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## **A.N.O. Kwakye, University of Ghana, Legon**

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Christian Missions and Churches. Between Racism and Respect

### **Indigenous African Perceptions of a European Mission in Africa**

#### **Introduction**

In 2015, a year after I had completed an ESKAS fellowship in Basel, Switzerland, my Department at the University of Ghana, hosted a delegation from the University of Basel. This was part of an existing partnership between the Department for the Study of Religions, University of Ghana and the Faculty of Theology at the University of Basel. As part of the itinerary, we visited Abokobi, an old Basel Mission station in Southern Ghana. Abokobi was established by the Basel Mission as a Christian village and has always maintained a Christian chief who is chosen and installed by the church. On meeting the team, the Chief of Abokobi, Nii Samuel Adjetey Mohenu, addressed them in Ga as *wo Nuntsomei* or "our Lords". The chief was by this greeting, extending the cultural courtesies to our guests who were from Basel in the manner in which old Abokobi indigenes would have addressed missionaries from Basel. I found this disturbing, especially because almost 60 years after political independence, reference to European visitors as "our Lords" was unacceptable. Much more, the fact that although these guests were from Basel, they were different from the European missionaries who laboured in the Gold Coast for almost a century and a half. Indeed, some of the students in the delegation were not practicing Christians.

However, one cannot run away from the fact that relations between the European missionaries and colonialists left a lasting memory for much of the older generation who either worked alongside them or had some contact with them. Indeed, in the words of a former Basel missionary, the marks left on Ghanaian culture by the Basel Mission go as deep as the grain in a block of wood, capable of resisting every attempt to sand them away.<sup>1</sup>

The attitude of the Abokobi Chief is representative of the perception that many Africans developed over the centuries in terms of the relationship between locals and Europeans. Africans learnt to show respect to the missionaries because living with the Europeans led many into privileged positions. In some places, however, the encounter was lopsided and sometimes led to resistance or rebellion from the indigenous people.

In this paper, I intend to discuss two case studies. These are based on correspondence from two groups of African Christians at two different periods of the Mission's history and in two different mission stations. They are written protests from African Christians, a rare resource in the Mission Archive. I call it rare for three reasons. First, much of the resource in the Mission Archive are reports of the missionaries and the local African pastors. The voices of ordinary African Christians are usually heard through the writings of their European and African leaders. In these two documents we hear from persons who were neither European missionaries nor African pastors. Second, due to the Basel Mission's approach to Authority and Discipline, dissent was usually not tolerated. These two letters therefore provide us with an insight into the internal workings of the mission and the perceptions of some African Christians. Thirdly, much of the African society is oral. Written protests will therefore be a small fraction of the several unwritten protests and murmurings from the Africans.

#### **Andreas Riis and the Akropong Station**

One of the celebrated Basel Missionaries who worked in West Africa was Andreas Riis.

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<sup>1</sup> Jon Miller, *Missionary Zeal and Institutional Control; Organizational Contradictions in the Basel Mission on the Gold Coast, 1828-1917* (Grand Rapids: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 17.

On January 13th 1845, the West Indian families came together to address a petition to the Inspector of the Basel Mission. They complained bitterly about Riis' cruelty and dishonesty and his disrespectful treatment of them. Riis' attitude reminded them of the cruel overseers who were such a prominent feature of the plantation economy of the Caribbean.

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A careful analysis of the complaint indicates that all was not well between the colonists and their leader, Riis. He seemed to be a bully who treated the African returnee missionaries as second-class persons. Generally, the picture is painted of a missionary who treated his own colleague, Halleur, with disrespect and therefore for persons who he perceived as beneath him in rank and race, he treated with the greatest contempt. His contemptuous maltreatment of the West Indians may have taken many forms. The unfair manner in which clothing for example was distributed caused a great disaffection. On one occasion, although all of the West Indians grumbled that the clothing was inadequate, it seemed that Jonas Hosford grumbled the loudest. Riis in his anger had him flogged by Ashong, the foreman of the labourers, a heathen, who is described by Widmann as a thief.<sup>2</sup> The missionary, Ernst Sebald portrays this event in a long and sad description of Riis, and concludes that Riis betrayed his Lord in this matter.<sup>3</sup> Reading the account, one can see that Sebald and Widmann attempted, unsuccessfully to intervene in the matter. When the stick used by Ashong to administer the punishment broke, Riis continued with his own boots and fists.<sup>4</sup> Sebald considered the newly arrived missionaries to be a "little bit sentimental" and that "the West Indians had their faults but were wrongly treated by Riis who had nevertheless good intentions. He thinks that the West Indians should live like the natives".<sup>5</sup> These actions of Riis plunged the Mission community into prolonged depression.

This position of Riis, in reference to the West Indians living like the natives, was a common feature in mission stations where West Indian Christians and native African Christians lived under the supervision of European missionaries. In Wariboko Waibinte's *Ruined by "Race"*, a similar story is told concerning the Jamaican missionaries who worked under the aegis of the Church Mission Society in Southern Nigeria.<sup>6</sup> Jaap van Slageren also cites a similar dispute between the Baptist pastor, Joseph Dibundu and the German Gottlieb Munz.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, while West Indians came from the African diaspora and therefore expected to be considered as expatriates working in the region, a number of European missionaries, treated them with so much disrespect because of their colour.

