

‘Facts about the child-wife problem from Groote Eylandt, 1938–1939’: how the account of Sister Elizabeth Taylor sheds light on mission policy and missionary responses to Aboriginal cultural practices in late 1930s Northern Australia

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This paper will examine one missionary’s account of child-wife practices on Groote Eylandt in Northern Australia in the late 1930s. Elizabeth Taylor, a nursing sister, served on the Church Missionary Society (CMS) mission station among the Anindilyakwa people of Groote Eylandt for just under eighteen months in the late 1930s. During her time on Groote Eylandt she became concerned that girls were being betrothed from infancy and going to their husband’s camp from a young age. Following her time of service, she wrote an account of polygamy and child-wife practices for the CMS Aborigines Committee. In this account, Taylor seeks to explain the problem of the practice as she sees it, and calls for stronger action against the practice to become mission policy. She titled her account, ‘Facts about the child-wife problem from Groote Eylandt, 1938–1939’.

Recent historical writings have critiqued the careless use of cross-cultural accounts like Taylor’s for simplistic reconstructions of the cultural practices of the observed culture.¹ However there is also a growing recognition of the value of missionary accounts for gaining insight into missionary attitudes, policy and practice and specific interactions between missionaries and indigenous peoples. Huber and Lutkehaus suggest colonial studies have often focussed on the effects of colonialism on the colonized while depending on ‘large generalizations about colonizers without regard to the finer points of geographical, institutional, or historical variation’.² Grimshaw and May also see metanarratives about colonialism and imperialism as potentially silencing the diversity of interactions between missionaries and indigenous peoples.³ Further, Harris has suggested the implementation of more progressive mission policy during the mid-20th century in an Australian context was a complex process significantly dependent on beliefs and attitudes of individual missionaries.⁴

Consequently, this paper will examine Taylor’s account as a source that sheds light on mission policy and missiology at the time. Earlier missionaries on Groote Eylandt had questioned how they should respond to polygamy and ‘girl wives’.⁵ Later missionaries would take more active steps to oppose polygamy, persuading or pressuring some older men to give up their youngest wives to single men.⁶ This decision had complex and debated consequences

¹ Shino Konishi, “‘Wanton With Plenty’” Questioning Ethno-Historical Constructions of Sexual Savagery in Aboriginal Societies, 1988-1803’, *Australian Historical Studies* 39 (2008): 356–72; Ann McGrath, “‘Modern Stone-Age Slavery’: Images of Aboriginal Labour and Sexuality’, *Labour History* 69 (1995): 30–51.

² Mary Taylor Huber and Nancy Lutkehaus, ‘Introduction: Gendered Missions at Home and Abroad’, in *Gendered Missions: Women and Men in Missionary Discourse and Practice* (ed. Mary Taylor Huber and Nancy Lutkehaus; Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 6.

³ Patricia Grimshaw and Andrew May, ‘Reappraisals of Mission History: An Introduction’, in *Missionaries, Indigenous Peoples, and Cultural Exchange* (ed. Patricia Grimshaw and Andrew May; Portland, Or.: Sussex Academic Press, 2010), 2.

⁴ Harris, *One Blood*, 791.

⁵ (Attributed to) H. L. Perriman, ‘Notes Regarding to Policy for Working Aboriginal Mission at Groote’, Document (C.M.S. Archives, 1936), Series 1/Box 2, Church Missionary Society-Australia Ltd records.

⁶ Keith Cole, *Dick Harris: Missionary to the Aborigines* ((Great Australian missionaries; Bendigo, Vic.: Keith Cole Publications, 1980), 62.

for those directly involved and for the complex social relationships on Groote.⁷ Missionaries also actively discouraged child-wife practices through social pressure, exclusion from the mission, the mission dormitory, and legal action in the 1960s.⁸ However, prior to 1944 CMS did not have a clearly documented or comprehensive policy for its Northern Australia missions and how they were to respond to local cultural practices.⁹ As a result this paper will explore Taylor's account for insights into mission policy and missionary responses to complex marriage practices on Groote Eylandt prior to 1944. However, this requires that Taylor's individual account be first situated in the wider historical context surrounding mission policy. So, before looking at Taylor's work in detail, this paper will begin with a brief examination of developments in missiology during that era more generally in order to understand the context in which Taylor worked and wrote.

Secondly, this paper will examine in more depth Taylor's concerns with the existing mission policy towards child-wife practices and her call for stronger action by the mission. It will examine Taylor's account for the insights it gives into some of the values, attitudes and organisational factors that influenced her perceptions and responses and the implementation of mission policy at the time. To this end, the second portion of this paper will explore some of the factors that shaped Taylor's experience and perceptions of child-wife practices.

Ultimately, this paper will conclude that, while Taylor's concern and call to action were well-meaning, they also reveal a lack of understanding of the cultural complexities surrounding child-wife practices, which in turn highlights the complexity of the issues and developments around Aboriginal missiology in that era more generally.

Locating Taylor's Account in its Missiological Context

The early to mid-twentieth century was a period of significant development of Christian mission attitudes, policy and responses to Aboriginal cultures. This reflected a more basic reassessment of the relationships between Christianity, western cultures and indigenous cultures happening within broader Christian mission.

