

**“New” men and women:
Gender perspectives on Norwegian Missions and
indigenous Christianity in KwaZulu-Natal, 1840–1940**

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Abstract

In what ways were the lives of 19th century South African indigenous men and women affected by their encounters with Western missions and their subsequent conversion to Christianity? The life stories of Zibokjane kaGudu and Unompepo kaNhlwana Ngema, presented in this article, is the starting point of a discussion on how Western, Christian ideals of “self-making men” and “home-making women” influenced and transformed men’s and women’s roles in family, society, and church. This article focuses on the region of KwaZulu-Natal from 1844, and the encounters between Zulu men and women and Norwegian, Lutheran missionaries representing the *Norwegian Missionary Society* (NMS) in the region.

Introduction

By the early 1800s, the only Christians in South Africa were the descendants of European settlers living in the south-west of the country. Two hundred years later, three-quarters of all South Africans describe themselves as Christians. This massive conversion process has affected all aspects of South African life and is interwoven in the social, political, and cultural history of the country. In addition, the societies’ gender relations have been affected by the processes of Christianisation. The main aim of this article is to examine the ways in which the lives of indigenous men and women were affected and transformed by their encounters with Western missions and their subsequent conversion to Christianity. The article focuses on the region of KwaZulu-Natal from 1844 and the encounters between Zulu men and women and Norwegian, Lutheran missionaries representing the *Norwegian Missionary Society* (NMS) in the region. When discussing indigenous Christianity, it is the Christians and congregations that came to belong to the so-called “Norwegian, Lutheran Zulu-church” that naturally attracted my attention. These congregations are today part of the South-Eastern diocese of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of South Africa.

The article consists of two main parts. In the first part, “Self-making men and home-making women”, I ask how Western, Christian ideals of men’s and women’s roles in family and society transformed indigenous lives. In the second part, “Churchmen and churchwomen”, I discuss the gender roles of men and women in the indigenous church. Although I take a predominantly macro-perspective, and look at major, structural changes over a period of 100 years, from 1840 to 1940, the two life stories I present here also represent a micro-perspective of these issues.

The Zulu girl, Unompepo kaNhlwana Ngema, who crossed the Tugela-river

The first life story is that of a Zulu girl, Unompepo, the daughter of the diviner (*isanusi*) Nhlwana Ngema, who worked for King Mpande (kaSenzangakhona) in mid-19th century Zululand.¹ In 1866, Unompepo, 11 years old, was put by her father in the home of the Norwegian missionary family, Wenche and Paul Peter Wettergren. In 1860, Pastor Wettergren had established a Norwegian, Lutheran mission station at Mahlabatini, close to the royal homestead, Nodwengu. At this tiny mission station, Unompepo served as a nanny for the missionary couple’s twin babies, but she was also trained in domestic services. She also learnt how to read and write, and attended Christian devotions and services. According to Wettergren’s agreement with her father, Unompepo was supposed to stay at the mission station for four years. But her mother, who had been informed about her preparation for baptism, arrived and, against Unompepo’s own wish, took her back home in 1867.

In 1878, 11 years later, Unompepo unexpectedly turned up at another Norwegian mission station at Umphumulo, in the British colony of Natal. She had escaped from Zululand to avoid a prospective marriage planned by her relatives. According to missionary sources, she claimed that she had never forgotten the Christian gospel and the Norwegian missionaries. The spirit of God had commanded her to run away from Zululand. In a letter to mission supporters in Norway, she explained the religious experience as follows: “It was not my own thoughts, not my dream, not my sudden idea, not my wisdom, but it was like I was speaking with the Lord himself, he was real to me. I have never since experienced something like this. And he said:

¹ The reconstruction of her life story is based on the following texts: *Norsk Missionstidende* (NMT) 33, no. 19 (1878): 387–390; 37, no. 12 (1882): 239–246; 43, no. 12 (1888): 232–233; *Missionslæsning for Kvindeforeninger* (MKF) 1, no. 5 (1884): 38–40; 1, no. 6 (1884): 41–47; 6, no. 9 (1893): 41–46; 16, no. 3 (1899): 17–21; 22, no. 10 (1905): 78–80; Ole Stavem, *Et bantufolk og kristendommen: Det norske missionselskaps syttiaarige zulumisjon* (Stavanger: Det norske missionselskaps forlag, 1915), 243–252.

