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# Married to Freedom? The Importance of Marriage for African Methodist Episcopal Missionary Women in South Africa, 1900 - 1940.

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## Abstract

In this article, I study the predominantly African-American religious denomination, African Methodist Episcopal (AME). Between 1900 and 1940, the AME regularly sent African-American members to South Africa where they worked as missionaries. Close analysis of AME hierarchy and structure, demonstrates that the AME overwhelmingly preferred to send couples to work as missionaries. Consequently, African-American AME women who journeyed to South Africa were typically married and did not undertake mission work as a career. In comparison, the travel of South African women who converted to AME was not as circumscribed. African-American AME women were held to different standards than their South African counterparts, with the differing standards symbolising the predominant race and gender relations of the time. African-American women had to be married in order to enjoy the freedom to travel internationally, but, quite unusually, female South African converts surpassed this limited freedom and sojourned internationally as single women and pursued missionary careers.

## Introduction

International travel is an important aspect of 'mission' work. For the United States (US) based African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Mission, the ability to travel, especially to Africa, was crucial for its members for a number of reasons including being able to perform mission duties in Africa. However, because of the legalised racial segregation enforced in the US in the period between 1900 and 1940, the freedom of missionaries' movements was hampered for the predominantly African-American denomination.<sup>1</sup> Despite this difficulty, travelling both nationally and internationally remained a cornerstone of the AME's

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<sup>1</sup> Racial segregation was legally enforced in Southern US states through the Jim Crow laws from 1877 to the mid-1960s and informally throughout Northern US states (despite more liberal states passing legislation in 1883 that officially prohibited segregation).

overarching determination to challenge the degrading racial stereotypes that abounded about Africans (and, by extension, African-Americans) through their mission work in Africa. However, the freedom to sojourn—in this case, to travel internationally—was not universal for AME missionaries. For US AME mission women, this ‘freedom’ was overwhelmingly determined by marital status and was limited to married women; single US AME women did not work as missionaries in South Africa.

Feminist studies of missionary women have long pointed out that women had greater mobility and agency to exercise their power and skills in the mission field, but, until now, little attention has been paid to African-American missionary women and the effects that marital status had on their mobility. It is the contention of this article that new historical perspectives on African-American missionary women can be gained by considering their marital status as an important determinant in their ability to travel overseas, in particular to South Africa. Furthermore, by also considering the effects of the marital status of black South African women who converted to the AME, and their subsequent mobility, new insights can be gained on the relationships between marriage and movement, missionary and convert.

This article, thus considers the effects of marital status on the mobility of both US African-American and South African AME women. I argue that while marriage may have permitted US AME missionary women to travel internationally—often with their husbands—this relative ‘freedom’ was surpassed by unmarried or single black South African women who, upon conversion to AME, were able to travel overseas, especially to the United States.

For the handful of highly-educated, middle- and upper-class Christian black South African women who converted to AME, marriage was neither a fundamental prerequisite for international travel nor a determining factor in whether or not they pursued a career in the mission. African Methodist Episcopal efforts in South Africa were localised to wherever the denomination could enter and garner support, such as Evaton, in the Transvaal, Cape Town and Johannesburg. This localisation of support was a significant strategy to ensure the continuation of mission work, as the AME was frequently hindered by government regulations and racist attitudes which prevented African-American missionaries from purchasing the land needed to build churches and schools.

Further, US AME women also entered the field in such small numbers that it was difficult to launch and sustain an active recruitment

campaign geared towards black South African women specifically. Black South African female converts were therefore essential for helping establish the AME in South Africa and founding the first AME mission schools in the country.

This article, builds on James Campbell's (1995) comparative study of the AME within South Africa and the US, in which he illustrated that the AME "was more tolerant of traditional practices than its predecessors and thus better able to accommodate traditional leadership" (p. 185). It is argued here that tolerance extended to supporting unmarried female converts to travel to the US and then return to South Africa to establish AME mission schools. The context of AME mission work in South Africa is thus significant, and the next section will outline the day-to-day operations of the AME mission outreach in South Africa in order to highlight the unique circumstances faced by the denomination. Following a discussion of how marital status determined US AME mission women's entry to the international mission field, the unusual case of three prominent black South African female converts will then be considered. This comparative exploration of the effects of marital status demonstrates that marriage was crucial for US AME women's entry to the mission field, in a manner not experienced by female converts from South Africa.