The close identification of Christianity with western culture during the nineteenth century resulted in debate about whether it was necessary to 'civilise' indigenous peoples before they could receive the gospel. While there were disagreements about which should come first—evangelisation or 'civilisation'—both were seen as integral parts of Christian mission to so-called 'primitive peoples'. A similar approach characterised both Catholic and Protestant missions to Aboriginal peoples in Australia.¹⁰

It has been suggested that as early as 1875 some missionaries began to distinguish between 'Christianisation' and 'Europeanisation', and were recognising the value and legitimacy of culturally-specific expressions of Christianity.¹¹ This view gained increasing support following World War I but was much more slowly adopted in mission to Aboriginal peoples in Australia. MacGregor has suggested that this slower shift was possibly due to less hierarchical structures in Aboriginal social orders presenting challenges to group conversion,

⁷ Harris, *We Wish We'd Done More*, 57; David Howe Turner, *Tradition and Transformation: A Study of the Groote Eylandt Area Aborigines of Northern Australia* ((Australian Aboriginal studies (Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies); Canberra: Aust. Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1974), 61–64.

⁸ Turner, *Tradition and Transformation*, 63.

⁹ Harris, *One Blood*, 786.

¹⁰ John W. Harris, *We Wish We'd Done More: Ninety Years of CMS and Aboriginal Issues in North Australia* (Adelaide: Openbook, 1999), 90; Christine Choo and Brian F. McCoy, 'Mission Dormitories: Intergenerational Implications for Kalumburu and Balgo, Kimberley, Western Australia', in *Missionaries, Indigenous Peoples, and Cultural Exchange* (ed. Patricia Grimshaw and May; Sussex Academic Press, 2010), 166.

¹¹ Russell McGregor, 'From Old Testament to New: A.P. Elkin on Christian Conversion and Cultural Assimilation', *The Journal of Religious History* 25 (2001): 44.

widespread perceptions of the extreme primitiveness of Australian Aboriginal peoples that contributed to a particular undervaluing of Aboriginal cultures, and a prevailing belief that Aboriginal peoples were a ‘doomed race’, which gave urgency to individual salvation but made the future of Aboriginal cultures appear hopeless.¹² Despite these challenges, by the early 1930s there were those who saw Aboriginal expressions of Christianity as key to missionary endeavours.¹³ By the 1940s an appreciation for the value for Aboriginal cultures was becoming officially expressed in mission policy.¹⁴

In addition to these particular complexities surrounding missionary engagement with Aboriginal cultures, we must note that indigenous marriage customs have often proved challenging to missionaries generally. Missionary ideas about how marriage should be expressed have often involved a complex web of theological and cultural assumptions. For instance, the Christian argument for monogamy has some biblical and theological basis, particularly grounded in the creation account (Genesis 1). The Old Testament depicts polygamy and does not explicitly condemn the practice, but there are suggestions in the New Testament that monogamy is the ideal (1 Tim 3:2). However, a long western history of monogamous marriage meant that by the 19th century, when missionaries encountered significant rates of polygamy in Africa, it was seen as being in absolute conflict with Christianity and incompatible with genuine Christian conversion.¹⁵ Many other aspects of western-style marriage were also seen as inherently Christian and preferable to that of traditional cultures.¹⁶ Missionaries also often misunderstood the significance of local marital customs. For instance, in Africa, missionaries saw the payment of bridewealth as a purchase price that treated wives as possessions, failing to recognise the crucial social protection it provided, indicating the woman’s value and protecting her from abandonment.¹⁷

Thus, Taylor’s time on Groote Eylandt was during an era when missionary approaches and attitudes to local culture were rapidly changing. Western values, at least in theory, were less likely to be seen as an essential part of Christianity. At the same time, indigenous marriage practices had frequently been confronting, challenging and confusing to missionaries. Against this background, Taylor’s account of polygamy and child-wife practices becomes an intriguing glimpse into the complexities and inconsistencies, caused by changing mission policy, for missionaries on the ground.

Shedding Light on CMS Policy in the Late 1930s

It was into this context that Taylor wrote her account for the CMS Aborigines Committee in 1939, which we will now examine. In her account she states that CMS has adopted their policy from a ‘booklet’ by Professor Elkin.¹⁸ She describes its policy as a ‘shame policy’ which she summarises as meaning, ‘No drastic measures should be adopted to prevent the custom, but that rather, the men should be gradually awakened to the fact of their wrong-

¹² McGregor, ‘From Old Testament to New’, 44–45.

¹³ For a survey see McGregor, ‘From Old Testament to New’, 45. For an example see Adolphus Peter Elkin, *Missionary Policy for Primitive Peoples* (Morpeth, N.S.W.: St. John’s College Press, 1934).

¹⁴ Church Missionary Society, ‘1944 Federal Council Policy’, Document (C.M.S. Archives, May 1944), Series 1/Box 2, Church Missionary Society Australia Ltd records.

¹⁵ Timothy Willem Jones, ‘The Missionaries’ Position: Polygamy and Divorce in the Anglican Communion, 1888-1988’, *Journal of Religious History* 35 (2011): 393, 396.

