

# THE MISSIONARY HOME AS A SITE FOR MISSION: PERSPECTIVES FROM BELGIAN CONGO\*

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In an important article entitled 'The 'Christian Home' as a Cornerstone of Anglo-American Missionary Thought and Practice', the prominent historian of mission Dana Robert writes: 'The idea of the Christian home was central to Christian Mission. Endorsed across denominations and national differences, discussed at ecumenical gatherings, and cutting across the dichotomy between civilisation and evangelisation, the 'Christian Home' consistently remained both a means and a goal of Anglo-American missions'.<sup>1</sup> Robert goes on to explain that the Christian home remained:

an enduring component of Anglo-American mission theory because it combined social and evangelistic functions of missions, while simultaneously justifying the movement's existence to western supporters of mission. It provided a rationale for the participation of women in all aspects of mission work, including homemaking, evangelism, fund raising, teaching and even social reform. It also validated a Protestant lifestyle that met the personal needs of expatriate missionary communities.<sup>2</sup>

Other historians have pointed to an even broader significance of missionary ideals of the Christian home. In work that integrates mission history into the history

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\*I am grateful for comments from Deborah Gaitskell, Stephen Griffiths and Emma Wild Wood.

<sup>1</sup> Dana Robert, 'The "Christian Home" as a Cornerstone of Anglo-American Missionary Thought and Practice' in Robert, ed., *Converting Colonialism. Visions and Realities in Mission History, 1706-1914*, (Grand Rapids, 2008). 135.

<sup>2</sup> Robert, 'The "Christian Home"', 136.

of empire, scholars such as Susan Thorne and Catherine Hall have shown how 19<sup>th</sup> Century English evangelicals and humanitarians sought to advance the emancipation of female members of the new industrial bourgeoisie by representing them in opposition to colonised women who were depicted as in desperate need of conversion and liberation. The notion that non-Western cultures lacked norms of hygiene, child rearing, sexual practice and gender relations created the intellectual and moral context for evolving new modern metropolitan domesticity which defined middle class women primarily as wives and mothers.<sup>3</sup> Women missionaries then embodied this bourgeoisie domestic agenda in their encounter with non-Western peoples.<sup>4</sup>

Robert contends, however, that despite its ubiquity in missionary literature, the Christian home has only tended to be studied in terms of missionary attempts to impose Western bourgeois notions of domesticity on indigenous peoples, particularly women.<sup>5</sup> This approach highlights missionary assumptions that indigenous women were incapable of intellectual development and needed only to be trained as a servant class. She cites, for instance, a particularly influential article by Deborah Gaitskell which examines the flawed attempts by a range of Anglo-American Missions to prepare South African girls for motherhood domestic service in a socio-economic context in which white bourgeois ideals of home could not be

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<sup>3</sup> Susan Thorne, *Congregational Missions and the Making of Imperial Culture in Nineteenth-Century England*, (Stanford, 1999); Catherine Hall, *Civilising Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination 1830-1867* (Cambridge, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> Patricia Grimshaw and Peter Sherlock, 'Women and Cultural Exchanges' in N. Etherington ed., *Missions and Empire* (Oxford, 2005), 178-9.

<sup>5</sup> Robert, 'The "Christian Home"', 140-1.

sustained.<sup>6</sup> As a counter to this emphasis, Robert's own work explores African appropriations of missionary domesticity in Zimbabwe. She shows how indigenous churchwomen have seized domestic ideals 'as a means of self-reliance, self-respect and control over one's spouse'. She argues that 'the Christian home remains a popular idea today because it is a sign and means of Christianisation that women control themselves'.<sup>7</sup> Robert does, however, over-argue her case, Deborah Gaitskell's own work has shifted from the study of the missionary imposition of domesticity to African appropriations and recognition that Africans and missionaries at times had similar views of the female role.<sup>8</sup> Other scholars have examined African transformation of Western domesticity as a means of increasing female autonomy or creating a new respectable identity.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, Robert's observation that the Christian home was a 'pragmatic plastic concept that was shaped according to national, class, and gender interests ...' remains particularly apt.<sup>10</sup>

Some of the best work on the missionary household explores the contests between Africans and Europeans over the meaning and uses of Christian domesticity. Nancy Rose Hunt provides a sophisticated examination of missionary domesticity amongst Baptists working at Yakusu in Western Belgian Congo in her

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<sup>6</sup> Deborah Gaitskell, 'Housewives, Maids or Mothers: Some Contradictions of Domesticity for Christian Women in Johannesburg, 1903-39', *Journal of African History*, 24 (1983).

<sup>7</sup> Robert, 'The "Christian Home"', 157-8.

<sup>8</sup> See Deborah Gaitskell, 'Power in Prayer and Service: Women's Christian Organisations' in R. Elphick & R. Davenport, eds., *Christianity in South Africa. A Political, Cultural and Social History* (Berkeley, 1997) & 'At home with hegemony? Coercion and consent in the education of African girls for domesticity in South Africa before 1910', in Dagmar Engels and Shula Marks, eds., *Contesting Colonial Hegemony: State and Society in Africa and India* (London, 1994).

<sup>9</sup> Teresa Barnes, *"We Women worked so Hard": Gender, Urbanization and Social Reproduction in Colonial Harare, Zimbabwe, 1930-56* (Oxford, 1999); David Maxwell, *African Gifts of the Spirit. Pentecostalism and the Rise of a Zimbabwean Transnational Religious Movement* (Oxford, 2006).

