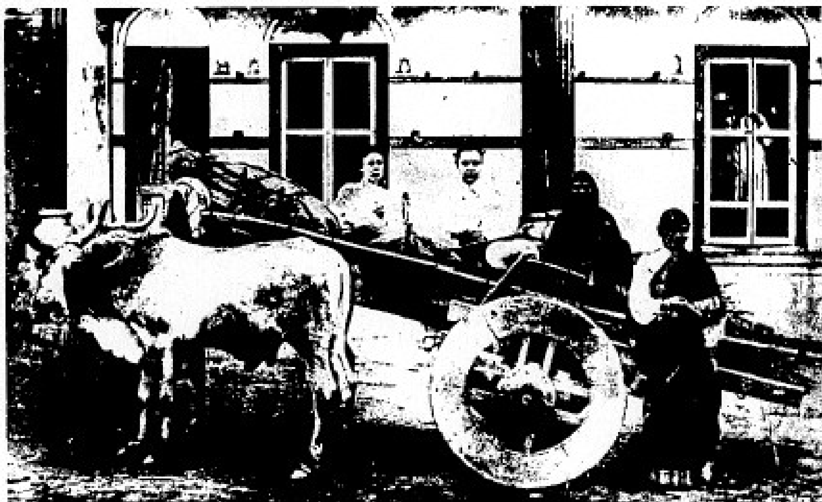

Missionary women. COURTESY FLEMING H. REVELL CO. *PANDITA RAMABAI: THE STORY OF HER LIFE* BY HELEN DYER, © 1900.

CHAPTER 14

Gender, Race, and Empire in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Africa and Asia

Margaret Strobel

European women participated not only in the politics of their own nations, but also in the empires acquired by those nations. Around the globe, they played ambiguous roles as members of a sex considered to be inferior within a race that considered itself to be superior. This contradictory position brought ambivalent results. On the one hand, European women advanced the interests of the colonizers by maintaining a social distance between the Europeans and the colonized, particularly in colonies with a substantial European population. On the other hand, European women sometimes identified with the oppressed and, although they rarely questioned the practice of imperialism itself, sought to ameliorate some of its worst effects. In either case, women traveling to the colonies often gained opportunities lacking at home and played a central role in shaping the social relations of imperialism. As missionaries, they modeled what Europeans believed to be appropriate gender roles for indigenous women. Through their writings, they helped construct an image of, and rationale for, empire. As ethnographers and anthropologists, they provided knowledge of indigenous peoples necessary for their more effective administration. As reformers, they intervened in practices on behalf of local women and at times used this maternalistic role as spokeswomen to legitimate their own claims back home for political rights.

European[1] women had a complex, varied, and often contradictory relationship to the African and Asian territories controlled by the European powers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As members of the "inferior sex" within the "superior race" (to use contemporary formulations), women were afforded options by imperialism that male dominance in the colonies then limited. By the twentieth century, some European women were attacking aspects of the racial, political, and economic inequalities of the colonial relationship. But the vast majority of them supported and contributed to the imperial venture. These women benefited from the economic and political subjugation of indigenous peoples and shared many of the accompanying attitudes of racism, paternalism, ethnocentrism, and national chauvinism. For most of them, life in the colonies provided opportunities not found in Europe, where their options were limited by their social class, a "shortage" of marriageable men, difficulty in finding adequate employment, or the lack of "heathen souls" to be converted. At the same time, women continuously experienced, sometimes challenged, and sometimes reproduced the economic, political, and ideological subordination of women. As wives of colonial officials, they subordinated their lives to a male-centered administrative environment. As educators of indigenous women, they reproduced the European notions of bourgeois or Victorian domesticity and female dependence. Even missionary women, whose commitment to career and calling was in some ways a challenge to those very notions, accepted the patriarchal ideology and bureaucracy of the Church and promoted conventional European gender roles to African and Asian women.

