CELEBRATING DISTINCTIONS: COMMON AND CONSPICUOUS WEDDINGS IN RURAL NAMIBIA[1]

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In many parts of southern Africa, weddings have become expensive, blending local ritual practices with Western middle-class consumption habits. Ethnographic fieldwork in the Fransfontein region of northwest Namibia indicates that the transformations in wedding consumption are linked to social class formation. Until the 1970s, wedding celebrations in Fransfontein were relatively modest affairs. With the establishment of new bureaucracies and the emergence of localized elites at the end of the 1970s, wedding celebrations gradually developed into costly celebrations of class distinction. An important outcome of this is that it has become increasingly more difficult for most people to marry; consequently, marriage rates have substantially declined. (Marriage rates, conspicuous consumption, elites, Namibia)

In Namibia, class formation with the non-European population commenced around the end of the 1960s (Tapscott 1993; Tötemeyer 1978; Wallace 2011:267). Comparable to other African regions, "style-setters" (Plotnicov 1970:293) of emerging modern elites from the 1960s onwards substantially changed consumption habits and life styles. House construction, automobiles, clothing, schooling, and etiquette all became important dimensions of class differentiation (cf. Tuden and Plotnicov 1970). Life cycle rituals like funerals were transformed into "cults of eliteness" (Cohen 1981:2; cf. Fumanti 2007; Lentz 1994; Cohen and Odhiambo 1992). Yet, except for Abner Cohen's (1981) detailed account of elite Creole weddings in Sierra Leone in the 1970s, class-based transformations of African weddings have hardly been studied. There is an ethnographic awareness that weddings have indeed changed into celebrations of class distinctions (Bourdieu 1984 [1979]). But contrary to the rich and detailed ethnographic studies on changes in wedding practices from other regions of the world (e.g., Argyrou 1996; Charsley 1991; Reed-Danahay 1996), most research on African marriages mentions weddings only briefly. Masquelier (2005:62) observed "extravagant wedding celebrations" in rural Niger, Niehaus and Stadler (2004:368) mention "white weddings" in Bushbuckridge, South Africa, and Hunter (2010:134) comments that "marriage has become virtually a middle-class institution." However, these reports do not include actual accounts of the dynamics and cultural complexities of contemporary African weddings.

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In Fransfontein, Namibia, weddings have become the most important arena for expressing class distinction. In no other area of life has the emerging elite of politicians and professionals invested as much money and creativity to exhibit and celebrate their distinctiveness as they do in weddings. For members of the Fransfontein elite, conspicuous wedding consumption has become a central "identity project" (Slater 1997:5). This is quite apparent in Teresa's spacious house in Fransfontein, a rural com-munity in northwest Namibia. In the living room, Teresa proudly displays pictures of her wedding,[2] when she married a wealthy politician at the start of the 1980s. In one photograph the bride sits on the hood of an expensive car. In another, a crowd and her husband (in a tuxedo) are shown admiring her wedding dress. One picture depicts the couple and a crowd of guests entering a reception hall. They are followed by four pairs of bridesmaids and groomsmen, all dressed in matching attire. Other pictures capture the couple cutting a huge wedding cake and guests seated for the banquet.

Teresa's pictures are easily placed within the framework of global modernity: a Namibian version of the lavish white wedding now celebrated in many parts of the world (Adrian 2003; Argyrou 1996; Otnes and Pleck 2003). Yet, the central expressive elements of a modern wedding (e.g., a white dress, a wedding cake, a church ceremony) formed only one part of a complex wedding dramaturgy. This became apparent when I asked Teresa if her mother and other family members had enjoyed her splendid wedding reception. She shook her head and said that her mother had celebrated the wedding at her family house just as the groom's family had celebrated at their family house. Teresa explained that after the two kin groups had exchanged and slaughtered two cows the previous morning (locally called *!gameb-#as*) and then ritually hung and prepared the meat and innards, her mother had been in charge of the celebrations at their home while her mother-in-law had done the same at her husband's house. Like many practices, the ritual exchange and slaughter of two cows between the two kin groups has become part of Fransfontein weddings only within the last 40 years. This exchange and many other new, hybrid, and expensive wedding practices have been added to the wedding celebrations of the emerging local elite since the 1970s.

