Speaking for Ourselves: The Ghanaian Encounter with European Missionaries – Sixteenth–Twenty-first Centuries

Daniel Justice Eshun

Dean of Chapel, Whitelands College, University of Roehampton,
London, UK

D.Eshun@roehampton.ac.uk

Abstract

This paper (re)examines European missionary encounters with Ghanaians from the sixteenth – twenty-first centuries from Ghanaian perspectives. The paper makes three main arguments: first, European missionary endeavours were quite peripheral to ongoing indigenous religious activities and daily life, with the movement of Christianity from the periphery to the center of Ghanaian society a more recent phenomenon with political implications and concerns. Secondly, missionary and colonial decisions were often made in response to indigenous activities, not vice versa. And thirdly, this methodological approach of hearing African and European voices in dialogue serves as a much-needed corrective to favouring European perspectives within African mission history. Taken together, this provides fresh insights into questions of how/why Christianity went from the periphery under European missionary leadership to Ghana's primary religion post-independence, offering differently nuanced understandings to concepts of mission while giving dignity and respect to the local context, people, and institutions.

Keywords

Ghana – missions – history – European missions – African missions – sixteenth century – twenty-first century – post-colonial

1 Introduction

In common idiom, when someone expresses a view with which we disagree, or erroneously offers their perspective as being ours, we might reply, “speak for yourself!” This signals both that we have a different view, and that we prefer to express it ourselves. This aim of this paper, therefore, in “speaking for ourselves,” is to (re)examine European missionary encounters with Ghanaians from approximately the sixteenth through twenty-first centuries, from Ghanaian perspectives. In seeking to answer the overarching question of “what changed in order to shift Christianity from the periphery of Ghanaian society under missionary leadership to explosive growth from the mid-twentieth-century onwards?” the paper makes three main arguments. Firstly, that Christian missionary endeavours, whether through their African agents or Europeans, were peripheral to ongoing indigenous religious activities and much of daily and community life. Further, our arguments demonstrate that the movement of Christianity from the periphery of society to the centre in Ghana is a more recent phenomenon, with very real political implications and concerns. Secondly, that missionary and colonial policies and decisions were often made in response to indigenous activities, rather than vice versa. And thirdly, that this methodological approach of “speaking for ourselves” and hearing African voices in dialogue with European voices serves as a much-needed corrective to favouring European perspectives within African mission history.

Why do these arguments matter? The significance, as we will illustrate, is that it provides differently nuanced understandings to concepts of mission and gives dignity and respect to the local context, people, and institutions. Furthermore, with the veritable explosion of Christian growth in Ghana in the post-missionary, post-independence period, such research offers fresh insight into what happened to move Christianity from the periphery to the centre, with implications for the contemporary study of Christianity in Ghana. It further serves as a reminder that missionary activity is always a dialogue or dance of sorts, with insiders and outsiders navigating one another’s unfamiliar environments, cultures, and religions, producing new and creative approaches to Christian thought and practice in the process.

To pursue these arguments, we will first address some of the methodological challenges. Then, we will follow a historical trajectory in exploring various European-Ghanaian encounters; followed by examining some examples of European missionaries’ attempts to fit into ongoing dynamic political, cultural, and religious lives of various Ghanaian communities. We will then look afresh at the local agents’ initiatives to commend the Christian faith to their fellow countrymen and women, alongside of their partnerships with Europeans.

Finally, we shall consider Nkrumah's ambivalent attitudes to missionary activities in post-independent Ghana and the ways in which Christianity has slowly shifted to the centre of civic thought and culture in Ghana. The conclusion highlights the importance of viewing Ghanaian mission history from Ghanaian perspectives, while making recommendations for the wider implications for mission as construed and executed in this African context.

Taking an interdisciplinary but primarily historiographical approach, this paper draws on re-readings of selected missionary and colonial historical records located in Ghana and the United Kingdom. The writer equally draws on his experience as a Ghanaian and as a trained historian, social anthropologist, sociologist, and theologian, who has spent over twenty years conducting fieldwork in different parts of the country, including interviews with selected Ghanaian Christian leaders on their perceptions and interpretations of Ghanaian-European missionary encounters. To draw solely on missionary and colonial records for the arguments presented here would not only be challenging but counterproductive, since neither party wrote with the intention of highlighting Ghanaian voices, and of course could not themselves offer a Ghanaian perspective. They were, effectively, speaking for us. Therefore, re-reading some of these documents alongside of interviews and field research allows for a fresh Ghanaian perspective on a Ghanaian experience, while highlighting Ghana's contribution to mission history and Christian engagement. Effectively, "speaking for ourselves."

This issue of methodology and perspective, however, bears further consideration. It is important to remember that in order for missionaries and colonial administrators to justify their work and in some cases financial support, it was important to present their accounts in a particular manner. As Fanon notes, "the settler makes history and is conscious of making it. And because he constantly refers to the history of his mother country, he clearly indicates that he himself is the extension of that mother country. Thus, the history which he writes is not the history of the country which he plunders but the history of his own nation" (Fanon 1964:102). Missionaries often had admirable motives, but their records and representations of Ghanaians, and Africans more broadly, needed to appeal to, and justify, the resources from those pouring funds into African missionary enterprises. Likewise, in missionaries' furlough speaking engagements, the need to solicit further financial aid, or reassure supporters about the gains ensuing from their gifts, precluded them from representing Africans completely objectively. Perhaps no one makes this point more clearly than Burkinabé historian Joseph Ki-Zerbo: "The history of Africa needs rewriting, for up till now it has often been masked, faked, distorted, mutilated, by 'force of circumstance' – i.e.,

through ignorance or self-interest. Crushed by centuries of oppression, Africa has seen generations of travellers, slave traders, explorers, missionaries, governors, and scholars of all kinds give out its image as one of nothing but poverty, barbarism, irresponsibility, and chaos. And this image has been projected and extrapolated indefinitely in time, as a justification of both the present and the future" (Ki-Zerbo 1981:15).

Despite the lack of objectivity in many historical records, imaginative, careful re-readings, in conjunction with exploring oral traditions and ongoing developments within the indigenous culture and ritual frameworks, provide fresh perspectives on this Euro-Ghanaian encounter. As a Ghanaian, this methodological approach is not only helpful but necessary if we are to give a voice to our ancestors' encounters with missionaries and colonial administrators and speak into the future with wisdom.

