



Change in Marriage Behaviour in North-Central Namibia 1925–2009

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Abstract

Namibia is the only country in Africa for which historical data is available to describe the change in marriage behaviour since the 1920s. The aim of this article is to describe and to understand how the age at first marriage and the trends of premarital births and cohabitation have changed since the 1920s in North-Central Namibia. The description of the changes is based on parish register material. The mean age at first marriage was over 20 for both sexes during the 1920s. After that, the age at first marriage gradually increased, reaching about 29 for men and 24 for women at the end of the 1950s. One of the main explanations for the increase was labour migration. The new marriage model was introduced at the end of the 1970s, characterised by high level of cohabitation, high proportion of premarital births, late marriage age and low proportion of married.

Introduction

Almost all women in Africa marry and after divorce or widowhood most women remarry (Bledsoe and Cohen 1993; Smith et al. 1984). Due to this fact the role of marriage has been especially critical in determining the time when regular sexual relations and child-bearing begin in Africa (Bledsoe and Cohen 1993; Lesthaeghe 1989; Van de Walle 1993). The classic statement goes that “African marriage we must think of it not as an event or condition but as a developing process” (Radcliffe-Brown 1950, 49). This became one of the most widely repeated statements among Africanists (Hunter 2016). The process of marriage included cohabitation, ceremony, and sexual relations (or consummation). In

the process, women usually married quite early, at about 16–18 years of age but other marital practices varied greatly (Bledsoe and Cohen 1993).

For quite some time, southern Africa has differed in marriage behaviour from the rest of Africa. The typical features of this marital model in Botswana, Namibia and South Africa are that age at first marriage is higher than generally in Africa and the proportion of people who have never been married is high (Lesthaeghe et al. 1989; Pauli and Van Dijk 2016; Van de Walle 1993). Nowadays high level of premarital births is part of this model (Garenne and Zwang 2006; Pauli 2019). Historically premarital births were not very common in Botswana, Lesotho or in Namibia during 1930s and 1940s (Notkola and Siiskonen 2000; Pauli 2019; Timaeus and Graham 1989). However, according to several anthropologists since 1930s, there has been the increasing trend of preliminary births connected to labour migration in the southern African area (Pauli 2019).

Late marriage was established in these countries by the 1930s and 1940s. The late marriage and decline of polygyny have been related to the interrelationship of labour migration, decline of agriculture, development of monetary economy and Christianisation. Polygynous marriages for men became gradually less economically advantageous and there were no incentives to marry early (Timaeus and Graham 1989).

Southern African marriage was a popular research topic among anthropologists until the early 1990s, then there was a paucity of research for some years. In 2016 the journal *Anthropology of Southern Africa* published a special issue titled “Change and Continuity in Southern African Marriage”, which presented the latest findings and new perspectives. In recent times, increasing interest has focused on the changing meanings and practices of marriage in southern Africa and how these changes are linked to cultural and societal changes within these societies (Pauli and Van Dijk 2016). The establishment of a southern African marriage model, change in marriage behaviour and increasing age at first marriage are connected to the general socioeconomic development of the region (Timaeus and Graham 1989). In Namibia the role of labour migration, the long civil war including apartheid government and high Christianisation are particularly important. Nowadays, Christian wedding combined with traditional wedding practices may only be affordable for the middle or upper class due to its excessive costs (Pauli 2019).

The aim of this article is to analyse how the mean age at first marriage developed in North-Central Namibia from the 1920s to 2009 based on the empirical data collected from church registers. We also pay attention to the trends of premarital births and cohabitation. Finally, we discuss the relationship of our findings to socioeconomic development of the North-Central Namibia, including the role of labour migration, Christianisation, and political development.

Background

Marriage in Namibia

There are only a few studies that focus on marriage in North-Central and Northwest Namibia. Tuupainen's (1970) monograph represents the first generation of "ethnographic studies since the 1930s" on marriage following the categorisation of Pauli and Van Dijk (2016). Tuupainen was engaged in economic and administrative duties of the Finnish Missionary Society and Evangelical Lutheran Ovambo-Kavango Church in North-Central Namibia in 1958–62 and 1964–65. The object of Tuupainen's study was marriage as a social institution. The main part of her work was based on interviews in villages and the hospital area. Instead, in Pauli's (2019) monograph the focus is on analysing the changing meanings and practices of marriage. She collected her data from Fransfontein in the Kunene region in 2003–2010. Her study is mainly based on interviews, questionnaires, and life stories of 120 marriages. Together these two studies give a good picture of marital life in North Namibia. Both studies used church records.

The focus of the Tuupainen's (1970) study was the marital traditions among Christians and how they were related to the old marriage customs. One key issue in Tuupainen's work is marriage ratification. According to Tuupainen (1970), marriage ratification has been the old tradition. Marriage was ratified by giving a wedding gift (cattle, payments, services, etc.). The value of the marriage ratification present was high. During the 1950s the salary of man in migrant work for one and half years was not in all cases enough to pay for this present (Notkola and Siiskonen 2000). Eligibility for marriage was also needed. One example in earlier times was that the man had to be able to carry salt from Etosha to Ovamboland (see map in Figure 1). Later migrant work outside Ovamboland was seen as comparable to this practice and it provided the possibilities to pay for high wedding costs. Marriage ratification is still practiced at least in some parts of Namibia (Pauli 2019). Pauli says that her book is telling "the entwined stories of marriage transformation and class formation in Fransfontein, a rural community in northwest Namibia" (Pauli 2019). According to this interpretation, marriage is a middle-class phenomenon and not available anymore for poor people. Pauli is using Bourdieu's (1984) theory about social distinction in her interpretation. The value of weddings and marriages has not declined in Namibia, but to marry has become an indicator of elite status, one that less affluent people also aspire to but, lacking the financial means for a wedding, often without success (Pauli 2019). "African upper middle-class weddings have developed into extravagant events that seem to have become fixed markers of marriage in contradiction to the processual understanding of marriage" (Hunter 2016).

