

UC Santa Barbara
Volume 5, Issue 1 (Spring 2025)

Title
Caught Between Two Worlds: Princess Emma Sandile

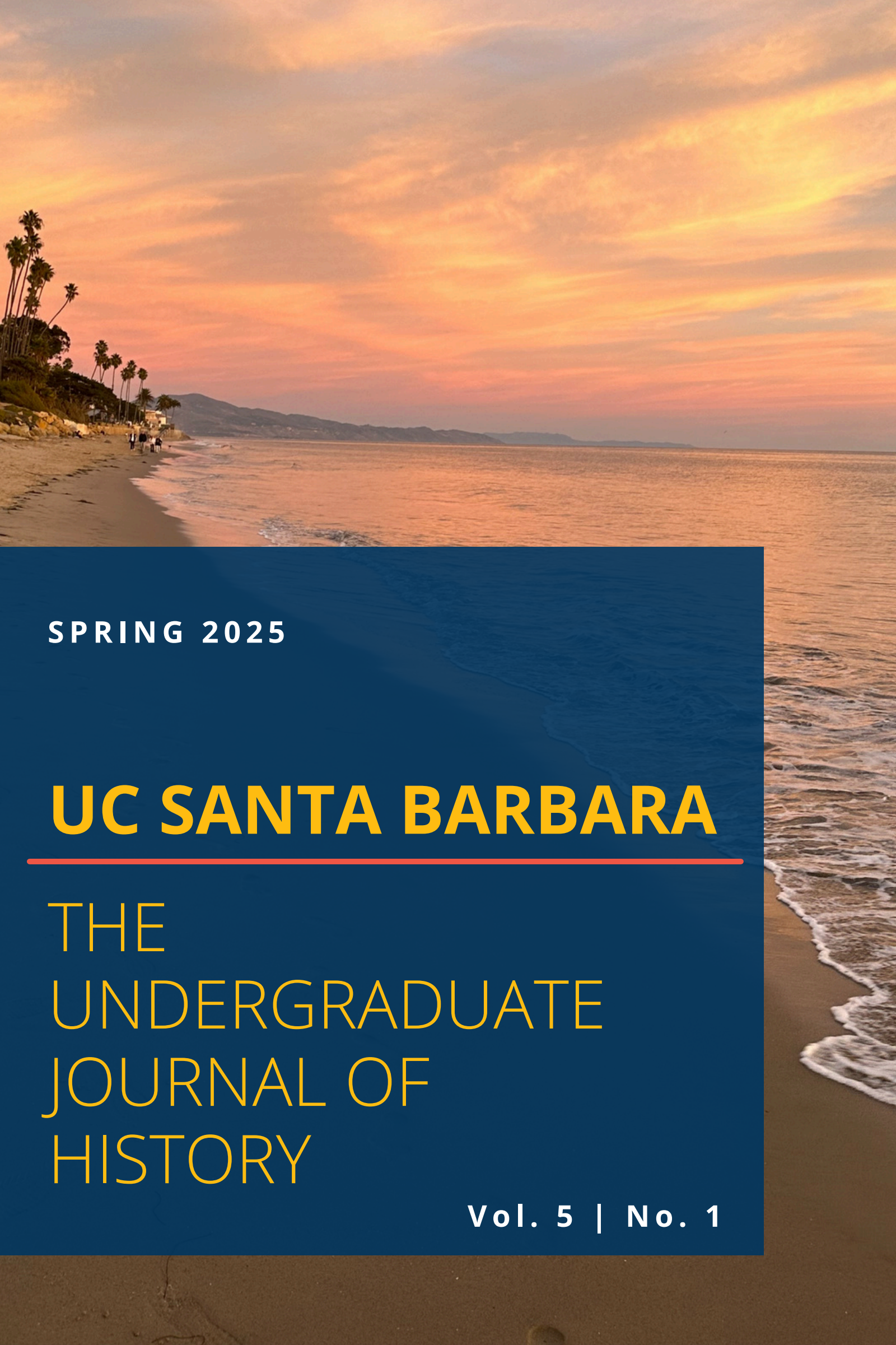
Permalink
<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1n19h5bb>

Journal
The UC Santa Barbara Undergraduate Journal, 5(1)

Author
Callahan, Ashley

Publication Date
2025-04-01

Peer reviewed



SPRING 2025

UC SANTA BARBARA

THE
UNDERGRADUATE
JOURNAL OF
HISTORY

Vol. 5 | No. 1

© **The UCSB Undergraduate Journal of History**
3236 Humanities and Social Sciences Building
The Department of History, Division of Humanities and Fine Arts
The University of California, Santa Barbara
Santa Barbara, California
93106-9410

Website

<https://undergradjournal.history.ucsb.edu/>

Article Submissions

Papers can be submitted for publication anytime through our submission portal on our website. Manuscripts must be between 3,500 and 7,500 words long and completed as part of a student's undergraduate coursework at an accredited degree-granting institution. Recent graduates may submit their work so long as it is within 12 months of receiving their degree. The Journal is published twice yearly in Spring and Fall. See the Journal website for more information.

micro historia

Are you eager to get published but want to start small? This is your chance: the *UGH Journal* is excited to launch our latest opportunity for undergraduate students to showcase their historical skills: micro historia. These microhistories, inspired by other scholarly journals and public history blogs, showcase in less than 1,500 words a historical interpretation of a single primary source — a document, object, or collection — to demonstrate how historical research deepens our understanding of the past and present. Think of these as historical writing in action.

Cover Image:

Butterfly Beach (2024), Kate Erickson.