### **The African Methodist Episcopal Church in South Africa**

African Methodist Episcopal missions were established in South Africa in 1896 and throughout the world, including Liberia and Haiti. The AME missions in South Africa stretched a considerable distance, from Cape Town to the kingdom of Barotse, north of the Zambesi, comprising the Cape Colony, the Transvaal and Natal (Barnes, 2002, pp. 330-331; "Bishops Howard & Wright Make Good in Africa," 1937, p. 3). The AME's mission outreach differed from other missionary societies in that, unlike others such as the London Missionary Society which sent British men and women to work as missionaries in South Africa, the AME did not actively recruit single women *en masse* to serve in foreign missions nor encourage women to pursue careers as missionaries (Etherington, 2012, p. 202; Fitzgerald, 2004, p. 150).

Indeed, the AME, unlike many of the other mission societies that worked in South Africa, was a predominantly African-American denomination and, as a result, its activities were frequently circumscribed as a result of racial discrimination. The AME missionaries' journeys to South Africa departed the US from New York, and can be considered in three distinct stages.

The hustle and bustle of New York city was the scene of the opening act for missionaries, who sojourned from New York to Cape Town via ship. Grand gestures such as streamers and flowers were part of the elaborate farewell parties thrown for the missionaries by the AME. The missionaries, often husband and wife, departed to the mission field for four-year stints and began their journeys in first-class accommodation aboard the ships, departing for Cape Town via London. The elaborate farewells would not prevent, however, the staunch racial discrimination they encountered in South Africa.

The second act, their arrival in Cape Town several months after departure from New York, was often met with a very different reception. Throughout the twentieth century, for example, many AME missionary couples reported being detained on ship while the South African government, which feared the denomination would incite a rebellion, investigated their travel plans (Berry, 1942, p. 167; Wright, 1963, p. 147). The South African government feared the African-American missionaries would propagate the idea of racial equality with white South Africans and urge black South Africans to overthrow the government (Campbell, 1995, p. 154). Consequently, upon arrival in Cape Town, many of the missionaries were detained on ship. When AME's missionaries were eventually allowed entry into South Africa, the AME mission both affirmed an already conservative doctrine and demonstrated an agenda that reflected the conservatism of the South African colonial government. After all, the AME never sought to reform the South African government, instead seeking racial equality through the emulation of white American middle- and upper-classes ideals. Nevertheless, it was this hostile greeting that prefaced the third act of AME missionaries' foray into the mission field, and this is also where this exploration of how these African-American women specifically negotiated the freedom to travel in the mission fields of South Africa begins.

Racism continued to affect AME women once they were in South Africa, although it does not feature predominantly in their writings. The AME mission women, for example, contributed to AME periodicals such as the *Women's Missionary Recorder* and the *Voice of Missions*, and their writings will be discussed in further detail in the next section. Suffice to say here, however, that these writings provide important insights into how the African-American mission women portrayed the racial discrimination they encountered within South Africa. The AME missionary women rarely wrote explicitly about instances where they faced racial discrimination. AME mission woman Charlotte Wright

(1955) explained that, “in white denominations segregation is the order of the day” (p. 55) although there were occasional incidents where white and black would worship together. These incidents remain vague and unsubstantiated in her writings, however, making it virtually impossible to trace when and where they occurred. Close analysis of her writings suggests, however, that segregated worship meant AME missionaries were discriminated against simply for being African-American.