Go ...”² Unompepo was baptised at Umphumulo mission station the same year, and she took a new name to mark her new Christian identity — Maria Magdalena.

Unompepo crossed the Tugela River, which divided Zululand from the colony of Natal, to escape a prospective marriage arrangement and to become a follower of the Christian religion. Which of the two reasons was the prime motivation, we do not know for sure. Human motivations are usually complex matters. The 19th century Zulu term for converting to Christianity – *wela* – meant “to cross over”. The same word was actually used to describe both a conversion to Christianity and crossing the Tugela River to escape the country.

Not all Zulu converts to Christianity literally had to cross the border river. By 1870, the NMS had nine mission stations inside Zululand. The Norwegian pioneer, Hans Paludan Smith Schreuder, was actually the first Western missionary to receive King Mpande’s permission to establish a permanent mission in Zululand in 1851. He was followed by German and Swedish Lutherans, and also Anglican missionaries.³ But as long as Mpande (and from 1872, his son Cetshwayo (kaMpande)) ruled in a politically independent kingdom, the missionaries had to ask the king, the chief, and the relatives for permission for each prospective baptism of a Zulu person. The Norwegian missionaries found what they considered to be a lack of religious freedom a serious obstacle to the progress of their evangelistic work. This partly explains why they wholeheartedly supported the British imperial invasion and conquest of Zululand in 1879, as examined by the Norwegian historian, Jarle Simensen.⁴

Scholars studying the history of Christianity in South Africa from different angles – political and social, as well as cultural and religious – have described and discussed how 19th century mission stations were intentionally developed as separate spaces, as scattered islands of Christian areas in the midst of non-Christian, indigenous areas. In mission discourse, a terminology that underpinned the contrasts and diversities between Christian and non-Christian flourished: “Christian” vs. “Heathen”, “white” vs. “black”, “light” vs. “darkness”, “clean” vs. “dirty”, “culture” vs. “nature”, “civilised vs. “uncivilised”, and “European” vs. “African”. Mission stations were supposed to be developed as “springs in the desert”, as “shining lighthouses in the darkness”, and as “cultivated spaces in the wilderness”.

² *NMT* 37, no. 12 (1882): 239–246.

³ Norman Etherington, “Kingdom of This World and the Next: Christian Beginnings among the Zulu and the Swazi,” in *Christianity in South Africa: A Political, Social and Cultural History*, ed. Richard Elpick and Rodney Davenport, 89–106. (Oxford: James Curry, 1997), 89–106.

⁴ Jarle Simensen, ed., *Norwegian Missions in African History, Vol 1: South Africa 1845–1906* (Oslo: Norwegian University Press, 1986).

To missionaries working in Zululand, the term “wela” (conversion), meaning “to cross over”, actually made sense. In their opinion, it was impossible for the Zulus to convert to Christianity and still maintain their social structure and political economy, not to mention their religious rituals. A Christian Zulu man or woman had to transform in all aspects of his or her life. The anthropologists Jean and John Comaroff, who have studied the encounter between British non-Conformist missionaries and Southern Tswana peoples, claim that “of all colonizers, it was the evangelists who made the most thoroughgoing efforts to revolutionize African being-in-the-world”.⁵ After all, the point of “colonial evangelism”, as it is labelled by the Comaroffs, was to erase what was indigenously African and to replace it with something different.⁶

No wonder African authorities, such as the Zulu kings, chiefs, and heads of households, were reluctant to accept the crossing-over activities of their subjects. Crossing-over, either the border river to Natal, or the border to mission station land, meant a serious challenge to existing power relations, to relations of production and reproduction, to cultural values, and to religious world-views.

