

# Transforming Christian Womanhood: Female Sexuality and Church Missionary Society

## Encounters in the Niger Mission, Onitsha

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### *Introduction*

The effort to convert African women to Christianity transformed the religious and sexual lives of African women converts; it also transformed the English Victorian ideal of Christian womanhood itself. Fiona Bowie and T.O. Beidelman, among others, have amply demonstrated the importance missionaries placed on inducting women converts into monogamous Christian marriage. If Christian mission was to succeed in drawing converts away from traditional practices to a Christian way of life, valued male converts needed available Christian marriage partners; otherwise pre-missionary contact marriage practices would draw converts back into the wider religious and social practices in which marital practices were embedded.<sup>1</sup> Recent studies of mission activity, among the Zulu in southern Africa (Porterfield), the Krobo in the Gold Coast (Steggstra), and the Igbo in the Niger area (Bastion), have emphasized how this determination to shape African Christian womanhood placed mission Christianity on a collision course with African polygamous practices for the regulation of female sexuality, showing in addition that, by the 1920s, pre-contact marriage patterns had been adapted by fusing bridewealth systems with girls' domestic missionary education.

This article follows a different line of enquiry. While both Victorian Christian womanhood and young African women's sexuality were indubitably subject to respective regimes of patriarchal control, it is also the case that English and African women actively shaped their own subjectivities within these constraints. This study focuses on mutual encounters between different groups of African and English Christian women in the Onitsha-

based Niger mission between 1857 and the 1920s, in order to track transformations in Christian womanhood produced through these encounters.

Growing from early missionary contact in the latter 1830s, the high-water mark of the movement was reached in the 1910 World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh (Walls 199). The gathering of Protestant missionaries from countries across Europe and America at that event is testament to the need to place the Onitsha example in its wider missiological context. Yet Onitsha, the centre of the Niger Mission, has a unique place in mission history, given that its first missionaries were themselves Africans. Following the abolition of the legal slave trade, Africans—who had once been enslaved but were then freed after their rescue from slave ships by British frigate crews—were subsequently resettled in Sierra Leone. As Christian converts, many were educated as evangelists by European missionaries sent by the Church Missionary Society (CMS).<sup>2</sup> Missionary encounters in this setting are thus of particular interest because the first missionaries were themselves Africans from Sierra Leone, though the mission later reverted to the more usual pattern of European staffing.

British abolitionist pioneers envisaged co-operation between missionary, commercial and government agencies to reconstruct West African economy and society following the disruption caused by the slave trade. Thus histories of Christian mission must heed the context of British colonialism and the development of legitimate trade, if missionary progress is to be understood. Commerce by British traders, protected by the colonial administration, accompanied and supported the life of the Niger Mission. The British Colony of Lagos was established in 1861, though administered from the Gold Coast, and the British Oil Rivers Protectorate was established in 1885. Nigeria came under a unified colonial administration in 1912, with Lord Lugard acting as the first colonial administrator of a unified Nigeria from 1912-1919.

In her study of Christian mission in Madagascar and Uganda, Elizabeth E. Prevost emphasizes the “intimacy and complexity” of exchanges between English missionaries and African converts, in contrast to “binary frameworks” of analysis that pit English women missionaries over against a heathen “other” (8). Her approach thus moves beyond analysis of the contest between missionary Christianity and African pre-contact cultures over the regulation of female sexuality. Prevost’s attention to intimate and complex English-African exchanges brings into view the constant renegotiation of Christian womanhood as it was embodied in English and African women alike. Prevost identifies African women’s agency, as effective Christian evangelists, as a key factor in this renegotiation (8); in consequence, African women converts assume an active part in the negotiation of new forms of Christian womanhood, rather than appearing merely as pawns in a contest between competing patriarchal systems. A parallel approach is taken in this article; Christian womanhood is investigated as a site of intimate, complex and productive exchange between African and English women, both of whom were actively engaged in a process of renegotiation, rather than being merely passively situated within either African or English systems of patriarchal order.

For Prevost, English missionary women’s experience in the mission field “demanded a continual re-evaluation of the frames of reference which structured their understanding of Christianity and womanhood” (9). English women themselves transformed Victorian notions of ideal womanhood by exceeding their domestic confinement through validating then constructing a wider female civilizing mission, within which foreign and home Christian missions found their place as twin enterprises. One kind of universalizing logic underpins these expanding enterprises by which Christian “spiritual womanhood” sought to bring women’s gender-specific spiritual influence to bear in the world beyond the home (Daggers 6-19). Missionary women’s lives and work thus “drew meaning from a forward-looking

vision of a new world order which would mirror feminine religiosity in its fullest expression” (Prevost 292). However, as a result of the foreign missionary movement, these notions of universality underwent a radical change which was brought about through the many transformations of the original Victorian English ideal, as Christian womanhood became embodied in an ever-increasing variety of forms beyond the European world. The ideal became universal in the different sense of a single notion, once identical with its quintessential English expression but now given form in a variety of distinct local expressions, of which the English version was relocated as merely one local form among others.

