

The White Wedding: Affect and Economy in South Africa in the Early Twentieth Century

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Abstract: Discussions of church weddings are not standard in accounts of African marriage in South Africa in the early twentieth century. However, from the 1890s onward, church weddings were becoming more common, and by the 1930s more Africans married in church than elsewhere. Indeed, these wedding ceremonies provide insight into how black families experienced and created their own social status in a context in which white South Africans viewed black weddings as a symbol of racial misappropriation. Via weddings and their associated commodification, families held on to and proclaimed the value of family life, and importantly, broader social networks as well as status-based associational life in an era of familial disintegration. At the same time weddings were often a double-edged indicator of status through their reference to sexual purity by means of white frocks.

Résumé: Les discussions sur les mariages religieux ne sont pas standard dans les comptes-rendus de mariages africains en Afrique du Sud au début du XXe siècle. Cependant, depuis les années 1890, les mariages religieux sont de plus en plus

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communs, et depuis les années 1930 plus d'Africains se sont mariés à l'église qu'ailleurs. En effet, ces cérémonies de mariage donnent un aperçu de la façon dont les familles noires ont connu et ont créé leur propre statut social dans un contexte dans lequel les Sud-Africains blancs considéraient les mariages entre noirs comme un symbole de misappropriation raciale. Via ces mariages et leur consommation associée, les familles perpétuaient leurs valeurs sur la vie de famille, ainsi que les réseaux sociaux plus larges et la vie associative fondée sur un statut dans une ère de désintégration familiale. En même temps ces mariages étaient souvent un indicateur à double tranchant à travers leur référence à la pureté sexuelle par le biais du port de robes blanches.

Key Words: South Africa; history; gender; Christianity; weddings; African tradition

In the novel *Wrath of the Ancestors* by Archibald Campbell Jordan, first published in Xhosa in 1940, Chief Zwelinzima marries his mission-school love in a ceremony replete with symbols of modernity, including a tea with the nuns at St. Cuthbert's, an Anglican mission station in the Eastern Cape, and later a grand dance.

So grand a wedding . . . had never been seen in Mpondomiseland before and was never likely to be seen again. In accordance with an old custom, the wedding-feast was held at the bridegroom's home. The bridal party came from Mjika accompanied by a huge band of young horsemen. . . . The marriage ceremony was held at St. Cuthbert's church which was filled to overflowing with crowds of people—White as well as Black—who had come in cars and on horseback. As for Mphuthumi, he had his hands full that day. In the *mkhwelo* he was standard bearer, while after the marriage ceremony, when the register was being signed, it was his business to conduct the school choir singing an anthem. And of course he was best man, since Nomvuyo was chief bridesmaid. . . . As soon as the marriage ceremony was over, the bridal party went to St. Mary's Hostel where they had been invited to tea by Sister Monica. . . . There were so many wedding presents that the bridal couple did not know what to do with them. Piles of congratulatory telegrams—some in English, some in Xhosa—were received at the Royal Place from well-wishers from all walks of life. . . . The messages that many of them contained added to the jollity of the occasion because they were from old school friends at Fort Hare, Lovedale, and St. Matthew's. The day's celebrations were rounded off with a grand dance at St. Cuthbert's. (1980 [1940]:55–56)

Despite the contemporary features, however, parts of the ceremony call to mind practices that had their roots in customs that preceded European colonization. Evocative in many different ways, the description of the wedding is also a cue to the centrality of the church wedding in black South African Christian communities by the early twentieth century. By at least the 1930s, church weddings had become the most common way to legalize a marriage for black Christians, even if accompanied by so-called traditional

rites. Across the country, Christians from the historic mission churches had wedding ceremonies and receptions that drew extensively on white practice. Black brides took evident pleasure in marrying in white dresses based on Anglo-American and European models. These weddings were often costly in relation to the earning power of black families in the inter-war period, but even less well-off Christian families supplied wedding gowns and wedding cakes for their daughters. Newspaper advertisements notified wedding guests of wedding present suggestions.

Studying these events provides insights into how black families, especially the modernizing elite, experienced and established their own social status in white-dominated South Africa. Such an analysis shows how older forms of social capital were recreated and newer forms were created through what I call an affective economy. People used trends in modern economic consumption to delineate and cement relationships centered on both families and friends, where gifts held value as much for their monetary worth as for the social ties they represented. Via the spectacle of the weddings (as much as marriage itself), families held on to family life and, importantly, worked to create broader social networks in an era of familial disintegration. At the same time, weddings were a double-edged indicator of status. On the one hand, they referenced pleasure in finery and a choice in the matter of style of dress; on the other hand, they had the potential to highlight shame through their reference to sexual purity. More so than in white society, black weddings conveyed a direct correlation between virginity and the color of a wedding frock, so that weddings indexed a world in which a bride might find her status simultaneously elevated and diminished.

Writing about Marriage and Weddings

Weddings are far from standard in accounts of African marriage in the early twentieth century, which focus instead on processes involving polygyny and bridewealth (*lobola*) (e.g., Kuper 1982). As Mary de Haas puts it, “with the possible exception of polygamy, there is probably no single aspect of black marriage in Africa which has attracted more attention . . . than bridewealth” (1987:33). Perhaps because of the very richness of the work, the subjects of bridewealth and polygamy have established a discursive framework for marriage that creates a two-fold problem. First, the narrative engendered by this literature completely downplays the incidence of Christian marriage and, by extension, the Christian wedding. In one of the more recent studies, *African Marriage in Southern Africa* (Krige & Comaroff 1981), the Christian wedding gets little attention as a mechanism leading to marriage. Second, it locates marriage and weddings in a “traditional” framework, making it difficult to write about African weddings as modern and global cultural phenomena.

