Elisabeth Engel

From Sex in Colonial Africa to Anticolonialism in the Bedroom: Reflections on the African American Missionary Position

Schriftenreihe Bulletin of the German Historical Institute Washington, D.C., Band 57 (Fall 2015)

Herausgegeben vom Deutschen Historischen Institut Washington, D.C.
FROM SEX IN COLONIAL AFRICA TO ANTICOLONIALISM IN THE BEDROOM: REFLECTIONS ON THE AFRICAN AMERICAN MISSIONARY POSITION

Elisabeth Engel
GERMAN HISTORICAL INSTITUTE

In this paper I would like to consider how African American missionaries in Africa altered notions of sex and family relations in the first decades of the twentieth century. My goal will be to suggest where a reassessment of the African American mission and its meaning in the context of the history of black Atlantic emancipation and pan-Africanism could begin. Present studies think through the mission and its impact from the perspective of the relations between black communities and their white oppressors in the Atlantic world. In this view, African American missionaries made a “significant contribution to a growing awareness of pan-Africanism among ordinary black people in the United States well before the rise of Garveyism and the Harlem Renaissance” — the two most important Africa-centered movements of the interwar years. Not much attention is given to the African American mission from the point of view of the colonial encounter of which it was part in Africa, despite the fact that it was precisely the European colonization of Africa in the late nineteenth century that sparked new waves of pan-African protest and identity. Scholars consider the impact of black American missionaries in Africa “somewhat illusive” and by extension mostly negligible where it was not directly related to the rise of black international movements and the resistance to global white supremacy, which characterized the twentieth century as the century of the color line. Adrian Hastings, the eminent scholar of African Christianity, for instance, describes black American missionaries in Africa as “never very numerous” and “mostly too immersed in the Westernizing orientation of the main American missions to offer any distinctive message.” Why African American missionaries were drawn to go to colonial Africa and how they defined relations of race and power in the spheres of sex and family relations — the core arenas of both colonial power and black Atlantic solidarity — deserves much more investigation.

This paper will only suggest a direction to take in answering these and related questions. As I hope to show, the travel writing of African American missionaries in Africa altered both the colonial and the pan-African discourse about the relationship between

1 This article draws on my research on the missionary work of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. For the full argument, see Elisabeth Engel, Encountering Empire: African American Missionaries in Colonial Africa, 1900–1939 (Stuttgart, 2015).


African Americans and Africa, mostly by altering dominant assumptions about what the markers of sameness and difference were in the intimate domains of home, sex, and family. By the turn of the twentieth century, the travelogues of a handful of African American Africa missionaries returning from their sojourns overseas had made the African American colonial experience the starting point of renegotiations of notions of home and foreign, gender roles, and family structures that were prevalent in the black American community and its response to the colonization of the presumed motherland, Africa. While scholarship unanimously endorses the view that African American missionaries were never very numerous, contemporaries could not easily ignore their dominance in maintaining transatlantic connections, precisely because they shared this function, at least to some extent, with pan-African agitators in the United States. As I will argue, black missionaries represented an approach to black self-determination that had a strong focus on the intimate sphere and that thus was much more genuine than what research on pan-Africanism commonly acknowledges. The problems and potentialities that African American missionaries saw in relationships to colonial Africa were premised upon the new notions of home, sex, and family relations that they developed from their colonial encounters. Although these notions were quite different from those that pan-Africanists proposed, they were no less culturally profound.

I. Sex in Colonial Africa

In 1884 and 1885, Africa was partitioned and then formally colonized by European powers. The continent was the last geographical, but not the last imperial frontier that was there for the “West” to move forward. With millions of new African colonial subjects and very few colonial officials to oversee them at their disposal, Europeans began an eager search for governmental strategies that protected white supremacy. Manipulating the conduct of African women in order to move them away from fieldwork and polygamous families towards Western role models of housewives and mothers was one such strategy. According to a confidential government report of Sierra Leone, the British considered assigning women this new “role” as essential to exercising colonial control. “There is a great possibility,” the report argued, “that any system . . . capable of influencing and moulding the girlhood . . . is likely the soonest to substantially influence the general population.” In addition to restructuring African families and gender roles, another important part of expanding colonial rule into


6 Marion Berghahn, Images of Africa in Black American Literature (Totowa, 1977), 44.


9 Memorandum of a Scheme for the Introduction of English Elementary Education into the Protectorate of Sierra Leone, 1914. National Archive of Sierra Leone, box 682 (1), C/261, 3.
the realm of intimacy was to draw the color line, the social segrega-
tion of the races around the globe, in people’s bedrooms. As Ann
Lora Stoler argues, colonial administrators took “sexual relations”
and “familiarity” as signs of what was racially “innermost,” locating
intimacies such as sexual desires, and forms of cohabitation, mar-
rriage, and childrearing strategically in imperial politics. Sexual
habits and personas in the metropole as well as the colonies were
thus strongly charged with notions of colonial otherness and West-
ern civilization, and ritually constructed in the service of imperial
structures of race and white supremacy.