Prevost’s study is concerned with the “contested and malleable character of Anglican mission Christianity and its multivalent impact on British women’s understandings of conversion, womanhood, and religious authority” in two localized African contexts and the metropole (292). While the “multivalent impact” on British women’s understandings of Christian womanhood is central to Prevost’s project, the focus of this study is on variants of African Christian womanhood in play in the single localized context of Onitsha, in their mutual encounter with English versions, and with the wider Igbo cultural forms. This investigation is dependent on second-hand observers’ accounts of African women catechists and converts, in the absence of first-hand sources. There are no writings by these African women; investigation of the forms of Christian womanhood which they represent is reliant on the writings of African male missionaries, in the first stage of the Niger mission, and English women missionaries in the second stage. This means the interpretative lens employed by these respective writers has to be taken into account; their reports allow African women missionaries and converts to be brought out of obscurity, but always through the perspectives of others, never in their own right.

At the same time, this study attempts to bring these early generations of African Christian women in the Onitsha mission, and the forms of Christian womanhood they embodied, as fully into view as the sources allow. The impact of their forms of African Christian womanhood on English women missionaries' concepts of spiritual womanhood is also significant. In this respect, the findings of this study are fully congruent with Prevost's findings in the two different local settings of Madagascar and Uganda. However, the emergence of a specifically African, often Igbo, version of Christian womanhood is also significant. Records from the two stages of the Niger mission provide a unique opportunity for examining embodied forms of African Christian womanhood in the Onitsha area and their subsequent impact on models of womanhood informing African women converts, English women missionaries and women's branches of the metropolitan mission societies.

The Niger Expedition of 1841, which aimed to explore the Niger River by boat, was crucial for the subsequent founding of the Niger Mission at Onitsha. The interests of trade, colonial administration, and mission were involved in the expedition, where the CMS was represented by a European missionary and an African catechist, Samuel Ajayi Crowther, both from Sierra Leone. Following a disastrous outcome for European expedition members, who were decimated by malaria, the CMS, under its General Secretary, Henry Venn, adopted a policy of African-led mission in the Niger area. Crowther was ordained in England in 1843, and, following a period of work among the Yoruba, he returned to Onitsha to found the first outpost of the Niger Mission in 1857, being ordained in 1864 at Canterbury Cathedral as bishop "of Western Equatorial Africa beyond the Queen's Dominions" (Dike 16). African CMS priests and catechists were required to send regular reports of their activities; these provide evidence at second hand of the contribution made by African "missionary wives" to the Niger Mission.

The 1890s saw the phasing out of African leadership, with a new generation of British missionaries arriving at Onitsha. Edith Warner, who, aged 25, was among the first British women to arrive in Onitsha in 1893 (Basden 23), was one of 388 women recruited by the CMS between 1891 and 1900; by 1900, women constituted over fifty-one percent of the missionary intake (Williams 55). The adaptation of Igbo marriage patterns, by fusion of the Igbo bridewealth system with girls' domestic missionary education (Bastion 148), coincided with the thirty year period of Warner's work at the St. Monica's girls' school she founded near Onitsha.

Despite the contribution made by African evangelists, the growing number of British women missionaries, and the supporting work of the home women's auxiliaries, representatives of the missionary societies gathered at Edinburgh for the 1910 conference were overwhelmingly white and male (Ross 6): few women and no Africans, men or women, were present, demonstrating that organization of the missionary societies remained under white male control. The renegotiations of Christian spiritual womanhood examined here thus took place alongside the ongoing exercise of European male institutional power.

The starting point for this investigation of Christian womanhood is necessarily the metropole. Victorian England first gave rise to this construction of Christian spiritual womanhood, which was exported via missionary activity first to Sierra Leone and, later, more widely across the African subcontinent, but subsequently re-imported in an altered form from the mission field to the metropole. The early mission to Sierra Leone predated the formation of supporting metropolitan women's auxiliaries, but, once in existence, the activities of these women's branches of the missionary societies provide insight into the transformation of English Christian womanhood through direct and indirect encounter with the foreign mission field.

Christian womanhood and its transformations are then investigated by attention, in turn, to mission-field encounters involving three groups of women missionaries: African women involved in the early phase of the Niger mission; English women missionaries, both married and single; and African women converts, who were subsequently involved in evangelistic activity among their own people. These three groups of women actively shaped, adopted or adapted the Victorian notion of Christian spiritual womanhood in different ways. Further, these transformations were relational, formed in response to their mutual encounters.

### *Women and the CMS in Britain*

Metropolitan ideals of Christian womanhood in play within CMS women's sections in Britain informed the English women who found their vocation as missionaries; conversely, missionary activity expanded the ideal beyond specifically English forms of Christian womanhood to include the new figurations embodied by women converts. It is important to recognize the CMS women's sections as sites where returning English women missionary speakers, whose term in the foreign mission field challenged them to adjust their notions of Christian womanhood beyond its initial "English" manifestation, could communicate this expanded view to a metropolitan audience. Just as English Christian womanhood was a formative influence in the mission field, so African Christian womanhood offered a challenge to the assumed supremacy of the English ideal, not only in the African context but also within the metropole.