The role of marriage is important in Namibia. Marriage is traditionally highly valued and in demand; it provides social security and economic safety for the members of the family (Nelago and Pazvakawambwa 2015). In many African societies women and children have played the crucial role as workforce in the fields as well as doing housework.

Age at first marriage has been high for a long time in Namibia and nowadays it is one of the highest in whole Africa (Garenne 2004; Garenne 2014; Pazvakawambwa et

al. 2013). The proportion of those not married is also high and premarital births (child-bearing before first marriage) are highly prevalent (Namibia Statistics Agency 2013; Pazvakawambwa et al. 2013; United Nations 2020). It is said that this pattern is “unique” in Africa (Thernborn 2006). Based on DHS survey material, the mean age at marriage among women born during the 1940s was about 23–24, about 25 among women born during the 1950s and about 26 among those born in the 1960s in Namibia (Garenne 2004). Although premarital births are quite common in Namibia, teenage motherhood (age 15–19) is not as prevalent as in other southern African countries (Shemeikka et al. 2009).

Usually in Africa, widows marry quite soon after their husband’s death, but remarriage in Namibia is not that straightforward (Siiskonen 2009); women felt that living alone with their children might be easier than living with a husband. Pauli (2019) also gave examples of women who chose to live alone and purposely did not marry. It is assumed that education and Christianisation have strengthened the independence of women, resulting in a high proportion of unmarried women (Nelago and Pazvakawambwa 2015; Pazvakawambwa et al. 2013; United Nations 2020).

Labour migration in North-Central Namibia

Labour migration in southern Africa area has affected marriage formation in many ways (Timaeus and Graham 1989). It has been assumed to be the key factor explaining why the marriage age has increased since the 1930s in countries sending labour migrants.

Migrant work has a long tradition in northern Namibia. Historical documents from as early as the 1920s show how the colonial administration together with local chiefs organised labour circulation from northern Namibia to other parts of the country. Migrant workers from North-Central Namibia were recruited by special labour recruitment organisations: the Southern Labour Organisation (SLO) and the Northern Labour Organisation (NLO), which were amalgamated into the Southwest Africa Native Labour Association (SWANLA) in 1943 (Hayes 1998; Notkola et al. 2017). Ovambo men were engaged in migrant labour work as early as the German colonial period started. During the 1930s the NLO worked with local chiefs and native recruiters to find suitable men to work in the south (Assistant Native Commissioner of Runtu 1939). Colonial reinforcement of the position of existing kings and headmen was fundamentally aimed at promoting migrant labour (Hayes 1998; Timaeus and Graham 1989). This labour migration system was very well organised and later it included a short medical examination. Based on this medical examination recruits were rejected or accepted and divided into three classes according to their health (Regional Medical Officer 1950). This health information was used when men were sent to mines, railways, or farms.

Timaeus and Graham (1989) have studied labour circulation, marriage, and fertility in southern Africa, mainly starting from the 1970s. Approximately 60 percent of Lesotho’s and 30 percent of Botswana’s men were working in the Republic of South Africa (RSA) (Cooper 1979; Kerven 1979; Timaeus and Graham 1989). Migrant men did not

set up their own household and they were not able to marry before they retired from wage employment (Molenaar 1980; Timaeus and Graham 1989).

Migrant work has been very important for society in North-Central Namibia since the 1920s. It has brought the monetary economy into society at a very early stage. Men left their home region voluntarily for fixed term employment contracts at least for one year and the main reason was poverty (Banghart 1969). Local chiefs and native recruiters also benefited. One reason to leave for migrant work to south was to earn money to be able to get married. At the same time, severe famines affected the study region in 1929–1933: during and after these famines migrant labour increased (Hayes 1998). The colonial administration organised famine relief programmes and an important reason to do so was that famine areas were labour exporting areas (Hayes 1998). This showed what important asset migrant workers were for the colonial administration: cash remittance was one of the most important coping strategies during the famine (Hayes 1998). At the same time women were not permitted to migrate. Households began to be headed by women during the early 1930s in North-Central Namibia. In addition, famine relief was only distributed in exchange for dam labour, and this work was performed also by women and children (Hayes 1998). During the 1930s and probably also later “colonial correspondence stresses that, in most reported cases, the movement of women out of Ovamboland was prevented” (Hayes 1998).