¹⁶ For examples see Adrian Hastings, ‘Were Women a Special Case?’, in *Women and Missions: Past and Present: Anthropological and Historical Perceptions*, ed. Fiona Bowie, D. Kirkwood, and Shirley Ardener (Providence, R I: Berg, 1993), 115–19.

¹⁷ Hastings, ‘Were Women a Special Case?’, 117

¹⁸ Taylor, ‘Facts about the Child-Wife Problem’, in ‘Papers of Elizabeth A. Taylor, 1931-1940’. Textual Material. November 29, 1939. Mitchell Library, MLMSS 463.

doing by Christian teaching and example, and so 'shamed' into giving up their custom quite voluntarily'.¹⁹

The document referred to seems to be *Missionary Policy for Primitive Peoples* by A. P. Elkin, published in 1934.²⁰ Elkin was Australia's most notable anthropologist of this period, an ordained Anglican minister, and frequent adviser to CMS.²¹ Minutes from the meetings of the Aborigines Committee record him being consulted regarding various policy matters.²² In this pamphlet Elkin does oppose 'just forcing the change [to betrothal and marriage customs] by the external authority, prestige or material advantages of the Mission'.²³ This seems echoed in Taylor's reference to 'no drastic measures'.²⁴

However, there is a discrepancy between Taylor's summary and Elkin's pamphlet. While Taylor's summary generally fits the approach Elkin recommended, her reference to the use of shame did not. Elkin saw the instilling of shame over indigenous cultural practices as a problematic part of a 'policy of substitution'. Such a policy was built on the assumption that all aspects of a culture were degraded and immoral and should be replaced by the western culture of the missionaries. Elkin described this approach but saw it as ignorant, discourteous and ultimately unsuccessful. While it could bring outward conformity, he believed it did not result in changed belief or 'wholeness of personality'.²⁵ Within this context, an approach that focused on young people, separated from their family and community, led to a 'conflict of allegiances'. As they reached maturity, they were drawn back to their old life, or else 'become misfits in their own society'.²⁶ This critique was clearly attacking the dormitory system, which focussed mission activity on resident children.²⁷ Instead, Elkin suggested that families and elders should be the focus:

A tribe or community, therefore, will not be won over through the children, though it may unfortunately be disintegrated by winning the children from allegiance to the elders and the past [...] The only satisfactory method of really influencing a community and the generations yet to come is to convert the parents and elders [...] This, of course, cannot be done in a day, but knowledge of the native language and view of life, together with patience and conviction, will eventually meet with success'.²⁸

Elkin's pamphlet advocated the need for missionaries to learn the local language and culture and focus their missionary efforts on families and whole groups, rather than targeting children. He saw cultural change as most effectively coming through communities' traditional processes.

The CMS policy of 1944 reflected an explicit movement away from an approach that aimed to replace traditional cultures with western culture in addition to imparting the gospel. It stated that:

...it is an essential part of the policy of the Society that the natives shall not be cut off from their own tribal life, but rather that the Mission shall aim at

¹⁹ Taylor, 'Facts about the Child-Wife Problem', 463, 464.

²⁰ Elkin, *Missionary Policy* (Morpeth, N.S.W.: St. John's College Press, 1934).

²¹ McGregor, 'From Old Testament to New', 39.

²² Church Missionary Society, 'Aborigines Committee Minutes', August, 11 1937, February 2 and September 15, 1938, October 19 and November 16, 1939, Textual Material (Sydney, NSW, 41 1937), Series 3/Box 4, Mitchell Library.

²³ Elkin, *Missionary Policy*, 4.

²⁴ Taylor, 'Facts about the Child-Wife Problem', 464.

²⁵ Elkin, *Missionary Policy*, 2.

²⁶ Elkin, *Missionary Policy*, 2.

²⁷ Choo and McCoy, 'Mission Dormitories', 175–176.

²⁸ Elkin, *Missionary Policy*, 5.

the far more difficult task of helping these natives to build up the Kingdom of God on the basis of their old tribal organisation and customs, where these are not opposed to Christianity.²⁹

Some cultural change was still anticipated: 'Evil' customs were to be 'discountenanced', although the means by which this was to happen were unspecified. The document also emphasised the value of missionaries studying local language, social customs and laws and was significantly influenced by Elkin.³⁰

Taylor's 1939 claim that '[t]his policy has been adopted by CMS', in relation to Elkin's 'booklet', suggests a more gradual and discerning approach to Aboriginal cultures was being promoted some years before 1944, when CMS drew up an official comprehensive policy. This point is supported by a CMS memo from November 20, 1939, which quoted at length from a further opinion received from Elkin. He suggested that 'we naturally feel some objection to the practice' of young girls being raised by their betrothed husbands, and suggested that parents be urged to take care of the child. However, he recognised the complex social relationships and structures that related to marriage customs and concluded, 'there was something to be said for the attitude that if you change the old men they would change the custom of child marriage'.³¹ He concluded that this necessitated learning the native language and culture in order to reach the old men. This mixture of permitting persuasion, warning against more heavy-handed influence, and a focus on reaching adults, reiterates Elkin's approach in *Mission Policy*.

