Pioneering Female Autonomy?
Johanne Borchgrevink’s Girls’ School in late-19th century Madagascar

Karina Hestad SKEIE¹
University of Stavanger

“In most places, at most times, colonialism did not exist in the singular but in a plurality of forms and forces — its particular character being shaped as much by political, social and ideological contests among the colonizers as by the encounter with the colonized”, claims John Comaroff.² This article explores some political, social and ideological contests among nineteenth-century Norwegian Lutheran missionaries in Madagascar over “proper education” for young Malagasy girls.

In 1872 the Norwegian teacher and missionary wife Johanne Christiane Borchgrevink (1836-1924) started Antsahamanitra boarding school for girls in the Malagasy capital Antananarivo. Mrs Borchgrevink was to run this school for the 40 more years that she and her husband worked for the Norwegian Missionary Society (NMS) in Madagascar. The school was her idea, and was started as a private institution, although not until after she had first sought and received permission for its establishment from the NMS leadership.³ Johanne Borchgrevink raised the necessary funds through her

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³ She first consulted missionary bishop Hans P. S. Schreuder in Zulu-Natal, at that time the
extensive network in Norway, in particular among Norwegian women interested in mission. This support remained crucial, since the school became a semi-independent institution within the NMS. Mrs Borchgrevink ran this educational venture with the help of both Norwegian and Malagasy employees.

Tensions between the aims of this strong, highly motivated individual and the rest of the NMS community in Madagascar surfaced during the Borchgrevinks' extensive furlough in Norway in 1881-85. Due to their absence, the relationship between Johanne Borchgrevink’s private institution and the NMS had to be rearranged. Disagreements over the school’s aims and rationale, as well as its admissions policy and curriculum, reveal not only fundamental conflicts regarding Malagasy (and Norwegian) women’s roles, but also unresolved tensions in the missionaries’ understanding of Malagasy people’s transformability and the relationship between Malagasy culture and the change the missionaries sought to achieve.

The sociologist Line Nyhagen Predelli has argued that Antsahamanitra girls’ school is an example of how nineteenth-century Protestant women missionaries sought to export a Western notion of women’s domesticity to elevate “pagan women’s” status. While Johanne Borchgrevink and the other NMS missionaries agreed on some basic Western gender-templates, such as the need for female virginity, chastity, fidelity in marriage and women’s crucial role in the Christian home, I will suggest that Predelli’s verdict may be too limited and negative, and that Johanne Borchgrevink had a far more modern agenda for her girls than did others in the NMS at the time.

Following a brief overview of the Norwegian mission in Madagascar, I will explore Johanne Borchgrevink’s background and personality. I then proceed to a description of the girls’ school and Johanne Borchgrevink’s aims and motivations, before focusing on the criticisms voiced by the rest of the missionary community.

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administrative leader of the Norwegian mission in Madagascar, and also the NMS secretary in Norway, Pastor Dons, who presented the issue to the board, which gave the necessary permission. It was, however, clear from the start that Johanne Borchgrevink had to get the entire funding for the project from sources outside the NMS. See NMS Archives, Microfilm no. 67, 1886 Missionary Conference Minutes Madagascar (hereafter cited without archival reference), p.291.