Editorial Board

Travis Applegate
Erick Cardenas
Kate Erickson
Alex Fischer
Neo Harter
Sherry Huang
Danika Kerner
Lauren Ko

Enri Lala
Vanessa Manakova
Benjamin Ortiz
Jacqueline Pucillo
Ela Schulz
Sara Stevens
Sophia Yu

Faculty Director

Jarett Henderson

Caught Between Two Worlds: Princess Emma Sandile

*Ashley Callahan*¹

Princess Emma, daughter of Xhosa Chief Sandile, was sent to be educated in Cape Town in 1858 as one of the only female students who would attend Zonnebloem College. After spending more than five years at the college, "Emma was said to be 'civilized and Christianized' far beyond her countrywomen. It was hoped that she would become a good wife and head of a Christian home."² However, a letter from Emma in November 1860 to Governor Grey portrayed a different sentiment. In this letter, she appears to be very homesick and asks permission to return home and be amongst her family and friends for a short time. She wrote:

My Lord Governor. I want to ask if you please, sir, let me go back to see my parents for a short time, and I will come back again, I will not stop any longer. It is because I do desire to see my own land again, I beg you to let me go to see my parents, and if you do let me go, I shall never forget [sic] your kindnessI beg you do let me go my Lord Governor of your kindness I am quite sure that you will, I cannot do as I like now because you are in my fathers place if you do listen to my ask I am sure I do not know what I shall do, because I cannot do anything [sic] for you, and you can do so much for me.³

Emma's heartfelt plea to Governor Grey not only expresses her homesickness but also showcases the way in which she exerted agency in navigating her circumstances by actively seeking permission to return home despite the colonial restriction placed upon her.⁴ Her request to Grey was ultimately denied on the grounds that she might be married off to a non-Christian by her father and would never return to the school. Emma's letter showcases a multitude of broader themes surrounding her experience at Zonnebloem and helps to illustrate how she navigated her challenging position as an

¹ Ashley Callahan graduated from the Concordia University of Edmonton with a B.A. in History in 2023. She is currently studying for an MLitt in History at the University of the Highlands and Islands in Scotland.

² Janet Hodgson, *Black Womanism in South Africa: Princess Emma Sandile* (Cape Town, South Africa: BestRed, 2021), p. 57.

³ Emma Sandile, "Letter to Sir George Grey, 2 November 1860," As cited in, *Women Writing Africa: The Southern Region*, ed. Margaret Daymond and Dorothy Driver (New York, NY: Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2003), p. 92.

⁴ Jean Allman, Susan Geiger, and Nakanyike Musisi, eds., *Women in African Colonial Histories: An Introduction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), ProQuest Ebook Central.

African woman. Emma Sandile's story exemplifies the tensions for 19th century elite southern African women who were placed in a tenuous position between two competing patriarchal systems, who seemingly desired the proposed benefits of mission education as a means of creating a place in which they fit and who often ended up existing in some variation between the two frameworks of society. This blended variation might have included a selective adoption of Christian missionary ideals alongside traditional African customs, creating a hybrid identity that would reflect women's agency in crafting identities that reflected their unique experiences.⁵ For Emma and others, this blending could have been both an opportunity to navigate new social roles and a source of tension, as it raised questions about whether this synthesis ultimately provided empowerment or compromise.

Emma's personal correspondences while at the school and throughout her life afterwards offer important insights into her experiences in between indigenous African and colonial Christian societies, including her reported return to "heathen" ways in maturity, as noted in colonial and mission sources. Therefore, it is important to note the ongoing arguments surrounding these sources and to analyze the lens through which an African woman-transplanted from one patriarchal system into another—would have viewed their experiences and managed the expectations that were being pressed upon them. Throughout the historiography of mission Christianity in 19th and 20th-century southern Africa, there is great debate surrounding the "colonization of consciousness," regarding sources written by Africans and whether they can be authentic representations of African experience, considering their ongoing interaction and assimilation with the Christian colonial sphere.⁶ Scholars, such as Jean and John Comaroff and Janet Hodgson, would and have argued that Emma's writings were either entirely controlled by the assimilation of her consciousness into the colonial sphere or that she acted with a simple or naive understanding of her circumstances. Instead, I frame my understanding of these sources through scholars such as Elizabeth Elbourne or Martin Carver's readings of events. My argument centers around the multilayered reality of these exchanges and the importance of African agency and personal independence in the face of personal, religious, and societal control. Without entrenching myself further into the discussion surrounding the intentions of missionaries and "the tremendous importance of the universalizing project as a mode of domination," my research into Emma and her contemporaries has overwhelmingly displayed the missionaries' aspirational view of evangelism as a solution to the "problem of women's subordinate status in African society." By their conversion to Christianity, these "poor degraded females" could, in the missionaries' view, escape from "tribal customs" and be restored to human dignity—despite the reality of women continuing to exist

⁵ Jean Allman, Susan Geiger, and Nakanyike Musisi, eds., *Women in African Colonial Histories: An Introduction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), ProQuest Ebook Central.

⁶ Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution, Volume 1: Christianity, Colonialism, and Consciousness in South Africa*, (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1991) p. 23.

in prescribed gender roles that further subordinated them by relegating them to the domestic sphere.⁷ Additionally, in the historiographical record, it has been commonplace to say that Black women suffered triple oppression because of their gender, race, and class, and also to acknowledge that white women were discriminated against. However, white women's membership in a privileged ethnic group mitigated race discrimination and prevented them from then identifying with Black women as women.⁸ Unfortunately, there are significant limitations in the study of these African women and Emma herself, as the historical records and sources available often lack written records of experiences and outcomes from their own perspectives. This documentary silence may be mistakenly attributed to historical passivity or, even worse, to historical insignificance, which makes them disappear from our historical memory. Therefore, it is only through the comparison of sources written by missionaries and colonial officials (of which there are many) with those written by southern Africans (of which there are too few) that I will attempt to convey an understanding of the experiences of young southern African women such as Emma. Although Emma had no control over her attendance at mission school or her movements as a pawn in competing patriarchal politics, her desire for the benefits of a "civilizing" education shows her ability to adapt to her new existence, despite it enmeshing her further into an equally oppressive system.