<sup>10</sup> Robert, 'The "Christian Home"', 136.

monograph *A Colonial Lexicon of Birth, Ritual, Medicalisation and Mobility in the Congo*. Her analysis focuses on the quaint tales that were the staple of Protestant mission propaganda. These biographical stories of mission Africans had simple plots which recounted lives marked by progress. At their most extreme and compelling the stories told of reformed cannibals eating with knives and forks and female ex-slaves who became house girls, mothers and Bible translators. Royal visits, Christmas dinner and tea parties all figured highly in these tales because they were a means of creating home and domesticating the savage. Good behaviour on the part of Africans was rewarded with greater responsibility in the missionary household and increased access to interior rooms. Domesticated young men moved from kitchens to dining rooms and bedrooms, then onto hospitals, operating theatres and rural health centres as nurses cum evangelists. Girls received a parallel formation in housekeeping and maternal training. Marriage between former house girls and house boys, often arranged by missionaries, was the pinnacle of missionary endeavour.<sup>11</sup> Hunt's account of the processes of domesticity amongst African men and women on a mission station is all the more compelling because of her use of fieldwork and extensive oral evidence to show how missionary attempts to remake African subjectivities were 'debated and translated' by those she calls 'middle figures' who strove to forge their own identity as respectable Christian elites.<sup>12</sup>

My own research on the Congo Evangelistic Mission (CEM) based in Katanga South East Belgian Congo shares many of Hunt's conclusions about missionary

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<sup>11</sup> Nancy Hunt, *A Colonial Lexicon of Birth, Ritual, Medicalisation and Mobility in the Congo* (Durham, 1999), 117-95.

<sup>12</sup> Hunt, *A Colonial Lexicon*, 7-8.

programmes of domesticity. But there are also significant differences. Although Hunt offers a nuanced account of the missionary household as a site of intimate evangelism, she examines the social and intellectual world of African Christians with far more empathy than she does that of missionaries who are the major concern of this article. The CEM case shows that missionary attempts to build the Christian household were highly contingent. In the opening stage of the encounter the household was at best flimsy and often mobile as pioneer missionaries attempted to come to terms with vast territories under their supervision. Once established, the household remained vulnerable to disease and death, hunger and exhaustion, isolation and loneliness. Missionaries remained reliant upon Africans for material and emotional sustenance. They constructed deep and lasting relationships with black brethren, although the stresses and strains of the colonial situation meant that they could at times also reject those with whom they formed the closest bonds. The porosity of the missionary household also had implications for the creation of ethnographic knowledge. Scholars are increasingly interested in the contribution of missionaries to colonial science, particularly their role as ethnographers.<sup>13</sup> The contingency of their existence meant that missionaries encountered Africans in circumstances far removed from stereotypical location of the veranda. Their observations were often well grounded, particularly in the self-representations of African converts who were evolving their own response to Christian modernity.

Some of the differences between the Baptist and CEM cases stem from different methodological approaches. Hunt makes close readings of the missionary

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<sup>13</sup> Patrick Harries and David Maxwell eds., *The Spiritual in the Secular. Missionaries and Knowledge about Africa* (Grand Rapids, 2012).

propaganda intended for European supporters. Mission periodicals were filled with optimistic stories of the transformation of African bodies and circumstances and normative statements about the parameters of the African Christian household in order to convince donors and intercessors of the value of the missionary cause. But missionaries also engaged in a private correspondence with friends and prayer partners, sharing frustrations and failings as well as successes. The genre of these letters was more that of the embattled and isolated Psalmist than the triumphal evangelical. This personal correspondence is supplemented by a genre of missionary images, usually found in personal photograph albums and sometimes magic lantern shows, which depicts the more intimate side of missionary life. These images taken by missionaries can show a far more multifaceted response to Africans than the simple oppositions that published evangelical prose for readers back home usually allowed. Other differences between the CEM and Baptists were theological and material.

### ***The Congo Evangelistic Mission***

The Congo Evangelistic Mission, CEM, was founded by William Burton and James Salter in Mwanza, Katanga, Belgian Congo in 1915. It was intended to be a mission to Luba and Songye speaking peoples. As an independent Pentecostal Faith Mission it was an exemplar of the type of pneumatic Christianity that increased in numerical strength and public presence throughout the Twentieth Century in Africa, Asia and Latin America to become one of the most dynamic religious movements in the contemporary world. The Congolese Church which is descended

from CEM claims over half a million adherents today.<sup>14</sup> The Baptist Missionary Society, founded in 1792, was one of the first Non-Conformist missionary organisations. Pioneered in Western Congo in 1880 it preceded the Leopoldian State of 1885 and its Belgian successor of 1908. It shared the latter's civilising mission of health and education, though often differed with it on the vexed issue of labour.<sup>15</sup> CEM Pentecostals were driven by a millennial imperative to evangelise and shunned the 'incubus' of a large mission infrastructure because it slowed continuous Gospel proclamation.<sup>16</sup> Fresh recruits were quickly placed in new stations in order to maximise the chances of reaching the unsaved before end times. CEM stations neither resembled the 'Little Englands' in the rainforest created by the Baptists nor the vast mission towns - even 'Kingdoms' - created by Catholic missions and which drew from state patronage.<sup>17</sup> Instead, a missionary family or two were responsible for vast swathes of territory. Because they were reliant upon an army of African evangelists, CEM missionaries had less capacity to transform African lives.

Burton and Salter had arrived in Katanga as bachelors. Their intent had been to live an itinerant life, planting churches in African villages by building up a core of faithful believers. They would move on when the assembly was self-supporting, self-governing and self-propagating – the ideal of the influential missionary thinker,

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<sup>14</sup> D. Cartwright, 'Zaire Evangelistic Mission' in S. Burgess, ed., *International Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements* (Grand Rapids, 2001). The movement split after independence and was given numbers as part of President Mobuto's top down amalgamation and classification of Protestant denominations. The largest section is now known as *La Trentième*, [The Thirtieth].

<sup>15</sup> B. Stanley, *The History of the Baptist Missionary Society, 1792-1992* (Edinburgh, 1992), 106-39.

