CHAPTER 6

The Dreams and Songs of Rebecca Rakua

The career of Rebecca Rakua of the Hermannsburg mission to Central Australia began, like many others, with service to mission families. As her Old Testament name implied, the mission imagined her as an appropriate wife for a Christian man whose children and grandchildren would constitute the core of the future Aboriginal Lutheran church. Late in her life the Archangel Gabriel appeared to her in a dream and showed her some of her deceased children in heaven. Then a number of angels descended a ladder from heaven and taught her a song about children that she was commanded to teach to all the people of Hermannsburg. Although the missionaries treated her vision with scant respect, Rebecca’s dream provides a rare insight into the way an indigenous woman might combine her indigenous identity and her mission experience with an evangelical calling. Such scenes may have often been re-enacted far away from missionary eyes as central Australian Aboriginal societies had segregated secret-sacred rituals where men were excluded from women’s ceremonies and knowledge. In her dream Gabriel appears with a message for her as a woman. It is about the destiny of her children, which accorded with the role the mission assigned her. But more than that it conferred on her an evangelical authority to teach her people by spreading the song. Rebecca’s vision transgressed two important limits of gendered power placed by Lutherans on indigenous evangelists: the source of authority had to be the Bible (which men controlled in translating and teaching) and the right of preaching and dissemination of God’s word was reserved for males approved by the missionaries. Lutherans, unlike Moravians, did not easily grant authority to dreams and visions. When they cautiously accepted some, as in a revival movement at Hermannsburg in 1921 they made strict gendered decisions when evaluating men’s and women’s visions.

This chapter examines Rebecca’s claim to evangelical authority and the gendered boundaries it threatened. Her story is compared to the experiences of other Christian Arrernte women, like Rosa Raggatt and Sofia Ljunga, and the experiences of Aboriginal male evangelists at Hermannsburg mission. During periods when there was no permanent missionary at Hermannsburg Aboriginal men were permitted to evangelize while women could only accompany their husbands on their proselytizing journeys. This discussion of Rebecca Rakua, Rosa Raggatt and Sofia Ljunga is based on Lutheran mission reports, letters, diaries, missionary wives’ letters, indigenous letters and a convert’s autobiography. The Lutheran sources contain no memoirs and hardly any letters by indigenous
women for the period 1870s–1930s. This silencing of women's evangelizing authority or spiritual leadership is also apparent in missionary wives' writings, which largely reproduce patriarchal gendered ideas. Lutheran women were not socialized into spiritual leadership. Their discussions of indigenous women extend to domestic violence and child rearing, but not religious authority.¹

Historical Background: Hermannsburg Mission and the 1921 Revival Moment

Hermannsburg mission was established in central Australia on the lands of the Arrernte in 1877 by the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Australia with support from the Hermannsburg Missionary Society in Germany. The first group of missionaries from Germany struggled in the dry, harsh interior of Australia thousands of kilometres from their sponsors. By 1891 they had all left the station in the hands of laymen who tried to maintain the vast property. In 1894 a new mission regime was established under missionary Carl Strehlow who remained at Hermannsburg until his death in 1922. Again there was a hiatus of several years before another permanent missionary, Friedrich Albrecht was appointed in 1926. He remained at the mission until 1951. The Lutheran church handed over control of the mission to the Arrernte in the 1970s.

The Lutherans promoted a conservative gender ideology which gave women no responsibilities in the public domain.² Women's restriction to the domestic

¹ Not all sources are publicly accessible. The important diary of Frieda Strehlow for example remains in family possession and could not be accessed by researchers at the time of writing.

For Aboriginal women's experiences at Moravian missions in Australia see for example: Bain Attwood, 'Cameron, Elizabeth (Bessy) (c. 1851–1895),' Australian Dictionary of Biography, suppl. vol. (Melbourne University Press, 2005), pp. 59–60; B. Attwood, 'Space and Time at Ramahyuck, Victoria, 1863–85,' in Settlement: A History of Australian Indigenous Housing,