Part I: Self-making men and home-making women

In what ways were indigenous gender systems transferred when Zulu men and women converted to Christianity and settled at the mission station land? In a mission study book from 1932, published in Norway, the missionary Peder Aage Rødseth described some of the changes that occurred in Zulu homes. “When Jesus enters a home”, he started, “the domestic life will totally change – also in the outward”. The first step was to abolish “nudity”, and by this Rødseth meant the traditional Zulu costume, and the Christian would start wearing Western clothes. The second step was a change in housing conditions. To the Christian man, a traditional circle Zulu hut would be “too miserable”, Rødseth claimed; rather, he would build an upright, square house with several rooms, doors, windows, a chimney, and furniture. The third step was a change in traditional internal work relations. According to Rødseth, the Christian man “will not be satisfied by watching his wife work alone in the field, and he will purchase a plough and a couple of oxen to plough with”.⁷

New Christian names, new Western-style clothes, new square brick houses, and new agricultural methods were all outward signs of conversion,

⁵ Jean and John Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: The Dialectics of Modernity on a South African Frontier* (Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press, 1997), 17.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 117.

⁷ Peder Aage Rødseth, “Våre kristne,” in *Zulu: Evangeliets landvinning*, ed. Johan Kjelvei (Stavanger: Det Norske Misjonsselskaps trykkeri, 1932), 63.

but they nevertheless reflected more thorough, subconscious changes.⁸ In pre-capitalist farming societies in southern Africa, a homestead was made up of a man, his cattle, his wife or wives, and their children, grouped in their different houses, each with its own land. The homestead was largely self-sufficient, subsisting on the cereals produced in agriculture, as well as milk products of the homestead's herds. Animal husbandry was the domain of men, while women were responsible for agricultural labour. Cattle played a decisive role in production. Before a man could marry and establish a new homestead, or before an existing homestead could be extended with a new house and a new wife, cattle had to be exchanged between the husband and the bride's father. Men's control over women's productive and reproductive capacity was therefore the central dynamic in a society in which the accumulation of people, rather than things, was of paramount importance.⁹

The Zulu polygamous family structure, the practice of bride-wealth, and the gendered division of labour were condemned by the missionaries.¹⁰ In other words, it was African patriarchy and Zulu masculinity that missionaries attacked. Polygamy was understood as evidence of Zulu men's sexual immorality and greediness, but also as a sign of their material greediness, as several wives meant wealth and prosperity. According to missionary views, Zulu women were poor creatures, existing merely as commodities in a masculine marketplace of "bride trade". After marriage, the women were obliged to serve their lazy and idle husbands as "slaves", working hard in the fields.¹¹

The missionaries preached that Christian Zulu men and women should live monogamous family lives, based on mutual love and respect. The missionaries furthermore dreamt of a class of free, industrious, and prosperous male African farmers. The new Christian Zulu man should live a settled agrarian life and enter plough cultivation in addition to pastoral activities. He should grow his crops in privately owned, fenced, rectangular plots, producing a surplus both for the home and for the market. The new Christian Zulu woman should withdraw from agricultural production and concentrate on "the home and the heart", on her reproductive and nurturing role. The

⁸ Norman Etherington, "Outward and Visible Signs of Conversion in Nineteenth-century KwaZulu-Natal," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 32, no. 4 (2002), 422–438.

⁹ Jeff Guy, "Gender oppression in southern Africa's precapitalist societies," in *Women and Gender in Southern Africa to 1945*, ed. Cheryl Walker (Cape Town/London: David Philip/James Currey, 1990), 33–47.