One of the very few African Americans who encountered colonial
Africa as a Christian missionary while such measures were underway
was a man called Charles Spencer Smith. Smith was born in a town
somewhere near Toronto in 1852, a time when many fugitive slaves
from the American South were seeking refuge in Canada from op-
pression and exploitation. Smith’s childhood and youth were marked
by privileges that blacks were entitled to only if they lived outside
of Jim Crow America and the colonial empires: he received a school
education and absolved an apprenticeship in furniture finishing.
These benefits of living, however, did not succeed in keeping Smith
north of the color line. At the age of fourteen, shortly after the Civil
War, he moved to the United States to try his fortunes as a utility boy
in Buffalo, as a deck hand and assistance cook on boats in the Great
Lakes region, and as a lumber trader in Detroit. He also worked in
hotels when the winter made outdoor work on boats and in forests
less pleasant. After a while, Smith decided to go south, where the
abolition of slavery and the racially liberal reconstruction period that
followed promised to offer unprecedented opportunities for men like
him to pursue more distinguished careers. Due to his education,
Smith could work as a teacher and held several short assignments in
schools in Kentucky and Mississippi. Although Smith was climbing
up the social ladder, none of these jobs seemed to bring him where
he wanted to go. His search for new frontiers coincided in his early
twenties with his conversion to Christianity. In 1870, he became a
member of the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME), the emi-
nent independent black institution of the day.

The AME Church had existed since 1816, and had guided many
blacks — enslaved and free — towards better prospects in life, through
inculcating religious values and lifestyles and through offering educa-
tion. The same was true for Smith, who was licensed to preach one

10 Ann Laura Stoler, Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule (Berkeley, 2010), 9.
tic dimension of colonialism see, for instance, Anne McClintock, Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest (New York, 1995).
year after his conversion, in 1871, and who eagerly performed a host of new responsibilities thereafter. He presided over several congregations in Alabama, represented his church at important political events of the burgeoning civil rights movement, served as a representative in the State Legislature of Alabama, and even left the church for a few years to go to college and study medicine. In 1882, when Smith rejoined the AME Church, his previously vague yet restless ambition to move and learn had gained a focus: instead of simply teaching, he strove to develop the knowledge base and instruction materials that were to be used in classes. To this end, he proposed the plan to organize the Sunday School Union, a new AME Church institution dedicated to producing the first self-made black study materials for youngsters. The AME Church approved the idea in 1884, the founding year of the Sunday School Union, and appointed Smith as its first secretary and treasurer. In this role, Smith erected the Union’s new headquarters in Public Square in Nashville, and worked to garner financial support by introducing an annual Children’s Day to the AME Church congregation, an event which took the specific interests of youngsters into consideration. During the formative period of the Union, Smith married his second wife, Christine Shoemaker Smith. While their marriage did not produce any children, Christine shared his ambition to build the AME Church’s education and served the Union as Smith’s assistant manager.13

Africa had not played a pivotal role in Smith’s ambitions. The valorizing idea that the continent was the “Land of the Forefathers” was a vague backdrop to his career, just as much as the condescending notion of Africa as the “Dark Continent,” a term European explorers used in their literature.14 In 1884 and 1885, the years when the Congo Conference convened in Berlin, however, both of these images were transformed. The partitioning of Africa among European colonial powers ended not only decades of imperial scramble but also longstanding fantasies of Africa as the last resort to which blacks dispersed around the world could return to live self-determined and in freedom.15

Smith reflected upon this problem in his first account, *Glimpses of Africa*, which was published to serve as teaching material by the AME Sunday School Union in 1895.16 In this volume, he wrote that his attention for Africa was first raised by a book called *The Negro Problem Solved*. Smith explained that he had read it in 1874, when he was working for the Alabama State Legislature, and that its argument...
that Africa was evolving towards Western civilization convinced him that Africa’s “ultimate redemption and development” was coming into view. More vigorously than by prospects of return, however, his interest in Africa was stirred by the fact that European powers were encroaching on the continent. About the Berlin conference of 1884 and 1885, he remarked: “[w]hen representatives of the various European Powers . . . had reached an agreement on matters pertaining to the partitioning of Africa, it became a question in my mind as to whether division necessarily implied possession — i.e., whether the partitioning of Africa was not a scheme on paper, rather than an actuality.”

Smith’s question was unusual if considered in the context of his African American peers. Representatives of his church had either engaged in efforts to deny any relationship to Africa, which the church’s name may have easily suggested, in order to avoid evoking negative stereotypes. Or, they attempted to encourage African Americans to leave. The AME Bishop, race leader, and pan-Africanist Henry McNeal Turner, for instance, strongly encouraged African Americans to emigrate. As he proclaimed, to the great discomfort of his church, he did not see a “manhood future in the United States for the Negro” and nothing he would “see or hear” about Africa would change this conviction. His stubbornness was mocked by the Indianapolis Freeman, the first illustrated black newspaper in the United States, in 1907. In a cartoon titled “Some Things Overlooked,” the paper showed Turner in a boat headed towards a continent filled by wild jungles and heavily armed colonial powers and commented: “The Bishop Undoubtedly Forgets that the Dark Continent is Well Occupied.”