Nineteenth-century southern Africa has been characterized as a "patchwork quilt of patriarchies" when addressing gender systems and the roles of women within these systems.⁹ So to discuss Emma's experiences, or that of other elite southern African women in the context of Christian and colonial patriarchies, it is necessary to understand the social history of their communities, which were shaped by family, kinship-based economies, and systems of exchange.¹⁰ The traditionalist farming societies south of the Limpopo typically shared certain social features with "all precapitalist societies in southern Africa, at least for the time for which there are written records and possibly much earlier."¹¹ These societies were based on a gendered hierarchical structure in which the oppression of women

⁷ Elizabeth Elbourne, "Word Made Flesh: Christianity, Modernity, and the Cultural Colonialism in the Work of Jean and John Comaroff," *American Historical Review* 108, no. 2 (2003): 459; Jacklyn Cock, "Domestic Service and Education for Domesticity: The Incorporation of Xhosa Women into Colonial Society," p. 86.

⁸ Cherryl Walker, "Women and Gender in Southern Africa to 1945: An Overview," In *Women and Gender in Southern Africa to 1945*, (Cape Town, South Africa: David Philip Publishers, 1990), p. 2.

⁹ Belinda Bozzoli, "[Marxism, Feminism and South African Studies](#)," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 9, no. 2 (1983): p. 149.

¹⁰ Bozzoli, "Marxism, Feminism and South African Studies," p. 144, 170; Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. Washington: Howard University Press, 1974, p. 36.

¹¹ Jeff Guy. "Gender Oppression in Southern Africa's Precapitalist Societies." In *Women and Gender in Southern Africa to 1945*, ed. Cherryl Walker, (Cape Town, South Africa: D. Philip Publishers, 1990), p. 33.

constituted the central familial and economic dynamic, and the “appropriation and control of women’s productive and reproductive capacity by men was the axis on which these societies turned.”¹² Plainly put, women were the economic producers responsible for field work and for the production of offspring: the accumulation of people brought increased wealth through their own economic output, their ability to marry and create kinship bonds, and their capacity to generate wealth through *lobola* or bride wealth. This central role underscores one of the ways in which traditionalist institutions such as plural marriage served as an important way to amass prestige through familial connections, kinship ties, and wealth as a byproduct of increased labor availability, allowing men to “build a foundation for social dominance that was independent of the cattle-labor power cycle.”¹³ However, as Jeff Guy notes, the position of women in southern Africa and their gender structures at this time cannot be reduced to contemporary notions of oppression. He argues:

The terms oppression and exploitation for the position of women in precapitalist southern Africa ... cannot be understood in terms of our contemporary notion of oppression. Women exercised control over the agricultural process and, by virtue of the central importance of their fertility to society, enjoyed considerable status and a degree of autonomy not appreciated -or replicated- within colonial society. The very centrality of women’s productive and reproductive labor to society ensured their social prestige and a limited but nevertheless clearly recognized authority.¹⁴

Guy’s analysis complicates the idea of uniform gender oppression in these societies by highlighting the significant social prestige and authority women derived from their economic and reproductive roles.¹⁵ Prominent South African sociologist Cherryl Walker further notes that while women were subordinate to men, there were stark contrasts between traditional and colonial systems of gender hierarchy where, “women were subordinate to men, but there were important contrasts in the operation of gender between different social systems in the region ... one broadly characteristic of the precapitalist Bantu-speaking societies of the region, the other of the colonial states established by the European settlers.”¹⁶ In this context, while traditional gender systems were hierarchical, they also offered women forms of autonomy and influence that colonial rule and missionary efforts often disrupted, diminished, or removed altogether. Recognizing these nuances adds an increased depth to our understanding of Emma’s experiences and the broader transformations of southern African gender structure during this period. Essentially, where both traditional African and settler sex-gender hierarchies assumed male authority over women, the two systems functioned differently. Through encounters between the two

¹² Walker, “Women and Gender in Southern Africa to 1945,” p. 7.

¹³ Guy, “Gender Oppression in Southern Africa’s Precapitalist Societies,” p. 42.

¹⁴ Walker, “Women and Gender in Southern Africa to 1945,” p. 8.

¹⁵ Guy, “Gender Oppression in Southern Africa’s Precapitalist Societies,” pp. 45-47.

¹⁶ Walker, “Women and Gender in Southern Africa to 1945,” p. 1.

competing paternalistic frameworks, this premise was reinforced, albeit in distinct ways, through the domination and exploitation of women. These dynamics later played out in responses such as the development of chiefs' strategic responses and the colonial state's expression of disappointment when women defied their expectations.

Typically, Western churches and schools did not expect women to fulfill roles that established them as productive members of society. Instead, Black African women's precolonial roles of production, initiative, and self-reliance were reduced to a Eurocentric view of oppression or "slavery". Many of the changes introduced by the colonial administration were enacted with the intention of giving women more personal freedoms, especially in marriage and child custody. Despite this intention, the individual rights promoted by magistrates and missionaries created revolutionary divisions within the traditional framework of their society, which had previously stressed "communal responsibilities and kin, rather than individual rights."¹⁷ Where it may be argued that the colonial administrators and missionaries were not entirely unsympathetic to the confusion or concern caused by the changing laws and social morays, Burman notes that "the prevailing patriarchal belief in Britain and the Cape Colony was that it was their Christian duty to 'civilize' the African. The 'civilization' to be introduced was that of Victorian England."¹⁸ In a 'civilized' settler society, a woman's place centered around the home and children, segregated from the world of money and power, a domain reserved exclusively for men. This does not mean that settler women did not engage in economic activity outside the home, but rather that any such work was not recognized as inherently "female" or "feminine". While settler women participated actively in the domestic economy, the dominant ideology focused on their function as reproducers rather than producers as opposed to traditional African women who were expected to actively contribute to both within their communities.

There were irreconcilable differences between the social expectations and lived experiences of African women who were maneuvered between the traditional and colonial patriarchies. In Emma's letter above to Governor Grey (believed to be the earliest known writing in English by a Xhosa woman), we see glimpses into the reality of her position at Zonnebloem, having been "pulled out of ... traditional milieu and totally immersed in the new way of life."¹⁹ The first predominant theme in the letter is the prevailing overtone of paternalism, a shared societal construct between both the traditional

¹⁷ Walker, "Women and Gender in Southern Africa to 1945," p. 9.