Wright (1955) did provide more concrete examples of segregation in her writing than did other AME women, explaining for instance how when driving through South Africa, where it was many miles between service stations, “if you appear to be in trouble, no car will pass you (except [for a] Dutchman who sees that you have a dark face)” (p. 105). She hastened to add, “in all justice to the Dutch, we met some fine characters” (p. 105); perhaps desperate to avoid offending the Dutch countrymen or projecting the same racist stereotypes she sought to dispel. Catching the train also meant segregation, typically to the worst part of the train, and being unable to travel as white women did; another source of discomfort for AME women that reinforced the racial discrimination endured (AME, 1927, pp. 43-44). Similarly, Luella White, another US African-American AME missionary, inferred in her writings that segregation existed when she described numerous accounts of not having access to accommodation for a night; however, she rarely acknowledged the discrimination directly (White & White, 1953, pp. 147, 263-264).

Indeed, throughout AME history, instances of racism were often only implicitly acknowledged or simply overlooked. Within the US, for example, the founding father of AME, Richard Allen, was reportedly mistaken for a runaway slave and briefly detained before the “embarrassing matter” was resolved and apparently never discussed again (Campbell, 1995, p. 21; George, 1973, p. 3). Furthermore, as Campbell (1995) observed, “the less pleasant aspects of African American experience—Jim Crow, disfranchisement, the horror of lynch law, all peaking at precisely the moment the AME Church entered South Africa—rarely entered African accounts” (p. 210), a favour female AME missionaries returned. AME writings that minimised the racism encountered in South Africa worked on at least two levels: first, South Africa was constructed as a welcoming site for AME missionaries and, second, it helped to sustain the mythology that missionaries were in a class of their own, especially mission women, who longed to be considered and treated equal to white missionaries.

Overall, however, the AME was often denied equal status to white mission societies. Consequently, missionaries had difficulty obtaining permits for church and residence sites, forcing ministers to live, and preach, in private huts, and accommodate the customs of chiefs or headman to ensure access to potential converts and lodgings (Campbell, 1995, p. 186). As a result, conversions were incredibly informal, setting the AME apart from other mission societies that generally kept detailed records and required formal examinations (Campbell, 1995, p. 186). Only one AME woman wrote about successfully converting South Africans. The two distinctively informal conversions she discussed occurred in Undola and remain unsubstantiated (Hughes, 1939, p. 23). African Methodist Episcopal finances were also frequently in turmoil, indicating that the church was unlikely to be able to fund the necessary formal indoctrination to the denomination.

Ultimately, the success of AME mission work depended not on the number of converts, but rather in challenging the racist, degrading stereotypes that abounded about Africans and by extension African-Americans, that AME was keen to dispel. The AME missionaries, irrespective of gender, were not on a moral crusade neither were they lifelong missionaries. Instead, AME mission work provided African-American US women (who were married to high-ranking church officials) with the opportunity to travel and, similarly, for a handful of select, highly educated black African women, the opportunity to travel to the US and receive higher education under the auspices of the AME.

### **The Mission Archives**

Generally speaking, studies of missionary women's writings have often been hampered by a lack of primary source material. Missionary women, regardless of their denominational affiliation, in contrast to male missionaries, were rarely obligated to submit regular reports to headquarters, and their experiences in the missionary field often remain unknown as a result (Elbourne, 2010, p. 17). There is no central AME mission archive and the material that has survived is not as extensive as that of other mission societies. As a result, AME source material differs significantly from other denominations. For example, there is a distinct lack of information about marriages within the local community, runaway brides, royalty visiting the mission stations, stories of conversion, statistics on conversion rates, or information about numbers of students and staff at the schools; all typically recorded by other mission societies. There is also no surviving evidence of published translations of the gospel, hymnbooks, catechisms, tracts or psalms, like

those of the European Anglican, Methodist and Lutheran missions in South Africa from the mid-nineteenth century (Etherington, 2005, p. 41). It is therefore difficult to measure the success of AME mission work more broadly. Overall, AME mission work was limited to Evaton in the Transvaal, where the most successful mission school, the Wilberforce Institute, was established, and Cape Town where the AME had a large following amongst the ever-increasing urban black South African population.