At the Liverpool Missionary Conference, held in 1860, no women were present, though one male speaker affirmed the importance of ladies' missionary auxiliaries as "an important means of enlisting sympathy in the cause" (Secretaries 63). By the turn of the twentieth century, British women's voluntary efforts raised more than seventy percent of funding for foreign missions, and women involved in the societies now undertook

responsibility for mission work among women (Thorne 41-44). One male missionary, speaking on a British platform in 1883, attempted “to excite feelings of grateful wonder” in his female audience, by indicting heathen patriarchy in contrast to the felicitous gender relations he perceived among British Christians (Thorne 45). Yet, by the late nineteenth century, women’s auxiliaries increasingly invited women as speakers; Prevost’s analysis suggests that a female audience might learn from women missionaries more about ambiguity in their negotiation of Christian womanhood in relations with African women, moving beyond the binary invoked by the male speaker. Among those gathered at missionary meetings, whether addressed by male or female speakers, were women who would subsequently offer themselves for missionary service; churchwomen’s involvement with missionary societies’ women’s sections made them conversant with missionary literature and discourse, and this could lead them to develop a vocation for the mission field.<sup>3</sup>

Once the need for single women missionaries was recognized, the CMS Ladies Association undertook responsibility for the selection, training and sending of women missionaries. Thus Edith Warner, at the age of thirteen, attended a Missionary Garden Meeting at Maidstone, where she decided to become a missionary—a choice that was to lead to her thirty-one year career as founder teacher at St. Monica’s School (Basden 23, 85).

#### *Women in the African-led Niger Mission*

By 1870, the Niger Mission had consolidated at a small number of outposts linked to Onitsha, run by African male agents. That these agents were frequently married, and accompanied by their woman partners, is clear from Bishop Crowther’s report to a conference held in 1869 at Lakoja:

We have been able to hold five principal stations since our last review, namely, Akassa, Onitsha with two outstations, and Lokaja at the Niger; and Bonny and Brass on the coast in the Bight of Biafra. In these have been employed two ordained missionaries and fifteen lay agents exclusive of their wives, three of the lay agents have been lately ordained pastors to the Christians at Onitsha & Lokoja. (4)<sup>4</sup>

Crowther's phrase "exclusive of their wives" implies that it was the usual practice for African agents to be married, and that their wives were viewed as an auxiliary force in the missionary effort, subject to the direction of their husbands. Further light is thrown on the contribution of these African Christian women by a document by Crowther in 1872 entitled "Rules and Regulations requiring the attendance of the educated wives of Mission Agents to School Duties." The responsibilities of these "educated wives" are spelt out as follows:

The service of the wives of the Mission Agents are required at the school for 3½ hours daily (unless prevented by sickness) viz:- from 10½ a.m. to 2 p.m. that is, to take a reading class of children in the school for 1½ hours to 12 a.m., and sewing classes to 2 p.m. and that the wives be made clearly to understand that on their refusal to take part in the school duties for 3½ hours daily from Monday to Friday, such allowances that are made to their husbands on their account are liable to be deducted from their salaries.

Sunday school being a voluntary benevolent work all the Mission agents not otherwise engaged both males and females should lend a voluntary helping hand by taking a class each in which they should pride themselves to teach the ignorant the art of reading.

But due deference should be paid to all such females who come forward to help in the work of teaching, both at day and Sunday schools.<sup>5</sup>

The Rules and Regulations were clearly intended for the male African agent, who was held responsible for ensuring his wife abided by the terms on which he was paid an allowance for her services. The gender of the children is unspecified here, though it is likely that African women instructed girls. Yet when attention turns from required to voluntary duties, Crowther's language shifted from reference to the (male) Mission agent and his wife to one of exhortation of Mission agents "both males and females." Deference was due to those African women who happily accepted the demands laid upon them for the sake of a small allowance payable to their husbands.

F. Smart was one such married African agent, who came from Sierra Leone to work, for a time, at the Bonny mission in the Niger Delta region. Smart was to achieve educational success at Bonny, but his term of service was to come to a sad end. In his resignation letter to Bishop Crowther, written in 1876,<sup>6</sup> Smart eloquently explained his reasons for wishing to leave the Niger mission and return to his native Sierra Leone. He complained that the stipends of African agents for the Niger mission are "far below what our brethren at home are receiving from the Society," making unaffordable the cost of passage back to Sierra Leone with wife and children (1). Second, he was incensed by the regulations governing the work carried out by, and allowance paid for, educated wives. The refusal to pay a stipend to married female teachers, and the removal of the allowance when an agent was bereaved (as had recently happened to Smart) made life untenable. Smart expressed concern for the missionary widow who remained at her post with no stipend being payable, as this demonstrated the disrespect for "her equally important and necessary labours out of the school-room, whether on Sundays or weekdays, among the heathen or Christian portion of

the female population” (3). Thus brief reference is made to a barely acknowledged auxiliary role of educated wives among women, both “heathen” and converts, complementing the efforts of male missionaries among the men. In correspondence and reports by Bishop Crowther and male African agents attached to the Niger mission, there is a shadowy glimpse of the African Christian women who partnered them in their missionary endeavours. The women themselves, like the English Christian women who would replace them, were spoken for in the official records by the husbands who were considered to exercise headship over them.