2 Historical Context: Ghanaians' Early Contacts with Christian Missionaries (Fifteenth–Eighteenth Centuries)

How Ghanaians encountered Christianity can be broadly divided into three main phases. The first phase began from 1451–1700; the second from 1700–1820s; and the third from 1828–1957, Ghana's independence, when all missionaries handed over church leadership to Ghanaians. While missionary accounts understandably center missionary activity, it should be remembered that in all these periods, missionary activities were rather on the fringes of the wider society.

2.1 *First Phase: 1451–1700*

Ghanaian's first contact with Christianity came through Portuguese Catholic missionaries and traders who came to the fishing town of Elmina in 1482. This enterprise was not as successful as the missionaries wished, for the following reasons. First, the missionaries acting as chaplains to European traders along the coast concentrated their activities more on the Europeans, doing only a limited amount of teaching and preaching among indigenous communities (Debrunner 1967:18). Second, many missionaries became more interested in trade than in missionary work (Clarke 1986:15). Barbot, an eyewitness, wrote in 1680 that "The great concern of the Dutch on this coast, as well as of all other Europeans, settled or trading there, is the gold, and not the welfare of those souls" (Barbot 1732:157). Thirdly, many Ghanaians remained indifferent to Christianity and were even hostile to the formation of a church that rivalled their indigenous religion.

The leader of the first mission, Diego de Azambuja, built a stone fort which housed a church and the settlement for traders and missionaries. De Azambuja named the fort *São Jorge da Mina* (St. George of Mina or Elmina). To persuade the Ghanaians to accept Catholicism, de Azambuja is believed to have told them of the commercial benefits they would derive from an alliance with the European missionaries and the values of the Christian faith. Furthermore, to convince the traditional authorities that they had nothing to fear from the missionaries, a Catholic mass was sometimes conducted in the Chief's palace. Records suggest that no converts were reported until 1503, when the king and his palace officials and their families accepted the faith.¹ Lamin Sanneh describes the conversion as "the palace elite converting rather than ordinary masses" (Sanneh 1983:14). It seems the palace conversion was primarily motivated by political and economic reasons, as the king sought support from a foreign power, the Portuguese, on whom he could rely in case of attack by other local states (Sanneh 1983:15).

Within this period, Christianity did not take firm root in Ghanaian soil. As we have observed, missionaries limited their activities to coastal forts and castles. The schools established by the Portuguese concentrated only on *mulattos*, the children of mixed European and Ghanaian ancestry.² And by the beginning of the 1600s, the transatlantic slave trade had completely diverted attention from missionary work (Wiltgen 1956:16). The slave trade caused rivalries between the European traders and created an unsafe environment for missionary work. The Dutch, for example, not only attacked the Portuguese who were trading at Elmina but intended to capture the entirety of Elmina itself and sell all the people as slaves. In December 1625, the Dutch made their first attempt with a troop of 1,200, but were attacked and completely defeated by the Elmina townsfolk; those who survived escaped to their ships (Ward 1958:77).

2.2 *The Second Phase: 1700–1820s*

While Dutch and Portuguese Catholic missionaries led the first phase of missionary work, Protestant missionaries mainly from Denmark and England led the second. In 1737, the United Brethren or Moravian Church, founded in Denmark by Nikolaus Zinzendorf, sent a missionary named Christian Protten,

1 Unpublished manuscript on "The History of the Catholic Church in Ghana," available in the Archbishop's Office, Cape Coast.

2 While the term *mulatto* today is considered derogatory, we use it here as it appears in much of the historical literature. The fact that it was seen as an important detail to include in describing some individuals is a sharp reminder of the racialized aspects of this Euro-African mission and colonial encounter.

born in Accra to a Danish father and a Ghanaian mother, to undertake missionary work in Ghana. Protten, who worked on and off in Ghana for eighteen years, primarily confined his activities to the Danish settlers along the coast, thus making virtually no impact at all on indigenous Ghanaians. But he did produce translations of the Lord's Prayer, New Testament parables, Catechism, and Christian Hymns into the Ga language (Debrunner 1967:12).

Jacobus Elisa Johannes Capitein, an ex-slave from the Ivory Coast and a Dutch Reformed minister of Ghanaian birth, was sent to evangelise in 1742 after successfully completing his studies at Leiden University, Holland. He taught in a school at Elmina from 1742 until his death in 1747. Capitein did not make any progress as far as Christian conversions, although the local people appreciated his efforts in literacy training. In addition to Capitein's teaching career, he likewise translated the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments, and parts of the Catechism, publishing them in indigenous language. As F. L. Bartels points out, "these rudiments of Christian faith, given in a written form as well as orally to the mulattos by Capitein, laid the foundation for future missions" (Bartels 1965:3).

From 1751–56, the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG) employed the Revd Thomas Thompson to work as missionary and chaplain at Cape Coast Castle. Thompson left an account of his ministry which contains a good deal of information about his missionary activities. For example, he wrote that on the Sunday following his arrival at Cape Coast Castle in May 1751, "I preached in the presence of the Chief of Cape Coast, Cudjo Cabosheer, I baptised at the same time one white child and one mulatto: and the next Sunday two more children, both of whom were mulattos" (Thompson 1937:34).

According to Thompson, he had the opportunity to preach at the chief's house, preaching on the nature and attributes of God, God's providence, and life after death, before specifically mentioning Christianity. Thompson's method of preaching appears to suggest that he gave attention to what the indigenous people understood within their own culture before moving on to Christianity, which was new to them. The response to Thomson's mission was mixed. Some indigenous people were not interested, while for those who were, Christianity had little impact on their lives, as the lives of the European traders around them did not provide relevant lifestyle examples in the new faith (Sanneh 1983:83; Clarke 1986:19).

Some indigenous people thought Christianity would interfere with their business activities, while others who were interested suggested to Thompson that if he wanted to instruct them in the Christian faith, he should attempt to do so on Tuesdays, the Akan traditional "holy day" and dedicated to the sea god,

Nana Bomsompo.³ As we might expect of the eighteenth-century missionary, Thompson refused to adopt the local holy day as a day for Christian teaching and preaching. Thompson sought instead “to strike at their false worship and endeavoured to convince them of their false notions and to expose the folly of their idolatrous and superstitious rites; so that, if possible, I might disengage their minds from these, for reception and entertainment of Divine Truths” (Thompson 1937:36). Interestingly, while Thompson was determined to convince Ghanaians that their religion was wrong, he acknowledged that they had a belief in a Supreme Being and a high sense of morality. He wrote, “I consider them to be more civilised people in general ... far removed from barbarity and savagery, they are certainly capable, and fitter to deal with ... they have a high morality.” (Thompson 1937:39).