Most people desire to emulate the elite, but they are unable to afford such expensive weddings, with the result that marriage rates have been declining. The elite's lavish weddings have also fostered new forms of exclusion, which include both identity-forming aspects and the potential for inequality (Graeber 2011; Carrier and Heyman 1997; Wilk 2001:254).

This article discusses both transformations together: the decline in marriage rates of the majority of the population and the emergence of local elites

and their appropriation of hybridized global middle-class weddings, as both processes are intrinsically linked.

METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH SETTING

The findings presented here are based on 18 months of joint ethnographic fieldwork together with Michael Schnegg in the Namibian community of Fransfontein and its surroundings in the former Damaraland, since Independence called Kunene South. Information on wedding practices and marriages comes from four sources. An ethnographic survey of 123 weddings that have been celebrated in Fransfontein between 1940 and 2004 provides retrospective data on wedding practices. This includes information on the couples (age at the wedding, occupation), their marriages (type of marriage, post-marital residence), the presence or absence of specific consumption goods and their financing, practices at the asking ritual (a kind of engagement), and the weddings themselves (wedding clothes, slaughtering of livestock, the rent of a reception hall). Financing was also elicited. However, between the 1940s and 2006, the Namibian currency changed several times, and we have been unable to find reliable information on inflation rates, so such data are not included in the analysis. A list of consumption goods and practices was compiled on the basis of our participation and documentation of eight weddings between 2003 and 2005. A third source of information on weddings is the recounted experience of past weddings and marriages by various members of the community—married and unmarried women, men, and couples (a total of 25 cases). These sources of information are supplemented with data on the conjugal and reproductive histories of 361 men and 364 women collected in an ethnographic census in 2004 in the Fransfontein region.

Fransfontein, which is the commercial, administrative, and educational center of a vast and dry hinterland, offers its inhabitants several small grocery shops and taverns, a primary school since 1964, a school hostel, a church hostel, a Protestant church, an undertaker, a traditional authority, a local government, a small health clinic, and a police station. In addition to the 137 households located within the community itself, another 161 households are situated in the area surrounding Fransfontein, where pastoralism is the dominant economic activity. The majority of people consider themselves as Damara (63 percent), followed by Herero (13 percent) and Nama (9 percent). Khoekhoegowab is the common language of the area, but most people are multilingual and speak some Afrikaans, English, or Otjiherero. Economic opportunities are severely limited. Most households survive on a mix of economic strategies, combining monthly pension payments for the elderly, small stock husbandry, remittances, sharing with the neighbors (locally called

augu) and petty economic activities like collecting fire wood and selling locally brewed beer (Pauli 2009; Schnegg 2009).

A small group of households, approximately 16 percent, can be considered as well off. These include government employees, teachers, traditional authorities, local administrators, and a few livestock owners (Pauli 2010). The emergence of this local elite is related to Namibia's political and economic development.

EMERGENCE OF A LOCAL ELITE

Fransfontein's establishment is linked to the Christian missionization of the region. Around 1880, a group of Nama pastoralists (*//Khau-/goan*) from southern Namibia migrated into the Fransfontein area (Bollig et al. 2006; Riechmann 1899; Schnegg 2007). In 1891, the Evangelic Rhenish Mission of Wuppertal, Germany came to Fransfontein. Along with the Christianization, white settlers arrived in Namibia and southwest Africa. First under German colonial rule and then, after the end of World War I, under South African rule (as a Mandate), the former grazing lands of the indigenous population were successively expropriated (Fuller 1993; Schnegg 2007). While the white settlers' land expanded, the indigenous population was forced into what were termed "reserves." The white demand for land created a need for cheap labor. More than two-thirds of the eldest generation of Fransfonteiners, born before the mid-1940s, have worked for extended periods on white commercial farms.