¹⁰ Jarle Simensen, Thomas Børhaug, Per Hernæs and Endre Sønstabø, "Christian Missions and Socio-Cultural Change in Zululand 1850–1906: Norwegian Strategy and African response," in *Norwegian Mission in African History, Vol. 1: South Africa 1845–1906*, ed. Jarle Simensen (Oslo: Norwegian University Press, 1986), 187–275.

¹¹ Hanna Mellemsether, "African Women in the Norwegian Mission in South Africa," in *Gender, Race and Religion: Nordic missions 1860–1940*, ed. Inger Marie Okkenhaug (Uppsala: Swedish Institute of Missionary Research, 2003), 159–166.

missionary ideals were, of course, a Western export, in which men were supposed to be breadwinners and women housewives.¹² They were furthermore related to modern ideas of "male self-making" and "female home-making".¹³

Historians such as Norman Etherington and Sheila Meintjes have illustrated how the mission stations in Natal provided the base on which a new emerging class of African landowners – the *amakholwa* (believers) – found agricultural and service opportunities within the colonial capitalist economy.¹⁴ Torstein Jørgensen found a similar trend of industrial and commercial innovation among Christians at the Norwegian mission stations in Zululand during the period 1850–1870.¹⁵ The ideals and theories of male self-making and female home-making, propagated by all Protestant missions working in southern Africa in the 19th century, were both culturally influential and socially transforming. They were nevertheless attached to a range of paradoxes and ironies as the economic, political, and social life saw profound changes in the last decades of the century, and a capitalist and racial segregated state emerged – the Union of South Africa. How many Zulu men could actually live as free and independent farmers, as prosperous breadwinners of their families? And how many Zulu women could actually live as middle-class housewives, concentrating their energies and efforts on the house and the heart?

Zulu Christians' struggle for economic freedom and political rights were met with growing constraints from the Natal settler government. Etherington, among others, has examined the tragic history of the rise and fall of an African, Christian middle class.¹⁶ Colonial politics of taxation forced African men into a class of wage labourers seeking employment as migrant workers in the industrial, commercial, and agrarian sectors of the colonial economy. By 1910, an estimated 80% of adult Zulu men had entered the

¹² Dana L. Robert, "The 'Christian Home' as a cornerstone of Anglo-American Missionary Thought and Practise," in *Converting Colonialism: Visions and Realities in Mission History, 1706–1914*, ed. Dana L. Robert (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008).

¹³ Kristin Fjelde Tjelle, *Missionary Masculinity: The case of the Norwegian Lutheran Missionaries to the Zulus, 1870–1930* (Dissertation for the Degree of Ph.D., School of Mission and Theology, Stavanger, 2011), 60–63, 123–134.

¹⁴ Etherington, *Preachers Peasants and Politics in Southeast Africa, 1835–1880: African Christian Communities in Natal, Pondoland and Zululand*, 24–46; Sheila Meintjes, "Family and gender in the Christian community at Edendale, Natal, in colonial times," in *Women and Gender in Southern Africa to 1945*, ed. Cheryl Walker (Cape Town/London: David Philip/James Currey, 1990), 125–145.

¹⁵ Torstein Jørgensen, *Contact and conflict: Norwegian missionaries, the Zulu kingdom, and the Gospel: 1850–1873* (Oslo: Solum, 1990), 343–352.

¹⁶ Norman Etherington, *Preachers Peasants and Politics in Southeast Africa, 1835–1880. African Christian Communities in Natal, Pondoland and Zululand* (London: Royal Historical Society, 1978), 135–144.

migrant labour system to support their rural families, and were spending most of the year in the industrial cities of Durban and Johannesburg, or in the mining districts of Kimberley and the Witwatersrand.¹⁷ And, as land owned by African farmers was appropriated by white settlers, a class not of independent and free peasants, but of peasant-proletarians in subsistence agriculture was created. Also, the ideology of female domesticity had many paradoxes in South Africa. African women were supposed to manage their homes properly, but they were simultaneously recruited to white households as domestic workers. And, as the migrant labour system forced their husbands to move to industrial areas, women were, by social sanctions and colonial laws, kept "at home" on the rural homestead land, still responsible for agricultural production, but under increasingly severe conditions.¹⁸

Rødseth's account from 1932, idealising the Christian Zulu family, describing the husband as a hardworking farmer on his own land, and the housewife as mainly concentrating on the domestic work and moral upbringing of her children, was merely an old missionary dream – far from the harsh colonial realities.