<sup>16</sup> Kay, P. 1996. 'Cecil Polhill, The Pentecostal Missionary Union, and the Fourfold Gospel with Healing and Speaking in Tongues: Signs of a New Movement in Missions', North Atlantic Missiology Project, Henry Martyn Centre, Cambridge, *Position Paper* no.20.

<sup>17</sup> Allen Roberts, 'History, Ethnicity and Change in the Christian Kingdom' of Southeastern Zaire' in L. Vail, ed., *The Creation of Tribalism in Southern Africa* (London, 1989).

Henry Venn.<sup>18</sup> This plan did not prove possible and so they developed the station at Mwanza. Their first house was extremely rudimentary and shared with African brethren. Like many pioneering missionaries Burton and Salter took their first converts into their home as ‘houseboys’ in order to enhance their Christian formation. The missionaries’ relations with their first convert, fittingly named Abraham, were characterised by a good degree of reciprocity. They taught him the precious skill of literacy and he helped them learn Kiluba, procured them food and gained them an entry into local society. Indeed the walls of their first dwelling place were so thin that Burton and Salter were treated to a rare snapshot of how African Christians viewed them. In his hagiography of Abraham, Salter describes how the missionaries could hear their African companions discuss their faltering attempts at language learning: [They] ‘mimicked our voices and accents and exposed our mistakes so faithfully that we had to gag ourselves with bedding or we should have been convulsed with laughter’. Burton and Salter also grasped that their early converts viewed literacy as possessing a talismanic quality. While constructing buildings at different ends of the station Burton and Salter would communicate via messages written on wood chips carried by Abraham. They lived in close enough proximity to him to observe that he had made a collection of these discarded chips among the treasures in his trunk.<sup>19</sup>

Plate 1 William Burton on Trek (courtesy CAM [Preston 26])

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<sup>18</sup> T. Yates, *Christian Missions in the Twentieth Century*, (Cambridge, 1994).

<sup>19</sup> J. Salter, *Abraham: Our First Convert* (London, ca 1933), 8-11.



In the pioneering phase the CEM household was often mobile as missionaries trekked, preaching to outlying villages accompanied by Christian porters who carried tents, provisions, the camera and other scientific instruments. The porters relied on the missionary's gun for game and protection, sleeping close to his tent at night. The missionaries depended upon their porters for local knowledge and were made aware that once they had retired to their tents at night their African colleagues would translate their 'faltering' attempts at Kiluba into proper gospel preaching, explaining what they had really meant to say.<sup>20</sup> More efficacious still in terms of proselytism was the porters' habit of singing out the gospel in order to ward off dangerous animals and raise their spirits as they traversed alien territory. It was song rather than preaching that attracted an audience and communicated new Christian ideas.<sup>21</sup> The sojourns to African villages provided the key opportunity to pursue the general activities that make up ethnography: observing, inquiring, conversing, noting and photographing.

Plate 2 Preparing for a trek (courtesy CAM [Preston 3]).

Burton and Salter soon realised that they were not suited to the single lifestyle. Burton was shocked by Luba notions of sexual hospitality. He was also unnerved by the advances of young women and felt unable to proselytize them. In March 1918 he went to South Africa to recruit more missionaries and to marry Hettie Trollip, a young woman from a respectable farming family in the Cape who were members of the Pentecostal Apostolic Faith Mission. Salter also married quickly but in 1922 left the field to run operations from England. Henceforth, Burton

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<sup>20</sup> Max, Moorhead, *Missionary Pioneering in Congo Forests. A narrative of William F. P. Burton and His Companions in the Native Villages of Luba-Land* (Preston, 1922), 75, 96;

<sup>21</sup> W. Burton, *Honey Bee. Life Story of a Congo Evangelist* (Johannesburg, 1959), 25, 27.

acted as secretary and *représentant légal* of the CEM. As effective head of the mission he was not only responsible for evangelizing the villages around Mwanza but for oversight of the entire field. Between 1918 and 1925, over thirty Pentecostal missionaries joined the CEM, vastly expanding the mission's reach across the entirety of the former Luba polity and subsequently into Songye-speaking areas and later into towns and cities.

Two of the most significant new recruits were Teddy Hodgson and Harold Womersley who arrived in 1920 and 1924 respectively. Womersley proved particularly skilled at pioneering new stations and in his history of the CEM he describes the first 18 months of his life in the Congo as that of a 'rough bachelor'. Although engaged to be married, the colonial state took almost two years to process his fiancée's papers. He was first sent alone to Kisanga where he constructed a simple mud and wattle hut and cooked his own food. Doubtless moved by his loneliness the villagers presented him with a 'village beauty, smeared head to foot with red ochre and palm oil, hair ridged and bobbed, blue and white beads round her ankles, and a tiny beaded cloth around her waist'. Womersley declined, drawing consolation from the fact that several months of solid isolation compelled him to make rapid progress in speaking Kiluba.<sup>22</sup> From Kisanga he was transferred to Lake Kikondja to pioneer the region with Hodgson. Then in 1927 he and his new wife, Josephine, were sent to a completely new area of Busangu where she was the first white woman locally encountered. Seven years later they were moved to another remote location, Kabongo in the far north of the territory. Although

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<sup>22</sup> H. Womersley, *Congo Miracle. Fifty Years of God's working in Congo (Zaire)* (London, 1974), 82 & 85.