It is possible that Smart’s unnamed wife played her part in the successes he achieved at the mission school in Bonny. In his report of the school “examination” in 1869,<sup>7</sup> Dandeson C. Crowther, son of Bishop Crowther, commended Smart’s work at school and Sunday school (7), being particularly appreciative of the mathematical achievements of three boys, and of the recitational skills of a larger number. His single reference to a girl student—who might have been instructed by the female agent of the mission—presents her accomplishment in glowing terms:

... among those that recited best was a little girl of about nine years of age, called Hannah Uranta ... one cannot but be struck with the clearness of her tone, and more so with the easy manner in which she went through the piece. Having no mark on her face, and being quite used to English dress, together with her distinct pronunciations & tolerably good English accents, one would have taken her for a girl from Sierra Leone, or other civilized place than from rude, uncultivated and uncivilized Bonny. (3)

Dandeson Crowther thus took Sierra Leone as his benchmark for recognition of the marks of civilization in Hannah's English idiom and dress. Unlike future generations of Igbo African evangelists, who shared the same cultural background as those they sought to evangelize, Crowther's comments point up the contrast he drew between his own English-inflected upbringing in Sierra Leone and the "rude, uncultivated and uncivilized" region around Bonny, where the of ritual practice of scarring the face was sufficiently prevalent for him to comment on its absence ("Having no mark on her face"), even in a nine-year-old girl.

Dandeson Crowther's observation is interesting for what it tells us of the likely qualities of the educated African female agent who was Hannah's model, namely an English style of dress and accent, marking her as civilized, her subjectivity shaped in relation to the Victorian ideal of Christian womanhood brought by English missionaries to Sierra Leone. These qualities set her apart from the African women receiving her missionary attention—though, as Hannah's conduct suggests, these were qualities her students might emulate. It is likely that she, like Dandeson Crowther, lacked an African cultural identity beyond that constructed within the Christian enclave of Sierra Leone, and this lack would reduce the scope of her African transformation of Christian womanhood. Like Hannah Uranta, she would always remain an *African* woman with English idiom and bearing. However, she would also be more reliant on the imposed English form of Christian womanhood, in which she was schooled, than the Igbo school graduates in future generations, who, despite their Christian conversion, would still have much in common with their Igbo sisters who remained committed to all aspects of Igbo culture and religion.<sup>8</sup>

Implicit in Dandeson Crowther's comment is the idea that the married African woman agent was also a model of the monogamous marriage that the CMS missions sought to impart to Christian converts, in place of polygamous African practices for the regulation of female

sexuality. The role of the married woman in educating the next generation in accordance with these Christian mores is acknowledged in the closing words of the report:

We think differently to the heathens respecting female education; while they think it useless to educate them, we consider it of all importance to the rising generation, because educated mothers will exercise a most salutary influence on their offspring, and thus will lay an easy & solid foundation for their education and future improvement. (9)

This priority was continued in the work of the European missionaries who succeeded the African pioneers of the Niger mission.

#### *English women missionaries*

The voluntary work of English women in the missionary societies at home was mirrored in the work done by married women in the mission field. As Susan Thorne puts it, “Nowhere was the missionary work that married women did acknowledged as professional or paid” (42). Women who married missionaries were sought as necessary helpmeets for men facing the rigours of the mission field; their labours were acknowledged in the breach, but largely left undocumented when performed according to expectation, in contrast with the work of the CMS male missionary, which was detailed in reports to London head quarters. One observer commented:

The volume and nature of this work is incalculable. Apart from all that a wife’s companionship means in a man’s work, apart from the distinctive

contribution in Christian witness which a missionary's home offers, there has always been rendered by missionary wives an immense volume of work ... To have attempted a record of this work would have been too large an undertaking. (Goodall cited in Kirkwood 28)<sup>9</sup>

In contrast, providing a full account of the work of these women's missionary husbands was seen as vital. The pattern of making only indirect references to married women's work, seen during the African stage of the Niger mission, is thus repeated here.

A major reason for this inattention to married women's work was the CMS's emphasis on their modelling female behaviour within chaste, monogamous Christian marriage: while the *work* of male missionaries was subject to close scrutiny, women's exemplary *conduct* was to provide a model for converts' emulation. Thus missionaries returning after furlough in 1898 were addressed as follows by the CMS Committee: "[you] the living exemplification of the Divine ideal of marriage and the example of holy, happy married life are potent for good in a non-Christian land, and do more than any exhortations to uplift and purify the homes of the people."<sup>10</sup> Given this priority, the CMS Committee was clear that single women missionaries, whose work was to be under scrutiny like that of men, were not to be subject to the authority of married women missionaries. As one instruction put it, "You, dear sisters, who are occupying the position of wife of a Missionary, naturally find a sacred sphere for exercising a gift of wise and gentle counsel in the case of the younger women Missionaries ... [Your relation] is one of love, and not of authority."<sup>11</sup> While male oversight was fitting, female authority was to be discouraged.

However, missionary conditions often "encouraged situations that denied women missionaries the domestic attributes [as model wives, mothers and homemakers] they claimed to promote." In addition, single women worked outside the domestic sphere, so that

missionary women modelled both marriage and its alternative (Beidelman 113). Further, women missionaries acquired practical training and administrative skills that allowed a measure of independence from the culturally prescribed roles of mother and wife (Predelli & Miller 69; Bowie 6). Despite their undoubted patriarchal organization and control, it is helpful to see missions as “contested gender regimes” (Predelli & Miller 70), where women missionaries not only experienced accustomed constraint but also widened scope. Thus Edith Warner was involved in development of the site for St. Monica’s school, and as principal, exerted administrative and pedagogical authority. In addition, she showed considerable initiative, courage and resourcefulness on her frequent missionary expeditions, in one case travelling nearly two thousand miles on a trip to Yoruba country.<sup>12</sup>

