

Introduction

IN 1917, Tiyo Burnside Soga, a second-generation Xhosa Christian, minister in the Presbyterian Church, and brother's son of the better-known Tiyo, wrote a historical ethnography of the Xhosa entitled *Intlalo xa Xosa*. It is a fascinating and eloquent piece of writing, touching past and present via an incipient Xhosa nationalism and a qualified critique of white society. In it, he comments upon the relationship between Xhosa tradition and Christianity. "Xosa's laws were many & very good although there were some dreadful ones. The strange thing about them was that they resembled the Ten Commandments of the Almighty."¹ While Reverend Soga may have been venturing toward grandiloquence, his suggestion that a congruence existed between Xhosa custom and Christianity was a commonly held view among Bible-familiar Africans in South Africa in the early twentieth century.

By the time T. B. Soga compared Xhosa custom to the Ten Commandments, Christianity—understood as a range of beliefs and dispositions—had fed solidly into Black society. In addition to its other effects, Christianity brought about considerable change in patterns of love, courtship, and marriage, a field I refer to as "Black intimacy." I use the term to capture an 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. A consideration of Black intimacy would include ideas about sexual morality, changes in patterns of marriage, commodification of private life, people falling in or out of love, emotions felt and then responded to (including love, shame, and loss), and also the public generation and sharing of ideas about these.²

Crucially, Black intimacy is impossible to understand without considering it in relation to Christianity. Nthana Mokale, a resident of Phokeng interviewed in the early 1980s, remembered organizing sexual trysts at school during the interwar period. “He wrote a letter to you if he wanted to know you intimately. Didn’t we go to school so that we could learn how to write? If a man saw you at the church or anywhere and was interested in you, he would write and propose to you through the post.”³ Her recollection charts the complicated, conflictual, and often messy shifts that occurred when intimate lives, sexuality, Christianity, and literacy coincided, both in private and in public.⁴

PRECOLONIAL INTIMACY AND LINEAGE POLITICS

From their first concerted encounter with Christian missionaries in the nineteenth century, Black South African Christians, often referred to as “Kholwa” or “school” people, struggled to bring indigenous gendered social practice into the practice of Christianity. Christianity taught different ways of thinking about sexuality and marriage. The way in which precolonial southern African society was structured carries a number of implications for a study of Black intimacy in the twentieth century, indeed, for the very definition of Black intimacy.

Southern African precolonial cultural and political economy placed a premium on lineage politics, patriarchal privilege, and wealth in women. When women married, their fertility and labor power were transferred to their husband’s family at the same time as their marriage created alliances between the families. Women carried the privilege and burden of lineage reproduction. Behavior that sustained the reproduction of a lineage, including its links to a family’s ancestors, constituted appropriate sexuality; other behavior, as long as it did not compromise reproduction, was allowable, usually as long as it was discreet. Polygamous and multiple-marriage relationships were acceptable according to this thinking, because these practices could grow and cement the status of their families. Practices like lobola—bridewealth—both created and performed the bonds that were built between families. Because of the centrality of bridewealth exchanges to marriage, it is almost impossible to consider histories of marriage in South Africa without some consideration of the role of lobola. This book is concerned with those who marry, or aspire to marry, via lobola.

Further, the priority placed on fertility meant these societies were heterosexual in outlook. Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner refer to social formations like these as heterosexual cultures, though they caution that these only ever have a provisional unity, or only ever give the appearance of an

overarching heterosexuality.⁵ This is evident in South Africa, where sexual cultures have always been historically and racially contingent. Same-sex sexual activity has consistently had a regional historical presence, including in precolonial African society, but its inability to promote social and biological reproduction has meant it generally needed to occur alongside biologically reproductive sexualities to be sanctioned.

However, Black intimacy is inadequate as a concept if it concerns itself only with sex and marriage considered as aspects of domestic or private life. In precolonial South Africa, the concepts of private and public were understood differently than they would have been in nineteenth-century Europe. A division existed between matters internal to the generational politics of a lineage—including marriage transactions, succession, and inheritance—and external matters of concern to the broader clan or chiefdom. Further, private and public, understood rather as internal and external, were not distinct realms that mapped onto feminine and masculine attributes. Instead, ideas about the respect owed to elders or in-laws in marriage were more determinative of status. Young wives followed complex rules of avoidance around the cattle kraals in their new married homes that gradually diminished over time, finally disappearing largely at menopause. When women did wield overt political power, it was generally when they were past the age of having children.

In Xhosaland, a chief's first wife might have been of his own choosing and exchanged for cattle under his personal control. All the men who offered patronage to him would contribute advice on an appropriate choice of wife and cattle for her when he married his principal, or great, wife. Little in the choice of a great wife was private, but it was intimate.

My definition of Black intimacy must, therefore, include the understanding that it is simultaneously what happens between sexual and/or married partners and what is created in public spaces that debate and dissect the nature of intimate life. It was a continual mediation between acts and feelings that occurred out of the sight of others and the same acts as subjects of public scrutiny.⁶ More recently, Berlant and others have written about an intimate public sphere, where ideas about intimacy gain public currency partly because they present themselves as forces rooted in affect rather than other political motivations.