The population living in North-Central Namibia was about 100,000 during the 1930s (Notkola and Siiskonen 2000). Of these, 14,000–16,000 were men aged 15–34, based on the typical age structure in Africa at the time. The contract term was one to two years (Katjavivi 1988; Kooy 1973; Peltola 1995). According to this rough calculation (the number of men aged 15–34 was about 15,000, the number of migrants was 3,500 and the length of contract was one to two years) about 20–40 percent of men were absent and working outside the study region during the 1930s. Since 1950 the number of migrants steadily increased. In 1951 the number of migrant working men was 9,858, in 1960 it was 14,577, and in 1974 it was 35,577 (Notkola and Siiskonen 2000). It has been estimated that about 40–60 percent of adult men originally living in northern Namibia during the 1950s and 1960s were working outside their homeland and at the beginning of the 1970s about 70 per cent of adult men had been involved in migrant work at least once (Moorsom 1977; Tuupainen 1970). In labour migration until the 1970s, work contracts varied from 12 to 24 months (Katjavivi 1988; Kooy 1973; Peltola 1995). Since the early 1970s no good information about labour migration in Namibia has been available due to abolition of the SWANLA in 1972 after the general strike of contract labourers. Since 1943 SWANLA – a merger of the -existing organisations SLO and NLO – had organised recruitment of contract workers in Ovamboland because it was not permitted to leave Ovamboland without a labour contract (Cooper 1999; Kooy 1973). It was estimated that after the strike about 20 000 Ovambo strikers did not return to work and fled the country. Many of the strikers joined the South West Africa People’s Organisation SWAPO (Katjavivi 1988).

The citizens of the homelands had to work in the police zone as migrant labourers without any claim to political rights because they were interpreted as being “foreign citizens” outside of their homeland according to the Native Nations in South West Africa Act of 1968 (Mbuende 1986; Notkola and Siiskonen 2000).

Socioeconomic and political changes

The root causes that accelerated the development of the migrant labour system in North-Central Namibia were primarily threefold. First, there existed a chronic shortage of labour in the expanding mining and later fishing industries in central and southern parts of Namibia since the early years of the twentieth century. The scarcity of labour originated from the Herero and Nama uprisings (1904–1907) against the German colonial administration, resulting in approximately four-fifths of the Herero and half of the Nama peoples inhabiting the central and southern parts of the present Namibia being killed or fleeing to the present-day Botswana (Drechsler 1984). The other two root causes, economic and social, were intertwined and related to socioeconomic changes in North-Central Namibia.

The economy in the North-Central Namibian small communities relied on subsistence farming, animal husbandry, and labour migration. The basic unit of production and social organisation was the men-led household or *egumbo*, consisting of a man, his wife or wives, and their unmarried children and foster children. In practice, due to absence of able-bodied men working outside the region, women have been responsible for leading the households (Erkkilä et al. 2022; Williams 1991).

Since the 1950s, there has been an increasing dependence on migrant work, shifting from a short phase primarily for unmarried men towards a form of wage labour even for married men. Even though the significance of subsistence farming has been declining, it has been an important source of basic foodstuffs both for those residing in the north and the labour migrants in the southern regions. However, labour migration has become an essential part of the adaptation strategy for rural households, which have become dependent on cash. The lifestyle in North-Central Namibia can be called translocal since the 1970s (Erkkilä et al. 2022; Notkola and Siiskonen 2000).

The implementation of the policy of separate development by South Africa's apartheid government began in Namibia through the establishment of the Ovamboland homeland in the late 1960s. Building of the homeland administration in North-Central Namibia created a new elite group of civil servants alongside the traditional kin-based elite. In August 1966, the armed liberation struggle for independence erupted in North-Central Namibia. The collapse of the Portuguese colonial regime in Angola in 1975, which had supported South Africa's government, escalated the liberation struggle. From the mid-1970s southern Angola and North-Central Namibia became the most crucial battlefield in the liberation war until Namibia gained independence in 1990 (Thornberry 2004; Töttemeyer 1978).

The escalation of the war led thousands of potential migrant workers from North-Central Namibia to flee to Angola and Zambia, where they joined the People's Liberation Army of Namibia (PLAN) established by the SWAPO (South West Africa People's Organisation). In 1978, PLAN had around 18,000 combatants (Thornberry 2004). The war economy boosted particularly trading and construction industries in North-Central Namibia and strengthened the position of the local business elite in the society (Dobler 2014).

Christianisation

The Finnish Missionary Society established a mission field in North-Central Namibia in 1870, becoming the sole missionary organisation working consistently in the north for approximately two decades (for more about the early years of missionary work, see Notkola and Siiskonen 2000; Siiskonen 1990; Siiskonen 1998).

The spread of Christianity was slow in the initial years of missionary work. The first baptisms occurred only in 1883, but from the beginning of the twentieth century, the number of Christians grew faster. By the early 1930s, nearly 20 percent of the population in the region was identified as Lutherans, numbering around 24 000 (Notkola and Siiskonen 2000; Notkola et al. 2000).

During the late 1920s and early 1930s, North-Central Namibia faced severe drought. In response, the South African mandate administration initiated relief works, primarily through dam construction. Finnish missionaries played a pivotal role in dam building by supervising the work and delivering emergency food for the workers (Hayes 1998). However, young men were not allowed to work there. They were supposed to go to work in south or central Namibia (Hayes 1998).

The scale of dam work was very extensive: about 500–600 women were working daily on a single dam project in the Ondonga community. This provided the Finnish mission a good opportunity to expand their work and increase parish membership during the 1930s. After that, there was a slow increase in the number of Lutherans, and it can be estimated that about 40 percent of the population were Lutherans in 1950s. By the 1970s the proportion of Christians in the entire population reached around 60 percent, continuing to 70 percent in the 1980s and reached over 80 percent since 1991 (Shemeikka 2006).