As an outcome of centuries of economic and political rivalry, by 1914 an estimated four-fifths of the inhabited portions of the world was under the control or influence of one of the Great Powers. European imperialism in Africa and Asia reached its height between 1850 and World War II. Following earlier Portuguese, Dutch, and French economic competition on the South Asian subcontinent, by the nineteenth century India had become the "Jewel in the [British] Crown." The British government took over administration from the British East India Company after the army rebellion of 1857. Thereafter Britain governed two-thirds of the subcontinent directly until it granted independence to India and Pakistan separately in 1947. From the mid-nineteenth century on, India had a sizeable European community, although men outnumbered women. The area between India and China remained an area of European competition, with the Dutch settling in and colonizing the Indonesian archipelago. Much like the British did in India, the Dutch government took over from the Dutch East India Company in the late eighteenth century. Britain and France contested for influence over and/or control of various portions of southeast Asia ruled by indigenous authorities.

Britain's relationship with Africa similarly began in trade and ended in formal colonial rule. Following the partition of Africa in 1885, Britain, France,

Germany, Italy, Portugal, and Belgium established colonial administrations by military conquest or co-optation of African political figures. In most areas, a small core of white men administered the colony. Even where the European powers encouraged white settlers (for example, Kenya, northern Rhodesia/Zambia, and southern Rhodesia/Zimbabwe for the British; Mozambique for the Portuguese; Algeria for the French), the European population was tiny and largely male until after World War I. South Africa's history differs. There, Afrikaners (Boers, descendants of the seventeenth-century Dutch settlers) had a demographically balanced population when British capitalists and settlers, disproportionately male, came in substantial numbers in the nineteenth century. South Africa became a self-governing (by whites) country in 1910; most of the rest of colonial Africa gained its independence beginning in the 1950s.

Effective control of the colonies required an ideology, accepted by at least a portion of the colonized, that legitimized colonial rule, namely, the superiority of European, Christian civilization. The spread of Western education and medical skills obscured exploitative economic relations and the absence of political rights for colonized peoples at the same time that it led to some real improvements in their lives. Excluded from the military and—until the very end of the colonial period—from key positions in the political administrative structure, women helped legitimize colonialism as teachers, nurses, the wives of administrators, and/or ameliorators of the worst manifestations of indigenous and colonial oppression. Interestingly, the patriarchal ideology that assigned these helping roles to women also masked the exploitation of imperialism by identifying the imperial power as the "mother country" and, by inference, the colonies as immature and untrained children.

Did European women in the colonies threaten the imperial relationship? Many scholars claim they did. Three components of this myth are relevant: British attitudes toward mixed-race sexual relations; rituals that maintained social boundaries between races; and the subordination of the domestic sphere to the public realm of imperial life. Examination of the sexist bias of the myth reveals the racial and gender dynamics of colonial society. The remainder of the chapter analyzes several roles women played in the colonies—as job seekers, travelers, missionaries, anthropologists, and reformers—and asks how women's activities advanced or subverted the imperial mission and how the imperial context reinforced or undermined female gender roles.

THE MYTH OF THE DESTRUCTIVE FEMALE: SEXUALITY, RITUAL, AND HOME

Until recently, most of the histories that mention European women's arrival in the colonies at all claimed that European women contributed to the deterioration of the relationship between the European administrator and those he governed. According to this myth, "vulnerable" European women provoked

the sexual appetites of indigenous men, while as wives they replaced indigenous concubines (from whom male administrators had previously learned much about local society and culture) and drew the attention of the men away from their official responsibilities. In addition, historians have described European wives as racists who distanced themselves from the local population. In the words of a famous historian of India: "As [white] women went out in large numbers, they brought with them their insular whims and prejudices, which no official contact with Indians or iron compulsion of loneliness ever tempted them to abandon. [They were] too insular in most cases to interest themselves in alien culture and life for its own sake."[2] It is true that the arrival of women in substantial numbers made possible the creation of an exclusive social group, and that the women, in their social roles as wives and hostesses, maintained the hierarchy within the European community and its social distance from the indigenous peoples by elaborate rituals.

Rather than blaming European women for the growing rift between white and nonwhite populations in the empires, recent historians tend to see their arrival as coinciding with other developments in colonial society: heightened racial prejudice, the growth of evangelical Christianity with its ethnocentrism and attack on nonmarital liaisons, and the increased size of the European population generally. And, where settlement was the goal (in parts of Africa and, earlier, in North America) rather than rule (in India, most of Africa, southwest Asia, and the Pacific Islands), women's arrival seems to have been valued more by their contemporaries than by later scholars. However, because it is so widespread and unquestioned, the components of this myth—sexist assumptions about sexuality, ritual, and domestic life—merit examination for what they reveal about the dynamics of colonial society.