Taylor's account of mission policy has further significance as it shows her understanding of policy. Clearly Taylor had some knowledge of one of Elkin's works, and familiarity with an approach that advocated gradual transformation of cultural practices considered incompatible with Christianity, rather than forceful intervention by missionaries. Taylor's conflation of an approach Elkin opposed with one he recommended may be mere misuse of technical language. However, it may reflect a misunderstanding of Elkin's actual recommendations, or suggest Taylor had only heard the policy secondhand. While it is unclear which was the case, the seeming confusion in Taylor's account is interesting in light of Harris' view that actual implementation of mission policy was significantly dependent on individual missionary beliefs.³²

Shedding Light on Missionary Values, Practice and Experience

Values and attitudes in Taylor's account

Taylor had two major concerns about the slowness of the CMS policy in producing cultural change: 'Meanwhile the children suffer, and also, the men are not helped to be different by the law'.³³ Here we will look in more detail at what exactly motivated these concerns.

Taylor's concern for children affected by the practice took numerous forms. 'Little girls of five to fifteen years are all wives to men of thirty to sixty years. They mature very quickly, and have hearts and faces full of years. They hunt for the men, and walk long distances for food'.³⁴ In contrast, 'On the mission station they become little girls full of the joy of life'.³⁵ She describes the girls' occupations on the mission station: attending chapel and school,

²⁹ CMS, '1944 Federal Council Policy'.

³⁰ Harris, *One Blood*, 786.

³¹ J. W. Ferrier, 'Memo to Mission Superintendents', Textual Material, November 20, 1939, Mitchell Library.

³² John Harris, *One Blood*, 791.

³³ Taylor, 'Facts about the Child-Wife Problem', 464.

³⁴ Taylor, 'Facts about the Child-Wife Problem', 464.

³⁵ Taylor, 'Facts about the Child-Wife Problem', 464.

learning to help in the kitchen and garden and playing on the play equipment, before saying, 'But at Sundown, the little camp girls sadly take off their mission frocks, and just wearing a chu-chu or old frock, go back to the camp, where they sit in the dirt and ashes with the camp dogs and women and become little wives again'.³⁶

The contrast Taylor drew between camp and mission life is colourful, emotive and seeks to persuade, but also implies values and assumptions about childhood and 'civilisation'. Taylor speaks negatively of traditional activities such as hunting and walking to gather food, linking these with child-wife practices. In contrast Taylor speaks positively of mission activities, linking them with genuine childhood ('On the mission station they become little girls full of the joy of life').³⁷ Visible in the contrast is Taylor's western value for cleanliness, contributing to a positive depiction of the mission and a negative depiction of the camp. Accounts by Aboriginal people who stayed at the mission to some degree challenge Taylor's glowing account of mission life. While often positive, these accounts describe the tough conditions and hard work involved.³⁸ Both lifestyles involved hard work and productive tasks. Taylor's portrayal suggests that, interwoven with her concerns about the girls' ages, were western assumptions about childhood occupations and a more broadly negative view of traditional Aboriginal lifestyles when contrasted with western civilisation.

Taylor's perspective was probably influenced by western marriage norms also. When she states that 'Little girls of five to fifteen years are all wives to men of thirty to sixty years' it suggests that, while her primary objection is to the girls' young age, the age difference between them and their husbands was also a concern. Elsewhere her account implies she valued marriage between people of similar age, stating that a man 'should have a wife of his own age'. This is not a distinctly Christian idea, but did reflect Australian norms at the time. In 1933, the average age of marriage in Australia was 27.0 and 23.7 years for men and women respectively, an average difference of just over three years.³⁹ In one of her letters, Taylor writes, 'Mr Gray's Caledon boy has a Caledon Bay girl of about 18 yrs, his own age, for his wife and they are a very happy pair'.⁴⁰ Her emphasis on their happiness, which she seems to see as a result of their nearness in age, also reflects a western value for marriage. Another western value the betrothal system challenged was the importance of choosing one's own life partner.

Taylor's concern for the children also included their moral well-being: 'Very often they are exchanged by their men and forced to lead immoral lives'.⁴¹ She saw this taking place in the context of the fuller knowledge of right and wrong that they were learning from the mission as they heard of 'the Love of a Heavenly Father, and then the need to cleanse their hearts and lives from sin'.⁴² She expressed concern that missionaries' non-intervention would send the wrong message: 'What confusion must be in the hearts of both little girls and the men and women? And how complicated Christian teaching must be to them!'⁴³

Taylor's Christian beliefs and morality clearly shaped her perceptions. When she wrote of girls being 'exchanged by their men and forced to lead immoral lives' her assessment reflects

³⁶ Taylor, 'Facts about the Child-Wife Problem', 464.

³⁷ Taylor, 'Facts about the Child-Wife Problem', 464.

³⁸ Keith Cole, *Groote Eylandt Stories: Changing Patterns of Life Among the Aborigines on Groote Eylandt* (Parkville, Vic.: Church Missionary Historical Publications Trust, 1972), 56–57.

³⁹ '1301.0 – Year Book Australia, 2003', *Australian Bureau of Statistics*, last modified January 24, 2003, accessed November 24, 2017,

<http://www.abs.gov.au/Ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/AA7D335E6FA7EAA4CA256CAE00053FA2>

⁴⁰ Elizabeth Taylor, 'Letter to Her Parents', September 1, 1938 (Mitchell Library, MLMSS 463).

