CHAPTER SIX

CONFESSIONALISED MEDICINE
THE NORWEGIAN MISSIONARY SOCIETY’S LEPROSY
NARRATIVES FROM MADAGASCAR 1887–1907

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During the late 1880s, The Norwegian Missionary Society (NMS) established a leprosy home, Ambohipiantrana, close to their mission station Antsirabé in the highlands of Madagascar. At a time when Norway obtained recognition for leprosy research and leprosy policies, both missionaries in the field and medical practitioners in Norway expressed their interest in the connection between the famous Norwegian leprosy expertise and the great tasks of the Norwegian missions. However, not much research has been done to investigate how the two Norwegian leprosy universes were related to each other, nor on how missionary writers responded to the changing medical understanding of the Biblical disease in the late nineteenth century.¹

This paper is a textual analysis of the written missionary narratives on Ambohipiantrana during the two first decades it was run by the NMS, from 1887 to 1907. The ambition has been to examine these narratives as literature, and how this literature is part of a discourse interacting with other texts, narratives and understandings of leprosy at the time. A more specific goal for the following readings has been to examine how the missionary narratives on leprosy and sin counteracted and clashed with the medical understanding of contagion, and how new hybrid narratives developed within this specific missionary discourse, colored by the colonial framing.

The period covers the two first decades of Ambohipiantranrana and also the period when Pastor Thorkild G. Rosaas was responsible for the home. The period is also particularly interesting because it covers the years when the theory of the contagious nature of the disease had its international breakthrough in the medical world and also the time when France declared Madagascar to be a French colony.

*Contagionism and Segregation: The International Leprosy Discourse in the 1890s*

By the beginning of the 1890s, it was still a matter of dispute whether leprosy was contagious or not. Contagion was, as a medical and microbiological term, not fixed, and hereditarians, sanitarians and others often opposed the unicausal etiology of the contagionists. In Norway, however, most physicians working within the leprosy institutional system, which included five hospitals at the time, considered leprosy to be a contagious and not a hereditary disease. Gerhard Armauer Hansen's first observations of the leprosy bacillus had been published in 1874, and in 1877 and 1885 the Norwegian Parliament had passed a new leprosy legislation based on the supposition of the contagious nature of the disease. Several international publications from around 1890 presented the Norwegian system of segregation and legislation as a groundbreaking prototype, and in 1890 the director of the Reknes leprosy hospital, Edvard Kaurin, had an extensive pro-contagionist article

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