Josephine transformed Harold's bachelor hut into a 'comfortable and attractive home', they often worked alone with Harold forced to make treks lasting several weeks to evangelise outlying villages and conduct mission business.<sup>23</sup>

Hodgson was a bachelor until 1932 living a peripatetic existence visiting lakeside fishing villages on his boat. His young wife Linda died of black water fever in 1933 and he remained a bachelor until 1939 when he married Helen who lived until 1959. Hodgson drew much from the companionship of these oarsmen and African evangelists.<sup>24</sup>

A good deal of Burton's correspondence with Salter and with the Meyerscough family, who acted as the mission's treasurers, concerned the selection of new recruits. As Pentecostals, applicants had, of course, to be baptised in the Holy Spirit, have a passion for soul winning, and believe in the eternal damnation of the unrepentant sinner. In addition, new missionaries had to possess the qualities necessary to build Christian households. They had to be 'useful', 'intelligent' and 'hard working'; those who were lazy, dirty and lacked initiative were sent home.<sup>25</sup> Missionary wives had to be 'all round capable girls'.<sup>26</sup> Given that the ideal was companionate marriage one might have assumed that applications from single men would have been discouraged like those of single women. But the former were accepted while the latter were viewed as too frail to survive the harsh bush

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<sup>23</sup> Womersley, *Congo Miracle*, 82 & passim

<sup>24</sup> E. Hodgson, *Fishing for Congo Fisherfolk* (London, 1934) & *Out of Darkness. The Story of an Indigenous Church in Belgian Congo* (London, 1946)

<sup>25</sup> Preston, Central African Missions, henceforth CAM (formerly CEM), file Burton to Meyerscough, William Burton to Thomas Meyerscough, 25<sup>th</sup> March & 18<sup>th</sup> August 1925.

<sup>26</sup> CAM, Burton to Thomas Meyerscough, Hettie Burton to Edith Meyerscough, 10 February 1944.

environment and not as useful as African male evangelists who cost far less to maintain. The bar on single women caused a stir at home not least because female vocations far exceeded male ones and women were the chief supporters of missionary work. Eventually some single women were accepted for missionary service, not least because it was hoped that they might be transformed into wives for bachelors.<sup>27</sup>

Plate 3 The Mission house at Mwanza (courtesy CAM [Preston 53])

Letters back home also carried advice for new arrivals on the accoutrements of the mission household. New recruits were encouraged to bring with them ‘a portable type writer for men... small tool chest, bedding and haberdashery and a little special crockery’. A good mahogany dining table, high quality reed carpets and the essential Singer sowing machine could all be procured locally.<sup>28</sup> The physical dimensions and setting of the mission house formed the first set of object lessons in Christian modernity. Images in magic lantern shows and CEM literature highlight the mission house with well-tended gardens and trees, and clear cut straight paths. There were a good number of shots of brick making. Bricks were far more than building block: they were associated with wage labour and new types of kiln; they produced rectangular structures which formed a powerful contrast with the circle so prominent in African architecture. Bricks built straight roads, bridges, beat back

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<sup>27</sup> CAM, Burton to Thomas Meyerscough, Theo Meyerscough to William Burton, 23 April 1934.

<sup>28</sup> CAM, file, Meyerscough, Burton to CEM Home Council, 25 January 1926 & William Burton to Edith Meyerscough, ca 1944; W. Burton to the British and Foreign Bible Society, July 1921 cited in Moorehead, *Missionary Pioneering*, 34.

vegetation, conquered streams and rivers, and kept out animals and some insects.<sup>29</sup>

An obituary for the Catholic missionary, Emile Callewaert, celebrated the fact that he had burnt more than 2 million bricks during his pioneering work in Katanga.<sup>30</sup> If the CEM missionaries ever did attempt to reproduce an alien idyllic setting it was that of the South African Cape.<sup>31</sup> The Burtons imported seeds and livestock from Hettie's family farm.<sup>32</sup>

Plate 4 Brick making (courtesy CAM [Preston 44])

While it was relatively easy to construct the physical circumstances of a Christian household, social relations were more difficult to engineer and maintain. The axiom that the twentieth-century African Christian movement was “a woman's movement” did not apply to Luba women, who initially proved more resistant to Christianity than young men.<sup>33</sup> Luba culture ascribed women a status complementary to men. Through coiffures, cicatrisation, and adornment, their bodies became receptacles of spiritual energy and beholders of political secrets.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, missionary strictures about Christian marriage seemed to limit their options to bear and successfully rear children. As in other East and Central African contexts the first converts were runaways, women fleeing domestic slavery or abusive relationships. Hettie Burton built a women's refuge, which beside women in

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<sup>29</sup> John MacKenzie, 'Missionaries, Science and the Environment in Nineteenth-Century Africa' in A. Porter, ed., *The Imperial Horizons of British Protestant Missions, 1880-1914* (Grand Rapids, 2003) 116.

<sup>30</sup> *Le Messenger du Saint Esprit*. [Ecole Des Missions (Brabant)] 30, 1- 3, January – June 1938, 134.

<sup>31</sup> CAM, file, William Burton to Phil and Edith Meyerscough, 28 January 1938 WB.

<sup>32</sup> William Burton sermon in South Africa, 1918 in Moorhead, *Missionary Pioneering*, 121.

<sup>33</sup> B. Sundkler, “African Church History in a New Key,” in Kirsten Holst-Peterson, ed., *Religion Development and African Identity* (Uppsala: Scandinavian Institute of African Studies 1987), 83. This was often the pattern in Southern Africa but it also did not apply to the Yoruba. See J.D.Y. Peel, *Religious Encounter in the Making of the Yoruba* (Bloomington, 2000), 234–40

<sup>34</sup> M. Nooter Roberts and A. Roberts, eds., *Memory: Luba Art and the Making of History* (New York, 1996), ch. 3.

flight, attracted other socially marginal females such as widows who lacked the security of living children and abandoned infants.<sup>35</sup> In time, other women converted, especially as the female missionaries developed their skills in midwifery.

