

Internationale Sozialarbeit

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(Hrsg.)**

Sozialarbeit des Südens

Band 7

**Family Structures in Change –
Challenges of Transitional Phenomena**

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Herausgegeben von Prof. Dr. Christine Rehklaun und Prof. Dr. Ronald Lutz

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Friso Ross and Stephanie Treichel

Family Structures in Change: A Prologue to Transitional Phenomena

Family structures are social constructions and thus, family structures do not remain fixed. Their traditional forms can be a protection against change and they are a constituent element of their existence. They are permanently challenged by local, regional or global developments – since the beginning of humanity. Sometimes these developments remain almost unnoticed by their protagonists for centuries or decades; but sometimes they are directly experienced within a short period of time.

These challenges lead directly to or correlate with modifications of family structures. Triggers for this can be phenomena like social change due to pauperism, industrialization, rural depopulation and urbanization, phenomena of epidemics and pandemics or the phenomenon of migration caused by wars, genocides or environmental disasters. But also changes of religious, political or cultural aspects shape family structures: e.g. in religious fundamentalism or political reactionism or in religious emancipation or political liberation. All the mentioned phenomena challenge, threaten and partially reinvent family orders, unless of their state at this point in time.

What family is or should be, is already a discourse that varies within the respective local or regional culture. Here, three different positions can be recognized within these discourses (cf. Schneider 2013: 99ss). The first position is strongly focused on a family-constituting institution, marriage in particular: Family is everywhere, where, according to local, cultural or governmental rules a recognized institution exists, e.g. the marriage. If this element does not exist, it does not count as a family. A second position focusses on the responsible relation between parents and children (or grandparents and grandchildren or other relatives and children). Family is everywhere, where there are also several generations of relatives, determined by local, cultural or social customs. If this does not exist for several generations, there is no family. A third position is even more open and emphasizes lived solidarity. Therefore, family is each exclusive community of solidarity between two or more persons that is oriented on a rela-

Multiplicities of Kinship and Family in Africa

Introduction

When a farmer wants to construct a building in his compound, a young woman needs accommodation in town so that she can go to school there, a woman needs someone to plough her field for her, a child or an old or sick person needs someone to provide daily food and care, a baptism or a funeral has to be organized, a man wants to buy a plot of land for his house in an expanding African city, or money is needed for a trousseau, for bride wealth, or simply for a taxi – in all these situations, family or kin structures play a very important role in African societies. In view of the limitations of state social security systems, family and kin networks are still the main source of care and support, not only in the emotional and social sense, but also in the sense of financial aid. Three times bigger than Europe and with 54 countries, Africa (including North Africa) is the continent with the youngest and fastest growing population: 41 percent of the population is younger than 15, and only 3 percent is older than 65 (Stiftung Weltbevölkerung 2018). Demographic transformation processes can be observed in Africa, but with some special features compared with other continents (Moultrie et al. 2012; Bongaarts and Casterline 2013). For example, while there was a marked decrease in the birth rate in Asia and South America in the 1970s, this did not apply to the African continent (Bongaarts and Casterline 2013: 155). Here, fertility rates have dropped only slightly in the course of recent decades. With an average of 4.7 births per woman in the period 2010-2015 (UN 2017), they are still very high. However, they vary considerably in different countries and regions. The population is currently growing at a rate of around 2.5 percent per year (UN DESA 2018), which is higher than in the 1950s (2.1 percent). In the last seven decades, the number of people on the continent has grown from around 230 million (1950) to almost 1.3 billion (2018), more than a five-fold increase. And the figures are still rising: according to demographic projections, in 2050 around 2.5 billion people, and thus a quarter of the earth's population, will be living in Africa (UN DESA 2018). More than half of the people in Africa (57 percent) still live in rural areas (UN DESA 2018); at the same time, rapid urbanization processes can be observed, visible not only in mega- and global cities like Cairo (2018: 20.1 million), Lagos (2018: 13.5 million) and Johannes-