The Zulu boy, Zibokjane kaGudu, who crossed the sea

I will continue with another story, this one about the Zulu boy, Zibokjane kaGudu.¹⁹ Zibokjane had been the apprentice of Norwegian missionary, Ommund Oftebro, since he was eight years old. He was baptised as a teenager in 1859, taking the biblical name Moses. He was praised by the missionaries as an intelligent and gifted young man. When Prince Cetshwayo asked Oftebro to teach him the art of reading, Zibokjane was put in charge of the task.²⁰ Zibokjane had the innovative spirit that characterised many of the first Christian Zulus. He was employed in the Norwegian mission, but he also served the prince as his private wagon-driver. He established a petty agrarian enterprise at Eshowe mission station, but was eventually elected by the mission to "cross the sea" and go to Norway for theological studies in 1866. Zibokjane, or Moses, became quite famous in Norway. He was actually the

¹⁷ Paul la Hausse de Lalouviere, "'Death is not the End.' Zulu Cosmopolitanism and the Politics of the Zulu Cultural Revival," in *Zulu Identities: Being Zulu, Past and Present*, ed. Benedict Carton, John Laband, and Jabulani Sithole (Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2008), 258.

¹⁸ Cherryl Walker, "Women and gender in southern Africa to 1945: An overview," in *Women and Gender in Southern Africa to 1945*, ed. Cherryl Walker (Cape Town/London: David Philip/James Currey, 1990), 1–32.

¹⁹ Torstein Jørgensen, "Zibokjana Ka Gudu Moses. Student fra Zululand ved Misjonshøgskolen 1866–69," in *Nordmenn i afrika – Afrikanere i Norge*, ed. Anne K. Bang and Kirsten Alsaker Kjerland (Bergen: Vigmostad & Bjørke AS, 2002), 221–229.

²⁰ Knut Holter, "Did Prince Cetshwayo read the Old Testament in 1859? The role of the Bible and the art of reading in the interaction between Norwegian missionaries and the Zulu elite in the mid-19th century," *Old Testament Essays* 22, no. 3 (2009), 580–588.

first Christian African connected to the NMS who visited the country. He was also the first African student at the School of Mission and Theology.

When Zibokjane returned to Zululand in 1869, he was stationed under the supervision of Schreuder at Entumeni mission station, working as assistant and schoolteacher. He simultaneously resumed his old friendship with Prince Cetshwayo. Zibokjane was central in negotiations between the prince and the NMS on Christian men’s participation in the Zulu military regiment system. The missionaries wished their male converts to perform service like everyone else. But their request for certain concessions, in effect, made normal military service impossible from the point of view of the Zulu royals. An agreement was eventually reached on Christian men’s services to the king, but was, according to Torstein Jørgensen and examined by Even for Zibokjane, not particularly successful.²¹ In the long run, it was a complicated and quite risky affair to be loyal to two lords – to both Zulu and mission authorities. When, on top of that, Zibokjane planned to take a second wife, he was outlawed by Cetshwayo and expelled from the mission by Schreuder.

“The fall of Moses” was an enormous disappointment to the missionaries, as well as the mission supporters in Norway, and was described in detail in the mission magazine.²² It was presented as a story of conversion and reversion, a story of a Zulu man’s backslide to heathendom, and of the continuous fight between Christian masculinity and Zulu masculinity. But the story was not quite that simple. Although Zibokjane came into conflict with Zulu and mission authorities, and as a consequence was expelled both from the land of the Zulu king and the mission station land, he continued to live a life as a Christian believer.