These Protestant missionaries, like the early Catholics, did not make any significant headway in converting Ghanaians to Christianity. There were also internal tribal conflicts, especially between the Fantes and Asantes, adding to the complexity of the period. In 1738, 1750, 1764 and finally 1777, the Asantes and Fantes engaged in intermittent warfare, which disrupted missionary activities. In addition, the trade in human cargo that began between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries increased alarmingly during this period (Claridge 1964:146).

While missionary activities were ongoing on the fringes of society in both the first and second phases, Ghanaians had confidence in themselves, their culture, and their beliefs. Johannes Rask, an ordained priest from Copenhagen, sent to be the chaplain at Christiansborg Castle in Accra in 1709, observed that “... they have a high opinion of themselves and walk with very proud gait” (Rask 2009:77). He further noted, “They are sound and healthy and live long, although their food is truly poor, but what I think prolongs their lives is that they are always in good spirits and laughing, never in despair or ever worried about anything; thus, they preserve their spirits and their bodies and are not overworked either, since they take both their sorrow and their work in the easiest way possible, this remarkable fold” (Rask 2009:77).

It is very important to mention here that many Ghanaians did not fully embrace Christianity because they did not clearly understand the Christian message. Certainly, the slave trade diverted attention from Christianity, and many did not find it relevant to the routines of community life. Nana Kobina Nketsia (IV), *Omanhene*⁴ of British Sekondi, who wrote a DPhil thesis on the

3 Interview with Opayin Kofi Nunnoo, 2nd January 1999, Cape Coast.

4 *Omanhene* means Paramount Chief. Nana Kobina Nketsia (IV) was among early pre-independent African scholars who used their insights as traditional rulers and academics to

effects of Christian missionary activities on the Akan social institutions from 1482–1916 (Oxford 1954) argues that whereas Ghanaians did see the relevance of Christianity in their daily lives, they adopted the patron Saint Anthony, and assimilated him into the Akan traditional pantheon and gave him a local name, *Nana Ntona*.⁵ Nketsia notes, “For generations *Nana Ntona* (St. Anthony) has been considered as unfailing giver of rain, children ... healing and the powerlessness of other gods before him was well-known” (Nketsia 1954:163). *Nana Ntona* is a powerful god whose authority no other god dares challenge. No festival in town can take place without his consultation (Nketsia 1954:163).

The assimilation of Saint Anthony into traditional religious thought suggests that right from the introduction of Christianity, many Ghanaians saw parallels between their own indigenous religion and the new one being offered. This parallel led the few converts to domesticate Christianity to suit their traditional religious understanding. But the impression one gets is that Christianity was peripheral, with the only surviving trace of the early missionary work being the cult of St. Anthony, honored every year during *Elmina Bakatue Annual Festival* (Nketsia 1954:163). This underscores the significance of the encounter between Christianity and Ghanaian traditional religion. It is significant to point out here an irony in twenty-first Ghanaian Christianity: while the Pentecostal and Charismatic movements have so successfully related with Ghanaian culture and religious sentiment, attracting huge followings and propelling Christianity from the periphery to the centre, they typically find any suggestion of this interaction between Christianity and indigenous religions in the past objectionable (Meyer 1998:316–347). But as we will see, this requires further attention.

2.3 *Missionary Activity on the Periphery: Eighteenth to Early-Twentieth Century*

After three centuries of intermittent Christian exposure, missionaries had established schools and hospitals, improved agriculture, and produced some indigenous Christian leaders, such as Philip Quacoe, Joseph Smith, and David Asante; but their efforts remained on the fringes of the wider cultural and religious life. Within this same period, European missionaries came to realise their engagements with the chiefs were crucial to the success of their activities. The

assess the impact of the interactions between Ghanaian Traditional Religions and Christianity. He was a staunch Ghanaian independence freedom fighter alongside Kwame Nkrumah.

5 Cape Coast Catholic Archives: An Unpublished Manuscript on the History of Catholic Church in Ghana, 9–10.

chiefs were very generous in their receiving of missionaries, offering lands and in some cases protection (Bartels 1965:18). Yet, chiefs were equally aware that their own authority, power, and influence could be lost to missionaries if they embraced the new faith or encouraged their people to do so. They were further aware that their own authority had been bequeathed to them by their ancestors and traditional religions, to whom they therefore owed continued allegiance. Furthermore, ambivalent relationships between the colonial administrators never placed missionary activities at the centre, and the independence movement, which gathered momentum after WWII, pushed missionaries' activities further to edge (Boahen 1975:57–65). These are the lines of argument we intend to pursue in the next section.

3 Euro-Ghanaian Interactions: Ambivalences, Positivity/Negativity, Vulnerability, and Mutual Suspicions

The Europeans – missionaries, traders, and colonial administrators – were aware that in order to move their activities from the periphery to the centre they would have to engage with local community leaders and traditional chiefs. These engagements were wrapped in ambivalent attitudes of positivity, negativity, ironies, vulnerability, and suspicions on both sides; further evidence of missionary activities being on the periphery of the lives of many indigenous people.

3.1 *Missionaries Engagements with Chiefs: Positivity/Negativity*

Missionary activities are not without political implications, yet this is often glossed over within the Ghanaian context, despite the political realities becoming more pronounced. Up until 1901 when the British colonial government defeated the Ashanti kingdom, burnt down their capital city, Kumasi, and forcefully claimed the whole area as a British protectorate under Queen Victoria, political power was in the hands of the indigenous chiefs.⁶ To the Fantes along the coast, political power shifted earlier from the chiefs' hands to the British than it did in Ashanti. The Fante chiefs signed a peace treaty with British administrators in 1844,⁷ though even after this, they continued to exercise traditional political powers in their various domains. It was not until 1880 that the colonial government took power fully away from them (Boahen 1975:57–65).