19 Ibid., 50.
Writing much earlier than that, Smith’s question about the actuality of the colonization of Africa was less catchy than that of Turner and other pan-Africanists. In his *Glimpses of Africa*, he offered what he called “genuine impressions and observations” of Africa, as gathered by himself during a 147 day-long voyage along the “West and Southwest Coast . . . from Sierra Leone to St. Paul de Loanda . . . Including the Rio del Ray and Cameroons Rivers, and the Congo River from its Mouth to Matadi.”22 Undertaken in 1894, the cruise brought Smith to Sierra Leone, Liberia, Cameroon, the Congo, and Angola, all of which had recently come under colonial rule by powers as various as Britain, the United States, Germany, Belgium, and Portugal. His travel notes were not a projection of dreams about an ancient fatherland or a political agenda of emigration. They were a meticulous report of the misconceptions of Africa that he had adopted from the prevalent cultural productions of the United States and of confusions and uncertainties that resulted from these misconceptions when he finally experienced his own colonial encounter. In his prefatory statement, Smith powerfully rejected both the authority of all kinds of Western book knowledge and the related visions of the bearing Africa was to have in African Americans’ life and future. His somewhat poetic opening paragraph stated:

“To see Africa from America is one thing; To see Africa through books and magazines is one thing; To see Africa through reports and hearsay is one thing; To see Africa through dreams and visions is one thing; But to see Africa in Africa is another thing.”

The page continued with Smith’s admission that he was no exception. “I do not regard any remark or comment necessary, other than to say that I frankly confess to error of judgment, the result of seeing Africa from afar.”23

Smith’s claim for on-site presence as being absolutely essential to be able to know Africa, and, by extension, for this on-site presence being the distinguishing feature of his own account, framed his analysis. Carefully avoiding the notion that he was pursuing politically motivated aims with his trip, he listed among his “inducing causes” that he indeed wanted to “see Africa” but that this seeing involved accounting for his awareness of the colonial process. Accordingly, he enumerated that he was expecting to see what “the European is doing there” and “what the African himself is doing,” and explained

---

22 Smith, *Glimpses*, cover page.
23 Ibid., 21.
that he wanted to “gain knowledge” of missionary operations, make “meteorological observations,” and assess opportunities for employment for “industrious young Americans of African descent.”

While sex and family relations were not among his predefined interests, the account quickly reveals that he could not forgo observing them. The first mention of the topic occurred in a section Smith called the “African in Africa,” in which he discussed the impact of Anglo-Saxon civilization on the indigenous population. Smith soberly presented indications of the dynamics of the colonizing process between rulers and ruled, and, while acknowledging that this dynamic involved a transmission of civilization, he avoided idealizing the process by also including its downsides. The “African is a keen observer,” Smith noted, and regretted finding Africans stealing, robbing, and cheating just as the white man did, all of which showed that the African “naturally followed suit.”

This observation was then further exemplified by an analysis of sexual habits. Smith wrote: “He [the African] found the white man lusted after many women” and underscored his disregard for the practice by stating that Europeans pursued “even the disfigured, tattooed, heathenish, fetish worshipping African women.” While condemning European sex drives, Smith did not condemn Africans for exhibiting the same desires. In view of Europeans’ sexual habits, Smith noted, the African was “reassured of the eminent correctness and propriety of his own long established custom of a plurality of wives.” Smith’s discussion of the virtues and vices of polygamous sexual conduct then turned into an analysis of sameness and difference between rulers and ruled. “The point of difference between the African and the European,” Smith argued, “is that the former has many wives and no concubines; but a large number of the latter have one wife and several concubines. The African, seemingly, is wholly innocent of any wrong in the practices of polygamy.”

Smith’s notion of polygamy as an African custom revealed his hankering to grant Africans a superior civilization, even though he did not deny monogamy as a morality he would favor. The absence of “concubines,” the term then used to refer to extramarital sexual partners, restored the virtue of Africans in relation to their own moral systems and intimated that Europeans did not honor their Western Christian ethics to the same extent. In this way, Smith reversed the hierarchy of the races that had been long constructed by natural science,
and according to which Europeans were the most advanced race in human evolution, whereas Africans were the lowest. 26 Although he challenged this perspective, Smith did not challenge the related stereotype of the “Dark Continent.” With his remark on the “disfigured, tattooed, heathenish, fetish worshipping African women,” he retained the image of backwardness and exoticness for females and confined his argument about Africans’ moral superiority to men. 27