¹⁸ Sandra Burman, "Fighting a Two-Pronged Attack: The Changing Legal Status of Women in Cape-Ruled Basutoland, 1872-1884," In *Women and Gender in Southern Africa to 1945*, ed. Cheryl Walker, (Cape Town, South Africa: D. Philip, 1990), p. 53.

¹⁹ Janet Hodgson, "[Emma Sandile, Letters and Land Submission](#)," in *Women Writing Africa: The Southern Region*, ed. Margaret J. Daymond and Dorothy Driver, Vol. 1 (New York: Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2003), p. 91., Janet Hodgson, "Kid Gloves and Cricket on the Kei," *Religion in Southern Africa* 8, no. 2 (1987): p. 63.

African and European colonial societies. This shift from the control of women by their fathers, husbands, or sons, to that of the school or colonial officials reinforces the shared gender system of female oppression that was continually ingrained in the newly integrated society. While not expressly seen in the letter, an underlying extension of this power system is also found in the way that colonial authorities utilized similarities between the two systems to persuade the African people to cooperate with changes, such as allowing their children to be sent away for mission education. Secondly, her letter and Governor Grey's reply display the ongoing tensions between her Western guardians and father over traditional customs such as arranged marriage and *lobola*, which, if allowed, would have been seen as the selling of women and the abject failure of their social enterprise from the mission perspective. As noted by Gaitskell, a primary purpose of the mission school's civilizing and evangelizing education was for her to marry a "politically important frontier chief sympathetic to Christianity."²⁰ While the missionaries framed their efforts as a path to civilization and moral uplift, this education often came at the cost of eroding traditional cultural identities. Critics of this system, such as J. and J. Comaroff, have argued that such programs essentially functioned as tools of cultural indoctrination, designed to align Indigenous elites with colonial and Christian interests, rather than fostering intellectual empowerment.²¹ This contention was an early foreshadowing of the difficult future Emma would face as a Christian African woman caught between two worlds, without a true place in either as a result of the "over-ambitious hybridization of cultural values that proved to be more than those who participated in the project could sustain."²²

Emma's desire to do well in her mandated placement at a Christian mission school, despite reinforcing her subordinate position within the patriarchal systems, was likely based on its promulgated benefits. For African women such as Emma, Victorian Christianity and mission schooling provided a contradictory message of both freedom and control; a potential escape from some of the constraints of traditionalist society (such as arranged marriage or burdensome labor), but also further incorporation into the constraints of the Christian and colonial patriarchy. The number of African girls educated in mission schools was originally small. Still, their participation was instrumental in establishing a Christian-based ideology of gender and "civility" among African elites and society over time. Nineteenth-century Xhosa women became involved with "Western-style education, offered by mission institutions, to a far greater degree than African women did elsewhere in southern Africa" reinforcing a link between the "ideology of domesticity that was rooted in European gender roles to an

²⁰ Deborah Gaitskell, "Devout Domesticity? A Century of African Women's Christianity," In *Women and Gender in Southern Africa to 1945*, ed. Cherryl Walker (Cape Town, South Africa: D. Philip Publishers, 1990), p. 254.

²¹ Comaroff and Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution, Volume 1*.

²² Hodgson, "Kid Gloves and Cricket on the Kei," p. 61.

ideology of domestication generated by the problems of controlling a colonized people.”²³ This “raising up” of African women has often been stated in missionary writings as the purpose of female education, the essence of which represented the replacement of one state (degradation), with another (Christian motherhood), and this metamorphosis was to be achieved through education.²⁴ What seems more likely, though, is that instead of the replacement of states for the goal of “raising up”, African women were simply exchanged from one oppressive regime to another. Despite the poor conditions that African girls frequently found on their arrival at mission schools, missionaries argued that the state of their existence in traditional society was so subjugated that coming to the ill-prepared schools would still be preferential for them. This view continued to be reiterated in various forms into the 20th century, with examples of missionaries, such as missionary Young at Lovedale College in 1902 stating that “The conditions of the female Kaffirs in their heathen state is one of peculiar hardship. Working in the fields, carrying home the crops, doing whatever requires to be done of a laborious nature, they are practically slaves to the other sex, and in very many cases are subjected to persecution.”²⁵

The poor environment found by female students at these schools was likely also influenced by several other factors and opinions of the time, including the conflicting views that education was relatively unimportant, because “the little learning gained is overborne by the habits and superstitions of generations.”²⁶ As Jacklyn Cock notes about the Xhosa women, “there were a good many people in nineteenth-century England who thought that women did not need much education and that it was not good for them. The education viewed as appropriate for women centered on the home.”²⁷ Even mission school administrators who saw some value in educating African students, whether vocationally or academically, shared a degree of frustration surrounding the lack of evolution in society that would allow for the acceptance of Christianized, educated Africans within it.²⁸ For that reason, female students who were educated as Christian wives and mothers were often not provided suitable options after completing their schooling and ultimately returned to their traditionalist social roles.

²³ Cock, “Domestic Service and Education for Domesticity: The Incorporation of Xhosa Women into Colonial Society,” p. 85.

²⁴ Natasha Erlank, “[‘Raising Up the Degraded Daughters of Africa’](#): The Provision of Education for Xhosa Women in the Mid-Nineteenth Century,” *South African Historical Journal* 43, no. 1 (2000): p. 28.

²⁵ Robert Young, *African Wastes Reclaimed: The Story of the Lovedale Mission* (London: J.M. Dent, 1902), p. 123.

²⁶ Joseph Whiteside, *History of the Wesleyan Methodist Church of South Africa* (London: Elliot Stock, 1906), p. 281.

²⁷ Cock, “Domestic Service and Education for Domesticity: The Incorporation of Xhosa Women into Colonial Society,” p. 88.