In an autobiographical account of her refuge work Hettie Burton offered an evangelical critique of institutions which she believed limited women's entrance into Christian monogamy and companionate marriage such as polygamy and commoditised bride price. Butanda and Kupata female initiation ceremonies which were important moments of liminality, education and socialisation into Luba culture and history were a particular target as sources of indiscipline and corrupting sexual mores.<sup>36</sup> The conditions of the typical village, from which girls were to be liberated, were repeatedly contrasted with the Christian home.<sup>37</sup> Ordinary domestic activity was turned into another set of object lessons for African women. Hettie Burton wrote:

In each group of girls ... I select the neatest and most intelligent, bringing them into our home do so some sweeping, scrubbing, dusting etc .... Their quick eyes take in many advantages and conveniences in our manner of life, commencing even with whitewashed ceilings and walls which make our home so light and gives a sense of cleanliness. They admire our texts and

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<sup>35</sup> M. Wright, *Strategies of Slaves and Women. Life Stories from East Central Africa* (London, 1993).

<sup>36</sup> Nooter-Roberts and Roberts, *Memory*.

<sup>37</sup> H. Burton, *My Black Daughters*, (London, 1949) 20-30.

pictures, making a mental note that they would like such things in their own homes when they get married.<sup>38</sup>

Taking the reader on a virtual tour of the home of Djenipa, one of her prize girls who married an evangelist, she wrote:

We are at once struck by the general neatness. ... The table has a clean white cloth on it, and there are two substantial home-made chairs. A book shelf on their walls was once a brick mould. It holds their precious testaments, hymn books, school books and a few lesser helps.

The food is in the cupboard. The beds are nicely made from planks cut in a near-by forest and are covered by counterpanes of native cloth. There is even a jam-jar of flowers on the table, while the wall is adorned by texts and coloured prints taken from the *Illustrated London News*.

A backroom contains their supply of peanuts, maize, millet and other foodstuffs, stored in big earthen pots with smaller pots on top to keep out dust, rats and insects.

The little ones are dressed in simple loincloths. ... The elder girls, however have dresses ... All are clean and supremely happy, so different from the dirty, diseased youngsters in the villages around.

In addition, Djenipa and her female Christian colleagues cultivated successful gardens and supported their husbands in evangelistic work.<sup>39</sup> Missionary photographs and slides celebrated these living embodiments of Christian

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<sup>38</sup> H. Burton, *Daughters*, 38.

<sup>39</sup> H. Burton, *Daughters*, 38-42.

domesticity. A popular image was an unnamed evangelist and his nuclear family, dressed in cotton clothes outside their square brick house. Another favourite was of unnamed 'pastors wives' in what the Burtons described as 'clean' cotton clothes. Their heads covered with simple turbans rather than complex coiffures, they represented a new type of Christian womanhood. The slide was complemented by another of five male pastors, dressed in simple cotton shirts. William Burton argued that clean clothes and homes were the 'beginning of a cleaner moral order'.<sup>40</sup> The images represented to western Church audiences the best fruit of missionary labours, providing outward and visible signs of conversion.

Plate 5 An evangelist and his family (courtesy CAM [Preston 75])

Plate 6 'Pastors Wives': (left to right) Ndokasa, Luisa and Jennifer (courtesy CAM [Preston 73])

Plate 7 Pastors: (left to right) Yoela Kapumba, David Katontoka, Samsoni Kashamo, Abraham Nyuki, Tshango Menge (courtesy CAM [Preston 50])

As in other African Christian movements it was African women themselves who chose to abandon their elaborate coiffures and cicatarization and cover their heads and bodies with cotton clothing as markers of respectability.<sup>41</sup> However, because this respectability fused with former notions of rank and honour Luba and Songye households never quite resembled the missionary ideal of the nuclear family. In villages far away from missionary supervision, the African Christian patriarch built an extended family of kin and collected a following of clients in order to enhance his

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<sup>40</sup> W. Burton, *Congo Sketches* (London, 1950)

<sup>41</sup> W. Burton, *Congo Evangelistic Mission Report*, 42, May – June 1933.



esteem, prestige and weight in the community.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, first generation evangelists frustrated missionary attempts at matchmaking by preferring to find their own wives, Christian or not.<sup>43</sup> It was fitting that African Christianisation had its own internal dynamic because missionary ideals and schemes so often failed.

### ***Disease and Death in the Missionary Household***

Missionary photography was an effective tool in recording the transforming effects of Christian modernity but what it did not show was how the household remained vulnerable to disease and stress. Although literary scholars have rightly shown how missionary propaganda emphasised disease and misfortune in order to portray the missionary life as one of heroism, missionaries did in fact fall ill and die, often in great numbers.<sup>44</sup> For most of the colonial era, doctors across Africa were unable to cure a host of diseases including pneumonia, yaws, tropical ulcers and several other diseases tied to colonial underdevelopment and poverty such as tuberculosis and cholera. It was not until the widespread use of antibiotics after the Second World War that European doctors in the continent gained a degree of healing power over these and other afflictions.<sup>45</sup> In West Africa missionaries died at alarming rates. In 1905 it was noted that the Catholic Society of African Missions (SMA) had lost 283 members in the first 50 years of its existence. It was estimated that, in Dahomey, a male missionary lasted three years, and a missionary nun for

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<sup>42</sup> T.C. McCaskie, 'Cultural Encounters: Britain and Africa in the Nineteenth Century' in R. Winks (ed.) *The Oxford History of the British Empire* vol. 5 *Historiography* (Oxford, 1999), 668-9.

<sup>43</sup> Interview with Ngoy Kabuya, Ruashi, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) 13 May 2007.

<sup>44</sup> Grimshaw and Sherlock, 'Women and Cultural Exchanges', 179.