Indeed, Smith used African women on a number of occasions in his description to demarcate where civilization — whether Anglo-Saxon or African — had its ultimate limits. Upon visiting an exhibition on the Congo, Smith noted that Congolese girls received a great deal of attention, as they were “disfigured by tribal marks” and ready to gratify male spectators’ curiosity “for a kiss” in public. 28 In a similar way, Smith denigrated a local practice of tattooing that was common among the Dwalla tribe in Cameroon, for it rendered their women “very unattractive.” 29 But Smith also knew of contrary examples. The “handsomest women on the West and Southwest Coast,” Smith lectured, could be found in French Gaboon. He presented them as noted “far and near” for their regular features, long hair, and smooth skin, yet not without mentioning that they were also known as the most “licentious” women of Africa and therefore “eagerly sought for by traders.” 30 Whether cast as sex objects or cargo, Smith’s Glimpses of Africa asserted that the otherness of African women had not only a strong appeal but also the power to drag men beyond the boundaries of good manners and civilization. For Smith, such transgressions were more acceptable for polygamous Africans than for presumably monogamous Europeans. The origin of all transgressions, however, was indisputable: African women symbolized the eternal lures of a mysterious and dark continent that could not be subdued, but remained poised to take possession of men of all kinds of civilization. (See Figure 2) 31

Smith’s gendered logic of difference shifted to family relations when he turned to discussing missionary operations. Here Smith noticed that missionaries had difficulties to reach out to the group of Africans he categorized as “uncivilized,” the term he used to designate people who had not yet come under the influence of Anglo-Saxon civilization. According to Smith, “uncivilized Africans” felt “hopelessly distanced by the European.” Smith then analyzed the origin of this divide as related to tribal traditions of childrearing, starting with “certain customs” connected to birth. These involved “the binding around

26 Berghahn, Images of Africa, 8.
27 Smith, Glimpses, 73.
28 Ibid., 155.
29 Ibid., 185.
30 Ibid., 199.
31 On the sexual norms that characterize the construction of the bourgeois white European subject, see Ann Laura Stoler, Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault’s History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things (Durham, 1995).
the body of every new-born infant a cord . . . to which are fastened the bones and teeth of certain wild animals, which are regarded as a sort of charm to preserve the health and life of the child; the handing over of every new-born infant to a native priest or medicine man to tell its fortune; the interdicting to every person at their birth some article of food which they are not through life . . . to put in their mouth.” Drawing on stereotypes of heathenism and superstition, Smith interpreted the body of the new-born child as dwelling in “the realms where the imagination alone can travel” and designated this space as the site where the African feels “at home.” The description powerfully undermined the pan-African idea that African Americans could find their roots and prospects on the continent. Instead, Smith expanded the notion that the home of “uncivilized” and hence authentic Africans was elsewhere, in a world of imaginations that rational and educated, “civilized” black subjects could not go to.

Smith’s rejection of the concepts of home that he observed among Africans became more explicit when he discussed the strategies of “civilizing” that were applied by missionaries. At the core of their vision was the attempt to transplant youngsters from “a world of heathenism” to a “world of enlightenment” by breaking up African family ties. Smith fully endorsed the approach, arguing that boys and girls who entered the mission should ideally never be allowed to return to the “bush,” in hopes that all recollections of their primitive life would be effaced. The brutality of the suggested procedure indicated that Smith did not, after all, seek to achieve the protection of any African heritage. To the contrary, he stated that he hoped that these transplanted Africans would then

again intermarry, found new families, and thus lay the foundation of “civilized homes, hallowed by the blessings of Christian influences.” In his opinion, there was “no other method” that could garner more permanent and beneficial results. At the same time, Smith’s assertion that replacing African with Christian models of marriage and family was inevitable applied to Europeans as well. “Strange as it may seem,” Smith argued, “most Europeans on reaching Africa give themselves up to a life of unbridled lust.” The phenomenon appeared to be due less to Europeans “going native” than to the culture and spirit in which they themselves were raised in the colonial metropole. Unfortunately, Smith added, “many of the young men who go to Africa belong to the vicious classes at home, and are related to people who are bankrupt not only in purse and intelligence, but in morals as well.”

Smith’s Glimpses of Africa thus redefined concepts of sex, family, and home based on his colonial encounter, instead of catering to the ideological battlegrounds of colonialists and pan-Africanists. In view of vicious European men, polygamous black men, tattooed and licentious women, and world-enraptured African children, race ceased to make sense as an organizing principle of sameness and difference. In the colonial situation, Smith instead observed degrees of mutual transmission, transgression, and variation. The categories of difference — and possibilities of identity — that he developed pertained to gender roles, sex appeal, Western and African moral systems as well as Christian and African customs of childrearing, and each could encompass Africans and Europeans alike. While Smith was not positive as to whether the reciprocity would be for better or worse in Africa, he clearly conveyed that colonial intimacies were full of tensions. By reporting on those, he invited his African American readers to engage with Africa and its colonization beyond racial solidarity.