CMS policy was to prefer male missionaries to be married, to avoid sexual impropriety in the mission field.<sup>13</sup> No anxieties were expressed about sexual impropriety on the part of women missionaries, married or single. However, there was also a policy of requiring male missionaries to delay marriage until after their training and ordination. The probationer missionary G.D. Wilson was unwilling to wait. Responding to a letter from Wilson, Group Secretary Baylis congratulated him on his engagement to Miss Frisby “from the point of view of your personal happiness,” while adding, “but we can’t help feeling that the position is a difficult one for you and for her in the future”; Mr. Baylis warned that, even should Bishop Tugwell eventually recommend Mr. Wilson’s move from Probationer to Missionary, “there would still be three years of service due before your marriage would be according to regulation.”<sup>14</sup> Edith Warner’s biographer, fellow CMS missionary at Onitsha, G.T. Basden, records that a Miss Frisby travelled to Onitsha with Miss Warner, and acted as her first teaching assistant (Basden 24 34), though whether she stayed this arduous course towards marriage is unclear.

Miss Frisby was one of a number of short-term teachers at St. Monica's, where eventually Miss Martin and Miss Pamela Row joined Edith Warner as a permanent teaching team over the last fifteen years of Warner's term of service, from 1909-1924. Warner's missionary career exemplified the significance of CMS education in the formation of Igbo Christian womanhood. Beginning her educational work with "nine undisciplined and somewhat rebellious girls at Onitsha,"<sup>15</sup> in the penultimate year of her term an inspection report of 1923 recorded that six African women teachers worked alongside the missionaries to educate one hundred girls enrolled as boarders at the school (Basden 51). Girls were taught no English, but learned enough written Igbo to read their Igbo Bibles and hymnbooks, together with abundant domestic skills, to prepare them for their future married role (Bastion 147).<sup>16</sup> By 1910, missionary education for girls was fast becoming an aspect of the adaptation of the bridewealth system; it had become established practice for young Christian men to pay school fees for their fiancées (Bastion 148).<sup>17</sup> It is significant for the emergent Igbo form of Christian womanhood that St. Monica's girls were educated in their own language and remained closer to traditional Igbo women as a result.

The importance placed on "education of mothers" during the decades of the African-led mission was thus repeated under white CMS leadership from the late 1890s, and the work of both Warner and her colleague, Frances Dennis, founder of a women's training institute, can be seen as continuous with the CMS commitment to girls' education as articulated by Dandeson Crowther in 1869. Girls' involvement in Christian mission is evident in the participation of senior girls from the school in missionary forays (Basden 28), and, following their graduation, in Warner's witness to the effectiveness of the African "catechists' wives" (Basden 77).

### *Igbo Christian Women's Encounters*

Evidence from the Onitsha mission shows the fluidity in constructions of Christian spiritual womanhood, as English missionaries and African converts negotiated the process of creating an Igbo Christian womanhood. While the roles of wife and mother were rooted in female sexuality, the Victorian concept of spiritual womanhood de-emphasized women's sexuality while elevating their moral qualities, (Beidelman 123). In one sense, this monogamous regime was pitted against African polygamy but, as Prevost points out concerning early twentieth-century Malagasy Christian society, given the shared language and culture between Christian converts and their Malagasy sisters, the lines between adherents, aspirants and opponents of Christianity were blurred (154). Igbo Christian womanhood was forged within a similar blurring of lines between CMS Christianity and Igbo cultural mores.

At this point, the likely impact of emergent Igbo Christian womanhood on English missionaries such as Warner, whose Christian womanhood was first shaped in the metropole, should also be noted: Prevost's comment that "metropolitan norms of femininity and religion were overturned as much as they were reproduced" (155) might apply equally in Onitsha as in Madagascar, and Warner's authority and initiative were in some ways a response to Igbo norms of womanhood. Along these lines, G.T. Basden's 1927 biography of Warner, which he titled *Edith Warner of the Niger*, suggests that (in Basden's view at least) Warner herself had become "of the Niger" during her years in Onitsha and drew on that African context as much as an English one. Between the age of 25 and her death, which followed swiftly after the end of her long term of service, Warner herself embodied a version of English Christian womanhood that would have been impossible in her native Maidstone but was facilitated by her life in the Niger mission; she was also confronted with an Igbo Christian womanhood that was impossible for her to emulate. Though shaped by schooling at St Monica's, Igbo

womanhood was lived out by school graduates in their adult lives among their own people and culture.

An 1898 instruction to returning women missionaries gives insight into CMS anxieties concerning existing African women agents, which mission education of girls would seek to ameliorate: “it is of the utmost importance that you endeavour to take your fair share in the distinctly missionary work of your station ... in order to supply an object lesson to the wives of Native workers and Native Christians generally, [as we have recently had occasion] to deplore the lack of such evangelistic enterprise on the part of many of the wives of Native workers in the Field ... ” (2). Towards the end of her term, Warner had the satisfaction of seeing the fruits of her labours in the evangelistic work of at least some St Monica’s graduates.<sup>18</sup> Their aspiration was towards married Christian womanhood. Thus the African women teachers observed by the inspection team in 1923 worked only temporarily before leaving the school to get married.