After Namibia's integration into the Republic of South Africa in the 1950s and 1960s, it was administered as a fifth province. This annexation came in the context of Apartheid and the creation of "homelands" based on ethnic criteria (Wallace 2011:261–71). To achieve this, in 1962 the Odendaal commission suggested the creation of ten homogeneous and self-administered ethnic homelands, among them Damaraland, including the Fransfontein reserve. With the establishment of homelands, new bureaucratic structures and elites emerged (Fumanti 2007; Rohde 1997; Tötemeyer 1978). Here, elite is defined as a "privileged minority" occupying the most influential positions and roles in the governing institutions of a community (Shore 2002:2; cf. Plotnicov 1970:275). A definition of elite, of course, is context dependent (Marcus 1983). Thus, in reference to the national elites in the capital, Windhoek, the Fransfontein elite is a localized middle class (c.f. Plotnicov 1970:278 for a similar case in Jos, Nigeria). Yet within the local context, the privileged minority of Fransfontein is atop the strata.

Although a modernizing elite existed in Fransfontein before the establishment of the homeland, it was a very small group (Pauli 2010). It increased in the 1960s with health clinics and with the addition of schools between the mid-1960s and the 1980s. Changes among the traditional political elite

evolved in patterns similar to the modernizing elite. Some of these traditional leaders were also successful businessmen.

For a minority, living conditions improved significantly (Jauch 1998). Their lives became increasingly distinct from what most Fransfonteiners had previously experienced. They started to buy automobiles, Western-type food and white wedding dresses. However, for the majority of local people, the situation worsened: "While an African bourgeoisie was thus beginning to emerge—although it remained small and fragile until after independence—the reserves nevertheless became places of extreme poverty" (Wallace 2011:267). Because of the poor quality of the land, for most Fransfonteiners living conditions were devastating. Many migrated to the country's urban centers, especially Windhoek (Greiner 2011). Since Independence in 1990, the economic situation of the majority of Namibians has not improved. The celebration of social distinctions through weddings has to be understood in this context.

A CELEBRATION OF DISTINCTION

Probably the most expensive of all weddings we observed was the 2003 wedding of Martin, the son of an influential regional politician. After more than three years living in a *ǂnu gomas !gameb*, a "black cow marriage" (i.e., an informal union), Marta and Martin decided to get married. Three years earlier, they had a son. At the time of their wedding Marta and Martin were living and working in Windhoek. Martin held a well-paid position at a soft-drink factory, and Marta was working for a school hostel. They were born and raised in Fransfontein, where many of their relatives were still living.

The wedding process commenced in August 2003 with the asking ritual (*!game–#gans,* marriage asking), which takes place outside the bride's family's house. During three consecutive nights (Thursday to Saturday), Martin's kin "begged" for Marta, enduring a number of humiliations. At the end of the third night, Marta's relatives gave their consent to the marriage. The asking ritual concluded with the engagement, the *reng #nuis* (putting on the ring). For this, Marta changed into an expensive silver gown. Dozens of people poured into the family's courtyard. Over 100 people arrived, many more than during the asking ritual. In the middle of the yard, Marta and Martin were seated at a beautifully decorated table. The bride received expensive jewelry, a gold necklace, a bracelet, a watch, and a diamond engagement ring. She gave her future husband a wristwatch. Then, Martin and Marta opened a bottle of expensive champagne. Several goats and sheep had been slaughtered in order to serve the guests. The cost of the asking ritual and the engagement rituals were mostly paid by the groom and his father.

Four months later, in December 2003, Martin and Marta celebrated their wedding. It began with a week's seclusion of Marta—the *!hae–om #nûis* (to put into a dark room). Martin had financed the construction of two extra rooms, significantly enlarging Marta's mother's house, for this occasion. Very early Friday morning, the *!gameb–#as* (marriage slaughtering) was performed. After Martin and his male relatives chased a cow from their house to Marta's family house, Martin cut the cow's throat. Then, Marta's female kin started to prepare the intestines, skin, blood, and meat of the animal. All parts of the slaughtered cow were publicly displayed and hung. After Martin and his kin returned to their house, Marta's male kin chased and slaughtered their cow in Martin's family courtyard. The rest of the day the two families remained at their houses, preparing food and slaughtering more goats and sheep for the wedding the next day.

