ASR Forum: The Politics of Marriage in South Africa

Introduction

Meghan Healy-Clancy, Guest Editor

South African President Jacob Zuma has been married six times and currently has four wives—wedding two of these wives since assuming the presidency in 2009. The expense of these unions and related upgrades at his lavish family homestead in rural Nkandla, KwaZulu-Natal, have engendered considerable controversy, in a national context marked by economic crisis and declining marriage rates. But this very married president has also earned the admiration of some South Africans, who see him as proudly upholding the responsibilities of an ideal Zulu patriarch (see Hunter 2014). Debates around the propriety of Zuma's polygyny reveal broader concerns around the connections between family life and leadership in a deeply unequal, diverse democracy. Is it right for a leader to use the public funds of a modern state to broadcast his commitment to a traditional form of marriage? Should a leader's marital relations simply be a private matter, as they largely have been for Zuma's rival, former president Thabo Mbeki, and his wife of four decades, Zanele? Nelson Mandela's recent passing has similarly provoked discussions about the role of marriage in shaping leadership: from Mandela's abandonment of his first wife to become a leading African National Congress (ANC) activist, to his nationalist romance with Winnie Mandela, to his statesmanlike marriage as president to former Mozambican first lady Graça Machel (see, e.g., Harris 2013).

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This *ASR* Forum, “The Politics of Marriage in South Africa,” is based on the conviction that such debates are not sideshows to the stuff of politics. Indeed, marriage offers an ideal lens through which we can apprehend the making of political communities. In 2014, as we have celebrated the twentieth anniversary of South Africa’s first democratic elections, both the country’s strides toward a common society and the tenacity of many forms of social division have been striking. As a unifying institution that has nonetheless operated quite differently, in law and practice, for South Africans of different classes, genders, sexualities, races, ethnicities, and regions in the past and present, marriage provides intimate insights into the making of these connections and inequalities.

We build upon an impressive and growing body of scholarship on transformations in marriage, family, and love in colonial and postcolonial Africa (see, e.g., Parkin & Nyamwaya 1987; Thomas & Cole 2009). Three decades ago, Kristin Mann saw the unique potential of studies of marriage to “present the African past as it really was: a world inhabited by men and women and shaped in fundamental ways by the interaction between them.” While pioneering social histories of Africa predominantly focused on male experiences, leaving “the study of women to women’s studies,” Mann argued that “we will only begin to understand basic problems in African social, economic and political life when we start to examine the relationship between the sexes.” Studies of marriage offered fertile ground for this exploration, as her work on colonial Lagos showed. “But if the perspective is to fulfill its potential, others must carry it beyond the study of domestic life,” Mann urged (1985:10). Heeding this call, scholars working across the continent have since demonstrated the mutually constitutive relationships between domestic transformations and political and economic change (e.g., Comaroff & Comaroff 1992; Hunter 2010; Osborn 2011). They have highlighted how disputes over marriage and family speak to the production of historical knowledge and expectations for the future (e.g., Cohen & Odhiambo 1992; Thomas 2003).

Yet major questions remain for scholars of South Africa in particular, and of the continent generally. The articles in this forum speak to two overarching issues with relevance for postapartheid South Africa: How have marital ideals and practices created and subverted racial, ethnic, gender, and class categories? And how have the economic dimensions of marriage changed over time and across space?

The articles in this forum suggest that marriage has been critical in constituting categories of difference, even while creating new forms of community. My article, “The Politics of New African Marriage in Segregationist South Africa” (7–28) examines how marriages between Christian mission-educated women and men bridged ethnic divisions, creating new forms of racial and national consciousness in the 1930s and 1940s. Yet transcending ethnic divisions hinged on inscribing differences between women and men. I demonstrate that by writing about their roles in mediating

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interethnic marriages in newspapers and memoirs, women insisted both on their importance to cultivating racial and national consciousness and that their roles were different from those of African men. I thus reveal how African nationalism was predicated on ideals of black married women's domestic authority that authorized their leadership of new social institutions, at the same time that these ideals constrained women's engagement in male-led political groups like the ANC.