Three years after the inspection, Basden wrote that “The girls as soon as they become really effective leave on account of marriage .... Native girls cannot be found yet who are prepared to consider any other career but that of wife and mother.”<sup>19</sup> However, it is significant that, even if individual teachers stayed for only a short time, Igbo teachers assisted in the formation of St. Monica’s students. Though Edith Warner achieved fluency in Igbo (Basden 27-8), there was a significant gap between her English embodiment of Christian womanhood and the thoroughly Igbo idiom of her temporary Igbo teachers. Through their agency, and their necessarily African embodiment of the ideal enshrined in girls’ education at St. Monica’s, English notions of spiritual womanhood were transformed into an Igbo variant. Pupils taught by African women teachers thus had access to a direct model of Igbo Christian womanhood, in contrast with both the first generation of girls taught by English teachers alone and those taught by Sierra Leone-trained African missionaries in the early stage of the

mission. The high turnover among their teachers only served to underline the importance of their destined role as Christian catechists' wives.

Frances Dennis set up a training institution for young women near Asabe in 1906, thus exemplifying a second type of CMS educational initiative towards the formation of Christian womanhood. The institute was for young Igbo women, already betrothed to husbands who had become Christian converts. For young women who were past school age, training institutions such as this provided remedial opportunities for the formation of Christian womanhood. Basden records that in one of her missionary expeditions, in 1902, Warner travelled with the two Dennis sisters in the district of Idumuje Uboko, where they experienced hostility and were forced to make a fast retreat (61-6). Dennis showed no qualms about the resulting "chaos in Idumije Iyboko" (2): she informed her readers that in this area where there were no Christians, "Public opinion was all against the women who wanted to be good" (2).<sup>20</sup> When Dennis located the work of her institute in the context of an attempt to "rescue" African women from pre-missionary contact marriage customs (2), her words betray the influence of an "Orientalist discourse of the enslaved female Other" and a consequent sense of "the need for a moral transformation of 'heathen' society" (Prevost 291), as providing the premise for her missionary work. Two factors, however, undermine this reading of Dennis's work: on the one hand, the assistance she received from an Igbo matron, and on the other, the capacity for Igbo women themselves to actively shape their own variant of Christian womanhood.

Thus Dennis described setting up a temporary training institute in a native compound, assisted by a Matron—the widow of a former CMS agent. The role of African women who had worked alongside their catechist husbands, and continued this work following their husbands' death, can here be seen as reiterating evidence from the African-led stage of the Niger mission. The matron is testament to the contribution of catechists' widows in this

generation, as during the years of the Crowther mission. Though barely visible in Dennis's account, she played a significant role in mediating Christian womanhood from the ideal English version assumed by Dennis to the Igbo variant that was in formation. Dennis and the unnamed matron received ten girls who were soon to be married to Christian male converts, for a few months preparatory training at the Asabe institute.

Dennis records, without comment, that eight of the women already had children who were cared for by friends during their training, while their fiancés paid for their food (3). This suggests that Igbo mores allowed for sexual activity before marriage, at least within prescribed limits, though chastity before monogamous marriage was expected of girls who married following a school education.<sup>21</sup> It is also significant that she fails to comment on the outcome for existing children of their mothers being "saved" in this way. To do so would highlight the ambiguities inherent in the work of the training institute, among young women who—unlike schoolgirls at St. Monica's—had already been inducted into Igbo cultural patterns regulating female sexuality. There was thus considerable blurring between traditional and Christian formations of Igbo womanhood in the lives of the women concerned.

Dennis described with approval the results of this English and African training regime in Christian womanhood: "Miracles we saw working before our own eyes—girls much more like heavy animals than women waking into new life—being transformed giving their minds to new things—submitting to the most rigid discipline cheerfully & never once rebelling—with the memory of what they had been saved from apparently remembered always" (4). This brief account provides an important insight into the transformative interaction between English and African notions of Christian womanhood. Dennis's somewhat disrespectful reference to girls "like heavy animals," responsive only to a necessarily "rigid discipline," is testament to the gap she saw between her ideal and the conditions of traditional Igbo

womanhood, from which they would be “saved” by conversion to Christianity and fulfilment of their future role of monogamous Christian wife.

The emphasis in Dennis’s account is on the unlikely responsiveness of these somewhat unpromising young women to the transforming discipline of the training institute. From the available evidence, it is not possible to say that Dennis’s own English ideal was challenged and thus transformed through this encounter: she appeared to see before her the “enslaved female Other” being released from her chains. However, it is instructive to consider the role of the African “Matron” in the move of the young women towards Christian womanhood. As with the temporary African teachers at St. Monica’s, the unnamed Matron provided another African model of Christian womanhood, bridging the gap between Dennis’s patently English ideal, and the emerging Igbo version. These renewed efforts in education and training of young Igbo women as Christian wives repeated, yet varied, the formation of the previous generations of African women evangelists in Sierra Leone. In both cases, English notions of spiritual womanhood shaped the missionary education they received. In contrast to the African women who had worked within the Crowther mission, however, Igbo Christian women were to live and work among their own people.