The next morning, Marta, Martin, the bridesmaids, and groomsmen prepared for the church ceremony. All eight bridesmaids wore the same fashionable and expensive purple gowns while the eight groomsmen wore tuxedos. Only a few family members attended the wedding ceremony at the Protestant church, other relatives stayed in the respective family houses. After church, wedding photographs were taken. Then the couple, bridesmaids, and groomsmen walked to the groom's family house. Little flower girls collected the money thrown on the street in front of the wedding party. While relatives celebrated at the two family houses, the wedding party proceeded to the official wedding reception at the beautifully decorated school hall. At the hall's entrance, two of Martin's nephews checked to see if all guests were carrying a wedding gift and an invitation card. More than 150 guests had been invited to the reception. Marta, Martin, the bridesmaids, and the groomsmen were all seated at the largest table, visible to all guests. Large bowls of meat and salad were placed at Marta and Martin's table. This part of the celebrations was quite unlike those at the two family houses, where everybody passing by was welcome to drink traditional beer, eat meat, dance, and sing. The next morning the marriage was made final with the handover of Marta, who raised her hand with the wedding ring so that everyone could see it.

Fransfontein weddings and marriages are given great respect (*!gôasib*). At public events like weddings and funerals, married people are seated apart and given foods that are not offered to the unmarried. Additionally, only married people are addressed with the respectful form of "you" (*sadu)*. The emphasis on the distinction between married and unmarried people explains why informal unions are not considered the equivalent of marriage. As many informal unions are short-lived, those that last are perceived as steps toward marriage (Comaroff 1980; Griffiths 1997; Hunter 2010). Additionally, children born out-of-wedlock do not have the same rights with regard to their father's

property as do those whose parents are married (Pauli 2012). Only marriage grants couples and their children certain rights of maintenance and inheritance (Hubbard and Zimba 2004).

A couple is considered married after a Christian church ceremony has taken place, or, although very uncommon, after registration at the magistrate (when the couple does not get married in church). Most of the 123 marriages surveyed are Protestant marriages (78 percent), followed by Catholic marriages (8 percent), Pentecostal marriages (5 percent), and magistrate marriages (5 percent). This distribution results from the missionary history of the region. The Evangelic Lutheran Church remains by far the most common denomination. However, in recent years, Catholic and especially varying Pentecostal denominations have also spread. Customary law marriages (4 percent) are practiced solely by recent labor migrants from northern Namibia (mostly Himba) working for Fransfontein farmers.

While the majority of the population survives on few resources, and many children and adults have experienced hunger, food was served in abundance at Marta and Martin's asking ritual and wedding. Food, and meat in particular, are important marker of wealth. Like the clothes being worn and the places chosen for celebrations, different types of food represent different distinctions. The abundance of meat is linked to a perceived traditional lifestyle, i.e., pastoralism, while luxurious wedding gowns and a lavishly decorated reception hall links the wedding celebrants with translocal and modern lifestyles.

MODEST MARRIAGES AND CONSPICUOUS CELEBRATIONS

Until the 1970s, Fransfontein wedding celebrations were comparably modest. The earliest weddings recorded were celebrated in the 1940s. There is little information on Damara weddings before the 1940s or during the German colonial occupation (Fuller 1993; Gockel-Frank 1998). Two conditions strongly influenced wedding practices before the 1970s: Christianization and the white settler economy. For example, when Jocoline, then 30 years old, and Petrus, 36, married in 1958, both worked for a white farmer. Contrary to the widespread practice of celebrating a wedding at the bride's birthplace, after their wedding ceremony during Sunday mass, they celebrated on the settler's farm. It was a modest wedding, typical for the time. The bride's dress was simple, and the groom wore a new pair of trousers and new shoes. The flowers for the bride, the church fee, and the rings were bought by the groom. The wedding food, sponsored by an aunt (HFZ) and the bride's mother, consisted of two goats. The groom paid for some vegetables. The couple and their guests ate outside of their small house. For entertainment, some Damara/Nama songs were sung. The wedding clothes of bride and groom were worn

later on special occasions. Like most couples married before the 1970s, Jocoline and Petrus did not have a marriage asking ritual.