II. Anticolonialism in the Bedroom

Smith’s Glimpses of Africa formed the beginning of what one may call the genre of AME missionary travel writing that grappled with the intimate domain, whether related to concepts of home, sex or family relations. Between 1895 and 1955, many more AME-related authors published recollections of colonial Africa geared to the travelogue genre, as titles such as Observations of Persons and Things in South Africa, 1900—1904 (1905), West Africa: An Open Door (1917), Dawn in

33 Ibid., 114.
34 Ibid., 126.
Bantuland: An African Experiment (1953), and Beneath the Southern Cross: The Story of an American Bishop’s Wife in South Africa (1955) suggest. In addition, some of these travelers published autobiographies that placed their sojourns in colonial Africa into broader narratives of their lives. One of these was Levi Jenkin Coppin’s Unwritten History (1919). In the following sections, I will analyze his autobiography in order to exemplify how the new notions of the intimate domains that AME missionaries gained from their colonial encounter altered their perspectives on their own lives and homes in the United States, and therefore departed from the dominant views of pan-Africanism.

Levi Jenkins Coppin was born in 1848 in a Log Cabin in Fredericks Town, Maryland. At the age of seven he moved to Baltimore, and later to Wilmington, Delaware — some of the least hospitable places for blacks in the Union. Unlike Charles Spencer Smith, who could make choices as to what apprenticeships and jobs he pursued in the North, Coppin quickly turned to the AME Church as his sole option. After his mother had taught him how to read, he “studied the scriptures consecutively and constantly year after year” in the local Sunday School, joined AME board meetings, became familiar with their policies and was licensed to preach in 1876 — only a few years after Smith had joined the church much further south.35

Coppin’s path to colonial Africa was paved by the AME Church’s Africa mission. In 1900, he was assigned to the post of the AME resident bishop in Cape Colony and Transvaal by “acclamation.”36 By this time, the AME mission in South Africa had only recently been established. Henry McNeal Turner, who visited Pretoria in 1898, had merged the AME Church with the Ethiopian Church, an African movement for religious independence that caused the British colonial power much distress.37

Like Smith, Coppin had heard much about Africa before he got there. In Unwritten History, he commented on the lecture engagements he took on before his departure in order to collect funds for the work. “Of course the subject of my lectures was: ‘Africa,’ or ‘South Africa,’ or ‘The Dark Continent,’” he assured the reader, thereby implying that there was a story that was both predictable and marketable. Reflecting upon his presentations from the perspective of his actual Africa experience, however, Coppin revealed in his autobiography that his initial views could not be sustained:

35 Wright, Bishops, 146.
36 Ibid., 147.
37 The best study of the merger is Campbell, Songs of Zion.
It is amazing, how much one can say upon a subject that he knows absolutely nothing about. But are there not books upon every imaginable subject? . . . I soon collected a small library on various phases of Africa, its peoples, etc. Those books contained a great deal of information, but most of them contained also many errors. This is such a large, interesting and important subject, that it is difficult for either a white or a colored writer to avoid being influenced by prejudice. The white man sees the African full of faults and deficiencies, which may be true; but certainly not all of the truth: while the colored man, in trying to correct the misrepresentations so apparent, may incline to the opposite extreme.38

The statement defines the complex epistemic frameworks in which AME missionaries developed their own views of Africa. Entering the colonized continent involved discoveries beyond the politicized and thus misleading representations of Africa in historical records that were constructed in service of either white supremacy or pan-African resistance. For Coppin — as for Smith — none of these described what he himself found to be true of Africa. Coppin had already noted as much in an earlier account he wrote about his time in South Africa. Here he explained: “No attempt is made in these brief pages to give a history of South Africa and its cosmopolitan people, but to note some things . . . which the historian . . . would very naturally neglect.”39

In grappling with the impossibility of aligning themselves with contemporary conventions of historical representation, and in digging for what these strategic representations concealed, AME accounts began to look backwards, into their author’s own homes. *Unwritten History* is a particularly explicit example of the critical potential of this inverted perspective, even if it does not offer a combative ideology. Coppin’s focus on representing the unwritten transcends the confines of dominant book knowledge and thus gains leverage to place different aspects at the core of the history of his race. To this end, Coppin made the private public. A good part of his account is concerned with his most intimate spheres, namely his various homes and the various relationships he had to women, ranging from his mother to lovers, wives, and daughters, as well as the presumed “Mother Africa.” This focus allows him both to disclose how women helped him establish his masculinity at home and to break the silence that was kept about these women’s history,


including their contributions to racial emancipation, within the domi-
nant narratives of pan-Africanism and Western imperialism.40 That
Coppin locates his Unwritten History in the things that both of these
stories neglect is underscored by the date of the publication, 1919.
In this year, leading African American agitators strongly directed
the black American community’s attention to Africa as a homeland:
W.E.B. Du Bois convened the first Pan-African Congress in Paris,
Marcus Garvey established the Universal Negro Improvement
Association (UNIA) in New York, and the Harlem Renaissance, with
its endorsement of African aesthetics and heritages, reached its
peak.41 AME missionary travel literature was part of this transatlantic
engagement, even though its focus on the home, women, and family
did not conform to it. Unwritten History presents us with a rare op-
portunity to demonstrate how the retreat into the domestic sphere
was a strategy that black American men could use to assert a new
masculinity based on the concepts of home and gender that they
drew from their Africa experiences.

