

'The Roman Catholic Church and Girls' and Women's Education in South-western Zimbabwe 1887-1965'

Barbara Mahamba

OCMS 2012

Abstract

Much work has been done recently on mission education for girls and women in Eastern and Southern Africa. These studies have much in common. They reveal how, in spite of missionary distrust for African women and focus on men, the churches the missionaries planted ended up in all cases being churches of women. But how this took place and the consequences differ widely from case to case. I intend to enlarge the area of comparison by a detailed study of the genesis, nature and socio-cultural effects of Roman Catholic education for women in south-western Zimbabwe from 1887 to 1965. I focus on Empandeni and Embakwe missions and their out-stations in the Mangwe District of Matabeleland, to demonstrate that south-western Zimbabwe presented an unusual environment, which brought missionaries into contact with a stronger African state and a much more elaborate African regional religious system than existed in the other cases which have been studied. By occupying important positions in the local *Mwali* and *shumba* cults, African women in south-western Zimbabwe had more stakes in these dominant forms of religion. The African women also had more to lose from the suppression of the cults through missionary proselytization and education, which were used as tools to suppress these cults. The women's initial resistance prejudiced European nuns and priests against them, but as is being realised for the whole colonial encounter, the relationship between missionaries and African girls and women was more than just a story of domination and resistance.

Roman Catholic missionary perception and social teaching was that education and Christianity would emancipate African women from savagery and oppression, prompting some African women to direct their struggle at gaining the education they wanted and playing their desired roles in the church. Focussing on a group of Roman Catholic schooled young women, who wished to become nuns, this thesis will show how European nuns and priests continued to impose their own value judgements on, and regard the African women as inferior, which made the process of African women attaining their desired ambitions a difficult and lengthy process.

This thesis is also about Roman Catholic education for 'Coloured' and European girls. Using the Embakwe 'Coloured' School as a case study, I demonstrate how schooling by Roman Catholic priests and nuns played a great part in defining 'Coloureds' as a distinct group, and constructed a peculiar Rhodesian version of hybridity. I draw upon theories of hybridity, and of the complex accommodation between rulers and ruled in a colonial situation in order to illuminate my case study. The thesis demonstrates that while Roman Catholic schooling exposed the African, 'Coloured' and European girls to a gendered curriculum, it aimed at preparing the three groups for different roles within the racially divided colonial society.