<sup>45</sup> Walima Kalusa, 'Christian Medical Discourse and Praxis on the Imperial Frontier: Explaining the Popularity of Missionary Medicine in Mwinilunga District, Zambia, 1906-1935' in Harries and Maxwell, eds., *The Spiritual in the Secular*, 248.

four.<sup>46</sup> Similar circumstances prevailed in Belgian Congo. Burton and Salter had originally set out as a group of four but one colleague, George Armstrong, died before he arrived in Mwanza and the other, George Blakeney, was so demoralised by a recurrent illness that he returned home.<sup>47</sup>

In his provocative book, *Out of Our Minds*, the influential anthropologist Johannes Fabian makes a 'critical study of the objective conditions that determined knowledge of the Other as reported in travelogues and early ethnographies'.<sup>48</sup> Seeking to destroy the myth that field work was conducted in laboratory conditions by the disembodied anthropologist, Fabian writes:

More often or not they ... were out of their minds with extreme fatigue, fear, delusions of grandeur, and feelings ranging from anger to contempt. Much of the time too they were in the thralls of "fever" and other tropical diseases, under the influence of alcohol or opiates ... high doses of quinine, arsenic and other ingredients from the expedition's medical chest.<sup>49</sup>

This model of encounter, framed by the realities of late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Central Africa and in particular the omnipresence of disease and drugs, sheds light upon the stresses and strains of the missionary household and the relationships missionaries cultivated with African Christians. Although in the case of the CEM the problem was not so much drugs but the lack of them. As Pentecostals, CEM

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<sup>46</sup> E. Isichei, *A History of Christianity in Africa* (London, 1995), 85.

<sup>47</sup> W. Burton, *God Working with Them. Being Eighteen Years of Congo Evangelistic Mission History* (London, 1933), 18.

<sup>48</sup> J. Fabian, *Out of Our Minds. Reason and Madness in the Exploration of Central Africa* (Berkeley, 2000), 8.

<sup>49</sup> Fabian, *Minds*, 3.

missionaries believed in divine healing and God's providential care, hence they preferred to live by faith rather than take prophylactics. Both Burton and Salter experimented with non-drug taking before deciding to learn from Armstrong's death. However, their colleague Cyril Taylor, missionary pioneer of the adjacent CEM station at Ngoimani, continued to abstain.<sup>50</sup> On Taylor, William Burton wrote: 'Taylor is himself in a funny condition. He does not seem to have the energy to settle down definitely to do anything, but wanders weakly and listlessly from one thing to another, so that often his natives, despairing of ever making him understand their palavers, come over here, to beg me to explain things to him'.<sup>51</sup>

Because of their missionary's condition, Taylor's evangelists acted with a high degree of autonomy. They refused to carry for the colonial authorities and were renowned for public displays of tongue speaking and falling down in the spirit. Such behaviour unnerved the Belgian colonial state, which was already suspicious of the independence of low church Protestant adepts and the fearful of a repeat of the prophetic movement led by Simon Kimbangu in the West of the country.<sup>52</sup> Neither did William Burton's own early abstention from drug taking facilitate good relations with the colonial state as a letter to Salter penned in 1919 illustrates: 'I assure you Jimmy I am so weak I can scarcely walk across Elizabethville. On the day I visited the Vice-Governor General I must have had a temperature of 104 and so I can scarcely remember anything I said to him'.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> CAM, file, Burton to Salter Letters and Reports, 1919-30, William Burton to Salter, 29 November 1919.

<sup>51</sup> CAM, file, Burton to Salter, 28 April 1923.

<sup>52</sup> CAM, file, Burton to Salter, 22 October 1928. On relations with the state see David Maxwell, 'The Soul of the Luba: W.F.P. Burton, Missionary Ethnography and Belgian Colonial Science', *History and Anthropology*, 19, 4, (2008), 331-3.

<sup>53</sup> CAM, Burton to Salter, 29 November 1919.

Salter did begin to take quinine but nevertheless fell victim to the dreaded black water fever, doubtless because he was not taking the prophylactic in the right dosage. In May 1917 he set off on an evangelistic trek three days to the north of Mwanza to pioneer what would become Taylor's station. When he did not return, a former slave-turned-evangelist, Shalumbo, set out to look for him and located him near death on the edge of a village. Shalumbo nursed Salter back to consciousness, but once the latter could walk he set off again with tent, carriers and a raging fever. Ignoring Shalumbo's protestations he staggered from village to village in a fit of preaching. Eventually he was found in a delirious state by a trader who accompanied him back to Mwanza. One can only imagine what the villagers of Ngoimani region made of their first encounter with Christianity, in the person of a fever stricken missionary, literally out of his mind in a state of delirium. But perhaps, once again, his African helper Shalumbo explained what he meant to say. This was an extreme example but as Harold Womersley observed, missionaries often trekked with fever that made their heads 'buzz and ache'.<sup>54</sup>

Burton's correspondence with Salter and the Meyercoughs documents many missionary triumphs, but also a catalogue of misfortunes: the death of missionaries and their children, poverty, the persecution of African evangelists, and a host of ailments affecting colleagues such as malaria, black water fever, pneumonic influenza, dysentery and nervous stress. Missionaries on furlough returned late due to illness and some never returned. By 1932 alone 8 CEM missionaries had died in

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<sup>54</sup> Womersley, *Congo Miracle*, 93.

the field or in England.<sup>55</sup> It was difficult for missionaries to rest and recuperate on their stations. The household did not equate with privacy. Hospitality had to be offered to officials, traders and other missionaries. There was also a constant stream of African visitors: enquirers, the curious, those in need of advice and the sick and the needy. Missionaries with children suffered the pangs of separation when those of school age were sent to Southern Rhodesia to study. Those with young children lived in constant fear of them falling ill. Even furloughs could become draining and alienating experiences; there were books and articles to write, the constant iteration for fundraising, but also the discovery that they had 'lost much of what made them really English'. As William Burton put it:

[T]he language is a little less perfect, manners and customs change appreciably in those intervening years. Brothers and friends have married. Old chums have now found other interests .... They find that they that they had forgotten how to swing onto a tram-car, and they would far prefer meeting a herd of buffalo to crossing a street with cars rushing up and down. Indeed they have largely become denationalised.<sup>56</sup>

These misfortunes added to the pressures upon the Burtons who were left holding the fort while their own health declined. In 1928 he recounted to Salter how each mailbag contained 40-80 letters from donors which he was obliged to respond to. In addition he was writing half of each bimonthly edition of *The Congo Evangelistic Mission Report*, as well as running a mission and dealing with the

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<sup>55</sup> W. Burton, *God Working*, 263-4.

