

## BOOK REVIEW

Natasha Erlank. *Convening Black Intimacy: Christianity, Gender, and Tradition in Early Twentieth-Century South Africa*. New African Histories Series. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2022. 288 pp. \$34.95. Paperback. ISBN: 9780821424995.

Natasha Erlank ingeniously crafts a 272-page critical text that portrays South African cultural practices related to Black intimacy in the early twentieth century. She defines Black intimacy as feelings, behaviors, and changes emitting from sexual and nonsexual relationships. The interactions of Blacks with Christianity influenced changes in South Africa's customs, social, moral, and political structures. Through public debates of Christianity, Black intimacy became a significant topic; also, Christian establishments enabled Blacks' involvement in colonial bureaucracy and implanted intimate concepts in the Black Christian imaginations, as well as propelled new perspectives on adulthood initiation, lobola, and polygamy.

Erlank argues that Christianity, newspaper, and the law court are interconnected. Christianity alleviated the constraints of indirect rule; protestant Christianity provided a voice for South Africans through the establishment of schools, hospitals, and political ideologies. Though the Christian ideas influenced intimate practices in Africa, the Christian educative forums were based on the indigenous practice of male participation, *Bhunga*, enabling new forms of public space in Africa, such as the text which is important for literacy, socializing, and raising awareness. Erlank uses the term "tin trunk literacy" to describe the promotion of literacy in Africa through collection, archiving, and referencing of texts. Focusing on the newspaper, the most widely accessed and general representative channel, Erlank investigates the newspaper, together with the law court, as a medium through which cultural practices associated to personal perspicacity such as male initiation, circumcision, lobola, among others, were debated. Also, the newspaper united the people in a discursive globe and functioned as a trajectory of/for new identity.

Erlank investigates the progression of Black masculinity from secrecy to public awareness through documentaries on circumcision and initiation. Initiation into manhood fosters sexual experimentation, public intimacy, and limitation of entrance into adulthood. Migration and missionary schools have influenced changes in the masculinity development process. Also, Erlank explores love, sex, and consequence brought into the public sphere by the judiciary. Sex, formally a clandestine topic, was brought into public view by the educated Black Christians and court, and accessed by married couple and

lovers, hence effecting significant changes in Black intimacy. The public consciousness of sex demeaned the situation of females by exposing them to early/forceful sex, and subjecting them to a virginity test. Also, Black intimacy was influenced by social/financial constraints on lobola and migrant labor, which promoted family disintegration and temporary cohabitation. The cattle exchange demanded in lobola marriage resulted in the migration of young men to cities in pursuit of work, compromising Black intimacy. Apart from migrant labor, Christian marriage and public debate of lobola drove changes in lobola marriage. Christians alternated cattle exchange with gifts, providing the Christian South Africans with access to Christian resources. Lobola remained a prevalent practice among Christian and non-Christian Black South Africans and was acknowledged in court. However, Christian marriage ranked higher than court marriage since the divorce rate was lower in Christian marriage. Lobola, which was initially considered as savagery by missionaries, gained a new perception in the twentieth century when Black South Africans challenged the Western perception of lobola as an uncivilized practice. Christians, the general public, journalists, African female literature all contributed to lobola's modification, though the majority of Black South Africans chose the Christian version of lobola.

The white wedding was a reenactment of the Zulu and Xhosa tradition known as *umtshato*. Weddings depicted people's social strata as well as their intimate lives. As portrayed in publications, white weddings in South Africa was a hybrid of the South African and European traditions resulting from religious and socioeconomical developments. The concepts promoting gift exchange, clothing, and representation were reflections of both cultures. The church wedding was criticized for being more expensive than the lobola, yet it remained crucial to the assessment of Black intimacy. On polygamy, Erlank notes that Europeans perceive polygamy as an uncivilized culture of male sexual supremacy and female enslavement, whereas Christianity portrays it as a heathen practice. The Christian preservation of monogamy enabled a high rate of divorce from polygamists, causing further problems for women whom Erlank refers to as "discarded wives." These challenges emanating from the conversion of polygamy to monogamy sparked public outpouring of opinions aimed at condemning and proposing solutions. With the decline of polygamy, public emphasis switched to cohabitation or "irregular union," which has been in existence but received little attention.

Black history cannot be told without acknowledging Christianity's significant contribution to the social, political, economic, cultural, and intimate lives of Black South Africans, which, in some situations, did not benefit the people but rather created a divide between rural and the urban people, resulting in the loss of a portion of the people's culture. Black intimacy, which is at the heart of Black co-existence, has been transformed by Christianity, producing public perspectives on issues formerly relegated to cultural custodians. Public discussions on Black intimacy have evolved beyond words of affirmation to controversial public documents that have been contested in the court. Apart from images and text references, Erlank adopts people's lived

experiences to explore Black intimacy as represented in court, marriage, lobola, gender, and polygamy. The book is a rich historical composition that gives a valued criticism on European and South African religious and cultural intersections and their effects on Black intimacy.

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