²⁸ Hodgson, “Kid Gloves and Cricket on the Kei,” p. 88.

Zonnebloem College “epitomized the identification between the religious aspirations of the missionary enterprise and the secular motives of imperialism in the Victorian era.”²⁹ The school’s primary focus on the children of African elites was intended to “civilize” future African leaders who would then return to their communities and implant their new values and practices into their societies, effectively converting communities as a whole instead of individuals one at a time.³⁰ Emma and her brother’s selection for Zonnebloem as “hostages for the peace and prosperity of their own country,” in 1857, exemplifies the church and state expectations for their future influence over the Xhosa people.³¹ Although she was not a male heir, Emma’s perceived purpose as a Christian wife and mother had special value as the bearer of British culture into the African home. The school was spearheaded by Sir George Grey, who often “criticized the prevailing mission school education as being ‘too bookish’” and believed that industrial education should be the focus instead.³² Cape Town was the proposed site of this superior school, as it was the center of British government and “civilization” in the colony during this period. Additionally, by locating the school near Governor Grey’s own residence, he meant to emphasize the connection between everything that he and the British government represented in the way of social, cultural and economic progress, the superiority of the colonial enterprise, and the way in which they held control over the territory, the Chiefs and their children. Grey already had some success with a similar school for the sons of Māori and Melanesian chiefs in Auckland, New Zealand, “linking the civilizing role of the missionaries to the government’s programme of social control.”³³ Much to Governor Grey’s dismay, the Eastern Cape African Chiefs’ responses to the invitation to send their heirs to the school were overwhelmingly negative. However, the Cattle Killings of 1857 proved a fateful turn of events in the efforts to procure students for the school. The widespread slaughter of cattle, driven by the millennial prophecies of Nongquawuse, resulted in devastating famine and economic collapse for many African families. In the appalling aftermath, destitute parents who were left with no other means to ensure their children’s survival were compelled to give their children over to mission institutions, where they were provided with food, shelter, and education in exchange for adherence to Christian teachings. Allied with Grey for the school’s development, the Anglican Church was under pressure to make a more profound contribution to mission work in southern Africa, which often meant that their missions and schools were “chronically hampered by a shortage of personnel and

²⁹ Hodgson, “Kid Gloves and Cricket on the Kei,” p. 61.

³⁰ Hodgson, *Black Womanism in South Africa: Princess Emma Sandile*, p. 11.

³¹ Bishop Robert Gray, “Letter to the Colonial Secretary in London, 1859,” As cited in *Women Writing Africa: The Southern Region*, ed. Margaret Daymond and Dorothy Driver (New York, NY: Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2003), p. 91.

³² Hodgson, *Black Womanism in South Africa: Princess Emma Sandile*, p. 10.

³³ Cock, “Domestic Service and Education for Domesticity: The Incorporation of Xhosa Women into Colonial Society,” p. 90.

money.”³⁴ In late 1857, the first group of children would accompany Grey to Cape Town, home of Anglican Bishop Robert Gray, where that estate’s old slave quarters would serve as the makeshift first site for the school.

As the school was initially designed for the male heirs of chiefs, the few girls who attended the school were “left to get on as best they could. Soon lagging far behind the boys” in both education and health due to a lack of suitable accommodations and dedicated teachers/matrons.³⁵ The pupils received a basic academic, religious, and industrial education, typically segregated by gender in schooling and socialization. Hodgson notes that “Emma and her companions were seldom mentioned in any early reports and they remained shadowy figures during this period,” and were likely left to fend for themselves.³⁶ Their education was intended overall to transform pupils into English ladies and gentlemen, to submerge their African identities in European culture. It was not until 1859 that the administration sought to find a dedicated teacher for the girls, once the school found a more permanent residence at the Zonnebloem wine estate. The evolution toward an intentionally gendered education for the girls is seen through Bishop Gray’s letter to the secretary of the SPG on this matter:

I have heard from the Cape that Sir George Grey contemplates the immediate formation of a female school for African children. Three girls, daughters of Sandile among them, are all ready in the house, and the number is soon likely to be increased. A female school is essential to the complete success of the institution for boys. If we do not provide wives for these young men as they grow up, they will then marry heathen women, and will be very readily dragged down again by their wives into the barbarism from which they had partially escaped.³⁷

The female students at Zonnebloem would continue their education with a particular focus on religious conversion and domesticity, including neatness and tidiness, cooking, cleaning, washing, ironing, sewing, and fancy needlework, for several years. While Emma would have received a form of domestic and economically productive education during her childhood, this particular form of domestic indoctrination would have served to foster “concepts of marital and household relations mirroring the nuclear family and the functions of the ‘civilized’ wife and mother.”³⁸ In the culmination of the religious education received at the school, Emma and another girl were baptized into the Anglican church by Bishop Gray in May 1860. This would have been seen as a great success for the school, as not only was Emma’s attendance there frequently used as a selling point to entice other

³⁴ Hodgson, *Black Womanism in South Africa: Princess Emma Sandile*, p. 10.

³⁵ Hodgson, *Black Womanism in South Africa: Princess Emma Sandile*, p. 22.

³⁶ Hodgson, *Black Womanism in South Africa: Princess Emma Sandile*, p. 25.

³⁷ Hodgson, *Black Womanism in South Africa: Princess Emma Sandile*, p. 29.

³⁸ Allman et al., *Women in African Colonial Histories*, p. 6.

chiefs to send their daughters, but her willing choice to be baptized would have signaled a dramatic shift in the perceived success of the program.