6 Public Record Office/C.O. 96/359 Hodgson to Chamberlain dd. 14 January 1901.

7 Public Record Office/C.O. 96/4 Declaration of Fante Chiefs, dd. 6th March 1844.

This political situation meant that from the beginning of the missionary enterprise, missionaries were guests of the traditional chiefs, not the hosts. Missionaries wanting to work within a particular area needed to negotiate with and seek the chiefs' permission before any work could begin, with chiefs' goodwill and patronage critical for the continued existence of the mission. Missionaries depended on chiefs for labour, building materials, even food. Again, they needed permission to talk to the local people, to travel around the country, to hunt, and not only to arrive but also to leave. Thus, missionaries were guests, totally reliant on the hospitality of traditional rulers, who themselves were the embodiment of the indigenous religion.

There are many reports in the archives about various missionaries' receptions, encounters, communications, and interactions with Ghanaian chiefs.⁸ In 1841, before the British Methodist missionary Thomas Freeman visited Kumasi in Ashanti, he wrote a letter to Chief Kweku Dua I, asking for permission. The chief replied that he would not have time to meet Freeman because the date Freeman suggested coincided with the *Adae* festival, and as chief he had responsibilities within his religious role to feed and pray to his ancestors. Therefore, the chief indicated he would only be free to receive Freeman on 13th December 1841 and gave him a letter permitting him to travel through the Ashanti Kingdom for that purpose (Freeman 1843:12).⁹

Freeman's own reports in 1841 and 1842 bring out the point clearly that missionaries depended on the chiefs during the pre-colonial era. In 1841, he reported: "I embraced the opportunity of informing the Chief that our special objects as missionaries was the introduction of Christianity into his dominions and for that purpose, we begged his protection, favour, and permission to build a Mission House in Ashanti: to which the Chief answered ... 'I will protect you and give you land to build the house on ...'" (Freeman 1843:18). Again, in 1842 Freeman reported on Chief Kweku Dua I's willingness to offer his protection to missionaries: "I rejoiced to say that the Lord has been mercifully pleased to crown our efforts in Ashanti with success, our important negotiations with the Chief have been brought to a comfortable end ... that Reverend Brooking will be under his protection as resident missionary in Ashanti. The chief has given us land, a very airy part of the town on which to build a Mission House; and

8 The National Archives at Kew Garden, London, Centre of West African Studies (CWSA) University of Birmingham, UK, and Missionary Collections School of Oriental African Studies (SOAS) London hold collection of these encounters.

9 Freeman Thomas Birch Journal documenting his various visits to the Kingdom of Ashanti, Aku and Dahomey in Western Africa to promote the objects of the Wesleyan Missionary Society published in 1843 is located at SOAS. The Journal records his encounters with Chiefs in West Africa beginning from January 1841.

allows people to attend divine service without restraint and treat us with uniform kindness and attention" (Freeman 1843:89).¹⁰

Likewise, when missionaries arrived along the coastal areas, they had to follow the Akan traditional religious customs by introducing themselves to the chiefs and asking for their protection. The Methodist missionary, Revd Wrigley, wrote in 1836 to the Methodist headquarters in London that "I have been introduced to the Chiefs at Cape Coast and they have all pledged their protection and support for the mission" (Wrigley 1836:1).¹¹ Other missionaries reported about the land, food, and many gifts that they received from the chiefs. Revd Thackwray, a Methodist missionary, noted the warm reception he received at Saltpond, near Cape Coast: "During opening day, the Chief, court officials and members of the Church came with their presents of yams, eggs, oranges, bananas, fowls, fish, and in so doing the Chief and his people gave me a Fante welcome" (Thackwray 1841:4).¹² However, it should be emphasised that these friendly overtures were not necessarily indicative of an openness to Christianity but possibly of the chiefs' own ulterior motives, in some cases wanting to use the missionaries for political or commercial advantages. And as guests, missionaries had to be prepared to conduct their activities within the framework of traditional culture and customs.

European missionaries attended festivals, funerals, puberty rites; obeyed taboos; befriended traditional priests and other indigenous religious specialists; and participated in traditional rituals during this pre-colonial era. In January 1834, when Basel missionary Andreas Riis moved from Christiansborg Castle in Accra to settle in Akropong, the paramount chief Nana Adow Dankwa warmly welcomed him, and Riis was given a place to settle. Dankwa spelled out the taboos of the town, including that Riis "should not bring a dog into the town, for the gods dislike them; [Riis] would not farm on Mondays and Fridays, for these days were sacred days to the gods, and should not kill a python or a black monkey for they are totems of the royal clan. Throughout his stay Riis lived according to these taboos" (Smith 1966:31).

It is significant to note that Riis' account of this event stereotypically presents Akropong as the "exotic other." Riis describes the scene as a "noisy procession, under drums and shouting [in which] they [Riis and entourage] were led to the great meeting place at Akropong" (Quartey 2007:46). Representing the

10 Having interacted with Chief Kwedu Dua I, Freeman convinced Methodist Mission Society in London to send Reverend Brooking to Ashanti under protection of the Chief.

11 Rev G. O. Wrigley was based at Cape Coast he wrote to Wesleyan Methodist Mission London in 1836.

12 Revd Thackwray, was based at Salton he wrote to Wesleyan Methodist Mission London in 1841.

Akropong community as the “noisy other” demonstrates Riis’ ambivalence and insecurity; while absent from this account is an indigenous perspective, showing the Akropong people as very secure in their own community and culture and simply offering a standard welcome (Quartey 2007:46).

In 1841, when Freeman went to Kumasi to discuss the possibility of establishing a mission station and a school with the Chief of Ashanti, there was an Akan Christian, James Hayford, who had obtained permission of Chief Kwaku Dua I to hold Christian services under his surveillance in the palace. The Christian service consisted of singing psalms and hymns, reading from the Bible, and prayer. To continue to enjoy favour with the Chief, Hayford and Freeman had to respect tradition by participating in the palace rituals as well as preaching their Christian message on Sundays. Freeman himself reported that when he met the Chief of Ashanti he was received in a traditional manner. As the Ghanaian traditional customs demand, libation was poured to the gods and ancestors thanking them for Freeman’s safe arrival, and then the rest of the drink was sent around for everyone to share, a practice to which Freeman did not object (Freeman 1843:43).