The myth of the destructive female contains two elements that pertain to sexuality: concubinage and the protection of European women. Officials justified access to concubines and indigenous prostitutes on the grounds of keeping men virile and heterosexual, both essential components of rule that reflected imperial power. Moreover, in interfering with the European male's access to indigenous concubines, European women purportedly contributed to the creation of greater distance between the communities. In the early colonial days, European men commonly took concubines. The perils of transition when one's wife appeared are illustrated by a story that circulated in West Africa about 1910:

> One D. C. [District Commissioner] arrived with his new spouse [at] his boma late at night and promptly went to bed. About four in the morning his cook walked boldly into the room, lifted the mosquito net sheltering the exhausted sleepers, soundly slapped the lady on her bottom and said, "Leave now missy, time to go back to the village."[3]

Concubinage entailed physical proximity and intimacy in a context of inequality. The same can be said of the mistress-servant relationship, but historians have not credited the latter with developing ties between the colonizers and the indigenous community. To single out European women's dislike for concubinage as a cause of increasing social distance is to leave unquestioned the inequality of the colonizing male–colonized female concubine relationship. Only if one ignores the element of subordination in a concubinage relationship can it be read as closeness. In fact, it was the attitude of superiority exhibited by Europeans in the colonies, male and female, that created the social distance. Moreover, as racial prejudice deepened toward the turn of the century, the need to reinforce social distance overcame official concerns about sexual access for European men. Previous measures to limit European men bringing wives were lifted in various colonies. In 1909, when there were still few European women in the British colonies other than India, the British colonial secretary prohibited liaisons between officials and indigenous women. In the Dutch East Indies, about the same time, in 1920, European plantation owners reversed their earlier policies that prohibited the employment of married European males.

According to the myth, not only did European women inhibit the valuable institution of concubinage; they also aroused the sexual appetites of indigenous men from whom they then had to be protected. This situation of sexual competition increased the distance between European and indigenous men. The contradictory nature of this formulation clearly reveals the sexism of the myth itself. If concubinage enhanced the relationship of colonizer and colonized, then why should not voluntary liaisons between European women and indigenous men do the same? Such relationships were not common, but they prompted sharp response. In 1893 the maharaja of Patiala married Miss Florry Bryan; this disturbed Lord Curzon, the viceroy of India. Not only did the marriage transgress against the social distance between Europeans and indigenous people mandated by imperial ideology, but the maharaja's high social status and his wife's working-class background confused even more the racial, sexual, and class hierarchies of empire. Even in the absence of marriage across class lines, such relationships raised concern. In turn-of-the-century South Africa, officials, in order to prevent African migrant workers from frequenting white prostitutes, passed laws that forbade intercourse between black men and white women. Such voluntary relationships offended imperial minds because they forced a contradiction between two notions central to the racist and sexist ideologies of the time: whites should be superior to people of color and men should be superior to women.

The aroused sexual desires of indigenous men, many Europeans feared, might lead to sexual assaults on European women—the dreaded "Black Peril." Ironically, European men seemed to feel more threatened than European women by this "danger." In Papua New Guinea, men, not women, pushed for the passage of the harsh White Women's Protection Ordinance in 1926—the death penalty for rape or attempted rape of a white woman by a New Guinea man. Moreover, former colonial women's reminiscences do not

mention fear of indigenous men. On the other hand, in 1907 the Associated Women's Organizations of the Transvaal requested the government to enact segregation as a protection against assaults on (European) women. Indeed, increased concern with the sexual assault of white women typically correlated with tensions within the European settlement and a perceived need to consolidate it. For example, labor protests in Indonesia in the 1920s threatened to split the European male population: low-paid European male employees allied with Indonesian workers in labor protests again European male elites who ran estates. The same period witnessed measures to enhance the safety of white women. Whether or not women participated in efforts to prevent real or imagined assaults, the notion that they needed male protection fit nicely into the racist and sexist ideologies of the day.

Surveying British, French, and Dutch colonial practices and policies related to interracial sexual unions, Ann Stoler notes the complex relationship between sexual morality and race:

> Miscegenation signaled neither the absence nor presence of racial prejudice in itself; hierarchies of privilege and power were written into the condoning of interracial unions, as well as into their condemnation. . . . Sex in the colonies was about sexual access and reproduction, class distinctions and racial privileges, nationalism and European identity in different measure and not all at the same time.[4]

Interracial sexual unions resulted, over the decades, in a hybrid subpopulation, some of whose members successfully claimed European status.