Natasha Erlank's article, "The White Wedding: Affect and Economy in South Africa in the Early Twentieth Century" (29–50) underscores that the Christian communities from which these African nationalists came were suffused not only with overarching gendered distinctions, but also with subtle status differences. Between the late nineteenth century and the 1930s, church weddings became spaces of spectacle and contestation in which clothing and rituals defined an aspirational black middle class. Through newspapers, creative writing, and missionary sources, Erlank shows how church weddings represented a reconfiguration of precolonial forms of social capital, which indexed new forms of class distinction and sexual mores. Indigenous forms of bridewealth—gifts of cattle, conferred from a groom's family to that of his bride—generally remained essential. But new commodities, such as engagement rings and white dresses, also became critical to reinforcing familial and social networks and to defining this class's respectability in a racialized society. Erlank therefore demonstrates how appropriations of "white weddings" enabled the consolidation of a racial, class, and religious identity. But this identity hinged on women's sexual purity and required conspicuous spending, creating enduring difficulties for women and for economically struggling families.

The economic costs of marriage have continued to rise, as Dorrit Posel and Stephanie Rudwick's "Marriage and Bridewealth (*Ilobolo*) in Contemporary Zulu Society" (51–72) makes clear. African marriage rates have declined precipitously in South Africa since at least the 1960s, while the average age at first marriage has risen. While multiple factors have shaped this shift—apartheid housing and labor policies, as well as women's rising access to education—the economic burdens of marriage are significant. Bridewealth remained an integral component of African marriages through apartheid and into the present. Yet over this period, across South Africa, bridewealth has increasingly come to be paid in cash, by the groom rather than his father, and settled before the wedding. These factors have meant that rising unemployment since the 1970s has led increasing numbers of young people to forestall or reject marriage. In President Zuma's home province of KwaZulu-Natal, particularly deep popular regard for ilobolo as an integral cultural institution has coincided with particularly protracted crises of unemployment. Marriage rates are consequently lowest among Zulu-speaking South Africans, of whom fewer than a third are or have been married. Posel and Rudwick's interviews with Zulu women and men in metropolitan Durban reveal longings for the security embodied by ilobolo, as interviewees recognize its economic impossibility in many cases.

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The distinctive politics of marriage in KwaZulu-Natal has a history: the colony of Natal was where bridewealth was first officially regulated, with a maximum of ten cattle—delivered before the wedding—the condition of marriage for commoners from the late nineteenth century. Ironically, the impetus for this change was to make it more affordable for young men to marry, since a ceiling of ten cattle prevented older, already married men with more financial resources from paying higher ilobolo for more wives. This policy accompanied taxation based on the huts—i.e., the wives—on each homestead, which made polygyny more expensive for those already married. Behind these innovations was the influential British official Theophilus Shepstone, who saw the regulation of African marriage as fundamental to governing a society predicated on women's agricultural labor in polygynous homesteads. The combined effect of the "hut tax" and ilobolo restrictions was to limit the accumulation of older patriarchs while pushing young men to labor for wages to fund their marriages. As Nafisa Essop Sheik's "African Marriage Regulation and the Remaking of Gendered Authority in Colonial Natal, 1843–1875" (73–92) demonstrates, colonial definitions of African "customary" marriage law thus had profound effects on African men's domestic authority. Drawing upon archival and newspaper sources, Sheik emphasizes that seemingly liberal interventions to make polygyny expensive and to abbreviate the process of paying ilobolo—as well as a new requirement that young women give their consent before marriage—had negative consequences not only for older men, but also for young married women. Critically, the demand that ilobolo be settled rapidly detached women from their natal home more rapidly and firmly than had previously been the case. Once a man had completed his ilobolo payments, he became the guardian of his wife, in a colonial legal regime in which women were perpetual minors.

The articles in this issue therefore begin to trace a history of the politics of marriage in South Africa: from the colonial consolidation of the authority of young husbands that Sheik discusses; to the self-assertion (as well as restriction) of young wives in the segregationist Union of South Africa that Erlank and I explore; to the decline of marriage amidst enduring longing for domestic security that Posel and Rudwick describe. The politics of marriage has already attracted attention from scholars interested both in the roots of South Africa's body politic (e.g., Hughes 2012; Lissoni & Suriano 2014), and in the politics of South African bodies (e.g., Hunter 2010). As debates around marriage continue to swirl in public and in South African homes, this *ASR* Forum urges scholars to think more deeply and broadly about what the politics of marriage can tell us about South Africa's past, present, and future.

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