⁴¹ Taylor, 'Facts about the Child-Wife Problem', 464.

⁴² Taylor, 'Facts about the Child-Wife Problem', 464.

⁴³ Taylor, 'Facts about the Child-Wife Problem', 465.

the Christian teaching that sexual activity is only permitted with one's spouse.⁴⁴ She described the girls as being 'forced' into 'immoral' behaviour.

Taylor's language suggests that child-wife practices removed children's freedom to follow God as the mission had taught them. This further depicted the practice as opposed to Christian morality. Similar language is involved in her account of a man whose young wife lived in the dormitory, and so he was 'tempted to live an immoral life'.⁴⁵ This suggests she saw the practice as contributing to sexual immorality among young men also, although through temptation rather than coercion. She believed that he 'should have a wife his own age'.⁴⁶

There are also suggestions she saw the continuance of child-wife customs as in conflict with Christian conversion. In one letter she states, 'I don't see how anything really definite can be done in the way of converts until this thing is rooted out, for the sake of the children and the men & women'.⁴⁷ Thus she saw these practices as incompatible with Christian obedience or repentance. Jones has suggested that among missionaries to Africa in the 19th century, 'it was generally thought impossible for someone in a pre-existing polygamous relationship to convert whilst in a plural marriage'.⁴⁸ This also may reflect ongoing debates and underlying beliefs about the relationship between Christianising and civilising indigenous peoples.

Taylor's account also suggests she felt the missionaries were betraying the children they cared for: 'The mission is not a sanctuary for the children, because although they run to the mission for refuge, they are handed out by the missionaries'.⁴⁹ She describes the distress of children forced to return to the camp or handed over to husbands and states that this happens because 'the missionary must not break faith with the men'.⁵⁰ She says, 'The men apparently are the first consideration', describing various ways she sees them benefiting from the mission.⁵¹

This aspect of Taylor's account suggests she was concerned by the interaction between mission policy, power and gender. Throughout her argument she maintains that the cultural practices are damaging to all: men, women and children. However, she saw child-wife practices as propagated by men, with CMS policy for change relying on 'the men [being] gradually awakened'.⁵² This concern for the well-being of women and children would continue to be a major factor that pushed Groote missionaries towards more direct intervention in the future.⁵³ Similar attitudes have also driven more general missionary and secular opposition to polygamy and child-wives.⁵⁴

Racial gender stereotypes are also apparent in Taylor's account. Her tone is negative when she says that the girls 'hunt for the men'.⁵⁵ In a letter she says of a group of women, 'The poor old things had walked miles—the men sit down & wait'.⁵⁶ Another woman, 'went back

⁴⁴ Taylor, 'Facts about the Child-Wife Problem', 464.

⁴⁵ Taylor, 'Facts about the Child-Wife Problem', 464.

⁴⁶ Taylor, 'Facts about the Child-Wife Problem', 464.

⁴⁷ Taylor, 'Letter to Her Parents', January 22, 1938.

⁴⁸ Jones, 'The Missionaries' Position', 396.

⁴⁹ Taylor, 'Facts about the Child-Wife Problem', 465.

⁵⁰ Taylor, 'Facts about the Child-Wife Problem', 465.

⁵¹ Taylor, 'Facts about the Child-Wife Problem', 465.

⁵² Taylor, 'Facts about the Child-Wife Problem', 464.

⁵³ Harris, *We Wish We'd Done More*, 57.

⁵⁴ For missionary opposition see Jones, 'The Missionaries' Position', 402. For secular opposition see Alison Holland, *Just Relations: The Story of Mary Bennett's Crusade for Aboriginal Rights* (Crawley, Western Australia: UWA Publishing, 2015), 120.

⁵⁵ Taylor, 'Facts about the Child-Wife Problem', 464.

⁵⁶ Taylor, 'Letter to Her Parents', January 22, 1938.

to the camp where her hungry, lazy husband awaited her'.⁵⁷ According to McGrath, typical western depictions of Aboriginal people portrayed the men as lazy and the women as slaves. She believes this assessment had its roots in the western role of men as 'exclusive breadwinners'.⁵⁸ Such stereotypes seem to have further aligned Taylor's sympathies with Aboriginal women.

Her other major concern is that the 'men are not helped to be different'.⁵⁹ Here, Taylor seems to advocate a punitive response, using the language of 'the law'. She states, 'the men are not helped to be different by the law as they are undoubtedly helped by the knowledge that for murder they will be taken to Darwin and for stealing, they will be punished'.⁶⁰ Elsewhere she suggests that two men 'would not have dared' to act a certain way if they 'had the arm of the law to confront them'.⁶¹ These references suggest that she saw the law as a potentially powerful deterrent.

There are hints that she saw the law as being of moral and spiritual value to the men themselves, as well as preventing this custom that she saw as harmful to children. She believed the two men mentioned, if deterred by the law, 'would have been helped to become stronger morally and spiritually'.⁶² She gives the example of a 19-year-old man who 'knows it is wrong to have a little child-wife' and so wanted his wife to remain in the mission dormitory'.⁶³ She says this man 'is tempted to lead an immoral life, and has caused much trouble and sadness'.⁶⁴ This suggests she viewed the law as a potential help resisting temptation for men who knew the custom was wrong.

