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Brothers and Sisters in Christ

Review by Kristina Helgesson Kjellin for Anthropology Book Forum

Todne, T. 2021. *Kincraft. The Making of Black Evangelical Sociality.* Durham and London: Duke University Press.

What comes to your mind when you hear the words "American Evangelical churches"? Maybe you immediately get images of megachurches with predominantly white members with conservative opinions on various matters. Maybe the most recent, former American president also turns up in your images, together with his supporters at big rallies. And maybe in your mind you already "know" exactly what these people think, for instance when it comes to family matters. Well, I can say that all those images come to my mind very quickly when I hear those three words, and this despite the fact that I, for more than 20 years, have studied churches (not Evangelical however, but Pentecostal and Lutheran), and by my training and experience knows very well that reality is always much more complex than we think it is. When I read "Kincraft. The Making of Black Evangelical Sociality," by Todne Thomas (2021), I am quickly reminded of the strength of the stereotypes regarding certain forms of religiosity, as well as of how important it is with close ethnographic studies in order to do away with misconceptions and broaden our understanding and knowledge of the world.

Todne Thomas, PhD, is a socio-cultural anthropologist and Associate Professor of African American Religious Studies at Harvard Divinity School. Building on fieldwork carried out during thirteen months from 2007 to 2008 in one Afro-Caribbean (Dixon Bible Chapel, DBC) and one African American church association (Corinthian Bible Chapel, CBC) in the metropolitan area of Atlanta, Thomas explores and analyses "church members' spiritual definitions and enactments of family" (p. 2). The two congregations, DBC and CBC, come out of Plymouth Brethrenism, a British evangelical movement that was established in the 1830s and in the 1860s and 1870s through missionary work spread to, among other places, the

Caribbean. The Plymouth Brethren emphasized the importance of small, local, and independent congregations, with male elder governance and leadership, with a strong focus on the priesthood of every believer, biblical teaching and evangelism. Through the missionary work starting in the 1950s, by among others, T. Michael Flowers, an Afro-Bahamian evangelist, DBC and CBC were founded. While black Americans at the time migrated in the other direction, Flowers decided to migrate south. According to Thomas, "Flowers's missionary work endeavored a textual reformation of a stereotyped charismatic African American Christianity and an institutional reformation of a cloistered white evangelicalism" (p. 59). She emphasizes the importance of studying missionary work in closeness to context and to what happens at the microlevel, in order to deepen and broaden our understanding of missionary historiography. Thomas describes how black evangelicals have had to navigate and find their own space in the landscape of churches in the U.S., between on the one hand white evangelicals who dominate the image of American evangelical churches, and on the other hand, the dominant understandings of the "Black Church."

Throughout the study she shows how "family" is much more than just biology and something in the private lives of people. Rather, "family," in the context of these evangelical congregations, is constituted collectively, through spiritual bonds that create spiritual kinship, and in relation to experiences of migration and of belonging to a transnational diaspora. Through various practices, what Thomas calls "kincraft," church members construct themselves as "brothers and sisters in Christ," as "spiritual kin." By addressing one another as "brothers" and "sisters" spiritual connections are prioritized over social distinctions, and it also signals inclusion, belonging, and identity. These familial connections transcend racial, ethnic, and denominational boundaries, although these boundaries are also highly tangible in the lives of the members of the two congregations.

Thomas describes how the processes of kincraft take place through, for instance Bible studies, and through the incorporation of church and home. The gender dimension is central to how community and family relations is being formed in these various settings. Home Bible studies are, as Thomas phrases it, "important sites for social interaction" (p. 121), where men play a crucial role. It is the male members that lead the Bible studies, teach and preach, while women are not to take on leading roles in gatherings where both women and men are present.

Instead, women play decisive roles when it comes to how spiritual relationships are crafted "in and across households, such as prayer partnerships and spiritual parenting ties, that infuse a sense of intimacy and familiarity into community sociality" (p. 135). Although they stay in the congregations and thus accept the given order, in conversations with Thomas some of the women express criticism towards the exclusion of women from official leadership positions, from speaking and teaching in mixed-sex groups, and towards the theological understanding of the submission of women.

Despite the reproduction of these traditional gender roles and norms of family patterns, Thomas argues that the study of black evangelical spiritual kinship can help us to deconstruct and be critically conscious of "the contexts and frames of conventional Western heteronormative notions of kinship" (p. 19). Family, as she points out, is much more than the nuclear biological family; the extended family ethos mediated through spiritual kinship is crucial to how these evangelicals understand family and community, where the histories of migration and diaspora need to be taken into account. The productions of kinship, as Thomas states, happen "in and beyond normative frames" (p. 19) and these perspectives challenge conventional understandings of family and kinship.

"Kincraft" is a rich and thorough study, and in inspirational ways Thomas combines kinship studies with studies of religion and spirituality. She argues for a broad understanding of relatedness: "[t]he migrations and kinship tracing of DBC and CBC evangelicals reveals that fields of religion and spirituality provide grammars and rituals by which vital forms of relatedness can be created and described" (p. 49). Taking these forms of relatedness seriously is also to legitimize "some of the social ties that have been vital to black social life" (p. 49).

Thomas also gives an honest account of her own prejudice towards evangelicalism, and describes a situation when she, after her fieldwork, when she had gone through a divorce, is contacted by her "spiritual parents," Brother and Sister Stewart. She expects to hear their judgement regarding her divorce and family situation, instead they show, through the conversation, that they share a spiritual kinship with one another. There is nothing of the judgmental attitude that she feared. She writes: "Even though I was writing a book that

examined the ways in which black evangelicals produced family beyond “the family,” even though I had experienced what it meant to be accepted by this community, I still fell into the assumption that our relationship would be contingent upon my successful maintenance of a heteronormative marriage” (p. 200-201). This brings me back to my introductory reflections on the strength of stereotypes and of how important it is with studies like this.

As Thomas ends by stating, there is much to be learned from the members of DBC and CBC. Instead of privileging individualistic and nuclear family wellbeing, the members of DBC and CBC form kinship ties and practices of reciprocity that go beyond the nuclear family, and also beyond the nation state through transnational ties. Not least are these ways of creating kinship and relations important in a situation such as a pandemic, when nationalism and closing in on ourselves sadly seem to have won over generosity and reciprocity.

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