

International Conference

**'The Exceptional Normal: Change and Continuity in Southern African Marriages and Beyond'**

June 5<sup>th</sup> – June 7<sup>th</sup> 2015, University of Hamburg, Germany

Organizers: Julia Pauli and Rijk van Dijk

The institution of marriage used to be widespread and common throughout Southern Africa. However, over the past decades marriage rates have substantially declined. Today, in many Southern African countries, including South Africa, Botswana, and Namibia, the majority of people never marry. An important explanation of the decline is the strong increase in marriage costs, i.e. a substantial augmentation of bride wealth expenditures and very expensive wedding celebrations. Several studies indicate that marriage has changed from a universal rite of passage into a conspicuous celebration of middle class life styles and aspirations. Yet despite marriage's recent turn towards exclusivity, the institution nevertheless continues to be an important frame of reference for most people. Marriage in Southern Africa seems to be paradoxically both normal and exclusive, thus the title of the conference 'The exceptional normal: Change and Continuity in Southern African Marriages and Beyond'.

The central aim of the conference is to bring together research on the changing meanings and practices of marriage in Southern Africa. We want to compare the dynamics in Southern Africa with developments in other African regions. In addition, we want to discuss recent transformations in reference to long-term historical trajectories. In the early 1980s several influential comparative volumes on marriage in Southern Africa were published (Comaroff's *The Meaning of Marriage Payments* (1980); Kuper's *Wives for Cattle* (1982); Krige und Comaroff's *Essays on African Marriage in Southern Africa* (1981)). However, since then, no comparative findings on marriage in Southern Africa have been compiled. There have been studies more recently, dealing with the rise of notions concerning love, romance, intimacy and sexuality which still need to be incorporated into our understanding of how the institution of marriage in the region has changed precisely. Hence, the central goal of this conference is to publish new findings on the changing practices of marriage in a comparative volume.

The comparison of the ethnographic cases will focus on three themes in particular: 1) Material dimension: what can be said on the entanglements between marriage and class formation processes? 2) Normative/ideational dimension: what is the relationship between changing cultural ideas about a 'good life' and a 'normal life course' and changing marriage practices and conjugal patterns of interaction? 3) Social dimension: In what ways are the transformations of marriage practices connected to changing gender roles and generational relations?