Possibly this aspect of Taylor's assessment was influenced by the widespread belief that Aboriginal peoples were a more 'primitive' and 'weaker' race. This belief, with roots in social Darwinism, was widespread in Australian society at the time, and is reflected in early CMS literature.⁶⁵ In her letters Taylor describes the people she is working with as 'quick to learn' and says she has seen 'lots of little things that plainly reveal a very normal & human intelligence'.⁶⁶ These statements were progressive for the time, yet the surprised tone in which they are communicated suggest they challenged assumptions. A view of inherent weakness or underdevelopment may have influenced Taylor's belief that the men required external motivation, a 'strong law', in order to do what was right. In one letter she wrote of a man's moral choice, 'he wasn't strong enough & wasn't helped by any stringent law'.⁶⁷ Harris suggests some early missionaries believed that punishment formed a key way of teaching Aboriginal people of their sin as preparation for understanding the gospel, needing 'law' before they could receive 'grace'.⁶⁸ Taylor's belief that punishment was a potential 'help' may have been a general solution to any person's moral weakness, however she may have viewed it as a specific help required by a less 'morally developed' race.

Her dissatisfaction with CMS policy seems to have been grounded in perceptions of its slowness in ending the practice: 'All these men mentioned have been in contact with the mission for four or five years and longer. They have attended chapel and camp services every day.' Regarding one couple she wrote, 'Apparently it will take a good many years for [H] to

⁵⁷ Taylor, 'Letter to Her Parents', January 22, 1938.

⁵⁸ McGrath, 'Modern Stone-Age Slavery', 32.

⁵⁹ Taylor, 'Facts about the Child-Wife Problem', 464.

⁶⁰ Taylor, 'Facts about the Child-Wife Problem', 464.

⁶¹ Taylor, 'Facts about the Child-Wife Problem', 466.

⁶² Taylor, 'Facts about the Child-Wife Problem', 466.

⁶³ Taylor, 'Facts about the Child-Wife Problem', 465.

⁶⁴ Taylor, 'Facts about the Child-Wife Problem', 465.

⁶⁵ Harris, *We Wish We'd Done More*, 98–100

⁶⁶ Taylor, 'Letter to Her Parents', n.d..

⁶⁷ Taylor, 'Letter to Her Parents', April 25, 1939.

⁶⁸ Harris, *We Wish We'd Done More*, 52.

be ‘shamed’ and [J] is still in bondage to the abominable custom’.⁶⁹ She also saw the practice as self-propagating: ‘All the little girls are wives to older men, therefore all the little boys will have not mates and resort to the usual custom’.⁷⁰

Inconsistency between mission policy and mission practice

The Groote mission, where Taylor was based, started in 1923 as a mission for half-caste children brought from Roper River mission on the mainland.⁷¹ The missionaries were to teach these children the gospel, practical skills and English, to prepare them for productive roles within wider society. Central to the roles of the missionaries was the running of regular chapel services and school for the children. In 1933, remaining school-aged half-caste children were returned to the mainland and the mission became focussed on local Aboriginal people.⁷² Mission life continued to revolve around chapel, school and dormitory, but now with local children as the main participants. Adults worked around the mission in exchange for supplies, with some attending chapel services and receiving medical attention.

The dormitory enabled some local children to be housed, clothed and cared for by missionaries and half-caste helpers. Unlike many missions in the south, these children lived in the dormitory with their parent or guardians’ consent, many returning to families for holidays, ceremonies and hunting during the week.⁷³ The dormitory system increased missionary contact and influence with a small number of children. Missionary women, such as Taylor, played a significant role in caring for them.

The dormitory seems to have significantly influenced Taylor’s experience of child-wife practices. Her account emphasises girls’ distress at being taken from the mission by their husbands and the difficulties of the missionaries, obliged to permit them to go. When she refers to the missionaries’ behaviour as betrayal, she conveys a sense of duty of care.⁷⁴ The fluid nature of the dormitory system and the policy of cultural non-interference appear to have placed Taylor in a position where mission policy required an action that seemed directly opposed to the well-being of children under her care.

Additionally, the day-to-day running of the mission and the expectations of CMS would have served to align Taylor’s sympathies with the children, at the expense of understanding the adults of the community. Taylor’s mission responsibilities, particularly in school, dormitory and Sunday school, limited her contact with indigenous adults and increased her contact with children, who also had more English.

This context regarding the mission and missionary roles raises questions about Taylor’s assessment that Elkin’s policy had been adopted by CMS. While the mission was not forcefully changing marriage practices at the time, Elkin’s policy also emphasised the need for missionaries to learn the local language and culture and focus missionary efforts at reaching adults and whole communities. Mission strategy was still focussed on children at this time with some contact with people living in the camp outside the mission grounds.⁷⁵ Harris, in his assessment of the CMS missions highlights how the day-to-day running of the missions monopolised missionaries’ time and limited opportunities to learn language or spend less structured time with adult community members.⁷⁶ A later missionary who sought

⁶⁹ Names removed from original.