Research on African Christianity, whether on Christian family life or on constructions of the moral discourse, also have focused more on marriage itself than on weddings (see, e.g., Jeater 1993; Lovett 1996; Peterson 2006;

Rich 2006; Schiltz 2002; Hastings 1973; Gitari 1984). The comprehensive *Survey of African Marriage and Family Life* (Phillips 1953), whose third section is titled “Christian Marriage in African Society,” also has little to say about church weddings. Monica Hunter (later Monica Wilson), in her work on the impact of European conquest on the Mpondo (Hunter 1961), writes about the church wedding, although her discussion of marriage rites is dominated by a consideration of the traditional ceremony known as the *umtshato*.¹

More recently this focus has begun to shift, however, especially with the growing focus on Africans’ intimate lives. One of the most insightful studies is Mark Hunter’s work (2010) on provider love and heterosexual relationships. Provider love refers to shifts in relationships between black men and women, the exchange of lobola making way in the present for exchanges of gifts and money for sex, all within an understanding of romantic love rather than sex-work. Importantly, he places the growth of provider love relationships, which are generally not formalized, in the context of declining marriage rates since the mid-twentieth century. The pathbreaking anthology *Love in Africa* (Cole & Thomas 2009) follows other work in reflecting on what is important to people in love and courtship (see Hirsch 2003; Hirsch & Wardlow 2006), though even here the modern Christian wedding gets little mention.²

This scholarship should also be viewed alongside literature on the anthropology of dress. In a relatively recent overview of dress and dress practice, Karen Tranberg Hansen (2004) shows how a dominant focus in African scholarship has been how colonialism and modernity have affected the ability of clothing to act as a statement of identity. In different ways, Deborah Durham (1999) and Robert Ross (2008) emphasize how dress speaks to identity and colonial or postcolonial power relations. Ross includes a brief discussion of the clothes worn by Christian men at their marriage ceremonies, including a discussion of the morning coat that the novelist Sol Plaatje wore at his Mafeking wedding. This work takes the material world of wedding dresses as serious statements about identity and positioning. John and Jean Comaroff, similarly, write about the importance of clothing, self-fashioning, and consumption in the second volume of their monumental Tswana mission project, *Of Revelation and Revolution: The Dialectics of Modernity on a South African Frontier* (1997). Wendy Urban-Mead, in her work on Christians in Matabeleland, colonial Zimbabwe, in the middle of the twentieth century (2004, 2008), discusses wedding garb in the context of larger issues of Christianity and identity, showing how it symbolized both excess and success, depending on one’s vantage point. Gendered conventions were both created and contested in the Brethren in Christ Church (BICC) weddings, for example, where women wanted to wear veils (which the BICC, unlike other mainstream Christian denominations, did not allow) and men wanted to dress in the latest male fashion. Male parishioners, in particular, took advantage of the missionaries’ reluctance to antagonize them for fear of losing

converts in order to push for choice in the matter of lavish wedding attire.

Weddings, Tradition, and Commodities

In precolonial Southern Africa, wedding ceremonies were only one part of the often complex transition to married life for men and women (Comaroff & Comaroff 1992; Kuper 1984). For Sotho-Tswana and Ndebele chiefdoms, marriage almost always rested on the transfer of cattle from the groom's to the bride's family according to rules of endogamy or exogamy. Often this transfer was ongoing, since it could still occur after a wedding ceremony had taken place, which in the patrilocal Nguni societies usually involved the bride's taking up residence in her husband's family's homestead or village. This constituted the general pattern of what might be called "customary" or "traditional" marriage, with the terms referring to contemporary cultural phenomena closely engaged with an archetypal past.

When black South Africans converted to Christianity, a process beginning in the early nineteenth century and accelerating toward the end of the century, they adopted many of the rites associated with Christianity, including the Christian wedding.³ The alternatives—which included not only customary marriage, but also various customary forms of elopement to expedite a wedding and/or to avoid the payment of lobola as well as civil (secular) marriage—were much less common. Although a civil wedding before a magistrate was cheaper than a church wedding, more couples married in church than did not. Before 1890 church marriages constituted 16.5 percent of all marriages (Wilson, Kaplan, & Maki 1952). By the end of the century mission Christians in the mainstream churches (Anglican, Presbyterian, Methodist, and others) routinely had church weddings. Blurry photographs from this period show African Christians marrying in Western clothing, often with the bride in white and the groom in a suit and gloves (Comaroff & Comaroff 1997:254; Stewart 1894; Schapera 1940:78). The incidence of Christian marriage rose during the first two decades of the twentieth century, increasing in number to nearly 65 percent in the 1930s and to 90 percent by the 1940s (Wilson, Kaplan, & Maki 1952). By the mid-1940s, for example, the majority of couples surveyed in Langa, a black location outside Cape Town, were married according to the Christian rites (Levin 1947). While the figure for the rural Eastern Cape was lower, Christian marriage was also more common than any other form of marriage in the Keiskammahoe valley by the late 1940s (Wilson, Kaplan, & Maki 1952).