Coppin introduced himself to the reader as one of seven free-born
children who had grown up in a log cabin.42 The family’s freedom
was owed to clever marriage politics: His parents, Jane and John
Coppin, were born free because Coppin’s grandmother was free,
and children inherited their mother’s status as their birthright.
Nonetheless, his family had a marginalized social status defined by
the “unwritten laws” of Maryland, which denied school education
and social integration to blacks. Coppin wrote that his situation
prompted him to mimic President Abraham Lincoln’s masculine
saga of the “Log Cabin Statesmen,” which showed him that famous
men could come from “these primitive dwelling places.” But he also
began to develop philosophies of life in watching his parents, so
that these for him became related to the two sexes. Coppin saw in
his father a prudent, hard-working man of good taste and judgment
who treated his wife with respect, while his aspirations for his family
and society were limited. His mother, Jane Coppin, to the contrary,
struck him as exhibiting “instinct” and “inspired vision.”43 Coppin
admired her for insisting upon teaching her children how to read and
write, and upon being generous toward neighbors and kin, although
this meant breaking the “unwritten law of Maryland.” Her courage
to combine uplift with Christian convictions, inspiration, and vision
necessarily transcended the confines of the family’s household.44 In
Coppin’s view, she used her principles to combat racial subjugation
and thereby exemplified that it was “the hand that rocks the cradle

40 Gayatri Chakravorty
Spivak argues that Western
epistemic violence was
particularly destructive
to the representation of
women. Gayatri Chakravorty
Spivak, “Can the Subaltern
Speak,” in Marxism and the
Interpretation of Culture, ed.
Cary Nelson and Lawrence
Grossberg (Urbana, 1988),
294–308.
41 David Levering Lewis,
When Harlem Was in
42 Wright, Bishops, 147.
43 Coppin, Unwritten
History, 11.
44 Ibid., 14.
In addition to his own family, Coppin got to explore the home of relatives in Wilmington. Moving in with them brought him closer to what he had already begun to discern as a “model, Christian home.” The housewife where he was staying impressed him as “a model woman, and housekeeper and Christian” and her husband as “especially affectionate.” Because both were Christian, Coppin concluded, “the moral atmosphere was pure, and love abounded, and the influence could only be salutary.” It was in view of the affectionate Christian man that Coppin became conscious of his desire to be such a husband.

At the same time, Coppin’s family background sharpened his critical attention to the patriarchal family structures that appeared to be the accepted norm in the United States. In view of the affectionate relationships that characterized his immediate family, he challenged masculinities that were built upon the oppression of women. He contended that overvaluing male leadership in the family led to the omission of the important role mothers played as a force of uplift, and thus in the process of black emancipation. In addition, the naturalizing of male superiority seemed to serve to neglect the history of male domestic violence, which he considered a crime that had remained “nameless.” Coppin inferred the problem of sexual abuse of black women from slaveholders’ overbearing concerns to perpetuate their “stock,” and admonished that it involved masters and slaves — that is, white and black men — alike. Although rape was not a “crime” in the legal sense, Coppin argued that the practice was evident in the stereotyping of the black man as “woefully wanting in his regard for sexual purity” and in the enormous economic benefit “proud Anglo-Saxon[s]” gained from selling illegitimate children into slavery.

Coppin’s specific condemnation of fathers as rapists was nuanced in its consideration of racial solidarity. Sexual violence, he argued, “degraded the master even more than the slave.” However, he could not condone the silent pact whereby rape was considered nonexistent as long as one did not “get caught.” Coppin instead advocated an understanding of rape as “[t]he crime for which any man deserves to die, according to the law, of course.” Here he underscored a gender bias that underlay the rule of law commonly associated with civilization, calling into question the superiority of those societies that concealed the sexual violence of men in favor of accepting them as the moral leaders of their families, their races, their societies, and even their nations.

46 Ibid., 210.
47 Ibid., 41–42.
48 Ibid.
Coppin’s negative view of American males informed his view of Africa. “I say Mother Land,” he stated, “because the amalgamations Americana [i.e. racially mixed population] that slave conditions brought about gave us so many American fathers, that should such offspring go to Africa, it certainly would not be going to a Father Land.” Following his own assignment in 1900 to Africa, Coppin correspondingly envisioned his mission. He anticipated that the colonialists would spread sexual misconduct under the banner of Western civilization and appealed to the British to be recognized as a marriage officer. By assuming this role he hoped to be able to bring “natives and coloreds” into legally binding monogamous relationships. Because these groups were often excluded from colonial Christian church life, Coppin articulated the bond of marriage as a way to encourage the “lowly and the lowliest” to regulate their “domestic relations in accordance with Christian doctrine, and in keeping with the demands of our civilized age.”