Christianity and the work of missionaries affected the development of Namibian society in many ways. Marriage and wedding practices became a blend of traditional practices and Christian rules (Pauli 2019; Tuupainen 1970). Missionaries also played a crucial role in developing the healthcare system in the area (Notkola and Siiskonen 2000). In addition, the whole educational system in the 1960s and 1970s was based on the work of missionaries as part of the colonial system (Lehtonen 1999). The spread of education is considered the most important factor in changing marriage in Africa (Bledsoe and Cohen 1993).

Data and Methods

Parish registers provide good research material to analyse marriage behaviour and premarital births in North-Central Namibia since the early twentieth century. The systematic collection of population data from the church registers of the sample parishes of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Namibia (ELCIN) allows to analyse marriage behaviour over the long-term since the 1920s.

The study area North-Central Namibia was known during the colonial era as Ovamboland. This area, is currently divided into four administrative regions – Ohangwena,

Omusati, Oshana and Oshikoto – and these formed the Northwest Health Directorate until the early 2000s. Instead of calling the study region by the colonial term Ovamboland we use the term commonly used today: North-Central Namibia. This area was selected as the study region due to the availability of a continuous series of good quality parish register data from the local parishes. According to the Population and Housing Census of 2011, 40 percent of the Namibian population, 847,259 people, lived in North-Central Namibia (Namibia Statistics Agency 2013).

The description of changes in marriage development and premarital births since the 1920s is based on parish register data originally collected for another project (Notkola and Siiskonen 2000). The data includes a sample of parishes of the ELCIN located evenly across different parts of North-Central Namibia. When selecting the sample parishes, the three most important criteria of selection were: (1) that the parish was established before 1925; and (2) that the parish registers of the selected parishes formed complete series of vital events from a long timeframe; and (3) that the vital events were carefully registered (Notkola and Siiskonen 2000). Based on these criteria parishes Nakayale, Elim, Tshandi, Okahao, Oshigambo, and Eenhana were chosen in the first stage of the study in the beginning of 1990s when the follow-up period was 1925–1985. For this period, the quality of old data from Eenhana turned out to be poor and it was excluded (no complete series of family books). The follow-up period was extended later in three data collection phases 2001, 2005 and 2013. The data of four new parishes Eenhana (2000–2009), Oshitutuma, Omulonga, and Onankali were included in the sample in 1980–2009. Of these, Oshitutuma and Omulonga were earlier part of the Oshigambo parish.

Parish registers of the selected parishes (Table 1, Figure 1) were microfilmed with the permission of and in collaboration with the ELCIN (ELCIN 1993). Family reconstitution was the method used to collect demographic data from the parish registers (Wrigley 1966). No new data was collected for this study, which uses data from the nine parishes. In this study the data is based on information from the main book/family book and the list of marriages at the time of marriage. A detailed description of the data collection principles and the quality of data is presented elsewhere (Cordell 2010; Notkola and Siiskonen 2000; Notkola et al. 2000; Shemeikka 2006; Siiskonen et al. 2005). Altogether there were 10,915 marriages in the data during the study period 1925–2009 (Table 1). Marriage rates have been calculated for those who married for the first time and were baptised before the age of 16. The original data includes also persons turning to Christians as adults and they were often baptised just before marriage. These marriages were excluded. Premarital births were defined as births before first marriage for women who married aged 17–30, cohabitation was defined, as a couple having two premarital children together before first marriage.

Earlier analysis showed that the quality of parish register data is relatively good. According to the analysis of missing birth dates, baptism dates, and sex ratio at birth, the quality of the data seemed to be much the same in all parishes and the errors were not systematically concentrated in one parish. During the period 1925–1985 the proportion of missing birth dates was among women 8.3 percent and among men 19.6 percent (Notkola and Siiskonen 2000). Later (1986–2009) these figures were 13.2 percent among women and 45 percent among men. The results from the first marriage cohort (1925–35)

are probably not as reliable as from later cohorts and women data is more reliable than men data. After the independency of Namibia in the 1990s the proportion of missing birth dates is increasing both among men and women. It is important to notice that a complete series of family books existed for each parish. The main book or family book is not used in Catholic or in Anglican parishes. The quality of Evangelical Lutheran parish register material from North-Central Namibia is exceptional in African context (Cordell 2010; Siiskonen et al. 2005).

Table 1. *The number of marriages in the study area by parish and marriage cohort (based on the Evangelical Lutheran Church Records). Oshitutuma and Omulonga were earlier part of the Oshigambo.*