3.2 *The Chiefs’ Suspicions of Missionaries and Missionaries’ Fight Towards the Centre of Power*

Missionaries knew that their activities were on the periphery of communities, and to move their activities to the centre they wanted power to shift, but to whom? Missionaries were ambivalent about this question. Evidence shows that many chiefs became suspicious about the consequences of missionaries’ activities and refused to have them in their communities. In many of these cases, chiefs realised that missionaries’ activities could undermine their own political and religious authority. A classic example of this outright rejection of missionary work occurred when the Revd Thomas Picot, a Methodist missionary, discussed the possibility of establishing a mission station and school at Kumasi with Ashanti Chief Mensa Bonsu in 1876. According to Picot, the Chief refused this proposal with the following response:

We will not select our children for education, for the Ashanti children have better things to do other than to sit down all day idle to learn ... They have to do other work which is much better than going to school. The Bible is not a book for us. God at the beginning gave the Bible to the White people, Koran to the Muslims and the gods to us ... The gods tell us where the gold is with which we trade. We know God already ourselves ... As for the Commandments of God, we know that we keep them all. We keep the first through the gods. In Ashanti we do not allow people to

abuse the name of God. As to keeping the Sabbath we have always kept it. If a man steals, we kill him, if a man takes the wife of another, we kill him too.... We will never embrace your religion (Christianity) for it is your religion that ruined the Fanti country, weakening the power of Chiefs and has made both freemen and slaves equal before the law.

PICOT 1876:2¹³

The Chief's response not only shows that he viewed Christianity as subversive to his own political and moral authority but reinforces the argument that during the pre-colonial period chiefs wielded the political power. Therefore, missionaries were confined to operating within the traditional framework, recognising the chiefs' authority, and needing to win their confidence. To do so, many missionaries offered gifts, which the Akan chiefs valued. For example, the disposition of the Chief of Ashanti towards the Wesleyan missionaries changed from suspicion to friendliness when he was offered a carriage. He was likewise pleased with gifts from Queen Victoria, viz. a portrait of herself and the new Windsor Castle. Further examples of gifts commonly presented to the traditional rulers included chairs, velvet, glassware, footwear, and umbrellas, which became an emblem of royalty¹⁴ For many traditional chiefs and those in the Ghanaian community, these gifts were recognition of chiefly authority, though this recognition did not always last.

Freeman, who had worked cordially with chiefs in Ashanti, begun undermining their authority. Freeman described Ashanti as "a citadel of Satan" and the Ashanti Chief Kweku Dua I as a "despot and prince of darkness, the stumbling block to missionary course." (Freeman 1843:38). After his second visit to Ashanti in 1842, he wrote to the Methodist Missionary Office in London that chiefs oppressed their people: "Have these poor victims no voice? Have they no tale to tell? I think I hear them lifting up their voices and crying to British Christians especially, 'come, pray come and look at our unhappy country!' See how they groan beneath the iron despotism of the prince of darkness! It is true, that it is a beautiful country, its fertile soil is producing a hundredfold; but what avails its beauty or fertility, when it is converted into a slaughterhouse" (Freeman 1843:37).

13 Revd Thomas Picot wrote to Wesleyan Methodist Mission London in 1876 Ashanti Chief Mensa Bonsu refusal to have Mission Schools to be built in Kumasi.

14 Receipts of Missionaries and Colonial Administrators various gifts to traditional Chiefs are located Public Record Office at the Kew Garden, London.

In Freeman's mind the only solution was for British troops to intervene. Whether the Ashanti's felt they were being oppressed by their chiefs is another question. It is quite a different thing for Ghanaians to "speak for ourselves" than for a foreigner to "think I hear them lifting up their voices!" By the 1870s, it had become clear to many missionaries that if the chiefs were swept away by British political intervention, many of the traditional religious practices that they found offensive might likewise disappear. But it would be too simplistic to argue here that missionaries and colonial administrators formed a unified coalition. As we shall illustrate, missionaries and colonial administrators often disagreed on policies.

3.3 *Missionaries and Colonialists: Differences on Policies and Ambivalent Relationships*

Relationships between missionaries and colonial leaders were never straightforward in Ghana. The cordiality of the relationship depended on the nationality of missionary organisation and policies to be implemented; and even when missionaries and colonial administrators came from the same country, the denomination of the missionary organisation played a significant role. Anglican missionaries coming from the established Church in England often tended to see themselves as an extended arm of the British government. As John Pobee observes, "the Anglican Church in Ghana have tended to have an Establishment mentality complex, though officially the Church was never established in the Gold Coast or Ghana" (Pobee 2009:104). Methodist missionaries as nonconformists in Britain tiptoed around colonial administrators who often viewed them with suspicion (Southon 1938:18), whereas the German Basel and Bremen missionaries were perceived as spies, particularly during the First and Second World Wars, and had to be deported twice to their home country (Smith 1966:89).

Nevertheless, there were complex symbiotic relationships between missionaries and colonial administrators. For example, missionaries knew that the presence of the colonial administration gave them protection from the tribal wars and less resistance from traditional chiefs. This desire to sweep away the authority of the chiefs and all the traditional rituals that went with the office was implicit in the answers that the General Secretary of the Methodist Society, Revd Dr Beecham, gave to the British Parliamentary Select Committee on West Africa in 1842. Beecham was asked whether he thought the Methodist missionaries derived any considerable advantage from British Forts on the Gold Coast. He replied, "Yes, I am bound to say the British authorities and administrators upon the Gold Coast have always manifested a favourable disposition to our

missionary undertakings and they have offered the kind of felicity which a Government can ever afford to persons under his control" (Select Committee Report 1842:124).¹⁵

The Committee Chairman then asked, "and you feel greater confidence altogether in dealing with Gold Coast in consequence of the presence of some fragments of British power?" Beecham responded: "I do know that we feel greater confidence so far as personal security is concerned ... We also have greater confidence in this respect, that owing to the extension of the British influence over the country generally, the missionaries can now go about their work without interruption which they sometimes experience among the savage and barbarous people" (Select Committee Report 1842:126).

Missionaries hoped that an extension of colonial administration would move Christianity from the fringes to centre. 1874 saw the military clash of the British and Ashanti, in which the British won a partial victory over Ashanti and many Akan states. This "victory" was completed in 1901, when the British Army burned down the capital city of the Ashanti kingdom. Also, in the 1880s, the major European powers formally partitioned the whole of the African continent and Ghanaian territories officially came under British protectorate (Boahen 1975:57).