Paradoxically, given the sanctity of marriage to nineteenth-century evangelical Christians and Protestant Christianity, most of the practices associated with the wedding had little to do with faith and more to do with clothing and other accoutrements. The church ceremony commonly involved a white gown for women and a dark suit for men. Other Western elements included wedding cakes, wedding rings, going-away outfits,

speeches, dances, and honeymoons. A three-tiered wedding cake had become standard at wedding feasts from the late nineteenth century, representing what Monica Wilson referred to as “ritual change” (1972:187; see also Hunter 1936). Other practices adopted by black Christians included, as at Chief Zwelinzima’s fictional wedding, congratulatory telegrams.

All of these changes required money to be spent and things to be acquired, so that by the early twentieth century church weddings contributed to a growing consumer culture among black South Africans. This mirrored wedding trends abroad (Penner 2004). Just as the commodification of weddings in Britain was good business for merchants from the mid-nineteenth century on (Ehrman 2011), silverware merchants and jewelers in South Africa contributed to producing “a powerful alliance between weddings and the growing market economy” (Penner 2004:2). African women were trained to sew wedding dresses by missionary institutions and had their talent demonstrated at annual exhibitions (*Christian Express* 1885; Comaroff & Comaroff 1997).⁴ Advertisements for wedding rings, wedding presents, and wedding cakes were a regular feature in local newspapers, with photographers and dressmakers also advertising their skills.

This is not to suggest that looking at weddings in terms of new patterns of consumption, or examining the ways in which they began to depart from a traditional focus on cattle-exchange and the joining of families, requires an absolute distinction between the practices of capitalist modernity and those of tradition. In his work on domesticity, hygiene, and the use of soap in modern Zimbabwe, Timothy Burke (1996) points to the interplay between the creation of need, the proliferation of commodities, the power of advertising, and the independent world of African values and aspirations which helped to create a consumer market out of modern African subjects (see also Comaroff & Comaroff 1997). Burke writes about the “intricate emotional and intellectual investments made by individuals in commodity culture” (1996:6), a caveat about the influence of capitalism that goes to the heart of my argument. While wedding ceremonies and their attendant rituals involved investment in specialized commodities and were partially a response to (and reinforcement of) the rise of a consumer culture, they also reflected an “intricate investment” by individuals in worlds set apart from, not neatly aligned but nevertheless coterminous with, money. Arjun Appadurai (1966), who also writes about the power of commodities to shape cultural practice, views the global economy as composed of centrifugal forces that make sense only if approached through the idea of disjuncture: a disarray of events and processes given coherence by their synchronicity.⁵ Weddings embody the kind of disjuncture he is referring to, because of their multiple layers of meaning and signification. While they reflected and helped to constitute a new kind of economy that embraced the material culture of capitalism, they remained rooted in ideas of reciprocity and people-joining that were important in traditional marriages, particularly in ideas and practices connected to the transfer of bridewealth.⁶ These processes are evident, for example, in the extract above from Jordan’s 1940

novel, in which various elements of the wedding—the telegrams and presents referencing the early twentieth century, the wedding feast at the bridegroom’s home, and the *mkhwezi* reflecting the world of reverence for older customs—would be understood in different ways by differently positioned spectators.

Weddings and Status

Much of the material for this article is drawn from the experiences of Xhosa-speakers living in what is today the Eastern Cape province of South Africa. These include the Mpondo, Mpondomise, Thembu, Mfengu, and Xhosa. Other material is drawn from Sotho-Tswana and Nguni communities in other areas of the country, since historic mission Christianity provided a common set of understandings about morality and family life that more or less cross-cut ethnic and denominational differences. Important scholarly sources include the writings of Isaac Schapera (1940) and Jean and John Comaroff (1977), who describe early twentieth-century weddings with many similarities to those I describe in this article, as well as the work of anthropologists such as Monica Hunter (1961 [1936]), Eileen Krige (1936), Ruth Levin (1947), and Laura Longmore (1966). Levin’s early work, perhaps the most detailed, follows the married life of couples living in Langa, including couples who had married in the rural Eastern Cape. While the material conditions of their lives differed from couple to couple, there were also many similarities in the lives of urban and rural mainstream Christians who aspired to middle-class status, since people moved back and forth between the country and the city on a regular basis.

The primary sources include newspaper articles, novels, memoirs, and missionary and church records, including diocesan records, the minutes of presbyteries, and the proceedings of inter-Christian groups like the Ciskeian and Transkeian Missionary Councils (regional mission bodies in the Eastern Cape) and the General Missionary Council of South Africa. In her memoir *Remembrances* (1995), for example, Frieda Matthews describes her wedding at Lovedale Mission Institute in 1928. Sindiwe Magona, in a published letter/memoir titled *To My Children’s Children* (1990), comments on the disappointment of her civil marriage (c.1940) compared to the festive and church weddings of her childhood. Christian weddings have long figured prominently in missionary writing as well, since one of the ways in which white missionaries from Europe broadcast their evangelical success in Africa was through reporting on Christian converts. The celebration of Christian marriage was thus a staple of conversion-success tales in the European evangelical publishing world from the mid-nineteenth century on.