Writings by Warner point up the significant affinity of Igbo women converts with the wider community of Igbo women. Her report on the first “Women’s United Conference” in Onitsha in 1910 gives insight into her perception of her former students, now scattered across the region.<sup>22</sup> Warner wrote that Miss Dennis’s address on women’s position and influence “reached the highest point in the conference, and one could see the eager longing on the faces of the women to reach up to something more nearly approaching the ideal woman” (2). In Warner’s account, then, Dennis was shown as capable of communicating the metropolitan ideal of Christian womanhood in a way that inspired her African hearers. The conference title, and this image of the English missionary, Warner, rejoicing in the Igbo women’s “eager

longing” for ideal womanhood, resonates with Prevost’s theme of “Christianization as a collaborative and mutually transformative process” (122). Isolated African Christian women were drawn together from a wide geographical area around Onitsha and united at the conference, but equally it represented a collaborative venture between the English missionary organisers and the African women themselves. While Miss Dennis proclaimed the ideal of Christian womanhood, African women’s keen response, as perceived by her fellow English colleague, marked a specifically Igbo embodiment of the ideal. While Warner might celebrate her protégées’ eager longing for ideal womanhood, her own received notions of this ideal were in turn subject to challenge, even transformation.

This challenge is evident when, eleven years later, Warner was present at a Conference of Native Women, attended by six hundred African women, where she expressed her admiration that “One or two of our catechists’ wives spoke so well . . . . They know what appeals to their own people” (Basden 77). Despite her linguistic proficiency, and despite the attempt of colleagues like Basden to represent her as “of the Niger,” Warner recognized her own limits in comparison to this example of effective Igbo Christian evangelism, which can be read as a key factor in the renegotiation of received notions of Christian womanhood. Warner’s reflections betray a similar process at work in her response to emergent Igbo Christian womanhood to that uncovered by Prevost in Madagascar, when she contrasts the new trust in Malagasy women evangelists with the vilification of indigenous women in earlier missionary accounts (8, 122).

Unexamined in Prevost’s account, but visible here, is the agency of those African women who shaped the African Christian womanhood of the young women educated at Bonny school, during the years of the Crowther mission, and at St Monica’s school or the Asabe institute in the subsequent years of the English-led mission. The effectiveness of this next generation of Igbo Christian women as Christian catechists, and their influence upon

Warner's perception of Christian womanhood, however, reiterates Prevost's findings of the evangelistic potential in the "blurring" of boundaries between Igbo Christian womanhood and Igbo womanhood as shaped according to Igbo pre-contact cultural practices.

In conclusion, when reflecting on her experience of the 1921 conference, Warner showed quiet appreciation of "our catechists' wives," simultaneously viewing them as exemplars of the ideal womanhood that inspired herself and Dennis, and as thoroughly Igbo, and therefore capable of navigating with ease the blurred lines separating them from unconverted Igbo women. This account has emphasized the significance of African woman teachers in their formation. Warner's sense of approval is grounded in a felt common bond with her protégées which testifies to the genesis of "a community of women" joining English missionaries with African Christian women in the Onitsha region. At the same time, Igbo Christian women maintained close bonds with traditional Igbo women, which Warner (and Dennis) could not share. By the 1920s, metropolitan notions of ideal Christian womanhood had shaped and assumed new forms among Igbo women converts that, embedded within traditional Igbo culture, moved beyond what was possible for the earlier generation of African women missionaries schooled in Sierra Leone. The existence of an Igbo Christian womanhood in turn brought into question the assumed Englishness of the ideal. Edith Warner appreciated this Igbo embodiment and her connection with it in terms that resonate with Prevost's notion of an "imagined community bounded by Christian womanhood" (26). This mutual transformation had the capacity to influence notions of Christian womanhood in the metropolitan CMS women's sections, in a mutual and two-way exchange between metropole and mission field: the original English impetus was transformed into only one single local manifestation, alongside its Igbo variant, of a broader, shared ideal of Christian womanhood.

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All references are to the Church Missionary Society archive, held in the Special Collection, University of Birmingham.

<sup>1</sup> Though pre-missionary contact marriage practices varied between African cultures, polygamy was widespread. Practices included regulated forms of sexual activity before marriage (Steegstra). Marriage practices involved complex economic transactions through bridewealth systems (Porterfield; Bastion), which were first disrupted but later adapted, in response to Christian conversion with its requirement of monogamous marriage.

<sup>2</sup> The CMS was founded in 1799 and was active in Sierra Leone from 1804. This account draws on K. Onwuka Dike's *Origins of the Niger Mission*, pp. 4-10. Dike explains that he was educated at mission schools, including the Dennis Memorial Grammar School, Onitsha, and at degree level at Fourah Bay College, Sierra Leone.

<sup>3</sup> See Williams (45-53) for an informative account of women missionaries in the China Inland Mission, and the role of the (revivalist) annual Mildmay conferences in generating support for this venture, and Thorne (43) on the recruitment by the mainstream societies of single women for missionary work among female populations from the 1860s. Williams (54-5) emphasizes the role of Henry Venn (founder CMS honorary secretary) and his successor Henry Wright in privileging clerical mission by educated and ordained men, and the part played by the Keswick convention which, in 1890, pressed the CMS to take "lay and female evangelists ... *from all classes*." [Emphasis in the original letter, as cited by Williams]. This account is contradicted by Beidelman (114) who claims that the CMS from its inception "placed more stress on the Holy Spirit and right motivation than on formal clerical training ..."

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<sup>4</sup> C A3 04/322A Samuel Crowther “Niger Mission A Charge. Delivered at Lokaja at the Conference, on the 13<sup>th</sup> September 1869.”

