When it recommenced its work on the Gold Coast in 1843, the Basel Mission established mission stations in two places. One was on the coast; the other was in the hinterland, in the small state of Akuapem. The previous chapter has looked at the coastal mission station in Christiansborg, where the history of the women’s mission up into the 1870s was dominated by the history of the emerging modern elite. People in and around Christiansborg, the old Danish trading settlement on the coast, first viewed the Mission mainly according to patterns which had evolved in Castle Schools. When the Basel Mission resumed its activities in Akuropon, the capital of Akuapem, the situation there was very different, and there was no equivalent of the Christianborg Castle School or the coastal elite.

In 1843 in Akuropon local expectations of the Mission were associated with schools, and contacts with the trans-Atlantic world on the coast did play a role in this. But when the authorities there decided to allow the Basel Mission to develop its work again in the state capital, Akuropon, the Akuapem context brought another aspect of the interrelations between Missions and local communities to the fore. This is the perception of the Mission from the perspective of a pre-modern society, polity or religion. Although in the coastal setting this will have been an issue as well, with regard to female education it remained only the background. However, in Akuapem it was the dominant theme.

The Akuapem state – like other pre-colonial polities – tends, in popular discourse, to be associated with ‘tradition’. Such perceptions are reinforced by more recent history, both in the writings of Gold Coast intellectuals and their modernising nationalism, and the system of British colonial rule.¹ The latter cast ‘tradition’ in a rigid institutional

¹ David Kimble refers to J. Mensah Sarbah, John B. Danquah and Carl Reindorf, who codified wide stretches of late 19th century/early 20th century knowledge and practice in works like Fante Customary Law (1897), Akan Laws and Customs (1928) or The History of the Gold Coast and Asante (1895) (D. Kimble, A Political History of Ghana, pp. 499, 520–8).
mould through the system of indirect rule, which began to be implemented in the late 19th century. In Ghana today, ‘traditional’ has become an adjective to describe anything which is regarded as of local and not of European provenance. Thus it became and still is simultaneously a descriptive and a normative term, and in many instances has remained highly politicised.

Gender is enmeshed in the general debate about ‘Ghanaian-ness’ or ‘African-ness’, and in the characteristic discourses about tradition and modernity associated with these. The affirmation of women’s rights can be denounced as un-African, while it can also be upheld as stating the epitome of Ghanaian tradition – which therefore would need no modern affirmative action. Men might claim that polygyny is the African male’s ‘traditional’ prerogative, while women activists might struggle to ensure women’s legal rights in what they claim are often exploitative ‘traditional’ structures. One difficulty from a historian’s point of view is that in such debates an understanding of ‘tradition’ as immutable tends to be presupposed, while change tends to be equated with an understanding of modernisation which involves the wholesale take-over of a modernity which is left rather undefined.²

Against the background of debates about tradition, modernity and the due recognition of the ‘African’ or the ‘Ghanaian’, the Ghanaian philosopher Kwame Gyekye suggests we should understand tradition not as immutable, but as something which (literally) has been handed down over several generations and which a particular group recognises as vital aspects of its collective identity.³ This concept of ‘tradition’ is not to be confused with the merely autochthonous, because it is open for innovation and for the incorporation of impulses coming from outside. Rather it presents us with a conceptualisation of a collective identity as a particular consciousness in the context of overarching notions of a universal humanity, as a frame of reference for norms and values related to modernity. So the understanding of tradition as proposed by Gyekye is highly relevant for an analysis of the proto-colonial and pre-modern situation in Akuapem, and for the potential change stimulated by the establishment of Basel Mission activity there.

² Such debates over tradition and modernity constitute the context of Kwame Gyekye’s treatment of the topic (id., Tradition and Modernity).