Another source is the black press such as *Imvo Zabantsundu* and other regional papers, in which engagement and wedding announcements began to appear in the late nineteenth century following a precedent set in the white press.⁷ By the 1930s they were ubiquitous in national papers like *Umteteli wa Bantu* and the *Bantu World*, multilingual black weeklies published

in Johannesburg (see Switzer & Switzer 1979). The October 30, 1937, edition of *Umteteli*, for example, carried announcements of the “Silgee–Frost Wedding” in St. Mary’s Church, Soweto (1937b); a list of wedding presents for the Tshange–Gumede wedding in Langa, Cape Town (1937c); and announcements of two forthcoming weddings, between Amos Oliphant and Elizabeth Mtshoe, and Johnson Mofokeng and Vina Bokolo. The same pages also included an advertisement by Wolf Brothers of Cape Town for wedding rings. The Tshange–Gumede announcement consisted of a whole column listing their presents, including two glass flower vases from the Progress Tennis Club.

Umteteli wa Bantu and the *Bantu World* were widely read and instrumental to definitions of modern African sensibility and taste, particularly self-representations that challenged dominant racial and gender norms (see Thomas 2006). In *Umteteli wa Bantu* wedding announcements were carried mostly on pages devoted to “Town and Country News,” while the *Bantu World* carried them either on its women’s or social pages. Wedding announcements ranged in length from a few lines to whole columns. The longer announcements typically included details about who was marrying whom, their families, who officiated at the wedding, the location of the reception, and even the attire worn by the bride and her party (bride’s mother, bridesmaids, and flower girls) and the wedding presents. By the 1930s many of the announcements were also accompanied by photographs, some of these formal studio portraits, others more amateur shots. Studio portraits of the couple often showed the groom standing behind the bride, although in most pictures, both amateur and professional, the camera lens was focused on the figure of the bride, drawing one’s eye particularly to her wedding gown.⁸

These photographs are what drew me toward the idea that wedding dresses were a critical element of church weddings. In 1938, for example, Annie Tlale married Isaac Phillips in the Methodist Church in Bensonvale, near Herschel in the Eastern Cape. According to the notice in *Umteteli wa Bantu* (1938a) written by a reporter based in the district, “The bride, who was given away by her father, was looking charming in a powder blue brocade with a trimmed bodice. Her veil of silk net was held by a halo of orange blossoms.” The two flower girls wore white crepe de chine with pink bonnets. The groom’s best man was the bride’s brother. A reception was held at the Bhunga Hall, Sterkspruit, after which the couple “went by motor to Port Elizabeth for their honeymoon.”

In this and other announcements the language used to describe the wedding dress is striking. The language in an article from the *Bantu World* (1935a) is replete with adjectives that conjure up confectionary and delight: “The bride was gowned in a gown of white radium matlace giving a peacock effect at the back and the sleeves which were opened from the elbow to the wrist. To add perfection and charm she wore a venetian veil and carried a bouquet of white artificial roses and carnations.”⁹ The details about the individual dresses in the many newspaper announcements indicate not only a delight in the descriptive powers of language, but also how dress can

exhibit personal taste. Wedding dresses spoke for their owners and to a joyful investment in cloth and fabric.¹⁰ The Mathabathe–Nakene wedding announcement in the same edition of the *Bantu World* (1935b) commented that “festival days should always be looked upon as remarkable days of enriching one’s life.”

Weddings ranged in opulence, from the less elaborate for couples whose families had little money to the more elaborate for families of the black elite. In July 1936 Irene Kuze married Roseberry Bokwe, a member of a well-known and well-established Eastern Cape Christian family (*Umteteli wa Bantu* 1936b). With other families the Bokwes formed an internationally peripatetic black elite, linked via marriage to other prominent black and white South African Christian families including the Matthews and the Hunters.¹¹ The report of the wedding tells us something about the importance of the occasion. Both Roseberry and Irene were very smartly outfitted, with the groom wearing a gray morning coat and the bride “a radiant picture in her full white satin beauty dress. Her veil was lined with pearls of coronet orange blossoms, and her train was lined with silver lama [sic].” She also carried a large bouquet, which she holds in the photograph of herself and her new husband published in *Umteteli*.

While the clothing conveyed the joy and solemnity of the wedding, other elements revealed the social power of the Bokwes. As Monica Wilson (1972) wrote, weddings were one of the ways in which Africans sought status in the modern, white-dominated, society of the early twentieth century, and the venue itself was extraordinary. The Grahamstown Cathedral is a large space and was more often occupied by a white congregation, and the officiating priest, the dean of the Cathedral, was an important figure in white Anglican life. In an era when most mainstream church congregations were de facto segregated, occupation of a white cathedral spoke directly to status. The church was filled by a multiracial and far-traveled group of guests, including judges, ministers, missionaries, and chiefs from Natal and Johannesburg, as well as Essie Robeson, wife of the renowned African American singer and civil rights activist. After the ceremony, the couple rode in a taxi to the reception at the Municipal Location Hall where tea and dinner were served, followed by a dance led by a wedding band. The next day the couple completed the “second stage” of their wedding according to “Bantu custom,” an echo of the St. Cuthbert’s wedding described in Jordan’s novel.

Not only the lavish nature of the wedding, but also the way in which it was reported suggests the wedding’s importance. As much as the weddings themselves, announcements of the weddings were “public statements of the social standings of the families being joined” (Lacey 1969:176). The wedding write-up occupied space in two columns on the page, covering more space than any other item there, and was continued in a third column on another page. A previous edition of *Umteteli* (1936a) had carried news of the engagement, and a later edition (1936c) carried a word of thanks for the gifts from the newly married couple.

