

had to keep changing to stay relevant and operable, responding to the whims of politics and cultural attention, as well as tourism trends. Some of these projects, like the Red Location Museum in Port Elizabeth, have been unable to keep pace and have had to shut their doors, while others have developed vocational and technical skills training for local youths to reinvent themselves anew. Again, it's easy to get lost in the detailed survey of these museums across time, but Witz is making an even broader point about the ever-shifting future of publicly counting time with objects and stories.

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## Christian Family Life in South Africa

### *Convening Black Intimacy: Christianity, Gender, and Tradition in Early Twentieth-Century South Africa*

Natasha Erlank. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2022. Pp. 288. \$80.00, hardcover (ISBN: 9780821424988); \$34.95, paperback (ISBN: 9780821424995).

Selina Makana 

University of Memphis

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The introduction of Christianity in African societies was a powerful transformative force not only in the modification of quotidian practices, but also in regulating Africans' intimate lives. How did African converts in the early twentieth century use Christianity to reshape their marital relations and navigate their intimate worlds? This question is at the heart of Natasha Erlank's recent book, *Convening Black Intimacy: Christianity, Gender, and Tradition in the Early Twentieth-Century South Africa*. This book contributes to the scholarship on Christianity and the life worlds of Black South Africans in the Eastern Cape by providing an intricate analysis of how family and intimate life were constituted through Christianity.<sup>1</sup> Erlank argues that scholars have paid little attention to the importance of Christianity in the "motivations for action and ideology" of South Africans since the late nineteenth century (31). Yet at the same time, Erlank suggests that although Christian moral codes and the colonial legal system constrained African intimate practices, local traditions such as circumcision, *ilobolo* (bride-wealth), and polygamy "survived" as African converts transformed marriage and their intimate lives and debated ideas through the mediated networks the conversion yielded.

With the onset of colonialism, African marriage traditions and other intimate practices changed considerably. For instance, colonial rule introduced legalistic measures that taxed polygamous men more than men in monogamous partnerships. Colonial legal systems considered practices such as polygamy, premarital sex, forced marriages, and *ilobolo* to be immoral. These colonial attitudes pathologized and at times criminalized African men; she suggests that this cultural work had economic implications, since it

<sup>1</sup>See, for example Richard Elphick and T. R. H. Davenport, *Christianity in South Africa: A Political, Social, and Cultural History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).



ultimately pushed many men to labor in the market economy.<sup>2</sup> Erlank's book recalls work done by other historians of South Africa who have underscored how at the dawn of the twentieth century Black South Africans found it difficult to conduct marital and other intimate relations in the way they had in the pre-colonial era. The strength of this book lies in Erlank's careful reading of letters published in newspapers to investigate how, in these straightened circumstances, African converts found ways to adopt moral codes, especially around sex, which had no historical precedent in their own societies.

Erlank's study introduces the notion of "institutional thickness" to show how African converts used church-based networks and especially literacy to reshape practices of Black intimacy. She notes that as the number of African Christians increased, they became a "community constituted through shared action of a nationwide repetition of social behaviors exercised in relation to the institutions of the church" (32). The first chapter of the book focuses on this idea of institutional thickness of Christianity and examines how the church, the civil courts, and Black newspapers provided spaces for Africans to contest and sustain ideas about a moral economy of their relationships. As evidence in support of her view on how Christianity paradoxically allowed Africans to remain rooted in their tradition while showing commitment to the modern, Erlank cites prominent nineteenth-century African converts and intellectuals from the Eastern Cape, such as Tiyo Burnside Soga, who had a capacious understanding of tradition and its role in a fast-changing modern world. For instance, Erlank quotes Soga, who argued that despite African Christians' adoption of missionary discourse "the raw Xosas still carry on circumcision and some school natives do it on strictly private lines, because by doing this custom, they are contravening certain rules" (61).