<sup>5</sup> C A3 04/560 Nov 14 1872 Bonny.

<sup>6</sup> C A3 04/561 9 Oct 1876 “Letter from F.W Smart to The Right Rev. S. A. Crowther, D.D. Bishop of the Niger Territory (Freetown, Sierra Leone).”

<sup>7</sup> C A3 013/37 10 Mar 1869.

<sup>8</sup> An important factor is that missionaries educated in Sierra Leone were educated in English, rather than in their own language. African missionaries during the first stage of the Niger Mission were thus at a greater distance from the language of the Africans at Bonny who they laboured to convert, than subsequent generations of African converts who were to educate and evangelize in their own first language.

<sup>9</sup> Kirkwood (28) draws attention to the double size of the gravestone in the Missionary Cemetary at Hope Fountain Mission, Zimbabwe, of missionary Rev. Neville Jones to that of Ruth Jones, his wife, as a visible sign of the respective valuation of the work of ordained male missionary and the voluntary contribution of his unpaid wife.

<sup>10</sup> G3 A3 L5 “Instructions delivered to missionaries at the Meeting of Committee on Tues July 5<sup>th</sup> 1898.”

<sup>11</sup> G3 A3 L5 “Instructions delivered to missionaries at the Meeting of Committee on Tues July 5<sup>th</sup> 1898.”

<sup>12</sup> See Basden (56-74); Basden (75) makes reference to the Yoruba trip.

<sup>13</sup> See Beidelman (138 FN 11) for evidence of impropriety between white male missionaries and African women, leading to male missionaries being dismissed.

<sup>14</sup> G3 A3 L4 Letter from F. Baylis to G.D. Wilson 20 April 1894.

Bishop Herbert Tugwell was ordained bishop as successor to Samuel Crowther in 1894, following the death of J.S.Hill, who had been consecrated in 1893, but died the following

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year (*The Story of the Niger Mission* 3). Edith Warner had travelled from Liverpool to Onitsha with Mr. and Mrs. Hill in 1892 (Basden 18).

<sup>15</sup> The words of Bishop Herbert Tugwell in his foreword to Basden's biography (10).

<sup>16</sup> While Bastion emphasizes the disadvantage to girls of being educated in Igbo, rather than English, *The Story of the Niger Mission*, produced by the Nigerian Anglican Communion in 1997, applauds CMS policy of instruction in local languages: "Had the CMS not taken this stand, Onitsha, Bonny, Brass and other riverine towns could have become another Freetown or Moravia" (4). However, the lack of instruction in English means that no records authored by Igbo women themselves are to be found.

<sup>17</sup> GA A3/0 1910, item 40 "Review of the Niger Mission for 1909" shows that there were 1,096 boys in attendance in all elementary schools run by the mission, and 280 girls, but only £125 was collected in fees, the remainder (the majority sum) being paid for by scholarships for boys, granted by the home missionary society. In contrast 50 girls were enrolled in the Girls' School at Umudioka (from which St. Monica's evolved), all maintained by 4s per month contribution by prospective husbands, or their own families. This situation stands in stark contrast with the position of the school inspected by Dandeson Crowther in 1869. His report lamented the recent withdrawal of most girls from Bonny school. The reason given was the disappointment of local chiefs who had sent some boys for education in England, only to find that the Bonny school children outperformed them. Consequently chiefs saw no point in education of the girls, who had been intended as favourite wives for these mis-educated sons (C A3 013/37 10 Mar 1869 (8). Dandeson C. Crowther Report on School Examination, Bonny)..

<sup>18</sup> See, for example Basden (78-80) for Warner's account of her visit to Enugwu in 1924, and her commendation of the Christian influence evident in this "wild lawless place" where the

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people had been “cannibals and murderers” before the founding of the CMS mission in 1916. She visited a number of former students, now married to Christian men.

<sup>19</sup> G3 A3/0 1926 Item 46; letter from George T. Basden to H.D. Hooper, dated August 5 1926. Here Basden is writing after Warner’s death.

<sup>20</sup> G3 A3/0 item 103 27 Sep 1906 Frances Dennis “Young Woman’s Institution for the Asabe Hinterland.”

<sup>21</sup> For Dennis, such patterns for the regulation of female sexuality could not reach acceptable moral standards that would be observed by women “who wanted to be good”. However, better informed observers who investigated pre-contact régimes for the regulation of sexuality disclosed the moral codes embedded within them; departure from these codes were seen as moral failures that had extreme consequences for those involved. See Steegstra (203-8) concerning Basel missionary misunderstanding of the *dipo* rituals that marked girls’ transition to adult status among the Krobo peoples of the Gold Coast. It was also the case that girls who were outcast as a response to sexual impropriety, as defined by the sexual mores of their culture, were frequently accepted as Christian converts (Steegstra 220; Porterfield 75; Bastion 146), with consequences for the standing of Christianity among their peoples that were invisible to Dennis, but could account for the “chaos” resulting from Christian evangelism among peoples who had their own, conflicting, notions of what it meant for young women to “be good”. The breakdown of pre-contact systems for regulation of sexuality repeatedly led to a rise in sexual promiscuity (Steegstra 221; Porterfield 77 & 72).

<sup>22</sup> GA A3/0 18-20 Jan 1910 E.A. Warner “Report of the First Women’s United Conference, Onitsha.”