⁷⁰ Taylor, ‘Facts about the Child-Wife Problem’, 465.

⁷¹ Keith Cole, *Groote Eylandt Mission: A Short History of the CMS Groote Eylandt Mission, 1921–1971* (Melbourne: Church Missionary Historical Publications, 1971), 24.

⁷² Keith Cole, *Groote Eylandt: Changing Aboriginal Life Styles* (Bendigo, Vic.: Keith Cole Publications, 1992), 43.

⁷³ Harris, *We Wish We’d Done More*, 330.

⁷⁴ Taylor, ‘Facts about the Child-Wife Problem’, 465.

⁷⁵ Harris, *We Wish We’d Done More*, 23.

⁷⁶ Harris, *We Wish We’d Done More*, 23.

to direct more time towards adults, at the expense of formal ministry, was criticised by the CMS Aborigines Committee.⁷⁷ Missionary time was also absorbed by the need to maintain wooden buildings and old machinery in a tropical climate. In her letters Taylor says of her brother, that rather than having time to 'teach people more & improve their conditions [...] all the time is spent in trying to make things look decent and keep the buildings intact, and make parts for the engines. They even make all the nuts & bolts!'.⁷⁸ While CMS might support Elkin's policy on paper, various institutional factors were hampering its implementation in practice. Taylor's account criticised the slowness of CMS policy in bringing about cultural change, but the partial nature of its implementation was also potentially undermining its effectiveness.

The impact of Taylor's particular circumstances on her experience

Taylor spent less than 18 months on Groote. Her arrival and involvement were not typical of CMS procedure, as she went on 'temporary service' on 'special agreement'⁷⁹ rather than following the 'usual formalities with the N.S.W. Branch'.⁸⁰ This was due to severe staff shortages. The Aborigines Committee minuted, 'After due consideration it was decided to record that the Committee is averse from sending workers on short notice, and that action can only be taken in this case because considered urgent to supply companionship for Mrs. Taylor during Miss Dove's absence.'⁸¹ Mrs Laura Taylor was Taylor's sister-in-law who, together with Taylor's brother Philip, had been serving at Groote mission since at least 1936.⁸² The approach of the wet season added to the urgency of Taylor's appointment.⁸³

Taylor received no cross-cultural or language training. An early letter suggests even informal information was scarce: 'I haven't been able to get much definite information about Groote Eylandt. Phil & Laura don't spread themselves much to give news or information, it comes out in bits.'⁸⁴ Within two months of her arrival, Laura Taylor had died of malaria, leaving Taylor as the only white woman.⁸⁵

Taylor's conviction that the mission had effectively communicated Christian teaching about right and wrong through chapel services and school suggests limited awareness of the challenges created by the cross-cultural setting and their use of English. In an early letter Taylor anticipated some difficulties teaching at the school: 'I shall find it very difficult for awhile I think because I do not know any of their language & they don't speak much English'.⁸⁶ Yet later she wrote of adults attending chapel, saying, 'Dear old things they seem to understand so well'.⁸⁷ A later missionary recorded how it was only language learning and Bible translation that helped him realise the extent of language and cultural barriers.⁸⁸ Lack of language made it hard for missionaries like Taylor to recognise limitations in cross-cultural communication.

Taylor's lack of language and cross-cultural training, themselves a result of institutional factors, mean her account has relied heavily on observation of child-wife practices at the

⁷⁷ Harris, *We Wish We'd Done More*, 32–33.

⁷⁸ Taylor, 'Letter to Her Parents', January 27, 1939.

⁷⁹ CMS, 'Aborigines Committee Minutes', October 13, 1937.

⁸⁰ CMS, 'Aborigines Committee Minutes', September 29, 1937.

⁸¹ CMS, 'Aborigines Committee Minutes', September 29, 1937.

⁸² Murray Wilfred Seiffert, *Gumbuli of Ngukkur: Aboriginal Elder in Arnhem Land* (Brunswick East, Vic.: Acorn Press, 2011), 34; Cole, *Groote Eylandt Mission*, 37.

⁸³ CMS, 'Aborigines Committee Minutes', September 21, 1937.

⁸⁴ Elizabeth Taylor, 'Letter to Her Parents', September 1, 1938.

⁸⁵ Elizabeth Taylor, 'Letter to Her Parents', February 12, 1938 and February 27, 1938.

⁸⁶ Elizabeth Taylor, 'Letter to Her Parents', September 1, 1938.

⁸⁷ Elizabeth Taylor, 'Letter to Her Parents', n.d.

⁸⁸ Michael Hore, quoted in Harris, *We Wish We'd Done More*, 37.

point of contact with the mission. The language gap would have limited her ability to hear and understand explanations of the nature and significance of the practice.

Taylor's account involves a straightforward argument for stronger intervention to end the 'child-wife' practice but lacks references to the issue's complexity that characterised other accounts. For instance, Levitt, a missionary in the 1950s–70s believed the practice was integrally related to childhood discipline and was aware of complex social rules and economic factors involved in the practice.⁸⁹ Elkin also identified economic factors and believed younger wives played a part in providing for the elderly in the community.⁹⁰ Some missionaries believed the practice had been exacerbated by an increasing population, attributable to food and healthcare from the mission.⁹¹ Anthropologist David Turner suggested the mission had exacerbated fighting and wife-stealing by bringing polygynous family groups into closer proximity with the single men although other accounts suggest it was widespread earlier.⁹² The true nature of child-wife practices is beyond the scope of this paper but these perspectives suggest Taylor's understanding was simplistic. Taylor may have been aware of complexity and excluded it from her account for the sake of her argument but there is no suggestion of an awareness of the nuances of the practice in her letters.