Zibokjane escaped to Natal and found employment as an inspector at a sugar mill. According to Oftebro, who maintained contact with him, he did very well and planned to buy his own land.²³ He continued to read the Bible and “his Norwegian books”, Oftebro stated. He held evening school for illiterate workers at the mill, and every Sunday he invited them to evangelistic meetings in his home. Zibokjane eventually disappeared from the mission annals, but in a last letter sent to mission supporters in Norway (“the congregation across the sea”), he assured them that he was not “lost”: “I am working here at the mill. God is also here. He has not hindered me to work labour but afforded me with suitable tasks”.²⁴ Zibokjane kaGudu Moses came to be one of many South Africans who, according to Robert Edgar, “inter-

²¹ Jørgensen, *Contact and conflict: Norwegian missionaries, the Zulu kingdom, and the Gospel: 1850–1873*, 328–340.

²² *NMT* 26, no. 1 (1871): 7–9; no. 7: 251–256; *NMT* 27, no. 7 (1872): 252; no. 10: 361–366; no. 12: 441–443.

²³ *NMT* 31, no. 1 (1876): 11–17.

²⁴ Before Jan Kielland left South Africa in 1874, he received a letter from Moses in which he was asked to greet the congregations in Norway and also Moses’ previous teachers at the Mission school in Stavanger. Parts of the letter were printed in *NMT* 29, no. 8 (1874): 315.

rogated, challenged, reinterpreted and assimilated" Christianity and simply made it indigenous.²⁵ We do not know what happened to Moses, but we can imagine that he joined, or even initiated, one of the many so-called African Independent Churches that came to light from the 1890s. These churches were generally established in opposition to the historic, mainline churches established by the missionaries.²⁶

Part II: Churchmen and churchwomen

Indigenous male clergy

Processes of indigenisation were also found inside the mission churches. The goal of a mission, according to the NMS founders, was to establish indigenous churches that would be "self-supporting, self-governing and self-propagating" Part of this strategy was "to train African converts as pastors and national assistants".²⁷ According to this vision, the views of NMS leaders corresponded with those of contemporary trends in international missions. The so-called three-self theory was systematised in the 1840s in the United States by Rufus Anderson, secretary of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, and in Great Britain by Henry Venn, secretary of the Church Missionary Society.²⁸

The recruitment of Zulu teachers, evangelists, and pastors was largely a gendered project, as the future leaders of the indigenous church had to be men, according to contemporary theological thinking and practice. Also, the influential three-self theory can be interpreted from a gender perspective. It is interesting that this theory of mission was developed in the same decades that

²⁵ Robert Edgar, "New Religious Movements," in *Missions and Empire*, ed. Norman Etherington (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 216–237.

²⁶ Bengt Sundkler, *Bantu Prophets in South Africa* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1948); Bengt Sundkler, *Zulu Zion and some Swazi Zionists* (London: Oxford University Press, 1976); Etherington, *Preachers Peasants and Politics in Southeast Africa, 1835–1880: African Christian Communities in Natal, Pondoland and Zululand*, 145–163; Erhard Kamphausen, "Unknown Heroes: The Founding Fathers of the Ethiopian Movement in South Africa," in *The Making of an Indigenous Clergy in Southern Africa: Proceedings of the International Conference held at the University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg, 25–27 October 1994*, ed. Philippe Denis (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 1995), 83–100; Simon Moripe, "Indigenous Clergy in the Zion Christian Church," in *Ibid.*, 102–107.

²⁷ Jørgensen, *Contact and conflict: Norwegian missionaries, the Zulu kingdom, and the Gospel: 1850–1873*, 218.

