



Conjugal Rights: Marriage, Sexuality, and Urban Life in Colonial Libreville, Gabon (New African Histories)

Rachel Jean-Baptiste

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Conjugal Rights is a history of the role of marriage and other arrangements between men and women in Libreville, Gabon, during the French colonial era, from the mid–nineteenth century through 1960. Conventional historiography has depicted women as few in number and of limited influence in African colonial towns, but this book demonstrates that a sexual economy of emotional, social, legal, and physical relationships between men and women indelibly shaped urban life.

Bridewealth became a motor of African economic activity, as men and women promised, earned, borrowed, transferred, and absconded with money to facilitate interpersonal relationships. Colonial rule increased the fluidity of customary marriage law, as chiefs and colonial civil servants presided over multiple courts, and city residents strategically chose the legal arena in which to arbitrate a conjugal-sexual conflict. Sexual and domestic relationships with European men allowed some African women to achieve a greater degree of economic and social mobility. An eventual decline of marriage rates resulted in new sexual mores, as women and men sought to rebalance the roles of pleasure, respectability, and legality in having sex outside of kin-sanctioned marriage.

Rachel Jean-Baptiste expands the discourse on sexuality in Africa and challenges conventional understandings of urban history beyond the study of the built environment. Marriage and sexual relations determined how people defined themselves as urbanites and shaped the shifting physical landscape of Libreville. *Conjugal Rights* takes a fresh look at questions of the historical construction of race and ethnicity. Despite the efforts of the French colonial government and society to enforce boundaries between black and white, interracial sexual and domestic relationships persisted. Black and *métisse* women gained economic and social capital from these relationships, allowing some measure of freedom in the colonial capital city.

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