One example of a simplistic perspective is the example of a man who was considered by the missionaries to have used deceit to gain access to a child. Taylor asked, 'Why [...] resort to subterfuge if he did not know that it was all wrong?'⁹³ Taylor saw his secretive method as reflective of guilt, without seeming to recognise that the very existence of missionary opposition, rather than a sense of guilt, might be the cause for his deception.

Amidst all of this, another factor at play was Taylor's own compassion. Her concern can be seen in her rhetorical questions: 'How long must children's hearts be hurt?' and 'What confusion there must be in the hearts of both little girls and the men and women?'⁹⁴ The emotive tone clearly seeks to persuade the Aborigines Committee to change policy, yet her strong desire for policy change was apparently driven by genuine concern.

Limited language and cultural awareness, the shortness of her time on Groote and the regular demands of the mission maximised her contact and responsibility for children while limiting the depth and frequency of interactions with adult Eylandters. This seems to have limited her awareness of some of the complexity involved in missionary interference with child-wife practices. Meanwhile, Taylor's perception of the effects of the mission policy of non-interference on the wellbeing of children seems to have aroused her compassion and motivated her calls for stronger interventions that would bring a more immediate end to the practice.

Conclusion

Taylor's experience reflects complex factors involved in a period when mission approaches to Aboriginal cultures were beginning to change. Her account documents her understanding of C.M.S. policy towards polygamy and child wives at this time. Rather than permitting missionaries to forcefully intervene in existing cultural practices, missionaries were to allow

⁸⁹ Dulcie Levitt, *Observations About Aboriginal Life on Groote Eylandt, 1952 to 1970*, (Palmerston, N.T.: Keith Hart, 1997), 27, 35.

⁹⁰ Elkin, *Mission Policy*, 4.

⁹¹ Harris, *We Wish We'd Done More*, 57.

⁹² David Turner, *Tradition and Transformation: A Study of the Groote Eylandt Area Aborigines of Northern Australia* (Canberra: Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1974), 61. See also Norman B. Tindale, *Natives of Groote Eylandt and of the West Coast of the Gulf of Carpentaria* (Adelaide: Hassell Press, 1925), 72.

⁹³ Taylor, 'Facts about the Child-Wife Problem', 466.

⁹⁴ Taylor, 'Facts about the Child-Wife Problem', 465, 467.

time and the message of Christianity to convict local leaders and bring an end to these practices.

However, Taylor's situation demonstrates tensions emerging in a period of changing policy. C.M.S. had accepted the recommendation from A.P. Elkin that missionaries not forcefully intervene in child-wife practices. However, Elkin had strongly advocated, as part of his original policy recommendation, a focus on language and cultural training for missionaries to enable them to effectively focus their efforts on adults and move away from a dormitory model focused on children. There is no mention of these latter aspects of the policy in Taylor's account, suggesting that implementation of these recommendations was slower. Taylor's account demonstrates how existing missionary roles and the mission structures of school, chapel and dormitory, when combined with a policy which ruled out active opposition, placed missionaries in the difficult position of passive cooperation with existing cultural practices when persuasion failed.

Various factors may have played a role in the uneven implementation of Elkin's recommendations. Taylor's account suggests there were considerable challenges for missionaries on the ground as some policies began to change but organisational values and structures, missionary roles and training, took time to align.

Taylor's account also provides insights into one missionary's values, situation and experience in the late 1930s. It suggests that Christian morality, a negative attitude towards traditional Aboriginal culture, acceptance of western marriage norms, and particular concern for Aboriginal women and children, may all have influenced her perceptions and experience of the cultural practices she sought to relate.

Other significant factors in her experience and perceptions are the short period of time she spent on Groote Eylandt, her lack of language and cross-cultural training and her limited contact and communication with adult Eylandters. Compared to other missionary accounts, Taylor's portrayal suggests a lack of awareness of some of the wider implications and complexities of marriage practices. Her account and her letters also suggest a tendency to underestimate the extent of the barrier created by the use of English by the missionaries.

All of these factors mean that great care should be taken before using Taylor's account as a source regarding the practices she describes. Nor was Taylor a typical C.M.S. missionary of the time, an exception being made in sending her for a limited term. However, Taylor's experience and the limitations of her account seem to support the importance of Elkin's emphasis on the need for missionaries to learn language and engage deeply with a community in order to understand culture and communicate effectively cross-culturally. Taylor's account remains a passionate and well-meaning plea for a change of mission policy during a time of complex mission policy change. It provides insight into tensions in C.M.S. policy and practice during the 1930s and some of the challenges faced by missionaries at that time. It also provides a glimpse of how cultural and contextual factors influenced one missionary's perceptions of an unfamiliar and challenging cultural practice and supports the importance of language-learning and deep cultural engagement.

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