²⁸ Henry Venn (1796–1873) and Rufus Anderson (1796–1880) arrived at their ideas separately, in spite of the outstanding similarities in the basic outline of the three-self theory. From the mid- to late-nineteenth century the "three-self" programme was the stated policy of both British and American Protestant missions. See C. Peter Williams, *The Ideal of the Self-Governing Church: A Study in Victorian Missionary Strategy* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1990); Paul William Harris, *Nothing but Christ: Rufus Anderson and the Ideology of Protestant Foreign Missions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

the modern Western ideal of "the self-made man" emerged.²⁹ In the mission leader's imagination, who were these "selves"? After all, were indigenous churches not supposed to be governed by men, not women – indigenous men who were expected to uphold Western masculine ideals of self-support, self-government, and self-extension?

Zibokjane kaGudu was the first among Christian Zulu men in the Norwegian mission to be elected as a future church leader, and he was sent across the sea and educated at a Norwegian theological institution. Education was of crucial importance to the indigenisation process of the church, according to the missionaries. From the pioneer days, elementary education had been offered at every single mission station. The Zulu term that commonly referred to a missionary (*umfundisi*) actually meant "teacher". Religious texts, including the bible, the hymnbook, and the catechism were translated into Zulu, and Zulu children and adults were taught how to read them. But future church leaders also needed secondary education. In 1881, a Catechist school was established at Eshowe, and in 1893, a teachers' training school was established at Umphumulo.³⁰ Compared to the NMS's mission field in Madagascar, where a theological institution was established in 1871 after merely five years of work, the missionaries in South Africa were slow to recruit, educate, and ordain indigenous pastors. It was only after a Lutheran cooperation with the Church of Sweden Mission and Berlin Missionary Society took shape in 1912 that NMS started to send its candidates to the Swedish theological seminary at Oscarsberg and the German evangelist school at Emmaus. But even after a few Zulu pastors were eventually ordained, they were not treated as the missionaries' equal brothers. Instead, an ideology of a father-son relationship between the white missionary and the black pastor dominated. The indigenous pastor was understood as a youth, described as childish and emotional, who had not yet reached the level of mature manhood. Paternalistic and racist discourses justified a reluctance to distribute church power to male Zulu pastors.³¹

While the number of missionary pastors in the Norwegian Lutheran Zulu church never passed 15, the indigenous church personnel, by 1890, outnumbered the NMS staff. The missionaries increasingly came to provide overall supervision for a wide district or were managing the educational institutions. As the period after 1880 saw a tremendous growth in outstations

²⁹ Michael S. Kimmel, *Manhood in America: a Cultural History* (New York: Free Press, 1996).

³⁰ Ingolf Edward Hodne, *Missionary Enterprise in African Education: The Co-operating Lutheran Missions in Natal, South Africa, 1912–1955* (Stavanger, Misjonskøleskolens forlag, 1997).

³¹ Kristin Fjelde Tjelle, "Abandoned ideals of brotherhood? A masculinity perspective on the relationship between 19th century Norwegian Missionaries and Zulu Pastors," in *Studia Historiae Ecclesasticae. Journal of the Church History Society of Southern Africa* 36, no. 1 (2010), 53–75.

and church membership, it was therefore the Zulu evangelists, teachers, and pastors who, more and more, were the face of Christianity to their own communities.

Indigenous female spirituality

What about indigenous churchwomen? The assertion of historian Deborah Gaitskell, in a discussion on female church organisations in South Africa, probably covers the experience of women in the Norwegian Lutheran Zulu Church the best: "Victorian Christianity offered a contradictory package to African women: A way of escape from some of the constraints of pre-Christian society and yet a firm incorporation into the domesticity and patriarchy of Christian family life."³² As an example, let's return to Unompepo kaNhlwana Ngema, better known in Norway as Maria Magdalena. Her conversion story was a popular mission narrative, but she was also well-known for her piety, moral deeds, and loyal service as a churchwoman. Unompepo moved to Eshowe after her baptism where she was employed for several years as a teacher in the mission school.³³ After her marriage in 1888, she withdrew from work³⁴ to concentrate on "the home and the heart", as was expected of every good Christian woman. But since her family was poor, and her husband also sickly, she was nevertheless forced into domestic service for a white settler family.