| Marriage cohort | Een-hana | Elim | Naka-yale | Oka-hao | Omu-longa | Onan-kali | Oshi-gambo | Oshitu-tuma | Tsandi | Total |
|-----------------|------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|------------|------------|--------------|-------------|--------------|----------------|
| 1925–29 | | 94 | 40 | 47 | | | 59 | | 53 | 293 |
| 1930–34 | | 133 | 49 | 34 | | | 62 | | 50 | 328 |
| 1935–39 | | 148 | 20 | 39 | | | 113 | | 35 | 355 |
| 1940–44 | | 205 | 53 | 100 | | | 142 | | 54 | 554 |
| 1945–49 | | 220 | 66 | 184 | | | 115 | | 77 | 662 |
| 1950–54 | | 335 | 111 | 261 | | | 231 | | 122 | 1,060 |
| 1955–59 | | 213 | 101 | 152 | | | 178 | | 136 | 780 |
| 1960–64 | | 243 | 116 | 271 | | | 260 | | 227 | 1,117 |
| 1965–69 | | 204 | 109 | 259 | | | 203 | | 159 | 934 |
| 1970–74 | | 94 | 104 | 317 | | | 168 | | 92 | 775 |
| 1975–79 | | 133 | 81 | 231 | | | 161 | | 92 | 698 |
| 1980–84 | | 76 | 44 | 113 | 58 | 85 | 110 | 21 | 53 | 560 |
| 1985–89 | | 12 | 67 | 126 | 46 | 79 | 58 | 31 | 57 | 476 |
| 1990–94 | | 0 | 60 | 150 | 51 | 81 | 85 | 39 | 75 | 541 |
| 1995–99 | | 0 | 99 | 125 | 38 | 93 | 85 | 51 | 51 | 542 |
| 2000–04 | 65 | 47 | 32 | 84 | 23 | 82 | 73 | 31 | 42 | 479 |
| 2005–09 | 45 | 67 | 36 | 103 | 58 | 174 | 137 | 84 | 57 | 761 |
| All | 110 | 2,224 | 1,188 | 2,596 | 274 | 594 | 2,240 | 257 | 1,432 | 10, 915 |

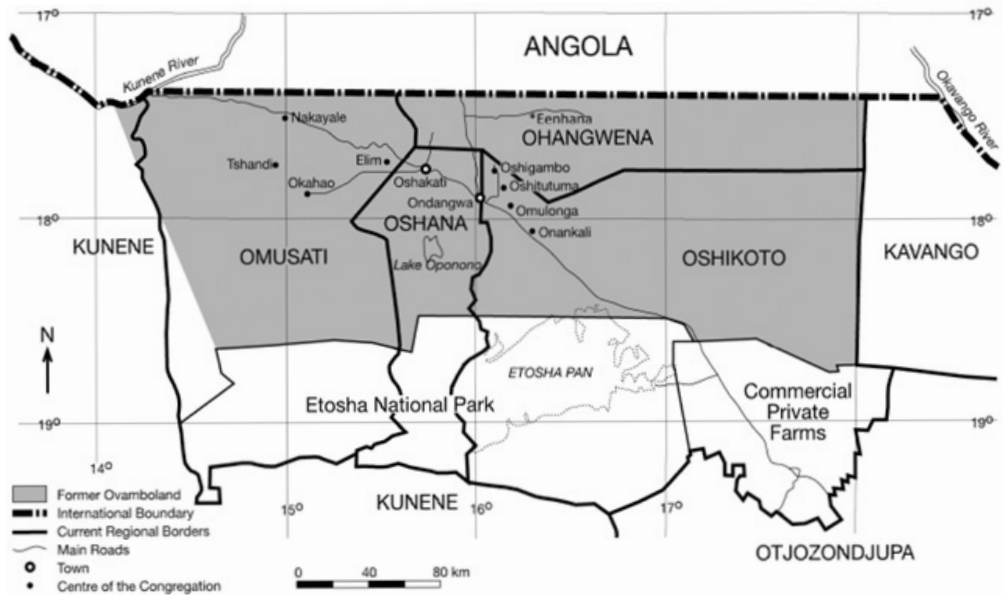


Figure 1. North-Central Namibia: Location of parishes studied using parish register data.

Results

Age at first marriage in Namibia, 1925–2009

Parish register data showed that women marry at about 20 years old and men at about 23 years old in North-Central Namibia during the 1920s (Figure 2). For women the mean age at first marriage remained at about the same level in 1925–1940. During and after the Second World War the marriage age jumped upward from 20.7 (1940–44) to 22.4 (1945–49) and it also increased in the 1950–54 marriage cohort. The mean age at marriage remained at about the same level in 1950–1974 marriage cohorts, being about 23–24. At the end of the 1970s the marriage age increased again by about one year both in 1975–79 and in 1980–84 cohorts (Figure 2). After that the increase in the mean age at first marriage among women continued, being around 29–30 (Figure 2).

The age at the first marriage developed slightly differently for men. The mean age at first marriage increased slowly for the 1925–1940 marriage cohorts. During and after the Second World War the marriage age increased clearly from 25.9 (1940–44) to 29.2 (1955–59). In the 1960–1984 marriage cohorts, the changes were small and marriage age stabilised around 29–30. The next big change happened in the 1985–89 marriage cohort, when the age increased by about three years compared to the 1980–84 marriage cohort. Since then, the increase continued, being around 34–35 years for men (Figure 2).