The “Affective Economics” of the Wedding

On the surface it might appear as if black church weddings reflected principally a take-up of white practice, including the lure of a consumer culture aimed at weddings. If the models of anthropological culture contact view weddings as Western mimicry (see, e.g., Levin 1947; Van der Vliet 1991), they are only partially correct in their assessments. Weddings were not just about the working of cultural homogenization (see Appadurai 1996). In church records and mission periodicals, reportage on weddings took a very different form from that of the newspapers.

The white church records have certain features in common. They are particularly clear in their commentary on the expense of weddings. In 1917 St. John’s Diocese (Transkei) investigated the cost of church weddings and the payment of lobola. Following an investigation the committee found that grooms incurred a minimum expense of £16–£23, with the fathers spending in the range of £30–£40. The maximum expense ranged from £35 for the groom and £70 for the father. The conclusions included the following:

All agree that too much is spent and that rivalry is very largely at the root of this extravagance. . . .

It is generally thought that the fathers are themselves opposed to such expense but are urged on by wives and daughters. . . .

All are agreed that the results of such a standard of expense are disastrous and lead to the avoidance of Christian marriage either by ukutwala [elopement] or by going to office. . . . [Until] native people can realize that a quiet and inexpensive wedding is legitimate & honourable, there will be a growing tendency to encourage escape from Christian marriage. (Wits CPSA, AB1653)

At the heart of this and other discussions was a concern about black Christian extravagance (see Wits CPSA AB3154). In 1938 the same issue was preoccupying St. Cuthbert’s, where the fictitious Chief Zwelinzima and Thembeke got married (Wits CPSA AB799). The commentary on wedding extravagance came up frequently during this period.

One of the comments quoted above ascribes the desire for lavish weddings to women, much of it relating to the wedding dress. Less-costly dresses received praise, from the men on this committee and others. In 1895 John Knox Bokwe (the father of both Selbourne and Roseberry, mentioned later), married Maria Sopotela. One of the male guests wrote the following: “The Bridal Dress/was quite suitable, grey in colour, attractive without being too costly—only three pounds ten shillings! It can be worn for many years to come. This is not the kind of dress that costs seven to ten pounds and can be worn for only one day (Wauchope 2008:107).¹²

Comments about extravagance, though, were not only about gender, but also about race. The St. John’s committee explicitly compared African

Christian weddings to the quieter, less expensive ones of Europeans (Wits CPSA, AB1653). However, extravagance was in the eye of the beholder, since white women wore gowns that were equally ornate, if not more so, and their wedding announcements described lavish festivities. This becomes clear in a 1917 article on economic difficulties in the Transkei.

Consider extravagances: remember you are dealing with a semi savage [sic] people in whom rivalry in outward display is a dominant passion; remember too, that they are just beginning to go into towns and see white men's dress and customs, and you will realize that almost inevitably they fall into childish and wasteful aping of the European. Marriage feasts, wedding cakes—the bride's people have one so the bridegroom's must do ditto—rings etc. Brides, whose father and mother were red Kafirs ten years ago, appear in full wedding costume. . . . (*Christian Express*, 191)

Ostensibly about the problems caused by an increased cost of living and diminishing earning capacity, the article is a thinly veiled criticism of Xhosa families organizing white weddings. Comments about extravagance mix with comments about the childish nature of blacks and their unsophisticated and primitive mimicry of whites. White Zimbabweans made similar comments about black Zimbabweans dressing in European style (Burke 1996). Robert Ross, writing about missionaries, discusses the existence of “private sumptuary laws” in relation to converts (2009:97; see also Urban-Mead 2004). Many of these practices were designed to maintain suitable social distance between blacks and whites: weddings, which were ultimately about social reproduction, challenged the white maintenance of these boundaries.

However, while missionary comments about extravagance were motivated by anxiety over racial boundaries, contemporary ethnographies show that black weddings could indeed be costly. Eileen Krige commented specifically on the average cost of weddings (£20) versus average monthly wages (£3) in 1936. According to Monica Hunter (1931), Christian weddings could cost a relatively poor family up to £40, sending the family into debt. From the data Ruth Levin (1947) gathered in the 1940s, a bride's outfit could cost in the region of £23, with a total wedding cost of approximately £110 (1947: 54–55), although she qualified this by noting that these weddings were exceptional. Laura Longmore (1966) has a comparative figure of approximately £105 for the 1950s in greater Johannesburg. All were in agreement that weddings for those not of the black elite were disproportionately expensive compared to earning power.

There is both a realistic and a poignant quality to this fact. By the 1940s the black middle class was experiencing a temporary respite, as a result of war conditions, from the downward economic pull of the previous few decades. As several researchers have noted, during the 1920s and 1930s there was a deterioration in the living standards of educated, black South Africans, especially “respectable” Christians (Bonner 1982; Cobley 1990; Goodhew 2000). While most work has concentrated on urban areas, the

case was no less so for rural South Africa and a Christian peasant class. In the reserves, a combination of government taxes and white farming monopolies made it difficult for black entrepreneurs to build capital or to maintain middle-class lifestyles. Black South Africans, who modeled their lifestyles on those of West, were finding it very difficult to make ends meet, and formerly debt-free families had become saddled with debt by the late 1930s. African purchasing power declined substantially over the second two decades of the twentieth century, so that weddings were not only expensive in absolute terms, but also becoming more expensive relative to other costs.¹³

What could have motivated African families to spend so much on weddings? At a Christian conference on African Family Life held in Pretoria in 1940, black and white participants stressed the dangers surrounding, and the possibilities of, the disintegration of African family life. This was a moral assessment, but also a real one as families split apart and collective measures of support floundered in the face of increasing hardship. The delegates to the conference identified poverty as the main cause of this disintegration (SOAS, ICM/CBMS Africa 2). African families themselves were keenly aware of the threat to family life posed by segregationist rule. Mothers especially went to great lengths to hold their families together in view of this deterioration (Gaitskell 1982, 1990; Goodhew 2004; Thomas 2006).