In 1910, a few Christian converts came into conflict with the Ashanti chiefs. Missionaries instructed their converts not to attend traditional festivals, pour libations, render services to chiefs, or follow any taboos that conflicted with their Christian faith. Chiefs protested and appealed to the Governor of the colony for support. He came and met a committee consisting of the District Commissioner, three other government officials, and representatives of the Missions Societies – one Methodist, three Basel, and two Roman Catholic missionaries, the traditional chiefs were not invited.¹⁶ This committee drew up rules regulating relationships between the chiefs and Christians, including that "No Christian shall be called upon to perform any fetish rite service but shall be bound to render service to his chiefs on ceremonial occasions, when no element of fetish practice is involved." Secondly, "an effort should be made to draw a distinction between 'fetishism' and purely secular ceremonial service" (Gold Coast Methodist Annual Records 1910:16).

15 Revd Dr Beecham gave evidence to the British Parliamentary Select Committee on West Africa in 1842, the purpose of enquiry was to establish among other things whether colonial presence provide protection to traders and missionaries in the regions where they station missionaries.

16 The Gold Coast Methodist Annual Records 1910, Ghana Methodist Headquarters, Accra.

Missionaries thought that with colonial administration presence Christianity would move from periphery to centre stage. But colonialism policies, focusing on power, control, opportunism, and expediency, were not helpful for Christian growth. In 1911, a new religious cult called *Abirewa*, believed to protect people against witchcraft and other malevolent forces, emerged among Ghanaians.¹⁷ For adherents of the cult to enjoy protection from the gods they had to observe taboos, which included speaking the truth all the time and ensuring they were not thinking evil about their neighbours. Within months the cult spread like wildfire, while the very few new Christians were abandoning the faith for the new cult (Der 1974:24–35). The representatives of all the mission societies rallied together and wrote to the Colonial Administrator, asking him to use his authority to stop the cult from spreading. He replied that there was nothing wrong with the new cult; rather, it was making the adherents speak the truth and the natives obedient to the law (Fuller 1911).¹⁸

The missionaries were unhappy with the Administrator's reply and wrote to the Colonial Secretary in London, who asked the Administrator to explain his actions. Fuller, one of the District Commissioners involved in the case, offered the following explanation to the Colonial Secretary, explaining why he allowed the *Abirewa* cult to operate: "The Christian Missionaries have found that they are unable to attract congregations when they go on a preaching tour so they have assumed a hostile attitude against the new religion (which is called *Abirewa*). In my judgement I do not think there is anything wrong with the cult, it makes the natives obedient to law and order in the district."

Armitage, another District Commissioner involved, also wrote to the Colonial Secretary that "the missionaries naturally objected to *Abirewa*, as the dancing and singing associated with the cult attract people and militate against their effort to preach to the people" (Armitage, 1911). It seems the cult itself died a natural death after WWI. But the Administrators' attitudes highlight the point that colonial administrators did not always acquiesce to missionaries on policies, making their relationship tenuous and complex and preventing missionaries from using the colonial presence as leverage to move Christianity to the centre.

17 Public Record Office/CO96'/471 *Abirewa* a new dangerous religion, August 1911.

18 Public Record Office/CO96/471 Fuller to Colonial Secretary, August 1911.

4 Local Initiatives in the Ghana Missionary Venture

There are arguments about local initiatives in the spread of Christianity and Ghanaian-European partnerships, particularly in translation work, that significantly transformed the fortunes of Ghanaian Christianity. Bengt Sundkler and Christopher Steed, Kwame Bediako, and Lamin Sanneh have championed these arguments with excellent insights (Bediako 1995; Sanneh 1989; Sundkler and Steed 2000). These arguments are very helpful in identifying important roles the indigenous community played within the missionary enterprise, and we certainly stand in agreement with them in emphasizing that these indigenous contributions to the establishment of Christianity in Ghana ought to be loudly and proudly trumpeted in missiological discourses and the history of Christianity in Ghana. Indeed, it is for this reason that Christianity in Ghana can arguably been seen as a local initiative.

For example, Ghanaians continue to remember the contributions of those like the Revd. Philip Quaque, the first Black African to be ordained into priesthood in the Anglican Church in 1765, and others we have already encountered here, including Capitein, Swane (a *mulatto* with a Ga mother, who trained in Copenhagen and become a catechist and teacher at Christiansborg in Accra from the 1740s), and Protten, another *mulatto*, working with the Moravians in the West Indies and then at Christiansborg, 1756–69.

From 1820 till independence in 1957, Ghanaians took initiative and served as catechists, teachers, and interpreters in missionary enterprises. In 1857, the Revd Wharton, a Methodist Missionary, wrote that in Ghana, “one hears of men who went into the bush, alone or in groups, to wrestle for hours in prayers ... agonising for their souls ... Many of them are filled with the Holy Spirit.... Men and women went without food or drink for days, so overburdened with sense of sin that they were utterly unconscious of their physical needs ... they will fast and pray until they have found relief for their souls” (Wharton 1857:30). However, we equally need stress these indigenous initiatives and partnerships, while laying an important foundation, did not move Christianity to the centre in these earlier periods; that was still to come following Ghana’s independence and the departure of European missionary and colonial apparatus.

5 Post-Independence Christianity in Ghana: From the Periphery to the Centre

The two world wars brought many changes to the world, including to missionary activities. By the end of WWII, Christians in Europe, horrified by the evils of the two world wars, had come to the realisation that it was not only

“savage” Africans who were capable of evil. There was soul searching everywhere, including among Christian missionaries in their dealings with other non-western nations (Baago 1966:323–333). Likewise, within Ghanaian society, many mission critics were questioning the justification of Christian missions as well as the moral authority and credibility of European missionaries to teach the love of God, if their own home countries were full of such hatred and mass destruction (Mobley 1970:323).

It is also important to bear in mind that Germany was the first postcolonial power (in the sense of being the first European power without colonies), with German missionaries undergoing these intellectual processes a generation before the British (or Americans). At the same time, it is helpful to recall the Kwame Nkrumah experienced WWII in America, where his interlocutors were African American clergy and intellectuals, who were rarely convinced that European Christianity was fully Christian. No less important, WWII ended with the establishment of the United Nations, which was against either religious or political imperialism.