<sup>56</sup> Burton, *God Working*, 260.

colonial state. By this stage his body had been terribly weakened by malaria and he had lost 10 inches from around his waist. 'I CANNOT POSSIBLY carry on much longer' he complained.<sup>57</sup> His wife was in a far worse condition, suffering from valvular heart disease. The following year he reported: 'I hate to own it, but the facts are facts. Hettie is losing ground all the time. Her heart is in a really serious condition', the burden of station responsibility was 'sapping her life'.<sup>58</sup> They struggled on with no relief until 1935 when Hettie's nerves were in such a state that she was sent over the edge into palpitations and breath-loss by crying babies and shooting motors.<sup>59</sup>

Fabian observes that Europeans often approached Africa and its population through 'hygiene'. This involved keeping clean but was a broader notion including ideas of discipline which was essential in the absence of the social pressures and the amenities of civilisation. Self-control was a prerequisite for the control of others too, given that the assertion of bodily vigour and the concealment of weakness were crucial to maintaining white authority. The loss of vigour through illness in front of Africans was deeply unsettling.<sup>60</sup> Worse still despite Burton's belief in the centrality of patriarchal Christian marriage, wives and single women found themselves in charge of entire mission stations.

To some extent William Burton dealt with stress by projecting it onto others.

Mwanza became a sacred enclave from which he seemed to do battle with the rest

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<sup>57</sup> CAM, Burton to Salter, 22 October 1928.

<sup>58</sup> CAM, Burton to Salter, 22 August 1929.

<sup>59</sup> CAM, Burton to Salter, 1 November 1935.

<sup>60</sup> Fabian, *Minds*, 59-63.

of the world: the Belgian authorities and their Catholic allies, the 'dirty Portuguese', the Protestant Christian Council in Belgian Congo, and even other Pentecostal denominations such as the Assemblies of God. He had little time for colleagues who were incompetent at French or Kiluba. In one of his darkest moments, whilst recuperating in South Africa, he seems to have momentarily fallen out with his lifelong friend, Jimmy Salter, accusing him of raiding his private letters. Salter had not immediately taken his partner's side against younger missionary who appeared to be as headstrong as Burton himself.<sup>61</sup>

It has been widely noted that missionaries behaved toward and wrote about Africans in a contradictory manner. Burton invested a good deal of creative and intellectual energy into collecting, photographing and painting Luba coiffures and sculptures. His scientific work on the Luba was valued by contemporary social anthropologists and museum curators in South Africa and Belgium and yet in his missionary writings he derided Luba sculptures as crude idols and complex coiffures were cast as frivolous wastes of time. It is likely that mood swings caused by fatigue and isolation help explain some of this bizarre behaviour. The stresses and strains of the colonial situation also contributed to the schizophrenic behaviour which missionaries exhibited toward progressive African Christians, the very category they had invested most in creating. Those who appeared too westernised were cast as mimics and those who were too autonomous were viewed with suspicion.<sup>62</sup> Like many of his colleagues, Burton appeared unable to come to terms with the built-in

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<sup>61</sup> CAM, files, Burton to Salter & Burton to the Meyerscoughs.

<sup>62</sup> D. Maxwell, 'Photography and the Religious Encounter: Ambiguity and Aesthetics in Missionary Representations of the Luba of South East Belgian Congo', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 53, 1 (2011), 67-72. CAM, Burton to Salter, 11 November 1925.

obsolescence of missionary work which involved devolving responsibility to an African church and going home. Doubtless, this was to do with the sacrifices he had made.

William Burton's embattled outlook and his wife's recurring health problems doubtless stemmed in part from bereavement at the loss of their child. In a tragic letter to Thomas Meyerscough in June 1923, Burton recounts they had been parents for just 10 days. Their child, David, named after Livingstone, one of the 'boniest babies' William had ever seen, died from a small insect bite. He concluded: 'It is a sweet thing to have been a father and mother but we do terribly miss our little boy'.<sup>63</sup> William never wrote about the death of his son again but in her account of women's work, published 16 years later in 1949, Hettie explained that they had longed for their own child to rear as an example but that God had filled her emptiness with another passion. Henceforth she threw herself into work with girls and women. Her book entitled *My Black Daughters* was prefaced with the words 'God took my one child and gave me many'. Indeed she formed a particularly strong bond of intimacy with a little girl, Mangasa, whom she adopted following the death of her mother and cared for until her marriage. Hettie devoted a whole chapter of her book to Mangasa although it is narrated in an unemotional manner.<sup>64</sup> But her fondness for the child is revealed in her loving gaze captured in a magic lantern slide and in the reminiscences of Mangasa's son who returned to Mwanza as a school teacher.<sup>65</sup> More generally, African Christian informants spoke of their relations with

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<sup>63</sup> CAM, Burton to Thomas Meyerscough, 22 June 1923.

<sup>64</sup> H. Burton, *Daughters*, 2, 59-64.

