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BOOK REVIEW

Erlank, Natasha. *Convening Black Intimacy: Christianity, Gender, and Tradition in Early Twentieth-Century South Africa*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2022. xvi. 272 pp. ISBN: 9781776148165.

Natasha Erlank's *Convening Black Intimacy: Christianity, Gender, and Tradition in Early Twentieth-Century South Africa* is a text that chronicles how "black affect" (referring to the feelings of love, devotion, and attraction in intimate relationships) was profoundly reconfigured by the influence of Christianity.¹ While acknowledging the profoundly destabilising effects of the system of migrant labour on the intimate and family lives of black South Africans, central to Erlank's argument is the assertion that the modernising influence of the adoption of Christianity by black converts should not be elided (p. 6). She successfully makes this argument over the course of six substantive chapters, demonstrating how embedded Christianity was and continues to be in black life, and "black intimacy" in particular, which she defines as the, "interlinked and interlocking set of thinking, behavior, and feelings tied to sexuality, fertility, the moral dispositions associated with both of these, conjugal and family life, and the gendered roles that shape them" (p. 1). This is, by necessity, a broad definition, also taking into account the public life and discussion of these ideas – the "convening" part of the title.

Her monograph covers the period from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century, and it attests to the fact that the advent of Christianity

¹ J Cole and L M Thomas, "Introduction: Thinking through love in Africa". In: J Cole and L M Thomas (eds.), *Love in Africa* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2009), p. 8.

in South Africa, together with mission-driven education and literacy, had far-reaching effects that went beyond matters of faith. Effectively, the spread of Christianity helped constitute a new “South African public culture” (p. 20), and its historical and continued contribution to ideologies of family life, even in present-day South Africa, cannot be underestimated (p. 6).

This is, therefore, a topical intervention by Erlank, since marriage rates have declined in South Africa since at least the 1950s, coinciding with a period of increased urbanisation and industrialisation. Nevertheless, despite its much-vaunted decline and rarity in contemporary South Africa, scholars have continuously demonstrated the enduring importance of the institution of marriage as an ideological paradigm through which many black South Africans view their romantic relationships.² Although not concerned with marriage alone as a marker of black intimate life, Erlank nevertheless emphasises Christianity’s irrefutable impact on this institution, with conflict around marriage being so heated that debates and legislation about customary marriage represented some of the preliminary attempts to regulate black life in South Africa (p. 189).

In the first chapter, “Convening Christian Publics: Churches, Newspapers, and Customary Courts”, Erlank demonstrates how, through an examination of church records, newspapers, and court records, the spread of Christianity formed new, “public spaces that had a Christian moral imprint” (p. 23) that then affected the black intimate space. Also important to consider is the concurrent spread of mission-driven education and literacy, which enabled and allowed educated black converts to voice their opinions in a range of public fora (p. 15). It is the records of these public fora that Erlank uses in her extensive account of the impact of Christianity on black life in general and black intimacy in particular. It must be said that black converts entered this new Christian public life in distinctly gendered ways, perhaps showing how Christianity and custom overlap when it comes to issues of power dynamics between men and women.

The second chapter, “Modern Masculinity”, explores the tensions between a newly formed Christian-inflected masculinity and African traditional understandings of *ubudoda* (manhood), with a specific focus on the practice of male traditional circumcision. Erlank asserts that, “all masculinities [...] are shaped by the societies that produce them” (p. 52), and she shows the contestations and conflicts regarding traditional and Christian definitions of “manhood” respectively, which were ultimately concerned with, “different ways

2 J Pauli and R van Dijk, “Marriage as an end or the end of marriage? Change and continuity in Southern African marriages”, *Anthropology Southern Africa* 39 (4), 2016, p. 258.

to honor house and home, or how to be a Black man in a modernizing and racially divided South Africa" (p. 72), during the segregationist period.

The third chapter, "Love Sex, Consequence", speaks contrary to notions that Africans had no conception of romantic love before the intervention of missionaries (p. 75), against anthropological readings that depicted "love as absent in Africa".³ In contrast, Erlank historicises African love affairs, highlighting how, in precolonial South African society, for instance, sex was viewed as both "necessary and pleasurable" (p. 81). With the advent of Christianity, however, and the concomitant "censure" (p. 101) of sexual practices, the performance of specific ideologies surrounding morality and intimacy becomes much more tied to, "the status of being an African Christian" (p. 102). This shows how ideas around sexuality and sexual practices are informed by history (p. 76), and ideas about acceptable sexual behaviour are "historically contingent" (p. 76). Christianity's influence is clear in this respect, as it was essential in constructing modes of appropriate behaviour (p. 98).

The penultimate substantive chapter, "Marriage and Lobola and the Imagining of Black Intimate Life", shows that, although the practice of bridewealth endures even into the present day,⁴ it has not gone unchallenged, most notably by the "moral teachings of Christianity" (p. 112). Despite this challenge, the customary passage of bridewealth often accompanied church marriages: this was, "the norm and so ubiquitous as to be unremarkable" (p. 122) by the early to mid-1900s. This shows that, "Christian marriage, with its emphasis on ritual, ceremony, and patriarchal authority [...] was in tune" (p.127) with traditional African marriage, highlighting, yet again, how Christianity and custom sustain each other. It also shows the centrality of bridewealth to conceptions of conjugal union, as it acts as a, "grammar in defining male and female roles" and also has, "subtly varying and concealed implications for notions of legitimacy and personhood".⁵ Erlank also comments on the wedding itself, arguing that owing to the effects of segregationist rule and migrant labour, weddings were an attempt, "not only to hold on to family life but also to publicize its continued importance" (p. 157), to mitigate against the two phenomena mentioned above, and their subsequent disruption of black family life.

"Polygamy, Multiple Conjuality, and Masihlalisane", the last substantive chapter, discusses missionaries' thoughts on polygamy, which they saw as

3 Cole and Thomas, "Introduction", p. 8.

4 D Parkin and D Nyamwaya, "Introduction: Transformations of African marriage: Change and choice". In: D Parkin and D Nyamwaya (eds.), *Transformations of African marriage* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987), p. 10.

5 Parkin and Nyamwaya, "Introduction", p.9.

proof of, “African sexual exoticism and social depravity [... and] the sexual slavery of women” (p. 163). Polygamy is still mostly seen as, “an obstacle to female emancipation”,⁶ showing the continued imprint of missionary thought on black intimate life. The chapter then moves on to a consideration of polygamy’s public life, as it was discussed in various public fora during the period under consideration, with Erlank concluding that these heated debates, “reveal polygamy’s status as a surface wound on the body politic of South African morality” (p. 171), although actual incidences of polygamy were decreasing and even marriage itself was and continues to be in peril (p. 177). Erlank, therefore, advocates for a broader understanding of the, “multimarried and multipartnered behaviours that Africans accommodated in their Christianity” (p. 184).

Erlank’s *Convening Black Intimacy* is necessarily an ambitious project, charting as it does the influence of Christianity on black society in general, and on the realm of black affect in particular, the effects of which can still be felt into the present day. The text shows how black converts, “adopted, molded, and selectively appropriated many Christian ideals [...] refashioning them as part of new intimate practices” (p. 4), and how this continues to be the case in contemporary South Africa.

6 V Ndabayakhe and C Addison, “Polygamy in African fiction”, *Current Writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa* 20 (1), 2008, p. 89.