The colonial powers were hence under continual and mounting pressure to justify themselves. While in the immediate aftermath of war colonial rule had to continue, with no immediate alternative in sight, a large question mark hung over its future in a way which no one would have anticipated twenty years earlier. This uncertainty had its own repercussions. The relationship between missionaries and colonial administrators had been complex and ambivalent, but both had been either accorded or arrogated to themselves assumptions of racial, moral, and intellectual superiority, which came under scrutiny and put both the future of colonialism and missionary activities in doubt (Jahoda 1961:102).

5.1 *Ghanaian Independence: Kwame Nkrumah and Changing Religious Tides*

Then came Ghana's Independence in 1957, under her first president, Kwame Nkrumah. By this time, the country was roughly one-third Christian, with large populations of both Catholics and Protestants.¹⁹ Nkrumah's ambivalent attitudes to missionaries summarizes post-independence national perceptions. On the one hand, missionaries were seen as part and parcel with racism, colonialism, and cultural destruction; on the other, nationalists saw themselves as indebted to missionaries for providing education (Mobley 1970:323). These contradictions are expressed in two speeches presented by Nkrumah.

19 See “Ghana”, in *World Christian Encyclopedia Online*, Todd M. Johnson, Gina Zurlo. Consulted online on 11 September 2021 http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2666-6855_WCEO_COM_02GHA. First published online: 2020.

At a conference of the International Missionary Council held in Accra in January 1958, he said:

If you have time to visit widely in this country, you will often find as you travel along the roads, little cemeteries lost in the bush where lie buried the brave men and women who in bringing Christian faith to this country gave the last measure of devotion. They know that they faced certainty of loneliness and imminent risk of death. Yellow fever decimated them and their families. But still they came. They belong to the martyrs of Christianity ... The fortitude which they showed is the sure foundation upon which Christianity is based in Ghana. Ghana salutes these men and women who gave their lives for the enlightenment and welfare of this land.

NKRUMAH January 1958:148–149

By this statement, Nkrumah, like many Ghanaian nationalists, showed his appreciation for missionaries' work and sacrifice. However, he contradicted this appreciation in an address to the Conference of Independent Africa States in Accra in same year, 15th April 1958: "The stage opens with the appearance of missionaries and anthropologists, traders, concessionaires and administrators. While the missionaries with Christianity implore the colonial subjects to lay their 'treasures in Heaven where neither moth or rust doth corrupt,' the traders and concessionaires acquire his minerals and land resources, destroy his arts, crafts, culture, religion, and home industries" (Nkrumah, April 1958).

Nkrumah appears to suggest that missionaries had been part of the Ghanaian colonial experience. Nkrumah's bold charge that Ghanaians should "seek first the political kingdom and all other things will be added to them" at a press conference on 13th February 1951, and his claims that he was both non-denominational Christian and Marxist socialist showed his cynicism about missionary activities (Nkrumah 1957:18–25). In Nkrumah's office there was a cartoon of a white bishop with a Bible in hand, hugged by a white soldier with a gun in hand who had shot down some Africans. The cartoon caption read: "Watch the Bible and Not my Actions." The cartoon insinuated missionaries' complicity in the colonial enterprise (Pobee 1988:15).

Nkrumah's ambivalent attitude convinced many European missionaries and Ghanaians that if Christianity would have any future, change was needed in the leadership of the church, its theology, liturgy, and attitudes towards traditional religion and culture. Nkrumah's demand that libation prayers should be offered at all state occasions likewise signalled that traditional religion could no longer be ignored in religious discourse. As Fretheim notes, Nkrumah realised

after political independence that in order to gain the trust of Ghanaians, he needed to operate in familiar ways, demonstrating his insider perspective and trustworthiness (Fretheim 2018:87–98). Furthermore, Nkrumah's adoption of chiefly honorific titles such *Osagyefo* and *Kasaperko*²⁰ in modern politics made leaders realise the possibilities for linking traditional religion and Christianity. Therefore, in creatively linking Christianity, African traditional religion, and culture and nationalism, Nkrumah cued Ghanaian Christian leaders who wanted to see Christianity move from the periphery to the centre, demonstrating that approaches which took the Ghanaian cultural and religious context seriously offered a new, *Ghanaian* approach for engaging with Christianity.

As Christian leadership moved from Europeans to Ghanaians, theological and missiological denigration of traditional religion changed. At the dawn of independence and beyond, the general attitude towards the missionary enterprise was that they could have treated indigenous religious understanding better and incorporated indigenous insights into Christianity more effectively. K. A. Busia expressed it thus: “As one watches the daily lives and activities of Christians, and takes account of the rites connected with marriage, birth, death, widowhood, festivals, or installations to traditional offices, one learns that a great deal of normal community activities lies outside their Christianity, and that for all their influence, the Christian Churches are still alien institutions, intruded upon, but not integrated with the indigenous social institutions” (Busia 1958:79). The major concern after political independence was how the church could officially “relate well to traditional religion and indigenous culture” (Baëta 1962:59). Ecumenical conferences and workshops were organised between Presbyterians, Methodists, and Catholics to explore how the church could dialogue with traditional religion and culture.

J. H. Nketia, a Ghanaian ethnomusicologist, argued at a 1960 conference on Christianity and African Traditional Religion that European missionaries wrongly assumed that for Ghanaians to become Christians meant cutting themselves off from family members who were traditional believers: “Christians should emulate what is good in traditional religion and adopt it ... After all Christ came not to destroy but to fulfil. Christians should not adopt negative attitudes to traditional customs but to find out whether they do or do not conflict with Christianity ... Where a particular custom does not conflict with Christianity it should be adopted” (Nketia 1960:38).

Ghanaian Christianity's dialogue between traditional religion and culture has been complex, ambivalent, and ironic. The dialogue presents a Ghanaian

20 “Osagyefo” means Saviour and “Kasaperako” means one who speaks and no one challenges.

Christian mosaic of juxtaposition, adaptation, syncretism, “utter rejection,” “breaking with past,” accommodation and synthesis in the change of liturgical expressions, biblical interpretations and theological articulations (Baëta 1962; Dickson 1984; Bediako 1997; Gifford 2004; Asamoah-Gyadu 2005), which, while not rejecting European missionaries’ legacies, takes traditional religion and culture seriously. Baëta’s study *Prophetism in Ghana* was literally a Ghanaian attempt to make theology, liturgy, and biblical interpretation relevant to ordinary routine life at a popular level at a time when “historical churches’.... risk[ed] seeming irrelevant” (Baëta 1962:138).