A history of intimacy also allows for a different presentation of South African history, one that offers new explanations for social change beyond those offered by race and class alone. Some of the earliest histories of intimacy range freely between private and public life, with historians not forced into a choice between investigating one or the other. For instance, they

investigate intimate practices and behavior in the public spaces of ancient Greece while in other parts of the world, archaeologists speculate about intimate behavior in prewritten times on the basis of artifactual remains.⁷

AFRICAN ENCOUNTERS WITH CHRISTIANITY

It is impossible to separate the shaping of Black intimacy from its connections to Christianity. As Africans encountered Protestant ecumenical Christianity, they encountered different and Christian thinking about proper masculine and feminine behavior, sexual morality, and beliefs about how marriages ought to look and function. While Christianity affected African society in diverse ways, its moral and gendered teachings produced some of its most lasting effects.

Nineteenth-century Britain almost seamlessly merged ideas in Protestant Christianity with the values of industrial capitalism. As the British middle class expanded in response to the growing importance of industrial capital, ideas about a separation of spheres—of women ideally placed to be mothers and wives and men suited to public life—folded smoothly into ideas about Christian religious life. By the middle of the century, it would have been almost impossible to separate what people understood as Christian piety and its requirements of behavior and belief from what they viewed as social convention and propriety. But religion did not merely offer ideas about proper gender roles; it fixed expectations about the role of faith in daily life that made faith essential to everyday life. “Church and chapel were central to the articulation and diffusion of new beliefs and practices related to manliness and femininity.”⁸

Much attention has been paid to the intersection of these ideas with African ideas in the context of colonial conquest, which I discuss in later chapters. However, the imposition of new ideas about gendered practice and moral codes did not go unchallenged, not only among Africans who continued to practice traditional forms of marriage but also among Christian converts. While it is generally the former who are historically viewed as most resistant to moving away from traditional practices, I argue that few converts were uncritical in their acceptance of Christianity. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, African converts adopted, molded, and selectively appropriated many Christian ideals, both in daily life and in ritual, refashioning them as part of new intimate practices.

This first occurred among those educated Africans who aspired to middle-class status and belonged to the historic mission, or mainline, churches or those closely associated with them—Anglicans, Presbyterians, Methodists, and Lutherans—as well as some of the larger of the independent

African churches, including the African Methodist Episcopal Church. These were first-, second-, and third-generation Christians who had early on aligned themselves with mission church procedures and practices, as well as with English literacy and education. As a group, they are described in the literature as a Black “petty bourgeoisie,” an older term used less today; a Black “elite,” by virtue of the group’s relationship with other Black South Africans; or an emergent Black “middle class.” The Black elite, or middle class (my preferred terms), was inseparable, historically, from its adherence to Christianity, and its members collectively shared an identity of being both Christian and educated. As Hlonipha Mokoena notes, for adherents—referred to as “amaKholwa” in isiZulu and “amaGqoboka” in isiXhosa—this was a political and social identity as much as it was a religious identity.⁹

While the literate and converted Africans who made up the Black elite were the first to experience and adopt intimate practices and a sexual morality rooted in Christianity, these ideas and practices soon spread to include most Black Christians, irrespective of denominational allegiance or membership in a mainline or independent church. By 1951, just under 5.1 million Black South Africans out of an enumerated Black population of just over 8.5 million identified themselves as Christian.¹⁰

But Christianity’s sphere of influence in South Africa went beyond its institutional membership. It had what I refer to as “an institutional thickness,” constituted through the relational connections it created among its adherents and their social worlds, which extended Christianity’s footprint to include also traditional communities and structures. Especially after industrialization and urbanization had firmly linked countryside to city by the 1920s, sometimes supportive but often fractious debates around the relative merits of Christianity and custom were a characteristic of all sectors of Black society. The debates were always mutually constitutive. Although sexual morality and gendered roles were not the only sources of conflict between Black South Africans, these concerns populated and vitalized the contested zone that existed between Christianity and modernity, and tradition and custom. As a result of this contestation, by the 1950s, Black sexual modernity had gained extensive traction and legitimacy within Black society.

Chapter 4 shows, for instance, the tenacity with which Black Christians defended lobola. Christian support for lobola gradually became so widespread through the twentieth century that in postcolonial South Africa support for lobola emanated as much from its continued practice by successive generations of Black Christians as it did from so-called traditional practice. What Black South Africans regard today as tradition has been altered unequivocally by Christianity.

Moreover, Christianity and its imprint on Black intimacy is partly responsible for the ideal of family life that remains central to Black social aspirations, even in the twenty-first century. While the impact of migrant labor was a powerful vector in shifts in family life, the changes wrought by a Christian sexual modernity were at least as consequential. Migrant labor and the differences between city and country life dominate discussions of Black social change in South African history, a point I return to in a later subsection. The destabilizing effects of migrant labor wrenched families apart. By the 1960s and 1970s, Black marriage rates had declined and migrant labor patterns had resulted in the growth of female-headed households spatially stretched over country and city.

However, migrant labor was not the only source of social change in African life. While this book concerns itself with family and intimate life constituted through Christianity, I also need to make a more general argument for the impact of Christianity in South African history. The diverse impacts of Christianity are regularly overlooked in South African history, including in the literature on migrant labor. The large-scale oscillation of women between city and countryside might have been caused by the needs of migrant labor or, later on, by forced removals, but concerns around labor and how to generate income were not the total of people's daily lives. Christianity also has played a powerful role in how people understand their place in this world and the actions they take as a result.