I want to suggest that weddings were also an attempt, not only to hold on to family life, but also to publicize its continued importance and to build social relationships that went beyond the family. Marriages had formerly linked families together. In twentieth-century consumer capitalism, weddings had begun to assume some of this function, within a Christian-influenced associational context.

There are several indicators that weddings maintained and expanded their function in bringing people together. These went beyond (but did not exclude) lobola, and they also show how people were starting to move beyond the family in order to create social capital. Ruth Levin's tabulations of the costs associated with several weddings included their distribution among members of the bridal party. According to her research, the bridesmaid chosen by the bride was outfitted by the bride's brothers, while the groom was responsible for one of the two wedding cakes and for the bride's bouquet. The bride's brothers were further responsible for items such as "two sheep, 3.18.0" and "one tin of custard, -.2.6." The groom paid £4.10.0 for the photographs (1947:55–6). On the *Umteteli Women's Pages* in 1937, the following wedding advice, based on European practice, was given: "The bride's parents pay for the reception, catering, wedding cake, floral decorations" and car to take the bride and her parents to the church. The bridegroom gives the bride and bridesmaid gifts and their wedding bouquets, he pays the fees of the clergyman, organist etc., and the car that conveys him and his wife from the church." The same year the *Bantu World* reprinted an article from a white Johannesburg daily titled

“How to Plan a Happy Wedding” (1937d): “The bride is expected to arrange for her own wedding dress and for the frocks of the bridesmaids. If the bride intends, as in the Scottish custom, to pay for her bridesmaids’ apparel, she may choose what style and colour she prefers, but as is more often the case, if the bridesmaids pay for their own frocks, it is only fair that their choice is considered.” This advice disguised the fact that a complicated familial formula dictated who would pay for the bridesmaids’ dresses. It is worth looking in more detail at what was happening here, since it speaks to what I call an “affective economy” of weddings.

As part of traditional marriage, following patterns common before colonialism, the bride gave presents to her various in-laws after arriving at her new homestead; these included items such as blankets and iron pots, cups, and saucers (Hunter 1961).¹⁴ Gift-giving accompanied a traditional wedding ceremony, but it occurred between the two families involved in the marriage. Gift-giving in modern weddings continued with these patterns. Via the cost allocation outlined above, Christian Africans were using the space of the church wedding to continue with older marriage-related patterns of reciprocity. This is obvious when considering practices like lobola, which became altered in meaning but continued in recognizable format into the mid-twentieth century (and continues today). Observations about the changed—and commoditized—nature of lobola are common in ethnographical work, but changes in the associated reciprocal giving at marriages are seldom highlighted.

The relationship between weddings and gift-giving went further than the binding of two families. Friends and associates of the marrying couple also gave gifts. The report of the Tshange–Gumede wedding mentioned earlier consisted of a list of gifts only. In 1922 the Msengana–Maqanda wedding report began as follows: “Miss Pikoli, 2 pictures, Mr. [and] Mrs. Tshula, 2 glass tumblers, Mrs. Lekoma, 2 cups & saucers, Miss Poyana, 2 cups. . . .” At the end of the report, the amount of money that people had given to the couple was also itemized: “Imali:—Mrs. Mjoji, 2/6, Mr. S. Jakatyana, 2/6, Mr. J. Makoni, 3/-” (*Umeteli wa Bantu* 1922). Most of Nancy Msengana and Samuel Maqanda’s presents were crockery or housewares. Two-thirds of their wedding write-up consisted of the names of those who gave presents, and what they gave. Modern gift exchange extended beyond the family, resembling the practices described by Barbara Cooper in Niger (1995), where such exchanges created ties of reciprocity between those giving and receiving. In South Africa, black mothers joined clubs whose members committed themselves to buying gifts for each other’s daughters when they married (M. Wilson 1972), and teachers gave wedding presents to fellow teachers. The networks engaged in gift giving also had roles assigned to them in the wedding. Bride and groom parties, which formerly would have reserved important roles for family, now included friends made at mission school and at work, as in the case of the fictitious King Zwelinzima’s wedding.

Following this logic, the cost of dresses and cakes and decisions about who paid for the car to transport the couple from one wedding venue to

another were part of a reconfigured emotional economy—an economy of affect—in which people exchanged items and services with people other than their families, instantiated through an exchange of consumer items linked to a nuptial commodity economy. Weddings were spaces in which married couples and their families created ties with other families in a practice reminiscent of the past, but also speaking to the reconfigured realities of an African family life under fissiparous circumstances, in which the importance of families was joined by the growing importance of friends.

