CHAPTER SEVEN

AKUAPEM (II) – EXISTING LOYALTIES AND NEW OPTIONS

The Basel Mission hoped to create the beginnings of a new Christian community when it established its first mission station in the hinterland in Akuropon, the capital of the small Akan state of Akuapem. Its aim was to recruit those it considered the societal mainstay, the central and pivotal members of society. However, John Middleton describes the status of the first Christians in Akuropon as socially ambiguous. They ranged from ex-slaves to princes (ahenemma). The latter were sons of the Omanhene who, in the matrilineal Akan system, could not themselves become rulers. In-depth analyses of both groups, the ‘slaves’ (including pawns) and the princes, have been provided by Peter Haenger and Sonia Abun-Nasr.\(^1\) Haenger has looked at the various forms of so-called slavery and at the role the Basel Mission played in the process of replacing dependent labour by wage labour. Abun-Nasr has reconstructed the life-story of the Akuapem prince-turned-missionary, David Asante. Both contend that, as Abun-Nasr puts it, there were many paths connecting the town of Akuropon and the mission station/Christian quarter. They describe how two groups from different social and political strata made use of the new options the Basel Mission offered, not least in order to deal with the issue of social ambiguity. However, the middle ground of Akuapem society has not yet been analysed to the same extent. This segment of society is particularly interesting for research focusing on gender and women.

In John Middleton’s categories, when applied to the free members of the Akuropon community who were not oheneba, social ambiguity referred to moral and physical characteristics. According to him, those who turned to Christianity from this group were mostly widows, divorced and deserted women, childless women and people who had wittingly or unwittingly broken taboos. He also lists six-fingered children among this group.\(^2\) He does not mention young women. This fits in with what John Peel observed for religious change and gender in the

\(^1\) P. Haenger, *Slaves and Slave Holders*; S. Abun-Nasr, *Afrikaner und Missionar*.

\(^2\) J. Middleton, *One Hundred and Fifty Years of Christianity*, p. 4.
case of Yoruba and the CMS. Peel argues that young women played a crucial role in pre-colonial Yoruba society by discharging the vital function of reproduction and therefore were less at liberty to turn to new social and spiritual options. Jean Allman studying the Akan state of Asante contends that in the pre-colonial situation reproduction was women’s central task. This same was true in Akuapem. However, with regard to the groups turning to Christianity pre-colonial Akuapem shows a different pattern from that which would be expected on the basis of these observations.

In 1847, the first people to turn to Christianity in Akuropon and accept baptism were four young men. A few years later in 1853 five young women followed suit. So members of a group whom Middleton does not count among the categories of early converts – and who according to the analyses of Peel and Allman should really have been the last to convert – were among the first to turn to Christianity. At least some of them had links to the palace, and thus, in all likelihood, were associated with moves for reform and innovation related to the group of princes (ahenemma). Yet the scope of the backgrounds of the first female Christians, even though the documentation for the early years is thin, appears to have been broader.

Two conceptualisations of the emerging community in the context of existing patterns point in a similar direction. The word used for ‘missionary’ and the word used for the emerging new community have something in common. The term ‘osofo’ (pl. ‘asofo’) referred to the missionaries and later also to local religious experts of the mission community, the pastors. It conceptualised the introduction of Christianity in a structural analogy to the cult of a new deity (obosom) brought to and kept in Akuapem by an osofo ‘owning’ it. As opposed to ancestors who were the other major source of mystical power, abosom came and still come from outside the community, acquiring a space within it. On the other hand, the new community, in the context of the customary congruence of the political and military and its inter-connectedness with the spiritual in Akuapem, was termed asafo. The asafo can be regarded as an entity of potential reform which challenged existing structures and accepted powers. As an icon for an association of young

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3 J. Peel, Gender in Yoruba Religious Change, pp. 136–61.