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Review: Julia Pauli, *The Decline of Marriage in Namibia. Kinship and Social Class in a Rural Community*, Bielefeld, transcript, 2019.

This monograph testifies to a close if not intimate engagement with residents of Fransfontein in Damaraland. The author's ethnographic fieldwork there began in 2004. She has since produced several book chapters and journal articles which have all contributed in some way to this compilation. Much informed and guided by the school of thought of Pierre Bourdieu, Julia Pauli presents data on the conjugal histories of 361 men and 364 women, a total of 123 marriages from the 1940s to 2005, with insights based on 20 more detailed accounts of individual life stories, two focus group interviews and descriptions of eight weddings which occurred during her research (p. 131).

More than 70 per cent of people above the age of 60 are married. But only about 30 per cent of Fransfontein's current population above the age of 15 is married, with a marked decline among the generations born since the mid-20th century. Less than 20 per cent in the age group from 20 to 50 years has ever been married: "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 distinction commenced long before the end of apartheid and colonial rule" (p. 16). Informed by a practice theory, Pauli observes that "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." (p. 18)

The final stages of regional-ethnic so-called separate development in South African occupied Namibia were based on the recommendations of the Odendaal Commission and the subsequent territorial consolidation of ethnic 'homelands' which emerged in the 1960s. The establishment of the Apartheid administration in Damaraland (with ongoing forced resettlements to the newly defined reserve) created new dynamics by the late 1960s. These "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" with a "local, 'modern' elite of 'style-setters'" composed of "administrators, businessmen, politicians and teachers" as beneficiaries of the newly entrenched structures. Pauli classifies these as "a small, regional elite, which enjoyed its status only within an artificial, local context". (p. 23)

Pauli suggests a generational distinction and breakdown based on three age groups. For the oldest generation interviewed, born between 1915 and 1944, the celebration of rather simple and affordable weddings was a common feature. She characterises these as "reserve marriages" (p. 157). These made up 39 per cent of the total of 139

married couples classified, to which she adds another eight per cent of what she terms “old age marriages”, often motivated by the church to “legalise” the co-habitation of partners. With the institutionalised structures consolidated in Damaraland from the 1970s onwards, “the ritual practices of weddings started to change”, involving couples usually born after 1945: “These marriages extended and transformed the previously modest form of Fransfontein marriage, leading to the current lavish practices”. She labels these “big man marriage”, amounting to 17 per cent (p. 158). To these she adds the category of “struggle marriages” (36 per cent) among those in the lower middle-class segments of salaried formal employment, who seek to keep up appearances with wedding ceremonies they can hardly afford and therefore struggle to cope with the costs: “Remarkably, the expenses and practices of the struggle weddings hardly differ from the lavishness of big man or elite weddings. My analysis of marriage in terms of generation thus demonstrates how marriages have gotten more lavish and expensive over time, and with that a clear marker of elite status within the community.” (p. 159 f.) With 86 per cent, marriages of Lutheran and Roman Catholic denomination are the norm. The emergence of Pentecostal churches since the 1990s has introduced a less costly alternative (given the prohibition of alcohol consumption and other cost saving features in their ceremonies). Pentecostal marriages, which were not available until Namibia’s independence,

made up 12 per cent of all marriages by the end of the decade (p. 160).

Two noteworthy sub-chapters on the “side line” deal with the growing number of single women (pp. 242-247) and the changing status of children born out of wedlock (pp. 247-255). As Pauli concludes: “for the new elites, marriage, reproduction and inheritance are closely intertwined. With the creation of ‘illegitimacy’ and ‘illegitimate children’, local power asymmetries that have emerged since the 1970s are further consolidated. The dynamics of distinction, so vividly expressed in contemporary conspicuous weddings, lead to exclusion and the loss of rights for most people.” (p. 255) Put differently: “The boundaries of legitimacy separate the married elite from everybody else” (p. 262).

Pauli’s declared aim “is to understand how marriage in Fransfontein has turned from an almost universal institution into a celebration of class distinction” (pp. 42 and 165). As she explains: “The new middle classes are often approached on the basis of their consumption habits and lifestyles. However, only few studies so far have tried to understand African class in combination with marriage transformations. This is remarkable as weddings are especially well suited for the study of lifestyles and class distinctions.” (p. 258 f.) Her accounts give such understanding credibility and allow deeper insights into how established traditions and cultural practices change and adapt to new socio-economic realities – with major implications and consequences for local everyday life: “The elite’s intentional changing of how

weddings were celebrated in Fransfontein made it increasingly impossible for people to marry. Most Fransfonteiners just could not afford it anymore. These historically situated class formation processes are a major explanation for the decline of marriage in Fransfontein." (p. 260) The much more general main title of the book on "the decline of marriage in Namibia" should be understood in line with this conclusion and the book's sub-title as a study on kinship and social class in a rural community – or rather, in Fransfontein. This mission has been accomplished.

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