White Dresses and Sexual Transgression

While weddings may have reflected and helped constitute social standing, and while they were joyous occasions, they were also concerned with the symbolic instantiation of sexual status. Earlier in the article I wrote about the ways in which Christian marriage spoke to the gendered and racial relationships of early twentieth-century South Africa. Here, to use what is a dreadful pun under the circumstances, I move from something old and some things borrowed, to something new—and blue.

At the 1938 Bensonvale wedding of Annie Tlale discussed above, the bride wore a dress of “powder blue brocade.” In the same year *Umteteli* (1938b) reported on another wedding—between Dorothy Kabane and Joe Busakwe—in which the bride also wore a blue dress.

A pretty wedding took place at Butterworth Methodist Church on Wednesday, 6th July when Mr. Joel Busakwe married Dorothy Kabane, daughter of Rev. W. W. and Mrs. Kabane. . . . She looked charming in an attire of ice blue dress, with a sweeping train. A wreath of orange blossoms held in position her long tulle veil of ice-blue. She wore dainty silver shoes and carried a bouquet of rose pink carnations. The two flower girls, Nozipho Kabane and Noncebo, were in frilled ice-blue tulle dresses ankle length, and they carried flowers. The bridesmaids Victoria Kabane (bride's sister) and Manaseh Nazo, both of Fort Hare, were in blue georgette dresses, ankle length. . . . The bride was given away by her father, Rev. W. W. Kabane. Her mother was in a sweet blue costume, and she carried flowers. . . .

Anyone reading these accounts in the papers would have known that the brides were not virgins.

Before European colonization, loss of virginity affected an African women's status, but not to any great extent. During the colonial era, Christian proscriptions against premarital sex meant that the loss of virginity was viewed as especially shameful, and they helped forge a moral complex that was incorporated into various rituals, even joyful church weddings. The popularity of the white wedding dress in Anglo-American and European society is widely ascribed to Queen Victoria, but white as a wedding color linked to sexual purity was common in Britain from the early nineteenth century. It also was a marker of social class. Working-class women did not marry in white until the development of easier laundering techniques, and also

because a white dress was not—to use a contemporary phrase—multipurpose (see Ehrman 2011). By the early twentieth century, with increasing secularization in Britain and America, brides were increasingly less concerned about displaying their sexual status in the color of their gown, although in more religious Christian communities in the West white continues to be associated with sexual purity (Church 2003).

These ideas show another side of church weddings: censure even in the context of joining and celebration. At a preachers' meeting in the Eastern Cape in January 1935, one of the attendees raised the issue of a "fallen" girl who had been restored to the church and wanted to marry in white. It was accepted that girls who married their childhood sweethearts, with whom they would have had sexual relations, wore white, "but he had never heard of a case where a girl who had given birth to a child had been allowed to marry in a white dress (CPSA AB799)."¹⁵ The attendees at the meeting were unanimous in their decision to ban Christian girls who had become pregnant from getting married in white, although their deliberations were based on complex formulae. Christian girls who had taken lovers without becoming pregnant, and who showed signs of penitence, might marry in white. The logic of their decision also was apparently not shared by all communities. According to the anthropologist Eileen Krige writing in 1936, "differentiation between the bridal attire and marriage-ceremonies of virgins and those of mothers of illegitimate children, so well-known in native society, is not a general practice of churches in the location, although common in some mission stations (1936:6; see also Gaitskell 1982; Schapera 1940).

The case of the Kabane–Busakwe wedding is particularly interesting because an archival explanation is available for Dorothy Kabane's blue dress. Five years earlier, in 1933, two civil cases were brought before the Native Commissioner's Court and then the Native Appeal Court in Alice in the Eastern Cape, in which Dorothy Kabane accused Selbourne Bokwe (the son of John Knox Bokwe, sister of Frieda, and brother of Roseberry) of seduction and breach of promise to marry her (CAD 1/ALC 1933).¹⁶ Dorothy Kabane had given birth to Selbourne Bokwe's child the year before. The case is a very rich one, including love letters the couple had written to each other. One of Dorothy Kabane's letters spoke particularly poignantly about the shame associated with loss of virginity for women.

It was only yesterday that it dawned to me how impossible it really was for me to go home. . . . If I go home in this state & say I stay there without telling anybody and then get married & then they find out from calculating afterwards (if they do not notice @ once which they are sure to) Mama can be disqualified or brought forward in the Manyano [women's prayer group] for hiding her daughter. If I go, the proper & expected thing for her to do is to go & report it to the Women's Manyano. Then they come & see me to see if it is true & ask where it happened & all sorts of mad questions. . . . You know the women for gossip.

In other testimony Kabane told the court that her male relatives had not paid lobola, a detail that places her family in a select group of Christians who eschewed the practice. But Kabane, in suing for damages, still made indirect use of “native” custom and the legal precedent of fines levied for causing a woman’s loss of virginity. This may have been a pragmatic and strategic move for the restitution of her status in the light of the damage her character had suffered. Interestingly, Selbourne Bokwe and his male relatives (probably Roseberry included) told the court that they had indeed followed “native” custom and had paid lobola, and as we have seen, “Bantu” custom had been observed by Roseberry and Irene Bokwe at their lavish and modern wedding in 1936. The Kabane–Bokwe case thus reiterates the complexity with which older and newer ideas were intermixed, in this case in terms of ideas about virginity (see also Gaitskell 1982; Thomas 2006). Only a few years later, Dorothy Kabane, having been judged legally as the wronged victim, still was required to advertise her transgression in the color of her wedding gown, at her wedding to another man. While her parents advertised their social and economic status in the expensive wedding they provided for their daughter, her female status was marked by the color of her dress, something blue.