In the 1970s these simple wedding celebrations started to change. The new professional and political elites provided the necessary momentum. All traditional leaders and elected councillors in the 1970s and 1980s celebrated lavish weddings. These first splendid weddings are part of the community's public memory. For example, in the 1980s, an influential councillor decided that all the Fransfontein halls were too small for his wedding reception, and he had a huge tent sewn. Teachers and some successful migrants started to have costly weddings, but many weddings of the 1970s and 1980s were still rather modest.

The marriage asking ritual is an indicator of this development. Only about one-third of all couples marrying before the 1970s had this ritual, and even then they were modest and inexpensive. But from the end of the 1970s onward, marriage asking became more common and progressively extended into a costly engagement. For example, the 1984 marriage asking of Moses, a wealthy politician, businessman, and livestock owner, and Teresa, a hostel matron, resembles Martin and Marta's engagement. Moses and Teresa, whose wedding photographs were described at the beginning of this article, had an asking ritual and an engagement. The asking ritual was still relatively small compared to later ones. At that ritual, only a dozen guests had the meat of a cow, soft drinks, and beer. Twenty years later, at Marta and Martin's engagement in 2003, it was common to have 100 guests.[3] Since the 1970s, "marking" the bride with jewelry (earrings, necklace, bracelet, watch, a diamond ring) also raised expenses. It is now common for the groom to buy the engagement and wedding jewelry in Otjiwarongo, the closest commercial center, about a three-hour drive from Fransfontein. None of these luxury goods were present at engagements and weddings prior to the 1970s. From then onwards engagements grew in scale, cost, and complexity, and now more than 70 percent of all marriages include a marriage asking ritual and an engagement ceremony.

Weddings, usually held several months after the engagement, developed similarly (cf. Pauli 2009). Since the 1970s, new ritual practices and consumption goods, like wedding cakes and wedding receptions, were incorporated. Inspirations came from other Namibian groups, e.g., Herero, Owambo, and Afrikaans, and from magazines like the South African *Drum*. Today, women's magazines (like the South African version of *Cosmopolitan*) and newspapers, such as *The Namibian*, that print photographs of national elite weddings influence brides, grooms, and their families.

The ritual marriage-cow slaughtering is also a recent development, again significantly raising wedding costs. Elder informants stressed that during the first half of the twentieth century, only the male kin group chased and

slaughtered a cow, if the ritual took place at all (cf. Schmidt 1981/2:63). Today, slaughtering is common. All recent weddings include this ritual practice. Since the 1980s this practice added another location to weddings. Previously, weddings were celebrated at only the bride's family house; now it includes the groom's family house. When it became increasingly common in the 1980s to host an official wedding reception, a third location was added: the reception hall.

Before the 1970s not a single Fransfontein marriage included a wedding reception at a hall. In the 1970s, 5 percent of the weddings incorporated a wedding reception. These were all elite weddings, celebrated by wealthy politicians, administrators, and teachers. In the 1980s, 28 percent had a wedding reception. In the 1990s, almost half of all marriages included a reception, and from 2000 to 2004, 60 percent of weddings were held at a reception hall. To entertain and impress the guests, the hall is decorated with flowers and sometimes a band is hired. Unlike the informality at the two family houses, the reception at a wedding hall is formal, and although one of the most luxurious moments of the wedding, it often lasts less than two hours. Usually, hundreds of guests are invited to a wedding reception and huge amounts of food and drinks are served.

Wedding attire has also changed. It became common to buy expensive white wedding dresses, wearing them on the wedding day and then never again. Before the 1980s, bridesmaids and groomsmen were nonexistent. Today there are at least four couples of bridesmaids dressed in similar colors and groomsmen in tuxedos.