Surviving archival material is housed predominantly in the US.<sup>2</sup> Housing the AME periodicals, these US archives contain the most useful source material by or about US AME mission women. The AME had three periodicals devoted to its mission work: the *Voice of Missions*, *The South Africa Christian Recorder* and the *Women's Missionary Recorder*.<sup>3</sup> These periodicals were published entirely by the AME, making them a particularly valuable source as entirely African-American run journals devoted exclusively to women's writings were very rare between 1900 and 1940 (Angell & Pinn, 2000, p. xviii; Carroll, 1972; Christian, 1980, p. 34; Loewenberg & Bogin, 1976, p. 313; Shockley, 1988, p. 113).<sup>4</sup> The most extensive holdings of the *Voice of Missions* can be read at Columbia University, New York, and Drew University in Madison, New Jersey. Unfortunately, only a few issues of the *Women's Missionary Recorder*—dedicated solely to women's experiences in domestic and foreign mission work—survive today. Issues from January 1935 to March 1938 are currently available on microfilm from Yale University and the author was fortunate enough to consult additional issues of the periodical held in a private collection of AME source material currently owned by Chester and Lillie Owens.<sup>5</sup> In

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<sup>2</sup> U.R.Meder (personal communication, September 28, 2012), Archivist and Records Manager at the Uni. of the Western Cape indicated that S.A. AME materials such as personal and government correspondence and Annual Meeting Minutes were unavailable. Many thanks to Gareth Griffiths for funding the archival search conducted on my behalf at the Uni. of the Western Cape.

<sup>3</sup> Issues of the South African-based *The South African Christian Recorder* are scarce. I surveyed the monthly and then quarterly South African based AME journal during my visit to the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in June 2012. At that time the Center held, on microfilm, issues published between April and September 1937 and March and April 1946.

<sup>4</sup> This range of AME written material is also important because the use of oral histories is impractical given the historical timeframe of this project.

<sup>5</sup> Special thanks to Deborah L. Dandridge, Field Archivist, Uni. of Kansas, for arranging my visit.

this private collection, which can only be consulted by prior arrangement, are issues of the periodical from 1929 and 1931 not held by any university (at the time of writing). The private collection owned by the Owens family contains the personal papers of AME missionaries John and Celia Gregg, who travelled to South Africa twice (1903-1906, 1924-1928). However, among Celia Gregg's personal papers there were no letters detailing her sojourns to South Africa. It was not possible to track the family records for any other AME mission women beyond those held at the Owens' home. Significantly, existing university archival holdings of US AME missionaries are held under the husbands' names and devoted to the husbands' personal papers.<sup>6</sup>

Secular newspapers from both the US and South Africa do, however, provide some insight into AME missionary women's activities. Black South African owned and operated newspapers *Bantu World* and *Umteteli Wa Bantu* were consulted on microfilm for this research. The agenda of *Bantu World* in particular converged with that of the AME. As Lynn Thomas (2006) has argued, "*Bantu World* embodied the concerns of mission-educated African Christians who worked as clerks, teachers, domestic servants, nurses and clergy, and who struggled, under increasingly difficult circumstances, to achieve middle-class status" (p. 466)—the very status AME missionaries sought to achieve and propagate among its local South African congregations. Both newspapers were based in Johannesburg and documented AME mission work throughout South Africa. United States AME women's writings, whether in the secular newspapers or AME periodicals, are part of an important literary tradition within the genre of travel-writing. Unpublished correspondence is limited, or simply non-existent, in the case of some female AME missionaries, as well as the majority of convert black South African women, as their names were rarely recorded by the AME. This makes it difficult to trace existing kinship networks, as any surviving unpublished correspondence is likely to be held in a private, family collection rather than a formal archival depository. From the surviving primary source material it is, however, possible to trace the role of marriage in the AME mission field of South Africa.

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<sup>6</sup> AME historian and member, Dennis Dickerson, who has written extensively about the AME and has a vast network within the denomination both abroad and within the US, stated that no other records such as the Gregg's exist (D. Dickerson, personal communication, July 9, 2012).

## **Married to Freedom?**

In this section, it is proposed that marriage was a fundamental requirement for US AME women's entry to the mission field. Marriage granted the freedom to leave the US and journey to South Africa. An overview of the hierarchical structure of the AME and the process by which US members were elected to travel to South Africa confirms the freedom marriage conferred to US AME women.