While southern African women were not originally meant to be educated as leaders and members of colonial society in the same way as the men, their religious “salvation” and Western “liberation” were meant to act as a cyclical civilizing influence on the new class of Christian African men. So, when a woman returned to her traditional customs (whether from a personal desire to do so or out of a lack of viable alternative options), this was seen as a failure instead of an example of African independence or the indigenization of Christianity and Western culture. To this end, Princess Emma’s time at the college would come with great expectations that she would “fulfill the hopes of her education.”³⁹ Emma would leave the college four years later in 1864, after continuous attempts by Chief Sandile to remove her on offers of marriage and highly prosperous *lobola* payments from other chiefs. Bishop Gray (who had essentially asserted himself as a father figure during her time at the school) had intervened on her behalf by “claiming for her the rights of a British subject” and therefore, the right to choose her own marriage partner without the exchange of a bride price.⁴⁰ As the oldest daughter of Sandile, her marriage would have significant implications for her people, but as an educated Christian woman, her English mentors were equally determined that they would reap the rewards of her training as well as her hereditary position. When a highly desirable match was offered -the newly situated paramount of the Thembu who was sympathetic to Christianity and had received some Western schooling- it gave “the proposed alliance both political and religious significance.”⁴¹ Emma appears to have been acutely aware of the expectations of her position and the provenance of her education and “civilization” as a woman wedged between two competing patriarchies. Resolute in her new commitments, she wrote in 1864 to her old schoolmistress, Miss Smart:

I have got so smart since you saw me. I have golden earrings in my ears, crochet lace round my petticoats, high heel boots, a net and ribbons on my head, but I hope I shall never be proud although they like to see me dressed nicely yet they always tell me that dress must not make me vain ... the young chief Qeya was here also and the Governor congratulated me on the conquest I had made and kindly promised to furnish our house for us he told me that whatever I needed he would grant it to me ... But one thing will disappoint you, we are not going to be married by the Bishop, or a clergyman, because Qeya likes to be married by the Revd Mr Hargreaves, therefore I cannot do anything but submit as my future happiness depends on my husband. I think it is right to try and please him in everything that is not wrong. No one here is

³⁹ Hodgson, “Kid Gloves and Cricket on the Kei,” p. 81.

⁴⁰ Hodgson, *Black Womanism in South Africa: Princess Emma Sandile*, p. 77.

⁴¹ Hodgson, “Kid Gloves and Cricket on the Kei,” p. 81.

anxious to change my Faith ... Give my best love to Warden and Mrs. Glover. Tell them that I will try next time to write a few lines to them, and they must not think I have forgotten them. I have not. I still love them as my parents, which indeed they have been.⁴²

In this letter, Emma epitomizes personal agency and character, trying to balance and meet the varied expectations that continued to surround her. This letter also provides a glimpse into her desires for the personal status and material trappings that were believed to come with Western “civilization,” as well as the complex tensions that surrounded a Christian’s possession of them. Emma appears to understand some of the inter-denominational conflicts between the different branches of Christianity as well, and that “the Church,” as the Anglicans were known, would not have approved of her marriage being performed by a Wesleyan minister. Knowing that she still chose to write to Bishop Gray, informing him of the news and her choice to abide by her future husband’s wishes (once again reiterating this cyclical passing of her subservience from father to colonial/church authority, to her future husband). She wrote, “I thought it better for me to submit to him, as we are to be man and wife, and the marriage is to be soon, if there is nothing to prevent it and after we are married he is going to take me down with him, and I hope that your prayers will never cease for me and for him as well as we are both to be your children.”⁴³

Unfortunately for Emma, while the Thembu agreed to her holding the status of the senior wife, they would not agree to a monogamous marriage, as this would have signified a reduction in their political, patrilineal, and financial strength in traditional culture. This rejection of the church’s high and inflexible moral demands also likely served as an expression of agency and ongoing resistance against colonial and missionary attempts to further augment African cultural practices that were keystones of their society’s structure.⁴⁴ However, the idea of Emma entering a polygamous marriage was deemed entirely unacceptable to her colonial and mission guardians, as “African customs were a mystery to the Victorian colonists. Polygamy was condemned as the worst of all evils,” who then broke the engagement and sent her instead to Grahamstown to serve as an infant teacher in an Anglican

⁴² Sandile, “Letter to Miss Smart, 26 March 1864,” As cited in *Women Writing Africa: The Southern Region*, ed. Margaret Daymond and Dorothy Driver (New York, NY: Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2003), pp. 94-95.

⁴³ Sandile, “Letter to Bishop Gray, 1864,” As cited in Janet Hodgson’s *Black Womanism in South Africa: Princess Emma Sandile*, p. 93.

⁴⁴ Hodgson, *Black Womanism in South Africa: Princess Emma Sandile*, 92-100.; Elizabeth Elbourne, *Blood Ground: Colonialism, Missions, and the Contest for Christianity in the Cape Colony and Britain, 1799-1853* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2002); J. and J. Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution, Volume 1*; Terence O. Ranger, ed., *Evangelical Christianity and Democracy in Africa* (2006; online ed., Oxford Academic, May 1, 2008).

mission.⁴⁵ Chief Sandile was furious that the new religion had intervened yet again, ending her mutually prosperous marriage to the Thembu chief. Not only had he and the chieftom lost the large bride price that would have come with the union, but they had also lost an important political alliance and any other chance to recoup these “costs” with Emma being sent away to another mission. There would be no more written communications from Emma between the end of her engagement and 1866, when she wrote a letter to a missionary who was responsible for overseeing the mission where she worked. Despite the events that had unfolded with her engagement, Emma’s letter indicates that she remained committed to her new beliefs and way of life at this point:

It is very pleasant to read and think about the progress of the Gospel in heathen lands, to hear that hundreds and thousands who were once naked and painted savages have become bearers of God’s word, and that many of them are true followers of Jesus Christ ... We were truly savages in years past, and our homes where the habitations of cruelty and were in misery in our ways, the way of peace we did not know. And so when the missionaries at first came to this land we were ready to kill them, our hearts were in want of God’s words ... I hope that some of our friends will someday be bearers of the Gospel by the help of God ... It would amuse you very much or perhaps make you sorry if you were to talk to a red and unconverted [Xhosa] about the state of their souls, or tell them about God. I remain your obedient servant.⁴⁶

Emma’s words reflect her internalization of missionary teachings, suggesting a profound shift in her worldview. However, they also reveal the complexities of conversion, where adopting Christianity often required the rejection of indigenous beliefs and cultural practices, which she expresses here as “savagery.” This process could arguably be interpreted as a form of indoctrination, shaping her identity in ways that aligned with colonial and missionary ideals while further distancing her from her heritage and her position within the competing patriarchy of southern African traditional society. The consequences of this shift were far-reaching, likely creating a sense of alienation from those who remained unconverted, as indicated by her description of the “red and unconverted [Xhosa]” people.