ANALYTICAL FIELDS IN PUBLIC INTIMACY, CHRISTIANITY, AND SOUTH AFRICAN SOCIAL HISTORY

In the next few sections I consider some of the analytical fields, theoretical directions, and historiographical writing that inform my larger argument about the constitution of Black intimacy in South Africa between 1919 and 1948. The first section details how ideas about Black intimacy gained a constituency and purchase through public discussion. This is followed by a reflection on current writing in relation to Christianity, including debates about its material and spiritual purchase on African imagination and practice. While African Christianity is not the primary focus of this book, some consideration of its larger appeal and constituency in South Africa is necessary to understand the book's argument. The final portions of this chapter consider the reasons for locating my argument in the period between 1910 and 1948 as well as describe my sources and chapter content.

A Convention of Publics

New ideas about intimate life were possible because of the spread of mission-driven written literacy in South Africa, which provided both the forms

necessary to share these ideas and the spaces where these ideas could be shared—the “convening” of the title of this book.

The church constituted the first and most powerful of those spaces. Whatever else it did, church life provided people with the tools and a shared repertoire of experience to behave in ways legible to public life in the early twentieth century. This occurred at the level of people’s daily lives but also in relation to how church institutions operated in conjunction with the state. The institutional life of the Christian church—its round of rituals and meetings and its ordering of time—facilitated the entry of Black men (not women) into the governmentality of colonial life. Institutional church life had a grammar that allowed Black and white Christians to share meeting spaces and, to a limited extent, the decision-making not open to Black South Africans in a racially divided society.

Further, men who worked as chiefs and headmen within the edifice of indirect rule had often served an organizational apprenticeship in a men’s council in the church or worked as lay clergy. Indeed, many of the remunerated positions available to Africans within rural districts hinged upon either their possession of mission literacy or their status as a Christian.

The associational and bureaucratic experience that Africans gained through church structures was not limited to South African borders. Several notable figures among the Black elite attended international ecumenical conferences about the future of Christianity. The same status and experience in church governmentality benefited the early twentieth-century leaders of the African National Congress through rounds of conferences in London in the 1910s.

Magisterial courts were another space for the performance of Black modernity. All precolonial southern African societies had chiefly forums where senior men (and occasionally senior women) debated matters of relevance to the chieftdom, including succession and, by the nineteenth century, relations with the British colonial state. (These were the matters I previously described as external to the family.) When the British established district law courts in the nineteenth century, these chiefly courts largely lost their power, and the adjudication of both internal kin and external chiefly matters passed to the colonial courts.¹¹ Interpersonal relations and customary obligations thereafter came under the purview of these, including cases of seduction, lobola, and inheritance and succession disputes, establishing a precedent for the kinds of cases that shaped Black intimate life in the twentieth century.

While customary law applied across the whole southern African region, when Union occurred in 1910, the two provinces with the most extensive

customary court networks were the Cape and Natal. In the Eastern Cape, where the customary courts began operating much earlier than elsewhere in the later South Africa (and which correspondingly have a denser archival record), complex adjudications occurred around whether or not a person's status as a Christian affected their personal and intimate matters. The processes involved in bringing a case to court were similar to those that structured the operation of precolonial chiefly courts. The elders of a lineage were familiar with arguing cases of succession and disputes around the occupation of land, even if the setting had shifted from the kraal of a chief to the square brick structure that served to house a magisterial court. Like church proceedings, court cases were doubly formed—both oral and textual—first, because of their instance as a performance and, second, because every court case generated a written record. Indeed, many of the legal texts that subsequently acquired life through the action of a typewriter began as oral performance.

This double formation present in church and court proceedings is important. While some African history tends to privilege oral forms as more authentic than written, the impact of an oral performance is necessarily limited by its particular audience. Mission literacy took oral performances and re-created them for multiple audiences, not just those physically present. It allowed Africans to transform their considerable oral skill into words written on pages, increasing the accessibility of that content. It also made it possible for those whose voices were not usually heard in public—junior men and women—to be heard more extensively. Alec Ryrie would refer to this as one of the democratic outcomes of Protestant Christianity.¹²

Further, content captured on paper, as in the case of the Black press, became the joint property of a public, in a way that the words of a performed text, like an *isibongo* (a praise poem), could not.¹³ This held particularly for newsprint agreement and discord over the content and shape of Black intimate life and sexual modernity. In articles and letters about the loss of parental authority, the importance of lobola, or the morality (or immorality) of polygamy, family life was rendered public in new ways, making its concerns national concerns.

African Christianity as a Field of Social Inquiry

The mission literacy that embedded ideas about intimacy in the Black Christian imagination has a history that can be written as the spread and influence of Protestant Christianity in South Africa. However, since the early 1990s, with the publication of John and Jean Comaroff's two-volume history of Protestant nonconformism among the Sotho-Tswana, studies of African Christianity have moved from an exclusive focus on mission effort

to a greater understanding of the purchase and status of multiple forms of Christianity across sub-Saharan Africa.