It was precisely this attempt to make Christianity relevant to Ghanaian indigenous religious and cultural sentiments that began moving Christianity from the periphery to the centre in post-independence Ghana, leading to the phenomenal growth that we continue to see today. According to the World Christian Encyclopedia, “Today, Ghana is predominantly Christian, and continues to experience significant Christian expansion.”²¹ The statistics speak for themselves: in 1900, 4.7 percent of the population was Christian; in 1960, three years after independence, this rose to 41 percent; in 1970, 50.5 percent; in 2000, 65 percent; in 2015, 71.1 percent; in 2020, 72.6 percent; with 76 percent projected in 2050.²² Furthermore, “the explosive growth of Pentecostal/Charismatic churches, both within Ghana and among Ghanaian communities in the diaspora, has been a key development of Ghanaian Christianity from the 1980s onward.”²³

6 Conclusion

To argue that missionary activities were on the fringes of Ghanaian communities is neither to devalue the significance of the early intercultural and inter-religious encounter between Christianity and Ghanaian traditional religions nor to suggest that Ghanaians perceived Christianity as untrue. As we have noted, today almost seventy-three percent of Ghanaians are Christian; and whether this growth is attributed to economic, political, social, or other factors, Christianity is now clearly perceived as relevant in addressing Ghanaian

21 See “Ghana”, in *World Christian Encyclopedia Online*, Todd M. Johnson, Gina Zurlo. Consulted online on 11 September 2021 http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2666-6855_WCEO_COM_02GHA. First published online: 2020.

22 See “Ghana”, in *World Christian Encyclopedia Online*; and “Ghana Statistical Service, 2010,” https://statsghana.gov.gh/gssmain/fileUpload/pressrelease/2010_PHC_National_Analytical_Report.pdf.

23 See “Ghana”, in *World Christian Encyclopedia Online*.

daily life in the midst of hardships. After several centuries of missionary activity with little Christian growth, this explosive growth beginning in the latter half of the 20th century took place in the absence of European missionaries and under Ghanaian leadership, with theology that developed relevant liturgical expressions and articulated biblical interpretations that took the Ghanaian worldviews seriously.

What is the importance of this argument? It has historical, missiological, and theological implications. Historically, mission history needs requires both sides of the story, not just the missionary accounts. As we have seen, centering Ghanaian voices, whether those of chiefs, indigenous Christian leaders, or mission agents offers a different perspective, and reminds us that European mission activity over several centuries was quite peripheral to daily life in Ghana. In reading mission history, reversing the lens in this way is a helpful corrective in other contexts as well, reminding us that European missionaries, typically the protagonists in their own accounts, were often tertiary figures within their adopted communities.

Next, theologically speaking, missionary work is seed planting, of which no one knows the results except God. To write mission history as hagiography obscures the complexities in mission. Andrew Walls draws attention to dialogues and negotiations rather than impositions on the mission fields in West Africa, noting that missionaries' existent theology "may help to clarify the issues, but it does not have the resources to make the final decision" (Wall 1996:102). Walls continues: "the missionaries' theology did arise from situations – where one must make choices, and previous Christian experience offers no clear precedent ... when the gospel crosses a cultural frontier new situations arise that require Christians to make a Christian choice and to formulate the reasons for that choice" (Walls 1996:103). These choices are made through dialogue and negotiations, spiced with pragmatism. It would be preposterous to assume that missionaries made these choices on their own without dialogue or negotiations with community leaders and their converts.

As we have seen, Christian missions in Ghana is not primarily a European story. Re-centering mission history from a Ghanaian perspective has shown that Ghanaians have been hosts, partners, laborers, and leaders in their own right, approaching Christianity with creativity and sometimes mixed motives. It was neither a European imposition, nor an immediately accepted faith, but one which was approached from quintessentially Ghanaian perspectives, slowly taking root in Ghanaian soil over several centuries before growing rapidly and coming into its own as a Ghanaian faith meeting Ghanaian needs. Finally, in seeking to chart the way forward with Christianity in Ghana, in part through analysing and learning from the past, the arguments presented here

support the view that Ghanaians must stop either demonising or idolising European missionaries for the current state of Christianity in Ghana – with all of its strengths and weaknesses – but instead look back to the more immediate, post-1960s past in order to find Ghanaian answers to the past and guidance for the future.

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Resumen

El objetivo de este trabajo es (re)examinar, desde perspectivas ghanesas, los intercambios entre misioneros europeos con los ghaneses entre los siglos XVI a XXI. El artículo presenta tres argumentos principales: en primer lugar, los esfuerzos misioneros europeos fueron bastante marginales en relación a las actividades religiosas indígenas corrientes y la vida cotidiana, y con el movimiento del cristianismo desde la periferia hacia el centro de la sociedad ghanesa, un fenómeno más reciente con implicaciones y preocupaciones políticas. En segundo lugar, a menudo las decisiones se tomaban respondiendo a las actividades indígenas y no a la inversa. En tercer lugar, este enfoque metodológico de escuchar el diálogo entre las voces africanas y europeas sirve como un correctivo muy necesario para con el que favorecería las perspectivas europeas en la historia de la misión en África. En conjunto, estos proveen nuevas ideas sobre las preguntas de cómo/por qué el cristianismo pasó desde la periferia bajo el liderazgo misionero europeo a ser la religión principal de Ghana post-independencia, y ofrecen una comprensión con matices diferentes sobre los conceptos de misión dando dignidad y respeto al contexto local, las personas y las instituciones.

摘要

本文的目的是从加纳的角度，重新审视欧洲传教士从十六世纪到二十一世纪与加纳人的遭遇。该文提出了三个主要论点：第一，欧洲传教工作与正在进行的土著宗教活动和日常生活相当接近，基督教从加纳社会的边缘向中心流动是一个较新的现象，具有政治意义和关切性。第二，传教和殖民的决定往往是针对土著活动作出的，而不是反过来。第三，这种在对话中聆听非洲和欧洲声音的方法论，是对非洲宣教历史上偏向欧洲观点的急需的纠正。综合起来，这为基督教如何/为什么从欧洲传教士领导下的外围走向加纳独立后的主要宗教的问题提供了新的见解，对宣教概念提供了不同的细微理解，同时给予当地背景、人民和机构尊严和尊重。