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In this original approach to the history of religion and culture in Africa, Natasha Erlank demonstrates the deep embeddedness of Christianity in early twentieth-century Black South African debates about sex, marriage, gender, and tradition. Christianity has already received, some might argue, its full share of attention in South African history. Since the 1970s historians have written extensively about specific individuals, denominations, and ideas through which Black believers encountered and transformed Christianity. But for Erlank, Christianity is something both more nebulous and more significant than any single denomination, event, or idea. *Convening Black Intimacy* therefore encourages historians of South Africa to reconsider understandings of tradition, and historians of African Christianity to reconsider their sources and methodologies.

Christianity, as Erlank uses the term in this book, is best understood as the flexible assortment of vocabularies, texts, institutions, and networks that formed the indispensable framework of Black public life in the early twentieth century. Most of the evidence in the book is from the Eastern Cape region, where mission stations, printing presses, and colonial law courts took root quickly after the violent conquest of independent Xhosa kingdoms in the early and mid-nineteenth century. Together these institutions—law courts, structured church business meetings (for example, Presbyterian kirk sessions), and multilingual newspapers—"convened" a Black public whose implicit shared knowledge of and/or affiliation to Christianity provided the framework for nuanced debate. Many of these debates were about the "moral economy of relationships," and Erlank organizes the main chapters around specific aspects of this moral economy.

Xhosa manhood initiation (which included circumcision) was one subject of public intimacy that was subtly transformed through Black public debate. Missionaries in the nineteenth century had condemned initiation, and early converts had been bound, at least in theory, to reject initiation and circumcision. But by the 1910s and 1920s, Xhosa Christian writers had successfully Christi-
anized initiation with circumcision, especially by pointing out Old Testament precedent. In the process they inflected their definition of timeless Xhosa tradition with Christian understandings of sexuality. In this way, circumcision and manhood initiation became central to how the Black male public (including those, like isiZulu-speakers, who did not themselves practice circumcision) understood both tradition and modern Christian manhood.

Similar transformations in the public discussion of intimate and secret affairs occurred in the matter of extramarital love affairs. Christianity “coded” extramarital love affairs as secret and transgressive, which had differential consequences for Black men and women; unsurprisingly, women bore the brunt of a sexual double standard. The public airing of transgressions in church and law courts offered opportunities and limitations to the pursuit of honor and respectability. In chapter 3, Erlank explores the detailed records of the case brought by a young woman, Dorothy Kabane, who sued her lover for breach of promise after she became pregnant. Civil courts allowed Black Christians to defend their honor and respectability by making or refuting claims of seduction or adultery. But at the same time, the racial hierarchy of the colonial state left Black litigants vulnerable—Dorothy Kabane could claim damages for her lover’s breach of promise, but the monetary value of any award would always be less than a white woman would receive under the same law.

Lobola (bridewealth) was another issue, like manhood initiation, where Black Christian debate transformed the meaning of the traditional. By the early twentieth century, Black Christians had cemented lobola as a typical component of a Christian marriage, and newspaper debates about lobola “were always conducted in relation to Christianity, even if their protagonists did not identify as Christian” (p. 128). Yet by the 1940s, the actual practice of lobola was declining, as urbanization and the migrant labor system made it more difficult for families to afford and sustain the lengthy process of lobola payments. Black public anxiety around lobola was reflective not of a fundamental tension between traditional and Christian marriage regimes, Erlank argues, but rather of the impossible pressures placed by racial capitalism and the migrant labor system on Black marriages and families.

Lobola’s role in publicly cementing a marriage was mirrored, rather than contradicted, by the rising popularity of the “white wedding” in early twentieth-century South Africa. The commodities required for a white wedding—dresses, suits, a car, food, and the gifts given by guests—could be taken as evidence for the individualization and commodification of Black marriage. But Erlank argues against such an interpretation, instead pointing out the parallels between white weddings and older forms of reciprocal giving and wealth transfer that happened during the marriage process. Gifts from friends and family at white weddings (meticulously described and valued in newspapers) evidenced the strength of a couple’s church and social connections, which were becoming increasingly important to the geographically mobile and economically precarious Black middle class.

Unlike circumcision and lobola, polygamy was one aspect of precolonial African culture that (most) Black writers in the early twentieth century did not defend. The irony of their condemnation was that polygamy was rare by this time, not least because almost no one could afford multiple lobola payments. Instead, in the early twentieth century, forms of multiple relationships (masihlalisisane, in isiZulu) were increasing. Urban men and women might establish long-lasting partnerships without formally ending a previous marriage. Indeed, Erlank argues, the present-day popular understanding of polygamy in South Africa (especially as portrayed in reality television) has much in common with masihlalisane. In early twentieth-
century South Africa, the “ghosts” of polygamy existed in combination with Christian ideas and practices, as men and women built lasting, supportive relationships that didn’t quite fit the standard definitions of polygamous or Christian marriage.

*Convening Black Intimacy* is a valuable contribution to the extensive historiography of Christianity in South Africa. It should also be read by historians of Christianity across Africa, as an example of how to move away from denominational histories with their tendency to emphasize exclusive identities, and toward histories of how religious ideas or practice come to be broadly shared. For by the mid-twentieth century, Christianity was a taken-for-granted part of public life and debate across much of twentieth-century Africa. Erlank demonstrates the potential to historicize this Christian public culture. Doing this means looking for Christianity in sources that are not straightforwardly “about” religion, defining Christian moral codes with broad brushstrokes, and setting aside theological distinctions between denominations. It’s worth noting, however, that practically all the named examples of denominations in this work are mainline or mission churches, leaving open the question of how “Ethiopian” or African-initiated churches contributed to and engaged in the Black cultural debates under examination.

The fruits of Erlank’s new approach to the history of Christianity should also interest historians interested in gender history and the making of tradition. Her arguments are complex and multiple, and cannot be reduced to a story about the invention of tradition. Attending primarily to the role of Black writers in defining and debating traditional norms, she shows how Christian ideas and language were integral to this debate. The writers whose words have been preserved in newspaper, church, or court records are mostly male, but Erlank is attuned to the participation of Black women in shaping the moral economy of relationships. In particular, the final chapter on marriage emphasizes women’s agency in establishing durable, meaningful partnerships, against the oft-prevaling narrative of the irrevocable “breakdown” of African family life under urbanization and labor migration.
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