The tragic irony that would befall Emma after being placed to work at St. Philip’s mission as a more suitable space for her after the break of her engagement was her “spoiling” by an unidentified man and then subsequently rushed marriage to a polygamous minor Mqwathi chief in Emigrant Thembuland in 1867. This marriage marked a return to traditional Xhosa dress and customs, and none of the five children she bore were raised as Christians.⁴⁷ Hodgson states that “the tragic circumstances of Emma’s supposed ‘ruin’ is not known” and that considering everything “she had

⁴⁵ Hodgson, *Black Womanism in South Africa: Princess Emma Sandile*, pp. 96-104.

⁴⁶ Sandile, “Letter to Reverend Turpin, 1866,” As cited in Janet Hodgson’s *Black Womanism in South Africa: Princess Emma Sandile*, p. 104.

⁴⁷ Hodgson, “Kid Gloves and Cricket on the Kei,” p. 81.

given up for her new faith, it seems highly unlikely that she would have indulged” willingly in any sort of extramarital affair.⁴⁸ Emma’s experience highlights how patriarchal systems -whether rooted in traditional African customs or colonial missionary Christianity- systemically subordinated women’s agency and well-being to the needs of male authority and social norms. The Anglican church’s swift removal of Emma from Grahamstown to avoid being embroiled in scandal and then the rushed marriage to a polygamous chief exemplify how women like Emma bore the brunt of efforts to uphold patriarchal order. In her case, the promise of protection and liberation from colonial mission Christianity was betrayed, leaving her to suffer at the hands of every power in her life and potentially fostering a shift in her loyalties or desires as she navigated these conflicting frameworks. Through her marriage, Emma was assimilated into Mqwathi society with its customs and obligations. No matter how European in manner Emma might have desired her life to be, her marriage to a polygamist effectively cut her off from any further involvement with the church, and she was left to create some personal combination of the systems where she could. Her circumstances had changed dramatically, but she managed to maintain certain aspects of her European identity and practice. This included living in a square house instead of a hut and wearing European dresses, both of which would have acted as a visual expression and external manifestation of the desire to combine her Christian and Indigenous educations, experiences, and preferences.⁴⁹ In the late 1870s, Emma’s Western customs were entirely stripped away from her by her husband, after his authority was removed by the colonial government. This loss of status within the colonial system resulted in a reaffirmation of control within his household, compelling Emma to “wear a red blanket like the other women” as a visible marker of her reintegration into traditional Xhosa customs.⁵⁰ This act reflected the broader dynamics of colonial disruption, where traditional and colonial systems clashed, often pushing women such as Emma into a position as a focal point of male efforts to reestablish power and identity.

The negative mission and colonial stereotypes of “failure” or regression that surrounded Emma’s return to traditional society and polygamy would have been reinforced by the racist settler rhetoric that was widely published in 1880 by Cape Town newspapers. One such newspaper wrote that “Emma’s education, ‘like that of all missionary converts,’ had been of a superficial nature: ‘The evil instincts of a [Xhosa] predominated ... Blue silk dresses and pianoforte playing ill-became [Xhosa] princesses.’” Maintaining that:

[Having fallen], she was ruthlessly cast out of the Synagogue. The natural longing of the Xhosa for the hut and the red blanket was too much for such civilization and

⁴⁸ Hodgson, *Black Womanism in South Africa: Princess Emma Sandile*, p. 105.

⁴⁹ T. J. Tallie, “Sartorial Settlement: The Mission Field and Transformation in Colonial Natal, 1850–1897,” *Journal of World History* 27, no. 3 (2016): [p. 399](#).

⁵⁰ Hodgson, *Black Womanism in South Africa: Princess Emma Sandile*, p. 110.

Christianity that had been instilled in Emma Sandile, and she took to both, with a chieftain for a husband, on the first opportunity offering itself.⁵¹

In addition to Emma's story, there are several other accounts by missionaries of college students reportedly regressing in this manner after leaving the schools. One such account would come from missionary Whiteside, who told the story of the daughter of a "Gcaleka chief who was educated in England but returned to her original 'barbarous surroundings'. 'A few years later she greeted a Wesleyan minister in the purest English, but she wore a Kafir blanket, had bead bangles on wrists and ankles and was the wife of a polygamist. Until natives can create improved social conditions, by their own labor, school education will fail largely of its purpose.'"⁵² While I disagree with the discriminatory implications of the missionary's statement, there is truth in the idea that the socioeconomic, cultural and political circumstances of the increasingly blended society should have been more developed prior to the education and indoctrination of African children into Western "civilization" and then their release into traditional society as independent agents of change. Additionally, it is important to further challenge and reconsider the missionary narrative that framed Emma and other women's return to African customs and practices as a failure. Was their return to these practices not a form of resistance for women who were commonly moved about as political pawns between colonial and traditional systems? Rather than viewing their choices as a regression, it is possible to interpret them as a reclamation of their identity, which had been eroded by years of missionary education and cultural indoctrination. Emma's return to traditional customs may instead represent an assertion of autonomy, resisting the rigid expectations imposed by colonial and missionary frameworks (those same systems which had failed in their promises, and arguably caused her unnecessary harm). By resuming aspects of her indigenous culture, Emma might have sought to reconcile her dual identities and reassert her place within her community on her own terms.