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According to Jon Miller, Riis alienated the very people the Mission was trying to attract. He was abusive and contemptuous of Africans and complained vocally when they were even present at meals. He endangered the mission and had to be recalled home. It is evident that in order to avoid bad publicity, these racist actions of Riis were not made public and he was quietly expelled from the service of the Mission. Indeed, the Mission reported to influential supporters in Europe that "impaired health" and a "disturbed frame of mind brought on by his heroic struggles" were grounds for his inability to continue.<sup>8</sup> He is still a celebrated missionary back in Ghana because many do not know the stories of his relations with the people to whom he was sent. It is not known that he was expelled from the Mission although this was so.

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### **August Fritz Ramseyer and the Abetifi Station**

Ramseyer is another celebrated Basel Missionary in Ghana.

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In 1882, the Basel Mission Inspector, Hermann Praetorius, left for the Gold Coast to assess progress of the Mission. Church Agents, employees and Presbyters (elders) were invited to express their wishes and grievances. These petitions as they are described are lodged in the D-1,3.8b file in the Mission Archives. Interestingly, one reads of a petition submitted by three members of the

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<sup>2</sup> BMA – D-1,2, Africa III, Akropong –Ussu 1845, Widmann letters, No. 22, (Debrunner, *Abstracts*).

<sup>3</sup> BMA – D-1,2, Africa III, Akropong 1845, No. 13, Sebald letters 16 May 1845, (Debrunner, *Abstracts*); Sebald came from Auernheim and was sent out to the Gold Coast in 1844.

<sup>4</sup> Miller, *Missionary Zeal and Institutional Control*, p.134.

<sup>5</sup> BMA – D-1,2, Africa III, Akropong 1845, No. 13, Sebald letters 16 May 1842, (Debrunner, *Abstracts*).

<sup>6</sup> Waibinte E. Wariboko, *Ruined by "Race"; Afro Caribbean Missionaries and the Evangelization of Southern Nigeria, 1895-1925* (Asmara: Africa World Press, 2007), 105-106.

<sup>7</sup> Jaap van Slageren. 'Jamaican Missionaries in Cameroon', *Exchange* 30:2. (2001), p.146.

<sup>8</sup> Miller, *Missionary Zeal and Institutional Control*, 134.

Kwahu congregation, Nathanael Berko, Johannes Ata, and James Boama. The letter written on 2nd January 1883 read as follows:

Sir, may it please your Lordship to allow us to explain these short words in the poor congregation of Abetifi. We are sorry to say about command of the Principal of this town:

- I. He makes himself as a King, but not as a Minister.
- II. He commands just the same as Ashante's King.
- III. He treats us a[s] animals.

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First, the missionary Ramseyer is perceived to behave like the Asante King. At this time, the Asante King was regarded as a tyrant leader and therefore the reference to Ramseyer was to his tyrannical and authoritarian rule.

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Second, the petitioners also accused Ramseyer of treating them as animals. The accusation of treating somebody as an animal, in Twi aboa, was (and still is) a grave insult among the Akan. According to Christaller, aboa (o)nipa refers to the animal called man; a rude ignorant, uncivilised man, fool.<sup>9</sup> By this accusation, the petitioners portrayed Ramseyer of grave misconduct.

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A third major accusation against Ramseyer was that his working relations with the indigenous people was fraught with disrespect and cheating. The wages paid them were meagre.

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The reference to James 5 which is a warning to rich oppressors, indicates their own self-appreciation of the theological basis for work relations.

Finally, the petitioners like the West Indians, accused Ramseyer of being an obstacle to the growth of the church. He was not a good example to the heathen, so much that they were afraid to come to the station. The heathen people of Abetifi seemed to refuse conversion, not because they found the message of the cross repulsive, but rather because of the disgusting and disrespectful behaviour of Ramseyer.

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## Conclusion

European missionary societies including the Basel Mission left an enduring legacy in West Africa. In view of their achievements, they were and are still highly respected. Their achievements in the area of social action, commerce and the establishment of the Christian faith cannot be denied. The history of their activities has been presented in largely hagiographic and triumphalist terms. In spite of these, the records are filled with negative perceptions of the missionaries. There were instances where the missionaries demonstrated grave disrespect and sometimes racist attitudes towards the very people to whom the message was brought. These instances, found in mission records were usually not made public in order to project a perfect image of the missionary societies. However, in these instances just like we see in the two cases, the Africans perceived of the lead European missionary as racist or disrespectful. In both cases, the Europeans were seen to be an obstacle and danger to the cause for which they had travelled all the way to the West Coast of Africa.

These examples mirror a trend of subjugation by nineteenth century European groups that will lead ultimately to the colonisation of the African continent. Following colonisation, there was a gradual but consistent attempt to make the Africans conceive themselves as dependent on a western economy. This was perpetuated through the schools and just as the Jamaican reggae star, Bob Marley, once said in Redemption Song, "emancipate yourself from mental slavery, none but ourselves can free our minds." Until Africans have freed themselves from this mental slavery that makes Africans dependent on the European, independence will be meaningless. In these last few years following the murder of George Floyd in the United States of America and the emergence of the Black Lives Matter Movement, a consciousness has been raised and its sustainability and the right responses will ensure that we heal wounds that have been created over a longue period.

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<sup>9</sup> J.G. Christaller, *Dictionary of the Asante and Fante Language called Tshi(Twi)* (Basel: Basel Evangelical Missionary Society, 1933), 31.