits. I argue that there are at least three central problems associated with the notion of flexible, plural African marriages. First, to classify most conjugal relations as "marriages" results in an inflationary use of the term and a significant loss of differentiation and meaning. Second, this inflationary use of the term "marriage" discloses emerging mechanisms of marginalisation and new forms of exclusion. And, third, a focus only on the flexibility of conjugal relations ignores that the construction of marriage as a process ideally has an endpoint when a couple is finally considered married. I examine each of these three in turn.

My first argument has been inspired by a recent, undoubtedly controversial article by Warren Shapiro (2008) on the new kinship studies. Although I do not follow Shapiro's fierce critique of feminist and constructivist theory, I nevertheless think that his objection that not all types of relatedness can be taken as equivalent to kinship ties is justified. There are indeed limits to the construction of kin relations. Based on results from cognitive science, Shapiro highlights the distinction between focal notions of kin concepts, such as prototypes, from variations of these notions. Thus, although concepts like "father" are transferable, as in the conceptualization of God as father, this does not mean that all relations subsumed under the concept have the same quality. 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.

In Fransfontein, people do, indeed, have an idea of a contemporary marriage prototype. 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. An example may illuminate the argument. While people in Fransfontein acknowledge that cohabitation might be a step on the way to marriage, cohabitating unions are nevertheless negatively described as *#nu gomans omi*, literally a black cow house, and the physical structure the couple inhabits might be called

!hai-omi, a bad house. Locally, *#nu gomans omi* are not perceived as marriages but as variations of marriages. Thus, a couple living in a *#nu gomans omi* will not receive the same respect as a married couple. Additionally, children born to mothers living in *#nu gomans omi* will not have the same rights to their father's inheritance and property as children born to married mothers.

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 (see also Bourdieu 2008). This point was made 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)

I argue that a central force behind the status deterioration of the majority of Fransfontein women is the tremendous decline in marriage rates, a decline crucially linked to class formation processes. While a small elite has appropriated the privilege of the "prototypical marriage", the overwhelming majority lives in relationships, like the *#nu gomans omi*, that are not granted respect and prestige and, importantly, lack access to central resources connected with marriage.

This leads to my third critique of the notion of flexible, plural African marriages. To focus only on the procedural character ignores that there is an ideal endpoint to the negotiations and flexibilities and that this endpoint – formally and publicly being considered as married – is not being reached by an ever-increasing number of people, in Fransfontein and beyond. The current strong focus on flexibility and plurality of African marriage may also explain why the de facto decline of marriage rates (which is only possible if there is an endpoint to the marriage process) in many regions of Africa has only recently been recognized by anthropologists (Pauli/van Dijk 2016). After having discussed the four metanarratives that have been central so far, I now turn to a fifth, emerging metanarrative.

THE DECLINE OF MARRIAGE IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

Before analyzing changes in marriage rates, it is necessary to discuss how universal marriage has really been. Analysing genealogies, Rada Dyson-Hudson and Dominique Meekers (1996) have been able to show that the notion of nearly universal

marriage, so prominent in the stability metanarrative, is an overgeneralization for sub-Saharan Africa. They argue that this image has, in fact, been caused by measurement problems and reporting biases:

> In many studies, the universality of marriage is an artefact of the methods of data collection, since both census and survey data exclude emigrants and people who have died. The idea of universality of marriage also is based on emic statements of what people aspire to, but may not actually achieve until late in life, and sometimes not at all. (Dyson-Hudson and Meekers 1996: 318)

These findings caution against too general statements regarding both the universality of marriage and the decline of marriage rates.[13] For a number of years, however, both demographers and anthropologists have noted significant changes in marriage rates and family relations (Claassens/Smythe 2013; Hunter 2007; Pauli 2010a, 2011; Posel/Rudwick/Casale 2011). Discussing the effects of labour migration on Southern African systems of family and marital relations, several anthropologists became increasingly aware from the 1930s onwards of rising rates of children born premaritally. An early example is Schapera's (1933) work on premarital pregnancies among Tswana communities heavily involved in male labour migration. Based on urban research in the 1950s and the 1960s, a number of 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 were having on family compositions in towns. Despite Schapera's earlier work, rural areas continued to be seen as virtually untouched by these changes (Preston-Whyte 1978: 82). This changed when, based on rural research from the 1970s and 1980s, both Adam Kuper (1987) and Ørnulf Gulbrandsen (1986) began to describe tremendous changes in marital and family relations for rural Southern African communities. Kuper, whose ethnographic comparison of four Southern African marriage systems titled *Wives for Cattle* (1982) had described the universal marriage as part of the political and economic system, observed in 1987 "dramatic changes in the incidences of marriage and in the incidence of illegitimacy" (Kuper 1987: 141). In a 1978 restudy of the Botswana village where Isaac Schapera had conducted his researched in the 1930s, Marja Molenaar, one of Kuper's graduate students, found a "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". (ibid: 141). As recent anthropological and demographic work on Botswana shows, these trends of declining marriage rates, an increase in children born out-of-wedlock and couples cohabitating without being married continue until today (Mokomane 2005, 2006; Setume 2017).