At the same time, Coppin’s time in Africa brought him new insights into male sexuality. With the African custom of polygamy never far from view, he could neither reinforce the stereotype of black promiscuity, nor could he support the idea that Africans were uncivilized. For Coppin, the custom affirmed, first, that “the verdict of the world civilized and uncivilized as expressed by action [was that] it is not good for man to be alone” and, second, that not being alone was not necessarily synonymous with an inclination to a monogamous relationship. Rather, polygamy seemed to be in tune with a tabooed desire for several women at once. Framed as a “natural bent of man,” Coppin began to appreciate the African custom as corresponding to an aspect of male sexuality that was significantly different from what he had previously rejected as the crime of slavery. Polygamous relationships, Coppin observed, were characterized by a remarkable “strictness”: they regulated sexual misconduct in a way that actually enhanced the “sanctity of the rite” of marriage, and they prevented Africans from engaging in rape, divorce, and adultery.

As a result, Coppin found some comfort in the insight that the Western ideal of monogamy could be reworked with non-Western examples from Africa. His positive attitude toward polygamy was tempered by the observation that “Africa is not unlike other portions of the world in its habit of holding the women back.” After all, the worldwide subordination of women strengthened his conviction that the spread of Christianity had to be a mission to herald “women’s
emancipation everywhere.”

Coppin’s clarion call to restore a manhood not gained at the expense of women sounded global. But, according to Unwritten History, the construction of such manhood began at home, within the arrangements of one’s family.

To make the case, Coppin’s Unwritten History offered a description of his family life, a sphere he considered as a “Domestic Bliss” and the backbone his own masculinity. With three marriages total, and several infatuations to boot, he reinforced his rejection of patriarchy and disclosed his want for female company — not promiscuously, but rather as a method to subject himself to some authority at home. The women Coppin shared his home with worked as industrial teachers, AME missionaries, and physicians. According to Coppin, they were the quintessence of Christian emancipation. He was convinced that their marked intellect and public appeal made them indispensable forces in the course of human uplift, including his own. While his first marriage ended with the tragic death of his wife and his son, the second lasted nearly a lifetime. Fanny Jackson Coppin had a “fixed course in life, and stubbornly maintained it, until it became a fixed habit.”

According to Coppin, her strictness almost prevented their romance and, to be sure, it served to forestall male domination in their relationship. During their childless marriage, she remained in the classroom, advanced the work of the AME Church’s Women’s Parent Mite Missionary Society, established a girls’ dormitory, and launched a campaign for industrial education in Philadelphia — all before, Coppin emphasized with reference to Booker T. Washington’s Tuskegee Institute, “it became real propaganda.”

Coppin admitted that he would have liked for his wife to give up her public responsibilities and that he attempted to “eliminate [them] gradually.” His assignment in Africa seemed to be an opportunity to get her to withdraw from teaching. And yet Coppin described her as constantly working to organize missionary societies, to train local women in Christian work, and to travel from Cape Town as far as to Bulawayo in Rhodesia.

Although this was not exactly what he had envisioned, Coppin noted “with special emphasis” that African women had learned from her that Christianity was not “simply something to believe or recite, but, something to be, and to do.”

Their time in the African field was followed by eight years of Fanny Jackson Coppin’s slow decay. Coppin eagerly stressed that her retreat to “the house” was an “enforced retirement” caused not by illness, but by the gradual breaking down of a constitution that had tirelessly
and faithfully responded to “the call of duty.” Eulogies later confirmed that Fanny Jackson Coppin stood for good character, purity, thoroughness, and righteousness, thus serving as an “inspiration of thousands.”\(^5\) While sharing the urge of her eulogists to acknowledge women’s public achievements, Coppin also wanted his readers to pick up a lesson that concerned male duty in the realms of marital intimacy:

This seems like a strange way to express it, but what I mean is so difficult to express. We had learned to live within each other. . . . Before [Fanny’s decay], both lives were so busy that each could easily become absorbed in the duty at hand. At last, my ‘duty,’ and privilege and pleasure, was to live alone for her who had lived for so many; and she, now unable to live the old life that was as broad as humanity itself, could only live for and depend on me.\(^5\)