burg (2018: 9.2 million) (CIA World Factbook 2018). In view of the big challenges facing the continent if it is to satisfy the basic needs of its population in the future, and in view of the fact that in most countries there is no comprehensive state social security system, such as health insurance or provision for old-age pensions, family networks are still extremely important. Their role in assuring the survival and advancement of individuals goes far beyond what is expected of families in present-day Western Europe. We will attempt to show the wide range of different forms of family life, in all their flexibility and adaptability, on the basis of our empirical research. In particular, we will illustrate the lines of transformation by taking a closer look at the development of marriage relations in southern Africa. But first we will discuss the development of scholarly debates in this field.

Concepts, traditions, debates

No clear distinction can be made between “family” and “kinship”. The parallel use of these terms in the humanities and social sciences goes back to scientific developments and intellectual traditions with their roots in the 19th century. The separation of the disciplines of sociology and anthropology was the consequence of an epistemological division of the world into regions, each with its own academic discipline. The ‘civilized’ societies of Europe and North America were the object of sociology, whose main aim was to explain the social transformation known as modernization. Sociology of the family sought to explain the development, the purpose and the functioning of the family, conceived of as a middle-class nuclear family with a male household head and dependent wife and children. Anthropologists, on the other hand, were interested in societies characterized as “illiterate”, “primitive”, “stateless” or “pre-modern”, which were thought to exist especially in Africa, Asia and Oceania. Since many of these societies appeared to have no superordinate political institutions, anthropologists declared kinship to be the central paradigm, because they saw it as the guarantee of social cohesion. They regarded kinship essentially as social relations based on descent and marriage (alliance), and tried to order them accordingly (Thelen and Alber 2017).

In the first half of the 20th century, British social anthropologists became particularly interested in kinship in Africa. They tried to identify social structures and their functions, mainly in rural areas. In the 1960s, for the first time, sociologists

began to make intensive studies of family in Africa before the backdrop of the dominant modernization paradigm. They focused on “households” and the supposed processes of modernization in towns.

In this paper, we use three terms: kinship, family and household. By kinship we mean not only social relations based on biological descent and marriage, but also other social constructions that are referred to using kinship terms (Schneegg et al. 2010). We use the term household to refer to the concept, used in sociology and demography and in some areas of economic anthropology, of production and consumption units that pool their resources and income – a conception which, according to critics, is based mainly on Western ideas (Baerends 1994b: 35). While in sociology the notion of family is still based on the model of the middle-class nuclear family, in African societies the term may include other, more flexible, units, such as a woman and her children who cook for themselves within a polygynous marriage (Roth 2004), or matrifocal communities organized around several women (Roost Vischer 1997).

In their studies of present or past kinship and family structures in Africa, anthropologists, sociologists, demographers and historians have focused on different questions, which in part reflect problems in their own society. In anthropology, the most important studies of kinship in Africa were carried out in the 1940s and 1950s, under the influence of British structural functionalism. The structural functionalists were interested in social institutions and rules; they paid little attention to differences between these rules and lived everyday practice, which they regarded as an imperfect copy of the regular structure. Their research consisted mainly of empirical studies carried out in the African colonies of the British Empire, and contain an impressive wealth of material, which is still of inestimable value for understanding present-day African societies. These studies include monographs on the Nuer in present-day Sudan (Evans-Pritchard 1969 (1940)), and on the Tallensi in present-day Ghana (Fortes 1945), as well as the collection of articles “African Systems of Kinship and Marriage”, edited by Alfred R. Radcliffe-Brown and Daryll Forde (1975 (1950)). They largely ignored questions of social change.

In the 1960s, the first sociological studies of family change in Africa were published in the context of political independence movements. Under the influence of modernization theory, interest was focused on the new African elites in the colonial centres. These studies can be seen in the context of hopes of change, meaning ‘modernization’, in the newly independent colonies. William Goode