In addition to such ideas about sexual relations between Europeans and indigenous people, the myth of the destructive female embodies the stereotype of petty, frivolous, racist, unproductive, and dependent women who contributed nothing to either the imperial enterprise or to indigenous peoples. Typically, the wife of a colonial administrator, settler, or army officer is pictured as living a life of leisure consisting of dinner parties, banal conversation, and petty jealousies about her own and her husband's status. This stereotype can be challenged in two ways: its inaccuracy, which the portraits in the subsequent sections establish, and its conceptual male-centered bias, which both distorts and subordinates female experience.

Colonial society charged women with enacting the social rituals that defined the boundaries between Europeans and indigenous people and the hierarchy among Europeans, but it subsequently stigmatized such activities as trivial (and, later still, as racist). The social life described here reached its height in the late-nineteenth century in India and between the world wars in the remaining colonies when the colonial enterprise was relatively unquestioned. A regal and commanding style necessarily accompanied political domination, and such rituals as dressing formally for dinner helped Europeans define the differences between themselves and the colonized. The widowed wife of a colonial officer, Sylvia Leith-Ross, describes herself and a colonial official dressing for dinner in 1913 on a steel canoe on a Nigerian river: "When you are alone, among thousands of unknown, unpredictable people, dazed by unaccustomed sights and sounds, bemused by strange ways of life and thought, you need to remember who you are, where you come from, what your standards are."[5] If some rituals helped maintain a sense of cultural identity, others emphasized internal stratification. The apparently trivial pursuit of "calling" can be seen in this light. By beginning from the top of the hierarchy on down, the practice of leaving calling cards at each European household revealed the social structure of the settler community as it inaugurated the rainy season in India, when the British returned to the plains from the cooler hill stations. Thus women performed important functions in organizing and executing the social life that appears, in a less formal time and place, unduly rigid and formal if not silly.

Although a woman's role in colonial society included identifying social boundaries and hierarchy, she did so in a profoundly male world. For many women, a wife's position in the colonial hierarchy derived from her husband's; she had no independent place. This fact has implications that shed light on the stereotypical behavior of colonial women. Colonial administrators' wives often had to engage in trivial conversation, for example, while entertaining to avoid revealing privileged information. Moreover, since a woman's position in the social hierarchy depended on the course of her husband's career, she was limited in the extent to which she could express intimacy or solidarity with other women above or below her, which helps to explain her apparent competitiveness with other women.

The diary of Laura Boyle vividly reveals the implications of having one's status and role derive from that of one's husband. Written in 1916 while her new husband was stationed in a northern area of the Gold Coast (now Ghana), where no white woman had been since the turn of the century, the initial portion of the diary describes their joint travels in the bush and her observations of African society. After the government promoted him and transferred them to the Secretariat in Accra, her observations run to sports and cultural activities. "It is all very different from the daily opportunities in Wenchi," she noted then, "where we both could take a share of the problems in 'bush' administration." In Accra she supervised the servants, while he worked at the office.[6]

In colonial administrative structures, the female hierarchy usually paralleled the male hierarchy. The highest-ranking wife set the standard and tone for the female portion of colonial society. Exercise of this leadership might range from mundane decisions that female dinner guests need not wear white gloves in hot weather to more substantive encouragement of welfare efforts. A wife who did not act in a manner appropriate to her husband's rank upset the entire community by disrupting the social order. Even in smaller European colonial communities, elaborate rituals prevailed. Social control of the behavior of other Europeans through gossip or ostracism helped maintain the sense of security of the outnumbered European community.

As noted earlier, the empire was seen as a man's world. Imperial structures and processes made few accommodations to the female roles of wife, mother, and homemaker, even though these activities both provided material benefits for the husband and children and helped to maintain the social boundaries that separated the European community from the indigenous one. Indeed, the task of homemaker and mother had even greater implications for preserving "civilization" when carried out in the outposts of the empire. Women's reminiscences overflow with tales of housekeeping, while men's deal with the public actions of imperial officers, accurately reflecting the typical social division of labor.