Coppin elaborated his vision of male domestic duty with the example of his third wife, physician Melissa E. Thompson. After Fanny Jackson Coppin’s death, he resolved to not go after other women. But friends who observed his moral decay — including sleeping in, smoking, and decreasing intellectual interest — advised him to seek “companionship at home.”\(^6\) Coppin narrated his infatuation with Thompson as a “love at first sight” story, which was fueled by the professional manner in which she presented herself in public. Referring to a speech she had given at an AME annual conference, Coppin noted that it was “free from that sophomoric air and tone that so often characterized the speech of professional people.” This, he emphasized, was remarkable, as men were “so inclined to either discount the ability of the woman physician or to regard her as, at least, being on trial . . . that it would not have been a great wonder had this young woman [tried] to utilize the opportunity to prove that her certificate was held by merit.”\(^6\) The story of Coppin’s third marriage again castigated male sexism in public, while praising the bliss of men’s domestic duty. By World War I, Thompson gave birth to Coppin’s first daughter, whom he named Theodosia, that is, a “Divine gift.” Coppin called the child “a rollicking ‘Tom-boy girl,’” who was “decidedly precocious; naturally spoiled,” but lucky, because she had “a wise Mother.”\(^6\) The depiction epitomized Coppin’s philosophy of embracing apparent contradictions as natural traits that were, as such, divine and his juvenile admiration of Christian women and mothers as the best leaders of the race.

---

\(^5\) Ibid., 364–65.
\(^6\) Ibid., 367.
\(^6\) Ibid., 368.
\(^6\) Ibid., 372–73.
\(^6\) Ibid., 375.
Disclosing his intimate relationships with females in all their various roles allowed Coppin to underscore that racial mothering was not limited to one’s own children, but it required women to be active outside of the home. Correspondingly, black masculinity had to be shaped at home and freed from notions of sexual aggression and Western dominance. On the one hand, Coppin’s domestic bliss thus asserted an ideal of modern monogamy, as both sexes used the domestic sphere to mutually unleash otherwise restricted potentials, namely, male capacities for love and affection and female capacities for public leadership. On the other hand, Coppin’s disclosure of the domestic concerned the innermost parts of his race. It filled the gaps in knowledge that existed in the histories of black mothers, the unnamed sexual abuse that was part of slavery, and the polygamy of African men, which was taboo in the West. By framing these elements as unwritten, Coppin pointed out that the epistemic violence of Western imperialism had destroyed black males’ ability to express their masculinity other than in the subordination of women. Coppin’s call to domesticate black males by subjecting them to emancipated women moved black anticolonialism to the bedroom: It made the home and intimate relations between men and women the new avenue for subverting black and white imperial masculinities.

Coppin’s Africa experience served in this narrative to reinterpret the stereotype of black promiscuity. Constructed as a natural trait, male sexuality helped legitimize polygamous forms of cohabitation, because they regulated the misconduct of rape, divorce, and extramarital sex. Combined with an appraisal of Christian marriage, Coppin applied these beliefs to his own home life entering into a sequence of monogamous relationships with emancipated women. Coppin’s ideal of black Christian manhood thus aspired to both African and female role models in a non-pan-African way. He grounded his relationship to Africa in the new understandings of male sexuality and morality instead of imagining himself as a son of an African motherland. And he proposed building a home, as opposed to going home to Africa, as the essential civilizing mission of his race, because it promised to undermine the power structures that suppressed the vital potentials only women had to offer.

**Conclusion**

From the turn of the twentieth century onwards, Smith and Coppin’s sexual codes remained an important subtext in the Christian black

---

Atlantic. On the one hand, as historians of black Atlantic protest movements show, between 1890 and 1930, it became difficult for pan-Africanists to dismiss the black missionary voice. What African American missionaries had to say about Africa was distinguished by the longstanding authority of the black church that for generations had been the cornerstone of black community life as well as by being rooted in their first-hand experience of the continent. On the other hand, as many more AME missionaries began to explore the intimate relationships between and among men and women in the context of their colonial encounters in Africa, they put together a record of contradictions and tensions in contemporary images of Africa that were at odds with the clear-cut ideologies of racial sameness and difference that were dominant in the “West”. Both aspects helped making AME missionary publications a powerful statement in the contemporary debate about black self-determination: they addressed concepts of morality, domesticity, and familiarity from the perspective of colonial Africa, instead of propelling pan-African dreams of black liberation. The writings of African Americans like Smith and Coppin thus are important reminders that black self-determination could at times also mean going beyond acting in opposition to white oppression. Their texts registered, instead, the inapplicability of colonial and racial dichotomies and placed a new, idiosyncratic discourse on intimacy at the core of African American-African relations.

Elisabeth Engel is a Research Fellow at the German Historical Institute in Washington DC. She received her Ph.D. from the Freie Universität Berlin in 2014 and held several teaching positions at the Universität zu Köln, Freie Universität Berlin and Universität Kassel. She is interested in the (post-)colonial history of the Atlantic world with a focus on North America. In her book Encountering Empire: African American Missionaries in Colonial Africa, 1900–1939 (Stuttgart, 2015), which was awarded the Franz Steiner Prize, she explores the relationships that emerged between African Americans and Africa during the colonization of the continent by European powers in the twentieth century.