<sup>65</sup> Interview, Banze Inabanza Jacques, Mwanza, DRC, 22 May 2007.



missionaries with a similar ambivalence that missionaries displayed towards them. Often deploying the parental idiom African converts depicted missionaries as kindly people who had taken them into their homes as children, provided material security and given them opportunities to learn new skills. Less appreciated were the missionary impatience, surveillance and overemphasis on discipline and hard work.<sup>66</sup>

Plate 8 Hettie Burton and baby Mangasa (courtesy CAM [Preston 76])

Plate 9 Mangasa (courtesy CAM [Preston 72])

Plate 10 Hettie Burton and Mangasa

Plate 11 Banze Inabanza Jacques, Mwanza, DRC, 22 May 2007 [photo by author]

Besides finding succour from sometimes conflicted friendships with African Christians, CEM missionaries were sustained by a theology of action, hope and endurance. They drew encouragement from the Psalms and inspiration from the miracles recounted in the Gospels. They celebrated conversions and movements of the Holy Spirit. They looked for signs of God's providential care in unexpected gifts, the good deeds of others and answer to prayer. Most of all they believed in God's power to heal.<sup>67</sup> The Burtons stayed at Mwanza in spite of recurring collapses of health, including William's cancer of the colon in the 1940s. Hettie remained until her early death in 1952. William was forced to leave Belgian Congo during the violence that followed the secession of Katanga from the newly independent colony

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<sup>66</sup> For example interviews: Nshimbi Kinekinda Simon, Ruashi, DRC, 8 May 2007; Ngoy Maloba Ngulungu, Ruashi, DRC, 9 May 2007; Mama Andyena, Kyungu Dyese & Mama Numbi Martha, Mwanza, DRC, Mwanza 21 May 2007. See also Hunt, *Colonial Lexicon* chapter 2 for similar reminiscences from missionized Christians.

<sup>67</sup> W. Burton, *Signs Following* (London, ND).

in 1960. He stayed on in Southern Africa living an existence of peripatetic preaching until his death in 1971. In his history of the CEM, aptly entitled *Congo Miracle*, Harold Womersley recounted a similar trajectory of collapses and ‘miraculous healings of his body’ that punctuated his period in the Congo 1924-1970.<sup>68</sup>

William Burton also took refuge in missionary science and art. At times his letter writing would digress into lengthy descriptions of African landscapes. He would irritate junior colleagues by extending homeward journeys in order to paint a sunset or an African village scene.<sup>69</sup> He described his art as his ‘safety valve’.<sup>70</sup> His most stressful moments seemed to have been particularly productive. In the same 1928 letter to Salter in which he protested that he could not continue any longer he also described how he had taken about 400 photographs, some of them ‘remarkably fine’, and written a 30,000 word hagiography of an African evangelist.<sup>71</sup> In this period he also finished an extensive ethnography of the Luba.

Because of the contingency of the missionary household we can be sure that Burton’s ethnographic representations came from empirical soil, though his reliance on converts as auxiliaries gave his research a particular emphasis. He often wrote of cannibalism but like other missionary writers he never saw evidence of the practice himself; his accounts were always second hand, generated by his Christian porters

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<sup>68</sup> Womersley, *Congo Miracle*, 129-30.

<sup>69</sup> H. Womersley, *Wm F. P. Burton. Congo Pioneer* (London, 1973), 100-03.

<sup>70</sup> CAM, Burton to Salter, 15 June 1933.

<sup>71</sup> CAM, Burton to Salter, 22 October 1928.

on trek.<sup>72</sup> These progressive young men, often the subject of Burton's hagiographical success stories, drew upon idioms of respectability to assert moral boundaries between themselves and 'pagan', even cannibal, neighbours.

In practice Euro-American notions of the Christian household were transformed by the realities of life in remote regions of Central Africa. Africans entered the most private spaces of missionary homes as servants. Others were brought up as surrogate children, bottle-fed from birth. Black porters lived in even closer proximity to missionaries on trek and were sometimes impelled to provide them with intimate care. Disease and death took companionate marriage and family life beyond the reach of many. Yet missionaries believed themselves to be exemplars of Euro-American ideals and strove to maintain them. As John Mackenzie observes, they had a self-image as 'a people who controlled their own natural and human environments with the help of their technology, science and western medicine, as well as through their moral aura, their moral force and state of grace'.<sup>73</sup> The Burtons did their best to ensure that the interior of their house resembled a Western home so that white visitors would not feel out of place and they insisted on maintaining European standards of hygiene and decorum. Visiting missionaries had to wash and change clothing before dinner.<sup>74</sup> The gap between theory and practice added to the stresses of missionary existence.

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<sup>72</sup> W. Arens, *The Man-eating Myth: Anthropology and Anthropophagy* (New York, 1979); for instance the 19 pages account by Hettie Burton, 'A Missionary Exploration of the Ludvidyo Watershed', CAM file, Burton to Salter, May 1923.

<sup>73</sup> John Mackenzie, 'Missionaries, Science and the Environment in Nineteenth-Century Africa' in A. Porter, ed., *The Imperial Horizons of British Protestant Missions, 1880-1914* (Grand Rapids, 2003) 128.

<sup>74</sup> CAM, file, Meyerscough, William Burton to Assemblies of God Missionary Council, 3 January 1931.

## ***Conclusion***

In this article I have explored how the missionary household was a key site of cultural encounter and one in which gender relations were a crucial element. Missionaries lived in closer proximity to African communities than colonial agents. Their agendas for social and moral transformation of African society caused them to engage more deeply with Africans than many colonial officials and settlers whose concerns were often restricted to labour and law. Because missionary designs for the African Christian household were demonstrated by example, they were more likely than others to include women among their workers and thus face more forcefully the disruption that colonial experience posed to gender relations. Given that childbearing often undermined their wellbeing, the health and energy of wives were more deeply affected than their husbands. The responsibility for maintaining a model household and an exemplary family added to their level of insecurity.<sup>75</sup>

By examining the missionary struggle to establish and maintain a Christian household we arrive at a more grounded understanding of missions. In order to manage their vulnerabilities, missionaries, both male and female, formed deep bonds of intimacy, affection and trust with African Christians and these meant that missionary lives were as transformed as they were transforming. This embedded and dynamic notion of religious change moves scholarship in the important direction away from an overly dichotomous model of encounter which depicts white missionaries colonising the minds of black pagans.

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<sup>75</sup> Grimshaw and Sherlock, 'Women and Cultural Exchanges', 181-2.