In spite of her hard life conditions, Maria Magdalena continued to be a central female leader in the Lutheran congregation at Eshowe. She established weekly women's prayer meetings, initiated monthly days of offering, and was said to be a powerful and enthusiastic evangelist who guided numerous friends, neighbours, and relatives to Christian conversion. She is remembered as the founder of the "Women's Prayers' League" in the Norwegian Zulu church. The Women's Prayers' League, or *abasizikazi* as the movement is called in Zulu, is the Lutheran version of uniformed female Christian organisations, the *manyano*, that have characterised South African Protestant church life from the early 20th century. According to Deborah Gaitskell, the manyanos are African churchwomen's own stamp on Christianity.³⁵ Women

³² See Deborah Gaitskell, "Devout domesticity? A century of African women's Christianity in South Africa," in *Women and Gender in Southern Africa to 1945*, ed. Cherryl Walker (Cape Town/London: David Philip/James Currey, 1990), 254.

³³ She assisted, among others, Levine Henrietta Samuelsen, the missionary daughter who for years worked as a teacher in Zulu schools and who also was regarded an authority on the Zulu language, its history, and folklore.

³⁴ *NMT* 43, no. 12 (1888): 232–233.

³⁵ See Deborah Gaitskell, "Devout domesticity? A century of African women's Christianity in South Africa," in *Women and Gender in Southern Africa to 1945*, ed. Cherryl Walker (Cape Town/London: David Philip/James Currey, 1990), 251–272; Deborah Gaitskell, "Praying and Preaching: The Distinctive Spirituality of African Women's Church Organizations," in

here found an outlet for organisational talents and energies that were otherwise frustrated by racial, patriarchal, and class mechanisms of suppression and control. Furthermore, the female prayer leagues met social and psychological needs at a time when family structures were coming under emotional and materialistic pressure. The manyanos were an authentic female response to Christianity in women’s own right, claims Gaitskell.

Conclusion

Unompepo’s and Zibokjane’s life stories, although unique, are still typical of the fates of the many men and women who were introduced to Christianity by Western missionaries in 19th century South Africa. Mission stations attracted those seeking advancement in terms of employment, land, homes, material goods, or new knowledge, and many young men, like Zibokjane, were among these self-improvers. Mission stations also attracted those seeking refuge from a life-crisis, like Unompepo, often young women escaping unwanted or forced marriages. Both Unompepo and Zibokjane lived and served in the households of Norwegian missionaries from a young age; they were students in the mission schools and they accepted the Christian gospel as it was presented by the missionaries.

In the case of Zibokjane, his new life as a Christian man meant new social and professional possibilities, and he was offered a future as an indigenous church leader. However, to live under both Zulu and missionary patriarchy became too challenging in his case. Even though he had to leave both Zululand and Norwegian mission station land, he did not abandon his new beliefs. To the contrary, there are reasons to believe that he became a protagonist of Christianity outside of missionary control. As an *amakholwa* in Natal, Zibokjane embraced many of the tenets of self-improvement and self-making advocated by the missionaries. But, like the rest of his black Christian brothers, he was soon to be met with the white settler colony’s increasing social and political restrictions. Zibokjane’s new life as a Christian man was indeed characterised by new possibilities, but also by broken expectations.

Unompepo was praised for her intelligence, high morals, and zealous Christian faith. Her new life as a Christian woman offered educational and professional opportunities. But she was, after all, a woman, and marriage, motherhood, and homemaking were regarded as her main calling. One may ask if African women seeking to escape suppressive, non-Christian patriarchal systems were not simply met by different forms of patriarchy in the mission churches. Black women, like black men, were furthermore expe-

riencing severe suppression in terms of race and class, both in church and society. Unompepo’s new life as a Christian woman did not mean an end to suffering and suppression, but in the Christian church she found an outlet for her innovative spirit and her talents of praying and preaching.

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