The first of some of the more relevant and current debates in African Christianity concerns the relative importance of Christianity in contemporary South Africa. According to the 2001 census, 79.8 percent of South Africa's roughly forty-two million inhabitants were self-professing Christians.¹⁴ In 2015, this figure was 86 percent, with 52.5 percent claiming some form of frequent religious observance and a further 22.5 percent claiming once- or twice-monthly church attendance.¹⁵

The self-profession of Christianity can mean many things. Africa is not reducible to one variant of Christian spirituality; all Africans who are Christian are not Christian in the same way. Indeed, more Africans have found practical strategies and ways of living in the diverse set of practices and beliefs tied to Christianity than in the century's only comparable nonpartisan and non-nationalist philosophy, socialism. But where socialism provided little practical assistance for the maintenance of structures like the family, which it regarded as a bourgeois myth, Christianity had a wealth to offer fathers, mothers, sons, daughters, and other sorts of kin. Much of the literature that accounts for the conversion of Africans to Christianity in the nineteenth century locates reasons for conversion in the material benefits associated with Christianity. Still, to leave the explanation for conversion at material reasons is a reductive assessment of Christianity's historical impact.

Most historians today, however, discount the historical impact that Christianity has had on South African lives. They find it difficult to consider experiences of faith, including the religious reasons people provide for their actions, as valid categories of historical evidence. As a result, rather than viewing belief or faith as historically causative, South African historians have underplayed the impact of Christianity on regional historical developments.

I shall return to this point later, but it is interesting to note that this idea is counter to the historical treatment of Christianity in other parts of the continent. David Gordon explains Zambian political developments in the twentieth century as crucially mediated by the visible effects of invisible spirits exerting "power in this world."¹⁶ And Stephen Ellis and Gerrie ter Haar explain the way that the spirit world constitutes a motivating force behind African political life.¹⁷ While some see an identification of spiritual agency in everyday life as an essentialization of African Christianity, this is not a sufficient criticism for discounting how belief, however we understand it, acts as a historical force.¹⁸ As Ruth Marshall notes, it is important to "restore intelligibility to religion in its irreducibility, to make sense of the inherent rationality of its disciplines and practices, over and above its social, cultural, or political functions."¹⁹

Most South African Christians (about 8.5 million of them) now belong to Zionist or Pentecostal churches, but many remain members of the mainline churches, where three denominations (Methodist, Anglican, and Presbyterian) account for approximately 5.5 million South Africans. Until the 1950s, most African Christians, about 59 percent of the total African population, were members of the mainline churches.²⁰ From the 1960s onward, more African Christians belonged to Pentecostal or Zionist churches than belonged to the mainline churches. This was both because of the expansion of South Africa's African population and because people were switching denominational allegiance.

Denominational allegiance is, though, something of a red herring in histories of South African Christianity. In 1948, Bengt Sundkler published his seminal work, *Bantu Prophets in South Africa*. In it, he distinguished between mainline, or historic mission, churches and a variety of churches he identified as Ethiopianist or Zionist. The former includes African-founded and African-led churches similar in structure to the mainline churches, and the latter includes the churches theologically derivative of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century holy spirit revivals in the US. It is now commonplace to distinguish between mainline, African independent, and Pentecostal Christianity.

But there are issues with this typology that overstate the importance of denominational difference and that link authenticity and political virtue to the independent churches only. Africa's religiocultural heritage, according to the theologian Mercy Oduyoye, needs to be viewed as contributing to the shaping of world Christianities rather than being solely derived from Western Christianity.²¹ Supporters of this position are uncomfortable with the term "African independent Christianity," preferring "African initiated/instituted Christianity," because the former implies that Africans were colonially dependent on the West to shape their beliefs.²²

Secondly, an association is often drawn between colonially complicit historical mission congregations and colonially resistant independent churches. In 1986, Terence Ranger drew attention to how African religious movements were often assumed to represent a developmental state in a later more nationally driven politics of anticolonial resistance. His work points to the need to consider religious movements as *sui generis*, not as moments in a national teleology.²³

An elaboration of this last point concerns a widely held distinction between Ethiopianism and Zionism, the former supposedly representative of a radical anticolonialism and the latter an antirevolutionary counterculturalism. The Zionist Christian Church, the largest Zionist church in southern African, is often written about as if complicit in apartheid.²⁴ A corollary of

this view positions mainline churches as irrelevant, institutionally rigid, and theologically homogeneous, at the same time suggesting that only independent churches are worthy of study.

More recently, in reaction to these views, scholars have noted the importance of moving away from a four-fold categorization of African Christianity as either mainline, independent, Zionist, or Pentecostal to an understanding of the practice of faith as denominationally fluid.²⁵ For example, the current Nigerian Anglican population is around twenty million, a significant number but probably only half the size of its Pentecostal population.²⁶ However, while the Anglican figure reflects the institutional strength of the former mission churches, it conceals internal variation. Many Nigerian Anglicans are Pentecostal in outlook, many practice polygyny, and almost all oppose homosexuality within the church. However, as Anglicans, they understand themselves to be part of a worldwide communion, even though the Western portion of the church advocates tolerance around sexual preference and orientation.²⁷ Anglicans in South Africa are split on the issue of offering an LGBTIQ ministry, but in practice, a more divisive issue is the ordination of Black women, because of a combination of patriarchal outlook and fear of sorcery. The point is this: denominational and sectarian allegiances can be fluid; people shift churches frequently, and while institutions and organizations may endure, their congregants are often more faithful to their own relationship to faith than they are to one form of it.²⁸ They may also hedge their spiritual bets by belonging to different churches simultaneously.

