Around 1860, a reform of the Basel Mission’s schools on the Gold Coast marked the beginning of the establishment of an institutionalised education system. It was then that a specific type of school for girls and young women was established. These were called Mädchenanstalten – literally ‘Girls’ Institutes’. They replaced the ‘house-education’ of ‘girls in training’. These had previously lived in missionary households and were now to live in the school. As this was a space governed by the precepts of the Mission, the girls would continue to be introduced to proper Christian femininity there. The closest English equivalent to these institutions are boarding schools. And the Ghanaian successors of these ‘girls’ institutes’ are, indeed, the well-known Presbyterian Secondary Boarding Schools. To make this connection clear I have called these institutions ‘boarding schools’ in this chapter. But it is important also to remark right at the beginning that these institutes of the 1860s, 1870s and 1880s differed from the modern popular image in one important aspect. The pupils were living in the school, but an organisationally enforced distancing from their households and families was a much less pervasive trait than is customarily associated with their successors nowadays.

On the Gold Coast, as in Europe, the boarding schools represented a new female space. In their background was the Basel aim of introducing domesticity as a female sphere within the paradigm of modern middle-class femininity. Their organisational set-up was located within the framework of institutional education. Furthermore, as Gold Coast boarding schools were first established by the initiative of European actors, they could be seen as the epitome of the imposition of alien concepts on a local community. However, the balance of power between local and European actors does not fit in with this view. Even in the process of their decline in the late 19th century, a determining factor was the European’s lack of ability to respond to local interests and to cater to local demands. In an ever-changing social and economic context, at that stage, the Basel Mission girls’ boarding schools was caught
between conservative European attitudes and the local wish to profit from the broad processes of modernisation.

In the decades after 1860, the Basel Mission girls’ boarding schools were places of negotiation and interaction over modernity and change in what was recognised as proper womanhood. As has been discussed in chapter 5, there existed a local quest for modernity, especially among the coastal elite. Furthermore, there were moves for innovation within the framework of ‘traditional’ structures, which saw how to make use of ‘products of modernity’ in their own ways.¹ Both aspects played a role in the set-up of the boarding schools and in the use people made of what these places offered. To gain insight into the complex processes involved I will focus on two topics. Firstly, the provision of food has been locally an important medium for interaction over social relations up to the present day. Food is gendered insofar as its preparation was and is considered a woman’s domain in this region. Looking at how the provision of food was handled in the boarding schools I will describe and analyse the multi-layered process of negotiating the set-up of these schools, and the complementary, competing and conflicting interests which this process reveals. Secondly, I turn my attention to clothing, which in 21st century South-Eastern-Ghana is generally, although not exclusively, regarded as a female domain. However, in pre-colonial societies, clothing was considered to be more a male than a female domain. Clothing therefore illustrates the fact that the assignation of gender to particular aspects of life is not static in Southern Ghana. This is true also in domains associated with the idioms of ‘Africanness’ and/or ‘tradition’. This part will look at how the Mission tried to introduce what it saw as ‘proper’ dress, and sees this as the beginning of a process in which clothing became a massively important domain for present-day Ghaianain women. The first part of the chapter will provide a brief sketch of the educational reforms which also led to the establishing of the boarding schools.

Educational Reform in Basel Mission Work in Ghana Around 1860

Elementary education had, in theory, been compulsory for the Basel Mission community on the Gold Coast right from the beginning.

¹ Elisio Macamo; Dieter Neubert, The New and Its Temptations: products of modernity and their impact on social change in Africa, unpublished manuscript.