Indeed, homemaking in the colonies, particularly in the early days, challenged a woman's ingenuity and fortitude. Flora Annie Steel and Grace Gardiner's *The Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook* (1888) offered advice on a myriad topics, from the number of camels it took to move the household to the hills for the hot season, to wet-nursing, to remedies for tropical diseases. Health was a constant concern. Malaria and blackwater fever took their toll of both children and adults. Sylvia Leith-Ross noted that of the group of five with whom she traveled from Liverpool to Nigeria in 1906, she alone remained alive thirteen months later. African and Asian women experienced health hazards and raised families under even more difficult conditions, of course. But the change from a European lifestyle shocked many emigrants, who sought to reproduce it as best they could.

The exigencies of life in the tropical colonies forced changes in family life. Unlike their sisters in Britain, women in Victorian India drew upon nonkin from their community for support. Restricted by Victorian conventions, women frequently chose female midwives over male physicians. Racial prejudice prescribed the use of European midwives, who came from lower-class backgrounds. Indeed, the British colonials believed that non-European physicians were unfit to attend European births. Because of local health conditions, miscarriages were common; tropical diseases caused a high infant mortality rate. Among the British in Bengal, for example, infant mortality more than twice exceeded that of England for the period from 1860 to 1869.

Official attitudes toward the domestic sphere changed over time, but they initially articulated the third element of the myth of the destructive female: the idea that a home and family distracted an administrator from his work. Before World War I, the governor-general for French West Africa claimed that administrators who lived with their families "lost approximately 50% of their efficiency."[7] Not until 1920 did the secretary of state for the (British) colonies decree that married life should be the norm for administrators in colonies other than India (where a substantial British community already existed). Elsewhere, until the 1940s a man expected to marry only after his second or third tour of duty. The practice of sending children back to Britain for schooling continued until after World War II. Thus, although many wives of men in the Colonial Service sought to fulfill the traditional female roles of mother, wife, and homemaker, they did so under severe strains and with little official support.

The perquisites of being a European in the colonies included having servants, a luxury not available in the twentieth century to the largely middle-class group from whom colonial administrators came, and certainly not to the working classes from which some settlers came. Granted, homemaking in the colonies was more difficult than in Europe, but Europeans lived at a much higher standard of living than the vast majority of colonial subjects. Dutch household manuals at the turn of the century recommended seven to ten servants for European families in Indonesia; the typical household had four to six. Even otherwise impoverished white settlers in Africa had servants. Living as an administrator's family in a remote part of present-day Ghana in 1916, Laura and David Boyle had six male and female house servants and twelve men working outside. Having servants not only lessened the burdens of housekeeping; it offered many women their most salient interaction with indigenous people. European women developed a distorted view of local people's lives and culture based upon this profoundly unequal relationship. European women's most intense relationships with indigenous people focused upon a single part of the social structure, because servants generally came from impoverished and low-status or low-caste groups. Moreover, Europeans rarely saw servants in the latters' own surroundings, and servants had every reason to mask their real selves.

Not surprisingly, much of the racism or paternalism found in memoirs of colonial women focuses upon servants and substantiates this aspect of the charge leveled at them as "destructive women." Yet colonial men expressed the same racism through their own work as administrators, business owners, or settlers. Elizabeth Melville's *A Residence at Sierra Leone* (1849) communicates a common attitude toward African servants, found with little variation everywhere and throughout the decades. Concerned with the "trivial matter" of daily life and housekeeping, the narrative bemoans the "indolence, stupidity, and want of tidiness of the African" and the problems of locating and training servants.[8] Where it occurs, such noncooperation is, of course, a standard technique of resistance on the part of subordinates. In many cases, cultural differences made difficult the transformation of indigenous men and women into servants for European households. Many memoirs, while noting difficulties with servants, record a paternalistic affection for particular servants and occasional concrete assistance to them. The author Isak Dinesen, for example, went to unusual lengths to provide for her servants when she left her failed coffee farm in Kenya.

In summary, the sexist bias of the myth of the destructive female obscures the real role played by European women in the empire. To the extent that their arrival inhibited the practice of concubinage, it struck a blow at a racially and sexually unequal relationship that has been romanticized to represent harmony between the colonizer and colonized. In carrying out the social rituals that have

been characterized as petty, women identified the boundaries between ruler and ruled and the hierarchy within the European community that lay at the heart of imperial relations. In establishing homes in the face of official disinterest or even discouragement, women contributed to the improved health and happiness of male officials and the solidification of a strong European community. Thus colonial women, far from losing the empire, were central to its continuation. Unfortunately, the rising nostalgia for the Raj that is exhibited in films, television shows, and collections of reminiscences provides little critique of either the sexist nature of empire or its fundamental exploitation of colonized peoples.