Debating Custom and Tradition in South Africa

If one pole of this book lies in Christianity, the other lies in custom and tradition. In this part of the introduction, I examine some of the tensions inherent in using these terms as well as look more directly at debates about the relationship between Christianity and tradition.

The literature on missions and Christianity in South Africa has usually assumed that cultural innovation and syncretic practices have been the domain of the Ethiopianist and Zionist churches. According to the recent *Cambridge History of South Africa*, “Such churches were prime examples of African cultural reconfiguration, blending Christian practices with a variety of African practices and beliefs (e.g., witchcraft, ancestor worship, polygamy).”²⁹ For example, the Shembe, or the AmaNazaretha, the subject of Sundkler’s work, are widely recognized as sanctioning polygamy and the veneration of ancestors.³⁰

However, while Zionists and Ethiopianists are routinely described as being fluid in relation to customary practice, the corollary attributes to

mainline Christians a desire to abandon custom. This is a mistaken reading, as I demonstrate in the following chapters. Many of the mainline Protestant denominations tolerated and allowed practices like lobola, polygamy, or, as I discuss in chapter 6, multiple conjugality. Traditional rituals and practices associated with marriage were particularly tenacious, and most mainline Christians found it difficult to abandon them, even if first-generation Christian converts in the nineteenth century attempted to eschew them.

One place to begin the discussion of the role of tradition in mainline Christianity is with a statement about what being modern meant to African Christians.³¹ Many Black South Africans, especially those who had converted, viewed Christianity as a route to “civilization,” or being modern. T. B. Soga, however, was not convinced that the equation worked in such a neat fashion. “Xosa may be made similar to a whiteman through education & civilization, but he shall never be created a Whiteman for ever & ever.” Anyone who argued differently was going against the word of God, or as he wrote, “God created what he has created.”³² He distrusted the teleological narrative that arranged Christianity, civilization, and being modern in the same bouquet. For Soga, Christianity was a claim to modernity that did not require sloughing off his African skin.

At the same time, though, T. B. Soga was an amateur newspaper correspondent firmly attached to the power of literacy, type, and the printing press. His paradoxical view of modernity was shared by many: convenient when it was beneficial, decried when it was not. Indeed, his and others’ predicament around modernity should not overshadow the fact that it resonated (and still does) with its users, often precisely because of its orientation to the past.³³ Lynn Thomas describes this as the historicization of modernity, “demonstrating just how diverse and dynamic definitions of the modern have been, and how those definitions have emerged from specific material relations, strategies of rule, and social movements.”³⁴ Her view draws upon Thomas Spear’s beautifully succinct description of tradition as “one of the most contentious words in African historiography widely condemned for conveying a timeless, unchanging past and the evil twin of modernity. But it remains critically important in understanding historical processes of social change and representation.”³⁵ Writing about the generation of Black men born around fifty years after T. B. Soga, Daniel Magaziner points to the ways that Steve Biko and other members of the South African Students’ Organization grafted their understanding of being Black to the condition of being modern, an intellectual consciousness that considered the past carefully and of a qualified utility. “In their thought the categories of ‘African’ and ‘adult’, ‘modern’ and ‘civilized’ had been configured and reconfigured time and again.”³⁶

Part of this reconfiguration included careful attention to tradition, an interest T. B. Soga shared with numerous contemporaries. It was a subject that Soga returned to again and again during the 1920s and 1930s, in an attempt to work out what was distinctive, and modern, about the condition of being African, the “good that should be preserved for any intelligent, progressive people.”³⁷ His exposition of Christianity in *Intlalo xa Xosa* was hybrid. As one of its readers for the Lovedale Press, which was less than enthusiastic about publishing the work, noted, “The writer personally confirms witchcraft to be true and goes on to back up his argument by a Biblical quotation when Eva befriends a serpentine devil.”³⁸

Despite the concerted efforts of an African elite to link Christianity and tradition—like James Calata, who drew explicit connections between biblical and traditional practice in his early 1920s essay in support of manhood circumcision and lobola—much contemporary academic writing delinks ritual and tradition from the world of Christianity.³⁹ Take Jacqueline Solway’s recent excellent and insightful piece on “slow” versus “fast” *bogadi* (the Tswana word for “lobola”) in Botswana.⁴⁰ It traces shifts in the tempo of marriage payments after the mid-twentieth century and relates a more contracted payment process to the phenomenon of lavish “white” weddings. Yet the erosion of bogadi is attributed to shifting patterns of consumerism resulting in debt, while Christianity is disregarded as a potential influence on wedding choices.

“Although they may have been Christians,” Adam Kuper writes in a recent survey of kinship and marriage in southern Africa, “they often paid bridewealth, but this was not the bridewealth of tradition.”⁴¹ This view would not have sat well with T. B. Soga, whose understanding of tradition was capacious, oriented toward past and present. Soga would have felt discomfited by any suggestion that his support for lobola could not simultaneously be both the product of his Christianity and his tradition.