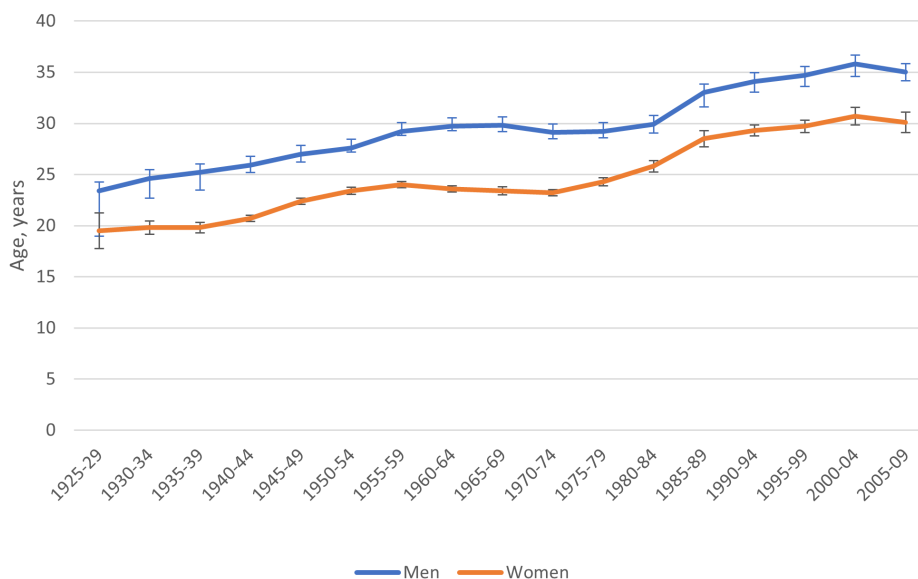


Figure 2. Mean age at first marriage and confidence intervals by sex and marriage cohort in the parish register data in North-Central Namibia for persons baptised before age 16, and marriage cohorts 1925–2009.

Results from the period 1925–1979 are based on the parishes of Elim, Nakayale, Oshigambo, Tsandi and Okahao. Results from the period 1980–2009 are based on the parishes of Elim, Nakayale, Oshigambo, Tsandi, Okahao, Eenhana, Omulonga, Onankali and Oshitutuma. (Number of men=2,346, women=4,978).

There is no other information than the results from parish register about marriage age during the 1920s in North-Central Namibia but the figures from this study area were clearly higher than we usually find for other parts of Africa (Garenne 2004; Lesthaeghe et al. 1989).

The results from the parish register data (marriage cohorts 1965–1994) and from the DHS surveys in Namibia (birth cohorts 1940–1969) yield about the same mean age at first marriage among women (Figure 2, Garenne 2004). In addition, according to both data sets, marriage age changed at the same time among women: in the marriage cohort of 1974–79, or birth cohort 1950–54. According to both sources, this increase continued during the 1980s (Table 2).

Table 2. *Age at first marriage among women by birth cohort 1940–69 (Garenne 2004) and by parish record marriage cohort 1965–94.*

| Birth cohort (DHS) | Age at marriage | Marriage cohort | Age at marriage |
|--------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| 1940–44 | 23.1 | 1965–69 | 23.4 |
| 1945–49 | 23.9 | 1970–74 | 23.2 |
| 1950–54 | 24.5 | 1975–79 | 24.3 |
| 1955–59 | 24.7 | 1980–84 | 25.8 |
| 1960–64 | 25.8 | 1985–89 | 28.5 |
| 1965–69 | 26.9 | 1990–94 | 29.3 |

Premarital births and cohabitation in Namibia, 1925–2009

Tuupainen (1970, 122) wrote “Youth has lost its sense of shame. A young man may leave three women pregnant in Ovamboland when leaving to work in a town and ask *Why should I be ashamed*. Only few of the girls giving birth to illegitimate children are ashamed on it.” Tuupainen also wrote that according to the Finnish and German missionaries working among Ovambo, Herero, and Nama migrant labourers in South African towns, nearly every Ovambo man had a concubine there (Tuupainen 1970). Tuupainen described the situation in the 1960s (see also Gay 1980; Timaeus and Graham 1989) – 14 percent of those married in 1956–66 were pregnant, but this figure included all marriages.

About 10–11 percent of first marriages had premarital births among the marriage cohorts of 1925–1975 (Figure 3). Traditionally, the changes in premarital childbearing have been small among North-Central Namibian Christians. There were some ups and downs, but the changes were small. The main change in premarital births happened at the end of the 1970s. Among the marriage cohorts of the 1970s the proportion of premarital births was 13.1 percent (10.8–15.4%), and for the 1980s this figure was almost 22 percent (16.5–27.3%).

After Namibia gained independence in 1990, the level of premarital first births increased from 22 percent (1985–1989 marriage cohort) to 34 percent (1990–1994 marriage cohort). After that the level still increased. In the 1990s the level of premarital births was over 30–40 percent and it continued to increase after that (Figure 3).

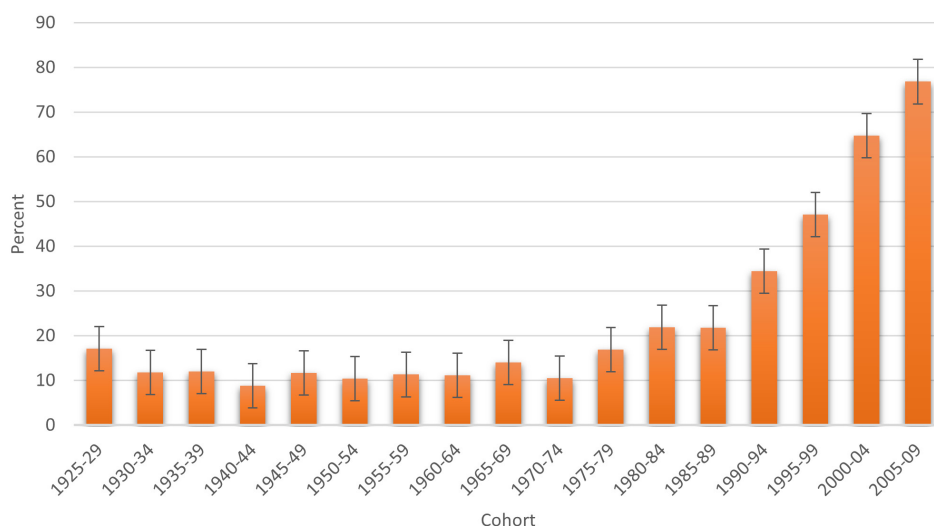


Figure 3. *Premarital births % and confidence intervals by marriage cohorts (1925–2009) in the parish register data in North-Central Namibia (women first married aged 17–30).*

Results from the period 1925–1979 are based on the parishes of Elim, Nakayale, Oshigambo, Tsandi and Okahao. Results from the period 1980–2009 are based on the parishes of Elim, Nakayale, Oshigambo, Tsandi, Okahao, Eenhana, Omulonga, Onankali and Oshitutuma. The number of marriages is 5,190.