Within her position in traditional society, Emma would continue to express her agency and utilize her education and literacy skills, showcasing her ability to integrate elements from her mission education, as literacy had become a key indicator of those associated with the adoption of the Christian religion.⁵³ However, even in areas where "Africans were quick to appreciate advantages deriving from a literate education," most Thembu Chiefs were illiterate at this time and relied on traders, missionaries

⁵¹ Author Unknown, *The Eastern Star Newspaper, 1880*, as cited in Janet Hodgson's *Black Womanism in South Africa: Princess Emma Sandile*, p. 105.

⁵² Whiteside, *History of the Wesleyan Methodist Church of South Africa*, p. 281.

⁵³ Wendy Urban-Mead, "Dynastic Daughters: Three Royal Kwenya Women and E. L. Price of the London Missionary Society, 1853–1881," in *Women in African Colonial Histories*, ed. Jean Allman, Susan Geiger, and Nakanyike Musisi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), p. 52, ProQuest Ebook Central.

or government officials to write their correspondence with authorities.⁵⁴ Stokwe placed Emma in charge of all of his business affairs instead, often writing letters for him regarding land transfers.⁵⁵ For her own affairs, Emma would continue to write letters to the colonial administration, in an attempt to fight for the grant of land that she had been promised for her attendance at Zonnebloem by Governor Grey. As a woman under African law, Emma was the legal equivalent to that of a minor, perpetually under the guardianship of her husband. However, her persistence in pursuing a mission school education had equipped her with some of the skills she would need to fight for her own causes. Her perseverance in fighting for what was owed to her was eventually rewarded when she was allocated full ownership of her farmland. This would be an outstanding testament to Emma's tenacity as an educated African woman who had learned how to work from her position between colonial and traditionalist societies. But Emma continued to be embedded and controlled within these patriarchal systems despite her best efforts. She would never live on her land (supposedly having asked to move there with Stokwe and their families once they were married) as it would have been unheard of in traditional custom for a man to live at his wife's home, and a group of Mqwathi were settled on the land instead.

Further challenges would befall Emma and her people throughout the Stokwe/Thembu rebellions in 1880, compounded by the death of her husband. Emma was "the outsider among the Chief's wives, the one who had acquired the white man's power," and therefore, she was accused of witchcraft and considered responsible for the death of the Chief.⁵⁶ After fleeing to the mountains with her children for safety, she eventually found shelter on a small farm near Southeyville. While staying here, Emma would write her last known letter in 1883 to the Land Commission in hopes that she would be granted a piece of land that she was given by her husband prior to his death, but that had been unlawfully occupied since. Within her letter, she subtly leverages her son's existence, noting that he was of an age that would soon be considered important within traditional society and subsequently of potential interest to the colonial government as the son of a Stokwe and grandson of Sandile. This final letter reinforces Emma's capacity to utilize her mission education as a tool to work within the colonial system in order to better her position within traditional society. She wrote:

I want a place to live in; I have five children of my own, one boy, the others are girls; the boy is about twelve years of age. After my husband's death, the people of his clan smelt me out, accusing me of being instrumental in causing his death. I went into the bush with my mother and Philip, who were faithful to me. Since the war, I have been living close to Southeyville, and living on what I could cultivate. Petrus Mehongo claims a

⁵⁴ Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. Washington: Howard University Press, 1974, p. 140.

⁵⁵ Hodgson, *Black Womanism in South Africa: Princess Emma Sandile*, p. 117.

⁵⁶ Hodgson, *Black Womanism in South Africa: Princess Emma Sandile*, p. 150.

farm which he says my husband granted to him in his lifetime ... My husband did not intend to give him the piece that he wanted ... and told me that was for me ... I should like the place my husband assigned and gave to me, or sufficient of it to live on and maintain family, and be secured in my possession.⁵⁷

Emma won her case when the commissioners recommended that she and her family should be in control of the land next to the Seplan mission. The idea was that there, they would “be among the more ‘civilised natives’ and so assured of protection.” This property that was hard fought for would become known as Emma’s Farm and is where she would spend the final ten years of her life.⁵⁸

Emma’s story exemplifies the high cost of imposing foreign social and religious ideologies on southern African women through the mission education system, particularly when they were elite women who were doubly used as pawns within the larger game of gender oppression and political competition. While there were great aspirations surrounding Emma’s education and “civilization,” mission and colonial society failed to acknowledge the position in which they placed her between two worlds, to find her a “suitable” match and then ultimately cast her off once her value as a pure Christian wife, mother and passive agent of evangelization had been removed, through no fault of her own. As seen through her writing, Emma endeavoured to create a beneficial position for herself between the double patriarchies of traditional and settler/colonial societies that continued to dictate and control every aspect of her life. But the theoretical benefits that came with mission education and Western culture “were not uniformly beneficial for the colonized ... They were bearers of a form of cultural imperialism which bore down upon the position of women in indigenous African society in complex ways” as we have seen through cases such as Emma’s.⁵⁹ There were many complexities and contradictions in the desires of missionaries and the colonial powers, and while their plan for the education of the Xhosa people may have liberated some women with marketable skills, it was primarily an agency of socialization, operating through coercion, that perpetuated subordinate gender roles for these women. In the aspiration for the advancement and liberation of southern African women, it ultimately can be argued that in reality, “Western influence weakened or destroyed women’s roles within pre-colonial society without providing alternative roles of power or autonomy in exchange” which left women such as Emma to create some livable hybridization between the two states.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Sandile, “Submission to the Land Commission, 10 February 1883,” As cited in *Women Writing Africa: The Southern Region*, ed. Margaret Daymond and Dorothy Driver (New York, NY: Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2003), p. 95.

⁵⁸ Hodgson, *Black Womanism in South Africa: Princess Emma Sandile*, p. 155.

⁵⁹ Cock, “Domestic Service and Education for Domesticity: The Incorporation of Xhosa Women into Colonial Society,” p. 94.

⁶⁰ Cock, “Domestic Service and Education for Domesticity: The Incorporation of Xhosa Women into Colonial Society,” p. 95.