Class, Race, Gender, and Christianity

Between the 1970s and the 1990s, South African history was characterized by race and class as modes of analysis. Social historians wrote about how precolonial societies lost independence as a result of colonialism, urbanization, industrialization, development of migrant labor, and histories of labor protest, in a welcome antidote to Afrikaner nationalist and liberal histories that had shaped history in the preceding decades.⁴² This broad school has had a keen imprint on the production of history in South Africa. Among its many effects, a primary one has been to make historical events and processes visible as, and in relation to, Black resistance and state oppression.

A further effect of this work concerns its construction of the migrant laborer and migrant labor as staple subjects of South African history. In the older literature on the history of labor migration in South Africa, the normative labor migrant was a man who first moved temporarily to a city, and later more permanently, in order to work. As a result, a significant portion of South African social history privileges the experience of work over all others in people's lives, although this position has not gone undisputed.⁴³ Patrick Harries, for instance, has demonstrated the persistence of rural ideologies and practices in how men living in cities and working on the mines conducted their lives.⁴⁴

Several developments helped to shift a focus on race and class and to blur the boundaries between urban and rural. Two are of relevance here. The first lies in the emergence of a significant set of works focusing on women's and gender history, which decentered many of the narratives that privileged men as the agents of history.⁴⁵ This includes the work of Belinda Bozzoli and others as part of the development of a literature on female labor migrants and the rise of female-headed households.⁴⁶ Deborah Gaitskell's work on Black women in urban areas demonstrated how women used their faith and faith-based networks to negotiate work and family life in hostile urban conditions and under the depersonalized gaze of the white state.⁴⁷

The second development concerns the re-emergence of Christian missions as a significant element in South African history.⁴⁸ In 1991, Jean and John Comaroff published *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism, and Consciousness in South Africa*, the first in a projected three-volume series on missionaries.⁴⁹ The publication of these volumes reflects an important shift from a focus on missions as agents of colonialism to a focus on "the colonization of consciousness" in the "long conversation" between the Tswana and the missionaries.⁵⁰

The most sustained and valid criticism of the first volume of the series lay in its treatment of African agency.⁵¹ It is worthwhile considering this critique, because it represents an ongoing thread in African history.⁵² Volume 1 is told mostly from the perspective of the missionaries, and its sources are missionary-produced accounts. The Comaroffs explain this by suggesting that the Tswana lacked narrative accounts of their past for use in the reproduction of their history (a view later tempered in volume 2). This means that the volume is strong in articulating mission agency but much less strong in attributing the shaping of the mission-Tswana encounter to Tswana intention.⁵³

While the Comaroffs were completing the first volume, Elizabeth Elbourne was working on evangelical Christianity among the Khoikhoi in the Eastern Cape. Khoi evangelists had appropriated the Christianity impressed

upon them by a series of European missionaries and began itinerating through formerly independent Khoi communities as well as among the Xhosa to spread an indigenized Christian spirituality. In the context of growing impoverishment and lack of land, a Khoikhoi—or “pan-Hottentot”—nationalism developed, which drew initially on Christianity and the Bible, and later, on the notion of common land, or blood ground, as sources of authority. Part of the *raison d’être* of Elbourne’s 2002 book was “to incorporate the study of religion more thoroughly into the mainstream of cultural, social and political history.”⁵⁴

Elbourne and the Comaroffs were plowing what became a popular furrow. The mid-1990s saw the publication of several edited collections and studies of individual mission societies.⁵⁵ Many of these were grounded in and incorporated Black Christian voices and perspectives and considered new thoughts on gendered mission authority and the mission-driven politics of colonialism.

Several of these also grounded African Christianity and African Christians into a politics of transnationalism. In 1995, James Campbell published on African Americans and African evangelical Methodism on different sides of the Atlantic. Working on similar themes, Robert Trent Vinson examined how Christianity infused networks and established political relationships across the world of the diaspora.⁵⁶

One of the more important recent currents in the history of Christianity and the growth of the Black middle class lies in directing attention to intertextual and intergenre literacy mediated through Christianity. In *The Portable Bunyan: A Transnational History of “The Pilgrim’s Progress,”* Isabel Hofmeyr explains how Africans and missionaries understood the book as both fetish and parable, its linear narrative making for a translatability that allowed for deft indigenous uses of the text.⁵⁷ Joel Cabrita’s work has challenged assumptions about the oral nature of African independent churches, showing how the AmaNazaretha in KwaZulu-Natal sustained their Christianity through a remarkable body of self-generated texts, including hymns and autobiographical writing, all carefully attuned to the dynamics of global Christianity.⁵⁸

Together, these works challenge thinking that sees African literary and textual production as less authentically African than oral production and African Christianity as more authentic when steeped and expressed in local idioms and politics. These points relate critically to the context of this book. Denied access to standards of living that most white South Africans considered their right, educated Black Christians used their oratory, their ink, and their pens to channel their frustrations into a range of publications and petitions. In the debates around initiation, lobola, and pernicious urban life that

appeared in the Black press, African Christians showed a humorous and dexterous handling of a language few would have learned at their mothers' breast, shifting genres to appeal to wider audiences. These debates extended into fiction, some of which is visible in the quotes that begin many of my chapters. In writing, African Christians could display an intellectual prowess rooted in one of the most confusing yet universal of the Western world's texts, the Bible, to seed intellectual movements like Black consciousness.⁵⁹