Clearly, from the 1970s onwards, Fransfontein elite weddings have changed from a modest ritual into a conspicuous celebration. The emerging African bourgeoisie (Wallace 2011:267) of the 1970s and 1980s increasingly expressed its status through their weddings, and this process has continued. Much in line with Veblen's (1994 [1899]) reflections on conspicuous consumption and class, contemporary Fransfontein weddings stimulate envy and emulation. At weddings, wealthier Fransfonteiners, for example, are impressed by the recent use of new media, like digital cameras, and talk about using such devices for their or their children's weddings. But this is mainly of interest to those able to compete. Destitute people in Fransfontein, who do not marry at all, are excluded.

DECLINE AND DISTINCTION

Along with social class formation and changes in wedding celebrations, the percentage of people marrying has declined steadily since the 1970s. The Table below presents a comparison of the percentages of married couples for eight ten-year birth cohorts based on ethnographic census data of July 2004.

Table
Percent married and median age at marriage by birth cohorts (364 women, 361 men)

	Women			**Men**		
Birth cohorts	N	% ever married	Median age at marriage	N	% ever married	Median age at marriage
1915–1924	11	91%	36.5	12	92%	34
1925–1934	26	96%	26	22	68%	38.5
1935–1944	41	58%	33	30	63%	34
1945–1954	47	30%	35	38	42%	35
1955–1964	59	37%	32	59	27%	37
1965–1974	65	23%	28	67	16%	30
1975–1984	89	6%		104	1%	
1985–1994	26	0%		29	0%	
All cohorts	**364**	**32%**	**30**	**361**	**25%**	**35**

As can be seen in the last row of the Table, of the 364 women interviewed, 15 years and older, only 32 percent are or have been married. The number of men who married is even lower, with only 25 percent ever married. Thus, less than 30 percent of the population 15 years and older is or has been married. As the Table shows, while the majority of older men and women (until birth cohort 1935–1944) is or have been married, from birth cohort 1945–1954 onwards, the majority of the population is unmarried. For all cohorts, divorce and separation are extremely rare. Out of the 89 ever married men, 87 percent are currently married, 10 percent are widowers, and only 3 percent are separated or divorced. Among the 115 ever married women, 67 percent are currently married, 3 percent are separated or divorced, and 30 percent are widows. Consequently, the number of married Fransfonteiners has consistently declined, and the few Fransfonteiners who have married almost always stay married.

As elsewhere in southern Africa, the declining percentage marrying might also be the result of a substantial increase in the age at marriage (Bongaarts 2007; Garenne and Zwang 2005). However, as the Table demonstrates, the median age at marriage has not increased for the different birth cohorts, and it suggests no clear trend toward an increase or decrease of the median age at marriage. For a long time, marriage has occurred rather late in Fransfontein, and people have lived in cohabitating unions. The decline in marriage rates

cannot be attributed to a change to a later age at marriage and longer periods of cohabitation.

How then can this substantial decline in marriage rates be understood? On the one hand, the strong decline in marriage rates seems to support "teleological narratives of 'family breakdown' in Africa" (Hunter 2007:654) resulting from the long-term effects of colonialism, apartheid, and the migrant-labor system. On the other hand, a decline in marriage rates can also be understood as a shift in social relations. Then, the decline in marriage rates is not an indicator of crisis but of social reorganization. Affines have become less important, while class-based relations and patronage embedded in the establishment of bureaucratic structures have gained increased relevance (cf. Gulbrandsen 1986; Kuper 1987; Solway 1990). Furthermore, some financially independent Fransfontein women have opted against marriage. However, these explanations do not take the substantial changes of wedding practices into account. Is it possible that the elite's desire for distinction expressed through their conspicuous wedding celebrations is gradually inhibiting people from marrying?

