For all the wrong reasons. Contesting marriage in Namibia

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Short Abstract:

Despite very low divorce rates many Namibians view divorce as one of the main threats to marriage. Unraveling the tension between marriage and the perceived risk of divorce will provide insights into the continuous significance of marriage in times of neoliberalism and increasing commitment uncertainties.

Long Abstract:

Marriage and divorce rates are both very low in Namibia. Many Namibians aspire to marry but are unable to afford the enormous wedding costs. The few who do marry often belong to the country's middle and upper classes. Their marriages are not always happy but they seldom end in divorce. In my paper I scrutinize why many of my married and unmarried interlocutors figure that divorce is a prominent threat to marriage. Why do people fear divorce when they hardly know anybody who got divorced? My interpretations are based on a long-term field project that I started in 2003 in rural Namibia and extended to urban Namibia in 2015. Repeatedly, people have explained to me that because couples are marrying 'for all the wrong reasons' the risk of divorce is so high. 'Appropriated' and 'unappropriated' reasons to marry are highly contested and can be contradictory. As such, they reflect the re-configurations and increasing plurality of broader moral, social and economic frameworks currently in flux throughout the country. This is especially pronounced in the tension between market oriented reasoning, that views marriage as an investment between two (business) partners, and kinship oriented approaches, that make the extended family a central part of achieving a suitable wedding and a fulfilled marriage. Unraveling what is being perceived as 'right' and 'wrong' reasons to marry will provide insights into the continuous significance of marriage in times of neoliberalism and increasing commitment uncertainties.