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Re-Making Homes: Ambiguous Encounters and Domestic Transgressions

Fluidity, fragility and the family

There is no doubt that families exercise strong social, economic and psychic binds, pulling their members together and suggesting shared identity and belonging. By presenting families as set types, missionaries exaggerated, almost reified, this commonality in their writing. But families are fluid constructs, whatever the illusion of fixity. Family members come and go, not least in missionary families where birth rates and death rates were high. Besides rooting identity and belonging, families are also characterised by instability, dislocation and conflict. Family members may have different race, national or religious identities, for example, as well as being of different genders and generations.

In the previous chapter, I explored how, in claiming that Indian and African homes were utterly unlike and completely separate from their own, missionaries suggested that families operated as sealed cultural types, which could be placed oppositionally. In this chapter, I examine how colonial experiences challenged this positioning, focussing on the production of a difference that was always fragile, always ambivalent and always unstable. Discursive constructions of Christian and ‘heathen’ families as discrete marginalised their many complicated overlaps and intersections. In colonial households, missionary ones included, anxieties around the home illuminated perceptions of difference and reconfigured them. As Stoler argues, racial classifications were ‘defined and defied’ or ‘confound[ed] or confirm[ed]’ through intimate encounters. I argue that missionary families and indigenous families (even ‘heathen’ ones) were neither spatially nor emotionally discrete. The household was a location where ambiguities threatened to disrupt
the discursive split between ‘civilised’ and ‘uncivilised’ in missionary writing. Yet as individuals entered into intimate relationships that appeared to threaten that cultural boundary, discourses of the domestic were also re-encrusted and difference recreated. The chapter is structured around three areas where essentialised understandings of ‘us’ and ‘them’ were challenged in the intimate sphere of the domestic: conversion; the interior space of the missionary household; and cross-cultural relationships.

Conversion and convergence

‘Heathenism’ was the operative word through which Indian and African homes were racialised in missionary discourse: whilst ‘Hindu women’, for example, were racialised and objectified within a specifically Indian context, such depictions were woven into a wider narrative of ‘heathen oppression’. The label ‘heathen’ never simply evoked religious difference but also stood for cultural and, less candidly, racial difference, as ‘heathen’ was discursively aligned with ‘African’ or ‘Indian’ and sometimes with ‘darkness’. Nevertheless, through framing their thinking in terms of a Christian–heathen framework, at least at one level, missionaries suggested that Christianisation would dissolve this principal manifestation of otherness.

Although the tropes powerful in missionary writing were often static ones, missionary thinking was premised on the potential for change. Indigenous people were to be ‘transformed’ by evangelisation. Conversion never simply meant a faith-based transfer of allegiance; it had to be embodied in cultural practices. The domestic was an important site where such change was to occur. ‘We must get them to be cleaner and to put up better houses,’ Reverend Wookey wrote from South Bechuanaland, and ‘do more to make happy homes.’ Wookey’s colleagues in India thought on similar lines. Back in Britain, the Foreign Secretary of the LMS wrote of the missionary imperative: ‘to touch the domestic life of those great Eastern races who scarcely know what the word “home” means, and to teach and persuade them so to alter their ways that the women, the wives and mothers, shall...become the fountain of Christianity.’ Here, as elsewhere, missionaries portrayed themselves as the only harbingers of change, representing indigenous families as stagnant, and marginalising other colonial agents who were also taking European domesticity abroad. What were the implications of conversion, and the fundamental desire to induce domestic change, for the framing of difference in missionary writing?