As conspicuous wedding celebrations have increased since the 1970s, so have the financial burdens for couples. Not only have weddings become more expensive, but expectations have changed so that the costs fall to the couple themselves, whereas in the past they could rely much more on their kin for financial support. Marriage has therefore become something that is only available to couples in a situation to afford the associated expenses. Perceived in this manner, marriage has become more a marker of the financial stage a couple has attained than a passage in the life cycle. This change in the cultural significance of marriage shapes an individual's thinking regarding potential candidates for marriage. In many interviews and conversations, the overwhelming majority of men and women said they would like to marry but that their insecure economic position prohibited planning a marriage. Unlike older generations, who perceived marriage as an important step in their life courses and as a public marker of their social being, young people's conception of their social identities linked their readiness for marriage not to social maturity but to economic security. Thus it is interesting to look at a case of a non-elite wedding. Francois, our research assistant, on several occasions stressed that he would not have married without the income he received as a research assistant.

Francois distances himself from the sense of status associated with elites. He explains his being married as resulting from luck, like finding money on the ground. His wedding and his status as a married man are like a dream come true or an unexpected gift. It is by no means something he expected, or needed, or thought he had a right to do.

He conceives of marriage as a privilege only for the elite, and this lies at the heart of both the conspicuous wedding celebrations and the declining marriage rates. The adoption of elite wedding practices by mainstream wedding culture has affected more than decorations and price tags, even determining who is eligible for marriage. The lavish displays explicitly underscore changes in more subtle ideologies, such as the implicit message that marriage is not meant for everybody, but should instead be reserved only for those who are well off. Thus, because of their desire for distinctive weddings, the emerging elite of the 1970s and 1980s changed not only their own weddings, but also what it means to marry, with the unintended effect that the overwhelming majority of Fransfonteiners now see themselves as unable to marry.

CONCLUSION

Unlike cheaper consumption goods, Miller (2010:81) suggests that "houses are the elephants of stuff." The contours of power and scale implied in housing can also be traced in weddings—if houses are like elephants, weddings may be rhinos. In many regions of the world, weddings have become one of the central arenas to express divergent desires. They are manifestations of local power, identity, and elitist distinctions that appropriate global modern middle-class aesthetics.

Analysis reveals how Fransfontein wedding celebrations have been transformed from a common institution into an elitist celebration of conspicuous consumption within the last 40 years. Even so, the weddings are not perceived as detached or elitist by the population. Marriage and weddings continue to be important to almost all Fransfonteiners. Indeed, the sharp increase in wedding costs is a sign of the high value of the institution. The majority of the unmarried population wants to marry and perceives it as a central, highly desirable goal in life. If people get the economic means to marry, they will do so. This is similar in southern Cameroon: "That is marriage rates are not declining because marriage is becoming irrelevant or because it is less systematically valued than in the past. Rather, marriage is becoming more rare precisely because it is so terribly important to women's status that it be done well" (Johnson-Hanks 2007:652).

In Fransfontein, marriage has become very important not only for the status of women but for the status of the local elite. In an ongoing creative process of mixing and merging rituals from different regions and sources, Fransfontein weddings are continually transformed and thus kept distinctive. This distinction makes the decline of marriage rates acceptable. Nevertheless, although most unmarried people value marriage, the changes in wedding practices described here have led to a substantial decline in marriage rates by

excluding most people from marrying. While some enjoy their splendid weddings, for many others the prospect to celebrate is dim.

The development of ostentation can also be traced in other life cycle rituals, and the transformation of wedding celebrations exhibits some similarities to class-related changes in funerals (Cohen and Odhiambo 1992; Fumanti 2007; Lentz 1994). Fransfontein's elite has also changed its burial practices, and now uses expensive coffins, and marble gravestones, and inviting hundreds of mourners, while other families are forced to go from door to door and beg for money to finance the burial of a relative. But while there are only a few weddings in Fransfontein each year and only a fraction of the population marries, the number of funerals has dramatically increased in recent years, mainly due to the spread of HIV/AIDS. Inequalities in social class formation are thus also visible at funerals.

NOTES

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2. The meeting with Teresa took place in August 2004. All names and some personal information have been changed to protect the anonymity of my informants.

3. For the 52 (out of 123) marriages with a marriage asking ritual and an engagement ceremony, the engagement date and the number of people attending the engagement has been correlated. The number of engagement guests strongly and statistically significantly increases with time (Pearson correlation 0,408). More guests also meant significantly higher costs.

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