The tools provided through the Christian elevation of the self and literacy were equally comfortable in female and male hands, but it seems that men generally felt more comfortable demonstrating them in public. In South Africa, in the outpouring of writing from mission school graduates, in fiction, poetry, and plays, very little work was published by Black women before the late 1950s.⁶⁰ The exception is Nontsizi Mqgqwetho, quoted elsewhere in this book.⁶¹ The veneration of agency in some recent work has resulted in uneven and selective histories, rendering men more often than women the subjects of action by virtue of their greater literary output and their more prominent public lives.

CHRONOLOGY, SOURCES, AND CONTENT

This book draws from material covering the nineteenth century but is primarily concerned with the period between 1900 and 1950. The chronology that tracks the constitution of Black sexual modernity, or Black intimacy, is roughly bookended by the formation of the Union of South Africa in 1910 and the rise to power of the National Party in 1948. At the turn of the twentieth century, discourses on the African family centered on the negative effects of the movement of men away from their families to South Africa's burgeoning urban areas, a phenomenon referred to at the time as "detrribalization." By the 1940s, liberal white and Black attention had shifted firmly to the problems associated with urban family living. Up until sometime in the 1930s, with probably a generational lag of about twenty years, efforts to reverse detrribalization were twofold. In urban areas, Christian and liberal concerns focused on demonizing and constraining African women's sexuality and on removing or returning them to rural areas, where they might once again fall under the authority of their male guardians. And in rural areas, magistrates and other officials colluded with senior men to prevent their daughters and female wards from leaving for urban areas. The 1927 Black Administration Act entrenched male authority over daughters and female wards by disallowing independent legal status to Black women.⁶²

However, the Great Depression and its effects, coupled with impoverishment in the reserves and domestic labor shortages in urban areas,

negated these earlier attempts to keep Black women out of South African cities. The 1932 Native Economic Commission was intended to investigate declining African standards of living and Black impoverishment (even if it did not intend to address them). By the time of its release, the state, liberal white concerns, and Black nationalist organizations, had all recognized the urban African family as fact. From this point onward, attempts to regulate African intimate life, including, for example, attempts geared toward regulating women and the provision of housing, recognized that Black urbanization was irreversible. By the start of World War II, it was generally accepted—certainly by every person who commented publicly about these issues—that African urban life needed to accommodate families, even if only imperfectly (and, in fact, it did so very imperfectly). The 1940 Conference on African Family Life, organized by the Christian Council of South Africa, was an example of this shift in focus; conferences in the first decade of the century had focused on reconstructing rural traditional life. Interest in reconstructing the African family as modern enough to withstand the twentieth century, in comparison with its tribal avatar, was widely held and present across preindependence Africa.⁶³

Already mentioned for its role in supporting male authority, the Black Administration Act of 1927 serves as a limiting factor on the shifts covered by this book in relation to older and newer practices of intimacy. By this date, a goodly portion of registered African marriages were under one system of administration instead of the multiple systems inherited from the constituent elements of the Union. Notably, several marriage regimes had prevailed in the Cape. A couple's married life depended on when they married and under which legislation. Some of these recognized women as legal adults, as in the case of Antje Gingxa, discussed later. African Christians in the Cape who had married in the 1890s represented a generation rapidly reducing in size by the 1940s. By simplifying marriage regimes, the Black Administration Act took large swaths of African intimate life out of the eye and from under the attention of the South African state. This move rendered African intimate lives invisible from the official record and allowed for a less complicated legal edifice in relation to customary law. Further, a generational shift in local magistrates, as the men who were the sons of missionaries were replaced by Afrikaner career bureaucrats, made for a much less sympathetic (the term is relative) category of official when it came to the legal resolution of intimate problems.

The shift in the bureaucratic regard for African intimate lives coincides with and is connected to the assumption of power by the National Party. While the introduction of formal apartheid was gradual and patchy,

1948 does mark a line in the sand. Before this date, official racial ideology included some notion of benevolent trusteeship, while official attitudes toward Black urban residents were centered on the control and supply of labor. After 1948, racial discrimination infused the state and white society to an even greater extent. As a result, African family life became more fractured, some of the evidence for which lies in declining rates of marriage or long-term cohabitation legitimized by lobola. By the 1960s, notwithstanding the potentially cohesive effects of Christian thinking, migrant labor, poverty, and increasingly unjust laws had made it extremely difficult for Africans to maintain long-term, dual-parent (or even multiple-parent) families. African family life and Black intimacy had become markedly different.

The narrative behind this chronology makes use of a range of sources drawing on the experiences of Black Christians in South Africa in the first half of the twentieth century. I used a range of archives in my research, noted in the bibliography. The following paragraphs reflect on the politics of archival use, including language and the literal colonial and postcolonial flows of paper.

