

BOOK REVIEW

Julia Pauli. *The Decline of Marriage in Namibia: Kinship and Social Class in a Rural Community*. Bielefeld, Germany: transcript Verlag, 2019. 296 pp. List of Tables. List of Figures. Index. \$55.00. Paper. ISBN: 978-3837643039.

In the last sentence of her book, Julia Pauli says it all, albeit too modestly: "... the vantage point of marriage has enabled me to understand how, over the last 60 years, class formation has been entangled with a decline in marriage in Namibia" (18). This book is a veritable tour de force through the analysis of marriage in African Studies, which Pauli resuscitates from its image of being an outmoded genre and builds onto by providing the latest theoretical addition. It is an intricate analysis of how transformations in Namibian marriage practices have been framed and structured by dramatic political and economic changes in the twentieth century, and thus how the vantage point of marriage is a productive tool from which to study how personal experiences reflect larger social shifts. In 2004, Pauli and her young family left for Fransfontein, a typical Namibian town, to study the vast difference in the number of marriages between the younger generation, of whom 30 percent were married, and those sixty years and older, of whom 70 percent were married.

Namibia has perhaps a different kind of status compared to many countries in Africa, as it gained independence relatively late, in 1990. From the early twentieth century, when German colonialists created reserves and forced the local people to live there, to the creation of homelands during apartheid and the South African annexation, to the freedom from colonial rule and participation in the post-Cold War globalization and liberalization of the economy, Namibia's social fabric has absorbed many political, economic, and social shocks, generating a wide range of outcomes for its citizens. Across these eras, marriage has changed from an almost universal practice and a collectively experienced rite of passage to a celebration of difference and distinction by a small elite. Since the 1960s, people have increasingly delayed marriage, and with regard to the current era, Pauli speaks of a "growing group of non-married (and probably never-to-be-married) Fransfonteiners" (16).

Methodologically the book is exceptional; it combines qualitative longer-term fieldwork that captures people's life histories with quantitative household surveys. It is a pleasure to read this mix of methods and the insights it generates,

and it is a great example of resuscitating another forgone scholarly practice, the use of mixed methods for generating knowledge to write a monograph.

The book is divided into three parts. Part I provides the outline of the study as well as the historical, political, and economic contexts of Namibia, and Pauli eloquently describes societal changes from the perspective of three generations. Part II zooms in on marriage practices and how the marriage rates of poorer people and wealthier people have grown apart. It analyzes how marriage has become a manifestation of class distinction. Part III tackles the main consequences of the decline of marriage and how marriage, sexuality, and reproduction have been entangled and disentangled across time.

The decline in the rates of formal marriage is of course food for thought about the definition of marriage. From the intimate meeting of partners to the formal conclusion of such a union, marriage has (always had) different meanings for different people in different contexts. Pauli's book is an important addition to the literature on marriage in Africa, as she analyzes how marriage has never been the stable foundation of kinship and society that earlier scholarship believed. Pauli distinguishes four meta-narratives on marriage in African Studies and adds a new one based on her own work: the idea of the stable African marriage; the dissolution of the "African" marriage; change in African marriage and kinship; the fluidity and plurality of African marriage; and lastly, Pauli's addition, an emerging narrative on the dramatic increase in wedding expenses with the parallel decline in formal marriages. This conclusion calls for more comparative research, as the decline in formal marriages is not similarly occurring across the continent, which only makes it all the more interesting.

Another addition the book makes is to the ongoing discussion about the middle classes in Africa. On the one hand, Pauli shows that the definition of "the middle class" remains a contentious issue, for her historical analysis shows how a particular elite has emerged, which introduces the question about the distinction between elite and middle classes. (See also Carola Lentz, "African Middle Classes: Lessons from transnational studies and a research agenda" [In *The Rise of Africa's Middle Class: Myths, Realities and Critical Engagements*, edited by Henning Melber, 17–53, London: Zed Books, 2016].) On the other hand, she provides the material needed to study such fickle concepts as the middle class from empirical research without throwing the baby out with the bathwater. Reading this book, it is clear that the last thing about the middle classes has not yet been said or written. The question of the middle classes in African societies reflects a moving terrain for research, as this book shows; it concerns shifting customary practices, the sometimes opportunistic and other times antagonistic alliance between patriarchy and the state, and the various ways that people maneuver this terrain.

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For additional reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:

- Boni, Stefano. 2001. "Twentieth-Century Transformations in Notions of Gender, Parenthood, and Marriage in Southern Ghana: A Critique of the Hypothesis of 'Retrograde Steps' for Akan Women." *History in Africa* 28: 15–41. doi:[10.2307/3172205](https://doi.org/10.2307/3172205).
- O'Rourke, Harmony. 2016. "Beyond the World of Commerce: Rethinking Hausa Diaspora History through Marriage, Distance, and Legal Testimony." *History in Africa* 43: 141–67. doi:[10.1017/hia.2016.4](https://doi.org/10.1017/hia.2016.4).
- Posel, Dorrit, and Stephanie Rudwick. 2014. "Marriage and Bridewealth (Ilobolo) in Contemporary Zulu Society." *African Studies Review* 57 (2): 51–72. doi:[10.1017/asr.2014.47](https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2014.47).