The AME was officially organised in a strict, top-down hierarchical structure presided over by bishops, the highest title an ordained member could achieve. Only men could be ordained during the early twentieth century, thus barring women from high-ranking positions. Beneath the bishops, in descending order, were reverends, stewards and class leaders. The AME preferred to send high-ranking members such as bishops to supervise the mission outreach for four-year terms. Every four years the high-ranking AME officials throughout the US would meet and elect a new bishop to supervise the mission work in South Africa. The voting system also meant that the AME overwhelmingly sent members who were part of the elite African-American upper class, consisting of community leaders who typically attended Episcopal or Presbyterian churches; they were highly educated, and typically descended from freeborn Northern US African-Americans (Perkins, 1997, p. 721). Significantly, most of the women discussed in this paper were part of this elite upper-class circle through birth or marriage.

The voting system meant AME mission women's entry into the field was firmly tied to their marital status. Their status entailed serving first, and foremost, as companions while their husbands carried out their duties. The role and responsibilities of the presiding bishop were significant and included the singlehanded responsibility for purchasing land, organising the building of church infrastructure, supervising members, presiding over services, and preaching to potential converts throughout the mission field. Charlotte Wright's husband, Bishop Richard Wright, for example, was reported to have:

touched much of this territory, having traveled over eleven thousand miles in automobile, horseback and on foot. Crossing swollen creeks, waiting hours for high waters in rivers to fall so they could cross, as well as to climb mountains. Mrs. Wright accompanied her husband in these travels. ("Bishops Howard & Wright Make Good in Africa," 1937, p. 3)

The wives of bishops subsequently travelled extensively in South Africa, far more than the AME would have accommodated in the US

where a greater number of members reduced the need to fund interstate travel. The AME viewed wives touring the mission field as paramount to the success of the mission outreach program. Bishop Levi J. Coppin (n.d.) wrote that his wife, Fanny Coppin:

accompanied us in our tours except the one through Basutoland. This was a means of inspiration, especially to the women ... Her long experience as school teacher and public speaker, and her broad sympathies especially fitted her for this work (p. 200).

Fanny Coppin, prior to travelling to the field, was a distinguished teacher and figure of the African-American community in Philadelphia. She was also highly educated (all AME women who travelled to South Africa were) and an experienced public speaker, qualities that made her an ideal role US AME model for black South African women.

The AME thus considered US women essential for its success in South Africa, even though entry to the mission field was dependent solely on the election of the presiding bishop and women had no formal vote. Nevertheless, entry to the mission field meant being able to travel alongside the presiding bishop and to travel extensively throughout South Africa. It was a rare opportunity for these US African-American women to journey outside of their hometowns or states and sojourn internationally. This would not, as will be explored in the next section, be the case for black South African women who converted to AME.

### **Convert Movements**

Surprisingly, for a handful of elite black South African women who converted to AME, marriage was not a prerequisite for international (or interstate) travel. It is remarkable that three black African women were able to receive tertiary education in the US, but their exceptional circumstances draw attention to the freedom they were afforded and how this freedom, unusually, exceeded that of US AME mission women. The three women, Charlotte Maxeke, Adelaide Dube, and Eva Morake, were born in South Africa and converted to AME when they journeyed to the US during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Maxeke would then go on to engineer the introduction of AME into South Africa. Both her and Dube returned to South Africa in the early 1900s and founded the first AME mission schools in the country, relying on kinship and personal networks to sustain their efforts.

The exceptional opportunity to study in the US arose from Maxeke and Dube's involvement in a South African choir that travelled to the

US at the end of the nineteenth century (the circumstances of Morake's arrival in the US, probably in the 1920s, are unclear). Whether the South African choir that Maxeke and Dube were part of was 'abandoned' or strategically placed in the US to undertake university studies at the most notable AME university, Wilberforce University in Ohio, is unknown. Maxeke, for instance, may have had an ulterior motive, namely, to be educated in the US, and the choir may have simply been a means of achieving this otherwise costly dream (McCord, 1995, p. 68). Whether the events were staged or not, research indicates that all three converts enjoyed the sponsorship of the US AME for the duration of their studies. These three female converts also contributed to the AME periodicals, *Voice of Missions* and *Women's Missionary Recorder*, while the Johannesburg-based *Bantu World* and *Umteteli Wa Bantu* newspapers provide insight into their domestic travels upon return to South Africa, perhaps influenced by Maxeke's husband, Marshall Maxeke, serving as editor of *Umteteli Wa Bantu* (Campbell, 1995, p. 278).