13 Catherine Allerton (2007) comes to a comparable conclusion for South and Southeast Asia.

For South Africa, similar macro and micro level trends are described (Hosegood/McGrath/Moultire 2009; Mhongo/Budlender 2013; Posel/Rudwick 2013). Based on long-term ethnographic fieldwork in South Africa's Kwazulu-Natal province, Hunter (2007: 692) shows that "throughout the 20th century a growing number of women gave birth out of wedlock". To further extend his ethnographic findings, he incorporates macro level national census data into his analysis. Despite a number of data problems, Hunter is able to present chronological data on marriage status for the South African population classified as "African". He shows that, from 1936 to the 1980s, between 50 to 60 per cent 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 per cent in 1980, 38 per cent in 1991 and 30 per cent in 2001. Hunter concludes: "Census data support the claim that there has been a quite dramatic decline over the last four decades". (ibid: 695) While he stresses that the factors behind the decline are complex, he explicitly mentions 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 (Hunter 2009b, 2010). He concludes that, in South Africa, "marriage today is, in many respects, a middle-class institution". (Hunter 2007: 695)

As in Botswana and South Africa, marriage rates are also declining in Namibia. According to the 1992 Namibia Demographic and Health Survey (MOHSS 1992), Namibia has very high proportions of unmarried women at the end of their childbearing years compared with most other countries in sub-Saharan Africa (Bongaarts 2007; Raitis 1994: 112). Furthermore, the total fertility rate of unmarried women is only one child lower than that of all women, and many women give birth before marriage (Raitis 1994: 116). In a similar vein and using the same data set, Gage (1998: 25) reports that 37 per cent of all births in the five years preceding the survey were premarital births. Demographers have highlighted a rise in the mean age at marriage as a central explanation for the transformations in marriage and fertility systems (Bongaarts 2007; Garenne/Zwang 2005). Some anthropologists have also noted declining marriage rates in different parts of Namibia (Fuller 1993; Gordon 1972; Iken 1999; Tersbøl 2002).

Demographers Michel Garenne and Julien Zwang (2005: 166) raise the important question of the extent to which these trends might be especially characteristic for Southern Africa: "High levels [of premarital fertility] such as those noted in Namibia, Botswana and South Africa, as well as late average age at marriage and premarital fertility at older ages, seem to be a feature of modern South Africa, and especially in the former apartheid areas". Similarly, in a recent publication on changes in median age at marriage and HIV/AIDS prevalence rates of 33 sub-Saharan countries, John Bongaarts (2007: 75) finds that "countries with late marriage and high HIV prevalence are concentrated in southern Africa". Therborn (2006: 38) has equally stressed

the uniqueness of Southern Africa's marriage transformations: "On the whole, Africa has belonged to the vast world regions of virtually universal marriage […] However, in recent times Africa also includes some deviants, above all in Southern Africa". Recent demographic and ethnographic research in Southern Africa thus clearly indicates that marriage rates have substantially declined, age at marriage has markedly increased and premarital fertility rates have increased.

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

Adeline Masquelier (2005: 59) notes very similar developments in Dogondoutchi, a Hausaphone and predominantly Muslim town in rural Niger, where a common perception pertains 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". 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" (ibid: 60). Alcinda Honwana (2012) has aptly coined the term "waithood" to describe this state in limbo. These observations resonate with my description of the envy and jealousy that the bride Anna experienced when she got married. 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). To celebrate (class) distinction and modernity through weddings and marriages is not only an African, but a global trend (Argyrou 1996; Bristol-Rhys 2007; Kaplan 2013; Kendall 1996; Lankauskas 2015; Reed-Danahay 1996).

Another West African example is the decreasing probability of age-specific marriage in southern Cameroon (Johnson-Hanks 2007b). As Isiugo-Abanihe and Masquelier, Johnson-Hanks (2007b: 652) emphasizes how marriage rates are entangled with economic dynamics: "Of course, there are many reasons for this decline; however, the disjuncture between aspirations for marriage and real-life opportunities plays a central role". Importantly, she stresses that a decline in marriage rates does not necessarily mean a decline in the meaning and relevance of marriage. Indeed, it may mean just 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 2007b: 652).

For Fransfontein, I would add that marriage has become "so terribly important" not only for the status of women but for the status of a local elite. Marriage has become rare for an increasingly large group of Fransfontein people. Men and women who, because of their meagre economic and "real-life opportunities", are unable to marry have been degraded to being the audience at elite weddings. The celebration of distinction through conspicuous weddings has become the elite's central arena for a demonstration of class and the legitimization of privilege.

Following Ferguson (1999), I have used the term "metanarratives" to label the various interpretations of the transformation of African marriage. The first four, stability, destruction, change and plurality, have been central lenses through which African marriage has been interpreted. The currently dominant metanarrative, plurality or fluidity, emphasizes the great flexibility and adaptability of marriage (and also kinship) in both past and present times. Yet this metanarrative also has significant limits, especially that it does not consider a strong increase in wedding costs and the parallel decline in marriage rates, developments that have been observed in several parts of Southern Africa. In general, these dynamics have to be linked to class formation processes and a substantial increase in economic and social stratification. A new, fifth metanarrative is thus emerging, one that is characterized by low occurrence and high value of marriage. I suggest that this emerging metanarrative could be labelled the "exclusivity of marriage": it draws out how in many parts of Southern Africa marriage rates are at an unparalleled low while marriage as an institution is extremely valued.