Traditionally premarital births have been a rare phenomenon in Namibia but in the birth cohort of 1985–89, over 40 percent of women had a premarital birth before age 25, according to the DHS (Clark et al. 2017; Garenne and Zwang 2006; Notkola and Siiskonen 2000). In parish register material this figure was about the same level. Among marriage cohorts after 1990 the proportion of premarital births was 30–50 percent (Figure 3).

There is no direct information about cohabitation in the parish records. However, if women had children at the time of marriage, there was information about who was the father and mother of the child. In this study the definition of cohabitation was based on the assumption that if the couple had at least two own children before marriage, they had lived together before marriage. In this case cohabitation has continued for at least two years and the unofficial marriage was stable. Based on this definition, cohabitation was quite rare in North-Central Namibia during the 1950s and 1960s (Figure 4). This all changed in the beginning of 1980s. Couples started to live together before marriage and the level of cohabitation jumped upwards in the marriage cohort 1985–89 (Figure 4).

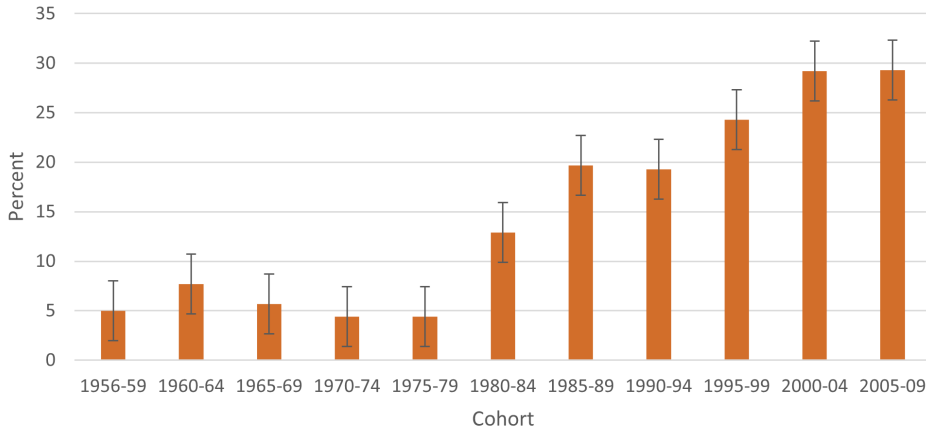


Figure 4. Cohabitation % and confidence intervals by marriage cohort 1956–2009 in the parish register data in North-Central Namibia (couple had two premarital children together before marriage).

Results are based on the parishes of Elim, Nakayale, Oshigambo, Tsandi, Okahao, Eenhana, Omulonga, Onankali and Oshitutuma. The number of marriages is 4,404.

Discussion

Late marriage in North-Central Namibia dates back to at least the 1920s when the mean age at first marriage was over 20 for both men and women. Similarly, in other parts of southern Africa, such as Lesotho and Botswana, women and men married later in the 1930s and 1940s compared to other parts of Africa. It is assumed that labour migration and early Christianisation mainly explain this. Labour migration was linked to the development of monetary economy and the decline of polygamy. The costs associated with bride wealth increased, providing fewer incentives to marry early. Additionally, Christianisation led to improved education and independence for women, enabling them to marry later ages (Timaeus and Graham 1989).

The comparatively high marriage age has been linked to the marriage traditions of the Ovambo people. The man was eligible to marry when his economic situation allowed it. It might be that the mean age at first marriage was comparably high among Ovambos by the end of nineteenth century. When a young man wanted to marry and establish a family, he had to gain access to communally owned land from a local chief and pay for the land use rights through cattle or cash. For these young men, the most viable option to acquire necessary funds for leasing land and purchasing cattle – essential for marriage – was to engage in migrant work (McKittrick 1996; Moorsom 1977; Siiskonen 2009). Labour migration was quite an early phenomenon in North-Central Namibia. The combination of labour migration and the tradition that only economically eligible men were allowed

to marry was the reason why the marriage age was comparatively high in the studied parishes as early as the 1920s and 1930s.

Labour migration from North-Central Namibia gradually increased since 1933. The number of migrants in 1942 was 6,518 persons (mean for 1941–47), in 1951, 9,858 persons, in 1961, 13,718 and in 1974, 35,577. The changes among men and among women in mean age at first marriage before the end of 1950s are closely linked to the increase in labour migration in North-Central Namibia. In the same way as in Lesotho and Botswana labour migration created monetary economy which was in connection to the increase in price of bride wealth and to the probable decline in polygamy (Timaeus and Graham 1989). At the same time the proportion of Christians and educational level of women increased. Childhood mortality and adult mortality declined during 1950s due to health services developed by Lutheran mission. Infant mortality declined already during 1940s. Based on available census data the population in Ovamboland almost doubled between 1933–1951 (Notkola and Siiskonen 2000). Southern African area needed new workforce. Labour migration was supported by local population and colonial administration because economical possibilities were limited in North-Central Namibia.