Conclusion

Weddings were important occasions in the South Africa of the 1920s and 1930s, the sum of their parts reflecting a greater whole. They were rituals that highlighted and reflected, and were both constitutive of and brought about by, the social aspirations and limitations of black middle-class society. They speak to an “economy of affect” tying together people and things, Christianity, gender, and racial politics.

Christian weddings were occasions for festivity, opportunities for the marrying couple to dress up and to celebrate with their family and friends. But weddings also reflected the growing power of commodities to shape people’s lives, particularly as they involved a range of goods and services reflecting the new orientation toward a capitalist economy. They also shed light on the changing meaning of wedding-exchange practices in Christian African society. As Christians adopted new marriage forms and the medium of the commoditized church spectacle, they also incorporated older forms and rituals, not only through the distribution of wedding costs but also via gift-giving, which created social capital between givers and receivers. As families used church weddings to create social position within black society (and also within the liberal white and church-related spaces of South Africa, which provided one of the few opportunities for blacks and whites to meet as equals), black women chose (or had chosen for them) bridal wear that reflected a range of possible contemporary fashions. While dresses represented a reification of Christian sexual morality, personal needs and aspirations were also part of the fabric of the garments they commissioned or sewed.

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Notes

1. In her preface to the second edition of *Reaction to Conquest* (1961), Monica (Hunter) Wilson examines some of the limitations of the culture contact model she had used in the 1930s edition. In later work she does describe, very usefully, how Xhosa Christians incorporated elements of both European and traditional practice into their weddings. See also Hammond-Tooke (1962).

Both the traditional and Christian wedding ceremony are now referred to as the *umtshato*, and my questioning of various people on the subject did not

elicit the use of any other terms. The exact meaning of the term has to be determined according to context.

2. Danai Mupotsa at the University of the Witwatersrand is currently finishing a doctoral dissertation on white weddings that is based on some of the same material considered here, including the description of the Kabane–Busakwe wedding discussed below. She focuses on the way in which weddings function as a performance of “Afro-modernity.”
3. In 1911, according to the government census of that year, 26% of Africans in the Union were Christian (mainstream, Zionist, and African independent); the figure from the 1921 census was 34%, and the figure for 1936 was 50%. See Henderson (1925); Mokitimi (1949).
4. For a keen and humorous take on contemporary white weddings in South Africa, see the film *White Wedding* directed by Jann Turner (2009).
5. Appadurai’s work is central to my thinking in this article, but I am a bit wary of transporting some of his terms, which seem anchored to the later twentieth century, back into an early twentieth-century context.
6. Keane (2007:18) uses the term “representational economy” to examine these sorts of changes, examining how words and objects are related to each other and to the lives of the people they serve:

This emphasis on materiality means more than just insisting on the materiality of the world within which signifying practices take place. It means that ideas and the practices they involve have not only logical but also causal effects on one another across a potentially wide range of apparently distinct social fields. They are parts of what we would call a representational economy. That is, practices and associated ideologies exist in dynamic relations with one another such that changes in one domain can have consequences for others.

7. See the *Grahamstown Journal* (1913a, 1913b).
8. African couples also invented wedding portraits for themselves, as documented in Peffer (2003). See also Thomas (2006) on the role played by photo portraiture in the creation and display of the figure of the modern African.
9. The meaning of “radium matlace” is unclear here; one can speculate that the reporter may have misheard a reference to “radiant matte lace.” Matte lace is a raised lace design on a matte background. “Radium” is sometimes used to refer to a brilliant white color, although not in connection with clothing.
10. Kathryn Church’s work in Canada (2003) and Deborah Durham’s work on Herero women (1999) discuss the aesthetic that women craft based on clothing, including their wedding dresses. In the anthology *To Have and To Hold: The Making of Same-Sex Marriage in South Africa*, one of the partners in a gay wedding comments, “When I first realized that I was gay, I said to myself, ‘I want to get into a white wedding dress.’ It was my dream and it so happened that God answered my dream, and hence the white dress on my wedding day” (Judge, Manion, & De Waal, 2008:318).
11. Monica Hunter (later Monica Wilson), a white anthropologist, and Frieda Bokwe (later Frieda Matthews, the wife of Z. K. Matthews) were best friends at school (see F. Wilson 2013; Matthews 1995).
12. See the discussion below about the significance of wedding dress color, specifically the connection between a white dress and virginity. In this case it is not clear whether the color of the dress was a comment on the bride’s status, especially

since it was the unpretentious, everyday quality of the dress that seemed to deserve praise.

13. Colin Bundy's pivotal work (1979) discusses the relative prosperity in the Ciskei at the end of the nineteenth century, which was followed by a decline in its economic conditions. This argument, however, has been challenged by Jack Lewis (1984), who takes issue with Bundy's periodization.
14. Except in the context of weddings, gift-giving was not a common practice among the Xhosa, unlike elsewhere in Africa.
15. The form of premarital sex referred to here is what the Xhosa term *ukumetsha*, or thigh sex. It supposedly stops short of vaginal penetration.
16. The world of black middle-class Christianity in the 1930s was both expansive and numerically small, so it is no surprise that members of its prominent families appear in various stories.