AIMS, LIMITS AND STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

The overall aim of this book is to understand how marriage in Fransfontein has turned from an almost universal institution into a celebration of class distinction. To pay close attention to the complex entanglements of marriage with political economic processes, especially class formation processes, but also gender dynamics and reproductive changes, a methodologically and theoretically plural approach is needed. Theoretical approaches roughly summarized as "practice theory" are key for my understanding of these developments. This has both methodological and theoretical implications. To grasp the interplay between structure and agency as carefully as possible, I draw on various methods and data. These include archival data, like church

registers, systematic participant observation of engagements and weddings, life narratives, general participant observation, economic and demographic surveys, census data and group discussions. In terms of theory, I combine macro level explanations proposed by demographers, approaches popular in anthropology at the intermediate level of the household, and micro level examinations that focus on individual actors and their agency, common in anthropology, sociology and history.

Western anthropology has a long tradition of research in marriage, gender and reproduction in Africa. This history of involvement has, however, also caused irritation and rejection. In feminist anthropology, the question of the extent to which Western researchers could study African gender, marriage and sexuality has been discussed virulently (Arnfred 2004; Cornwall 2005; Kolawole 2004). A recent book by Francis Nyamnjoh (2008) further challenges any "Western" attempts to understand African social dynamics through social science research methods. With these caveats in mind, I nevertheless hope that my findings contribute to the overall understanding of past and current dynamics of marriage and class formation processes in Namibia and Southern Africa. I follow Bruce Knauft's assertion that "approximation" and "pragmatic possibilities of comprehension" are intersubjectivley possible:

> While ultimate knowledge of others' experiences or actions (or even their existence) is impossible, greater or lesser approximations of this otherness are possible; indeed, they provide the basis of all social living. Absolute impossibilities should not blind us to pragmatic possibilities for comprehension, translation, and representation across the intersubjective divide. (Knauft 1996: 46-47)

Doing research in postcolonial Namibia is permeated by power differences and inequalities. My attempts to reciprocate and to reflect these differences and injustices in my writings are approximations but not solutions. Despite these complex circumstances, Fransfonteiners showed great willingness, and often also joy, in talking with me about marriage celebrations and wedding dreams. People proudly introduced me to the ways in which marriages are currently celebrated in Fransfontein. Marriage continues to be one of the most central aspects of Fransfontein life. For everybody involved in our research, there was never any doubt that marriage was a well-chosen topic. This resonates with Adam Kuper's (2008: 733) reminder not to abolish the study of marriage and kinship from anthropology:

> Marriage choices are regarded in very many societies as the most important decisions in life, almost certainly too important to be left to any individuals to make for themselves. It would be a disaster if anthropologists found that they had nothing to say about matters that are so essential to most of the people we live among, to say nothing about our recent ancestors, and, perhaps, even ourselves.

The book is divided into three parts, following the dramaturgy of background, main act and consequences. In the three chapters of Part I, I present the methodological, conceptual and ethnographic background to the study. In the first, entitled "Fransfontein Fieldwork", I reflect on my fieldwork situation in the Fransfontein region and present the different kinds of data gathered. The chapter also discusses a number of theoretical concepts that have been suggested to analyze change over time. Out of these concepts, I develop an approach that combines biographic, cohort and generational perspectives. "History through Biography" gives detailed information on the political economic developments of Fransfontein with a detailed description of the emergence of indigenous, local elites since approximately the 1970s. The third chapter of Part I, "Postapartheid Livelihoods", presents ethnographic portraits of contemporary, postcolonial lifeworlds in Fransfontein.

In the two chapters of Part II, I tackle different aspects of the transition from common to elite marriage. "Contemporary Fransfontein Marriages" presents a detailed outline of how weddings are being practiced in Fransfontein today. The findings are discussed in light of other historic and regional studies. "From Decline to Distinction" extends these findings and describes how and since when marriage rates have declined in Fransfontein. The chapter unravels the ways in which marriage has turned into the central arena for class distinction by local elites. Special attention is paid to how new forms of consumption have been integrated into wedding rituals, making weddings increasingly more conspicuous and costly.

Part III discusses some of the main consequences of the decline of marriage in two chapters. "Forming Families" links the transformations in marriage to the formation of families and reproduction. Detailed life stories, mainly of women, help to explain how marriage, sexuality and reproduction have been entangled and disentangled during different periods of time and for various generations. "Intimacy outside Marriage" discusses how intimate relations are formed, maintained and resolved outside and beyond marriage. The chapter also scrutinizes the increasing stigmatization of children born out-of-wedlock and transformations in inheritance practices relating to marital status.

The conclusion discusses my main findings in global comparison, investigating the specificities of the Namibian situation. It ends with a reflection of the possible long-term consequences of class distinctions through marriage in Fransfontein and beyond.