Marriage traditions change slowly. Marriage ratification and bride price were still practiced among Christians at the end of 1960s and 1980s (Pauli 2019; Tuupainen 1970). However, at the end of 1970s or early 1980s something happened. After low increase in marriage age the mean age at first marriage started to rise, premarital births became more common, and cohabitation increased. In his general overview of missionary work in Namibia during the 1970s Eriksson wrote that the proportion of married persons was decreasing. When the number of Christians increased, the number of marriages remained at the same level. A lack of priests and the high cost of weddings have been mentioned as some causes for this (Eriksson 1977).

Marriage age increased not only in Namibia but also in South Africa and Botswana, although slightly earlier in Botswana, from the 1970s to the 1980s, which has been related to an in-migrant labour (Timaeus and Graham 1989). Similar reasons may have played a role in this process in Namibia because labour migration rose considerably at the beginning of 1970s, despite the lack of information about labour migration due to the abolition of the SWANLA.

The Namibian war of independence started in 1966 and ended only in 1990; throughout the period, it caused insecurity in North-Central Namibia. Leaving for exile concentrated on the 1970s. This caused spousal separation and played a role in the postponement of marriages during the 1970s and 1980s (Shemeikka 2006; Van der Merwe 1989). In addition, there was a general strike in 1971 and revolts in 1972 and about 20 000 men fled from Namibia (Katjavivi 1988), affecting marriage age and family formation.

The main explanation for the increase in marriage age among women and in premarital births at the end of the 1970s is the socioeconomic development of Namibia during the 1970s. First it caused a shortage of men, and later it created the new cohabitation model. The shortage of men tended to lower the marriage age among men, remaining the same during the 1970s and early 1980s. The combination of old marriage and wedding traditions, Christian rules and habits, and the decline of polygynous marriages allowed late marriage, but kept premarital births low.

At the end of the 1980s the mean age at marriage both among men and women increased sharply. At the same time the economy improved slightly, but not significantly. Namibia's economic performance was poor during the 1980s due to sanctions against South Africa. It can be assumed that stagnation and poor household economy limited opportunities to marry in the studied parishes. The income of rural families came mainly from farming activities and cash remittances from migrant relatives working in the cities, the mines, and the RSA (World Bank 1992). Earlier increases in labour migration increased marriage age and at the end of the 1980s lack of cash remittances together with expensive weddings and the new cohabitation model allowing premarital sexual relations caused first marriage age to increase further, particularly in North-Central Namibia.

The increasing relative cost of weddings may be behind only middle- or upper class couples being able to afford to get married (Pauli 2019). Increased costs of bride wealth (marriage ratification) or the cost of weddings in general cannot explain the periodic change in women's first marriage age and premarital birth rates at the end of the 1970s. Since the 1920s marriage age has been comparably high in Namibia, and the role of labour migration vital. During the 1970s, low economic development and the war of independence changed everything. The establishment of homelands by the South African administration created a new administrative elite alongside the traditional kin-based elite, while the war economy accelerated the strengthening of the business elite (Dobler 2014; Töttemeyer 1978).

Fumanti (2016) has drawn attention to the emergence of two new elites in postcolonial Namibia: the liberation elite and the youth elite. What characterises these different elite groups is that their values may differ from those of ordinary citizens, and they are wealthier, which enables them to organise expensive weddings.

In 1990 the war ended, Namibia gained independence, labour migration was liberated, and the HIV epidemic started. Namibians started to live together with a new cohabitation model. In the new cohabitation model marriage age is high, about half of women marry, widows do not necessarily remarry, and it is acceptable to live together before marriage and to have children before and outside marriage (Garenne and Zwang 2006; Siiskonen 2009; Pauli 2019; Pazvakawambwa et al. 2013; United Nations 2020). This model combines traditional and Christian values.

The quality of the data is reasonably good. In addition, comparisons to the DHS material (Garenne 2004) showed that parish registers and DHS data present a similar picture regarding marriage development. The Evangelical Lutheran Church parish register data describe the marriage changes among Christians. Christianisation in North-Central Namibia started at the end of the nineteenth century. In the studied parishes the Christian population became large enough from the beginning of 1930s to yield reliable figures on marriage trends. During the 1970s more than 70 percent of people living in the study region belonged to the Evangelical Lutheran Church (Shemeikka 2006). Unfortunately, we lack historical data regarding change in marriage behaviour among non-Christians in Namibia or in North-Central Namibia. Anthropological studies (Pauli 2019; Tuupainen 1970) do not offer reliable historical data to describe the change in marriage behaviour among non-Christians, and the DHS survey data cannot be used because the proportion of Christians in the first Namibian DHS survey in 1992 was very high (97.2%). Our data-

set included two new parishes, Onankali since 1980 and Eenhana since 2000, but their results did not differentiate from the rest of the parishes. In general, labour migration had an important role in shaping marriage behaviour. There was no indication that labour migration varied significantly between Christians and non-Christian population in the study area. Marriage eligibility was primarily determined by a man's economic situation, independent of his religion.

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