Maxeke and Dube married only after completing their studies in the US and upon returning to South Africa (which indicates that marriage was not necessarily a fundamental prerequisite for female converts to travel internationally). Maxeke married fellow black South African Marshall Maxeke in 1903 and together they founded AME mission schools. Similarly, Adelaide Dube married fellow countryman Charles Dube when she returned to South Africa (the precise date is unspecified) and had one son. She continued to actively work for AME, helping to establish mission schools throughout South Africa (Campbell, 1995, pp. 272-281). Both Charlotte Maxeke and Adelaide Dube were important figures in the AME although they could not be ordained, like their husbands. Morake, on the other hand, was the only female convert from South Africa who married prior to her arrival in the US, separated from her husband while in the States. Alan Copley (1990, p. 121) noted that Morake's former husband remained in the US as a teacher (see also Clark, 1931, p. 9).

Significantly, to the best of our knowledge, neither converts nor mission women discussed this unequal degree of travel. When the female converts were studying under the auspices of the AME in the US, African-American AME women portrayed them as forlorn orphans, in need of adoption by female members of the church (AME, 1901, pp. 7-9, 21). This portrayal of orphaned female converts erased their African cultural heritage and conjured ideas of maternal relations between US AME and South African convert women. Within South Africa, US AME mission women relayed the physical difficulties

African women encountered attempting to travel (always careful to downplay the impact of racism on their own travels, as previously discussed), reporting how female converts had to travel by foot, often with young children in tow, to attend annual South African AME conferences (Wright, 1955, p. 117). African-American AME mission women were no doubt particularly horrified to see one of the most influential converts Maxeke, arrive at the convention “after an overnight ride in an open railroad car [with] a group of migrant workers” (Campbell, 1995, p. 285). The US AME missionary women prided themselves on upholding the ideals of white, western femininity, which meant travelling in a dignified manner at all times as a manner of pride (Wright, 1955, p. 14). The open railroad car was a far from luxurious mode of transportation and likely to have been one of the few options for black South Africans travelling by rail in the racially-segregated 1930s. Such racism did not, however, prevent the three black South African convert women from travelling extensively.

Importantly, the international travel of Maxeke and Dube indicates that mobility was not reliant on one’s marital status. While it is unclear who funded Morake’s journey to the US, she was already married and the AME did not need to assume responsibility for her welfare; that responsibility, given the gendered hegemonic norm at the time, remained with her husband. Morake’s separation from her husband provided no hindrances to her to return to South Africa or sojourns within South Africa. This unique conversion placed the three women in an extraordinary position to travel without the fundamental prerequisite of marriage that hindered African-American US AME women’s ability to travel to South Africa.

## **Conclusion**

In this article, I have illustrated that marriage was a crucial prerequisite for US AME women’s entry into the mission field. Given that the top-down hierarchical organisation of the AME determined US AME women’s ability to travel internationally, it is perhaps unsurprising that marriage played such a central role in women’s ability to be a part of the AME work in South Africa. Since only high-ranking, ordained officials could be elected to supervise the mission work in South Africa, US women’s entry was determined by marriage to such an official. Once in South Africa, these African-American women were considered essential for mission work and accompanied their husbands as they travelled extensively. Such travel was uncommon in the US where there was a far greater concentration of members, which reduced

the need to travel extensively throughout the US to supervise the church's work.

Select converts were able to operate outside of the AME hierarchy that bound US AME women's entry to the mission firmly to marriage. The effects of marital status therefore depended greatly on nationality and access to higher education. The AME may have been able to keep a tight rein on US AME women's international travel, but for elite black South African convert women the AME posed no hindrance to their ability to travel internationally.

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