The women described above largely represent those who came as dependents to their husbands. But, in addition to the many dependent wives who developed an interest in working with African and Asian people, other women came to or grew up in the colonies with their own agendas, which fit the imperial design to a greater and lesser degree. Patriarchal structures and ideologies shaped their lives as well.

DOMESTIC SERVANTS: WHITE WOMEN AND THE IMPERIAL MISSION

Particularly after World War I, but earlier in India, women—from prostitutes to doctors—came to the colonies seeking employment to escape economic conditions or sexist discrimination back home. The experiences of one such group of white women, those recruited to South Africa as domestic servants, reveals most clearly the harmony of imperial and gender ideology.

Although most domestic servants in Africa were Africans, many of the women who emigrated from Britain throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century ended up in South Africa as domestics. By the 1880s and 1890s, several groups united under the British Women's Emigration Association (BWEA). Their recruiting propaganda stressed the possibilities for genteel domestic service, potential marriage, civilizing the world, and promoting British values in the colonies.

The causes for female emigration lay in demographic imbalance and limited employment for women in Britain. Because of male migration to the colonies, the ratio of women to men in Great Britain increased steadily from the mid-nineteenth century, from 1042:1000 in 1851 to 1068:1000 in 1911. The notion of "surplus" women of marriageable age is, of course, ideologically determined: a patriarchal ideology that prescribed for women the roles of mother, wife, and household manager could conceive no positive outcome for single women. In addition, lower-middle-class and middle-class single women competed for the same narrow range of employment. The differential in wage levels also helped recruitment. White domestics in South Africa might earn as much in two months as their counterparts in England could earn in a year.

The colonies needed female immigrants for demographic, ideological, and employment reasons. In contrast to the belief elsewhere that European women destroyed the empire, here they were considered essential to it. The successful transplantation of British civilization and the assurance of enough white labor required large numbers of white women. Particularly in South Africa after the turn-of-the-century Anglo-Boer War, the colonial state encouraged the "surplus" women of Britain to immigrate. The rhetoric of the time combined imperial and patriarchal goals. Ellen Joyce, a BWEA pioneer, stated that "the possibility of the settler marrying his own countrywoman is of imperial as well as of family importance." Put more bluntly: "We cannot assimilate the Boers at present if at all. . . . If we cannot assimilate them we must swamp them."[9] In addition, the colonial state sought to replace African male servants with white female servants to free the former for work in the goldfields of the Transvaal.

Although many women emigrated, recruitment ultimately failed to satisfy the demand for servants. Between 1902 and 1912, approximately 1,500 white female domestics came to the Transvaal. Once there, however, the women deserted service for other occupations or for marriage. The racial ideology clearly dictated that the lowest work should be done by Africans, and employment in other typically female occupations as waitresses, clerical workers, or, to a lesser extent, factory operatives attracted emigrants after a year of domestic service. Still, although a servant's marriage represented a loss to the employer, it counted as a success for the colonial state, which sought to increase the English population. For the individual woman, marriage meant entry into a relatively privileged white society.

In the institution of domestic service in South Africa, then, we see imperial and patriarchal forces reinforcing each other. European mistresses, while also oppressed as women, had their condition meliorated by the availability of domestic servants. The mistress-servant relationship, often European women's only significant contact with indigenous people, reinforced the ideology of racial superiority. The colonial state's recruitment of white female labor was based on the patriarchal definition of domestic service as (white) women's work, the patriarchal glorification of matrimony, and the imperialist "ideal" of spreading British values and civilization. Domestic service was, for many white women in South Africa, a way to gain a share of white privilege. For African men and women, it remained, as it does today, an institution of exploitation and oppression.

FEMALE MISSIONARIES

Missionaries preceded formal rule in the colonies. They played a crucial role in dissolving and transforming the societies and cultures of the peoples with whom they interacted, linking colonized peoples to the colonizers socially and culturally. Not that missionaries worked hand in glove with colonial governments;