At the beginning of the period this book covers, Black converts wrote principally in English; by the 1940s, the Black middle class was writing and publishing both in English and a range of indigenous languages, sometimes two or more in the same piece of writing. This language spread is reflected in the sources I used. These are principally written in English but include records in isiXhosa, isiZulu, Setswana, Sesotho, and Afrikaans. A multilingual historicity is not accidental, not just in relation to people's own language fluency but also in the sense that people made choices about the languages in which they wrote. In West Africa, the linguistic politics of the region meant that in the early twentieth century most newspaper publishing was in English; in East Africa, publication was on a smaller scale and often in vernacular-language newspapers; and in southern Africa, newspapers frequently shared space between indigenous languages and English.⁶⁴ Newspaper editors chose, or had chosen for them, the languages in which they published in response to complex factors around accessibility and audience. Black reporters often switched between languages to reflect different viewpoints, but before the 1950s, published work more often reflected a bias toward English. Official sources, however, such as court and church records, are exclusively in English, even when many of the meetings they record were conducted in other languages. Black clerks were required to transcribe court proceedings in English, later Afrikaans.

Colonial record flows—the literal movement of pieces of paper via steamship and later aircraft—mean that many of the records used in this

book are located in archives far from their place of origin. Several of the collections are located in London at the School of Oriental and African Studies, in New York, or in Edinburgh. There is also a bias toward the records of the historic mission churches; indigenous churches have fewer preserved records. The extent and location of these records speak directly to the power and sway of Protestant ecumenism, not only at the height of mission influence in the nineteenth century but also in the first half of the twentieth century, when almost all Christian aid and Christian services to Africa were channeled through an office in New York or London. “Why North American Christian Forces Should Undertake Now a Programme of Advance in Africa” was the title of a program put forward by the Foreign Missions Conference of North America in 1946. It reflected a common cross-Atlantic fascination with Africa, including consideration of the continent as a destination for future development aid.⁶⁵

The church documents I use speak principally to church life within institutional spaces, like the church itself, local schoolrooms, or diocesan offices in Mthatha and Grahamstown. Minutes and official reports chronicle the meetings that people attended in the course of their church work, the debates that took place, and the proposals that were made. They present the literate face of the church, that part of it and those members within it who felt fluent and confident enough to speak. Sometimes the church records reflect that translation has taken place, but often the fact of translation is concealed. Church events and concerns that happened outside of official meetings must remain the province of speculation. This affects what we know about Black Christians in the early twentieth century, especially Black women in the church.

The church records used in this book reflect a particular style of literacy, one that elevates and values order, form, and the erasure of individual in favor of institutional and collective identity. To counterbalance this, I have used personal writing, including letters.⁶⁶ This presents an intermediate and more personal zone of writing, something that would have resonated with T. B. Soga, who fought for many years to have his ideas about history published and who pursued the publication of these ideas across a range of forums. Soga was adept at slipping in and out of genres, his hand equally skilled at writing a minute as it was at recording the speculative history that characterized his amateur ethnography.

I wish to make a final point about many of the archival sources used in this book. They exist still because of a personal tenacity that gifts them with a posthumous agency absent at the time they were produced. For instance, in 1911, John (Gamiso) Kula challenged the occupation of a piece of land by

widow Antje Gingxa. Customary law would not have recognized her occupational rights, which came to her via a marriage in community of property, because she and her husband, Moses Kula, had married in church.⁶⁷ She appeared in court with a copy of the church register reflecting her marriage. More than one hundred years later, Gingxa's pursuit of justice is relevant to historians like me because of her care of her pieces of paper.

The themes discussed in the first sections of this chapter, as well as the sources I use, ebb and flow through the six chapters that make up this book. Chapter 1 covers two related issues. Firstly, it places church-centered networks in relation to other networks present in South Africa in the early twentieth century. I show how Christianity constituted a significant structuring presence in people's lives that went beyond the weekly rituals of faith, into South African public culture, and even further into a global Christian ecumene. Building on what I call "institutional thickness," I then use the anthropology of texts to outline the different ways that Christianity and literacy allowed for the public convening of a Black intimacy, an expansion on the section "A Convention of Publics" in this introduction.

Chapter 2 is about masculinity, especially older ideas of masculinity transformed and shifted to varying extents within South Africa after 1910. Ethnic differences were critical to the construction of masculinity different from how African women understood their gendered roles. Through an examination of male circumcision and initiation, I show how African Christians brought innovation to the consideration of custom. Some of this centered on relocating both the practice and discussion of custom from the secrecy that cloaked its traditional practice to more public spaces in a context in which African Christians went to great lengths to Christianize initiation. They used a range of arguments based on Christian precedent and the Bible both to defend and to denounce it. The discussion in newspapers, initially about the constitution of Xhosa masculinity, soon developed into a more general discussion about the link between ethnicity and masculinity and what constituted modern masculinity.

Chapter 3 speaks to what happened when African Christians adopted mission-driven moral codes. Through an examination of love letters, church proceedings, and civil court cases from the Eastern Cape, it considers the consequences of love and sex, including the transgression of Christian sexual morality. It also examines the extent to which people's intimate lives were truly ever private, as well as the ways that love affairs were always carried out at least partially in public. Accusations (and proof) of sexual immorality had significant, though different, consequences for men and women, and gendered patterns affected how and whether people attempted to resolve accusations