The second chapter uses newspaper letter-based debates to demonstrate the constitution of Black masculinities and reveal the tension between Christianity and the ongoing practice of circumcision. The practice of circumcision goes beyond the physical act. Across various African cultures, this ritual serves as a mechanism of social authority for the maintenance of social order, hierarchy, and control, with adult male initiates expected to behave properly and responsibly, having now "shed" their childish ways. Erlank observes that "the Xhosa men who wrote publicly about initiation were writing to two audiences, pulling it into a Christian repertoire while emphasizing its role in the constitution of Xhosa masculinity" (73). By focusing on the contestations between Christianity and ethnic specific traditions, this rich chapter engages with Derek Peterson's idea of "ethnic patriotism" to reveal that even though initiation practices shifted to fit into Christian moral codes, the understanding of masculinity itself as moral authority did not change.<sup>3</sup>

In Chapter Three, Erlank examines how Africans transacted their sex and love affairs against the backdrop of mission-driven morality. Erlank is careful to point out that as African women and men embraced modern ideas about love and sexuality, "they found themselves set adrift from traditional protections for love affairs gone awry" (76). Erlank reads her primary sources to show the gendered consequences of love and sex. Chapters Four and Five chart the shifts in the practice of *lobola* and marriage in the early twentieth century and set out tensions between the moral codes concerning Christian marriage and the immense impact of the practice of *lobola* on Black intimate life. The author's deeper reading of Christian weddings vis-à-vis the practice of *lobola* allows her to make the argument that weddings not only provided opportunities for the bridal couple to dress up, but also revealed the power of commodities to shape people's lives as these weddings were oriented toward a capitalist economy. Chapter Six skillfully weaves together discussion on polygamy with other forms of multiple relationships to demonstrate how African Christians used these practices to debate and contest the moral codes imposed on them by the church. Erlank posits that one

<sup>2</sup>T. J. Tallie, *Queering Colonial Natal: Indigeneity and the Violence of Belonging in Southern Africa* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020); Elizabeth Thornberry, *Colonizing Consent: Rape and Governance in South Africa's Eastern Cape* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

<sup>3</sup>Derek Peterson, *Ethnic Patriotism and the East African Revival: A History of Dissent, c. 1935–1972* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

of the most extensive changes in Black intimate practices related to the “proliferation not only of informal unions between men and women but of different forms of multiple partnerships. These arrangements were neither necessarily sanctioned nor legitimated by traditional practice or Christianity but nevertheless bore the deep imprint of both” (163).

Despite the book’s rich descriptions of moral dispositions of African converts and the gendered roles that shaped their intimate lives, Erlank sometimes falls victim to the tendency to equate “Blackness” and “Africanness.” In the section on terminology, the author asserts that “contemporary South African identity politics makes using terms like ‘African’, ‘Black’, ‘White’, ‘Coloured’, and ‘Indian’ intensely contested” (x). Yet, Erlank does not explain the decision to use “Black,” as evidenced in the title of the book, and not “African” or “Xhosa.” Moreover, while the modern masculinities explored in this book are often bound together by their domination of women and privileging of patriarchy, Erlank’s analysis obscures rather than delineates differences between Black, African, and Xhosa masculinities. If constructions of masculinities are highly contested and contradictory, as clearly articulated in this book, then the question of how conceptualizations of masculinity among the Zulu and Xhosa differed from those of other racial and ethnic identities would be a particularly fascinating one to explore. Another minor criticism about the title: while the intersecting themes of gender, Christianity, and tradition are central to all regions of South Africa, both urban and rural, the focus of this book is on the specific South African province of the Eastern Cape. This should have been named in the title of the book.

Nevertheless, this book makes a significant contribution to the scholarship on African Christianity by showing how literacy and church-based networks allowed for the persistence of older ideas and for new configurations of social and intimate life. By paying attention to intimacy, the book reveals the tensions between local traditions Christianity “modernity,” and the colonial legal culture on African life during the colonial period. This book should be required reading for anyone interested in gender, colonialism, and the paradoxes of Christianity in the lives of African converts.

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## Universities, Apartheid, and Decolonisation

### *Uprooting University Apartheid in South Africa: From Liberalism to Decolonization*

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Bronwyn Strydom 

University of Pretoria

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At first glance *Uprooting University Apartheid in South Africa* by Teresa Barnes may appear to be a treatise on contemporary higher education policy in South Africa. In actuality, Barnes’s book is more of a work of university history, investigating the case of a certain professor of political