CHAPTER NINE

WOMEN’S SPEECH IN THE BASEL MISSION COMMUNITY AND BEYOND

In the decades after 1843 the Basel Mission established a speech community on the Gold Coast. Women participated in this process, as well as in the missionary ‘work on language’ (Spracharbeit) it entailed.¹ The appropriation of Akuapem-Twi and of Osu-Ga by the missionary community gradually established both as vehicular languages for Basel Christianity in the multilingual setting of the Gold Coast. To ‘reduce’ Ga and Akuapem-Twi into writing meant ‘translating’ orally practised languages into European conceptualisations of a ‘language’ with grammar and dictionary. As Mary Esther Kropp Dakubu states, from then on ‘language’ was definitely no longer ‘the same’ as it had been.² Finally, it meant creating a new language for Christianity.

In the process of establishing the Basel Mission’s speech community, actors from the Gold Coast played a vital role. A prominent example is David Asante’s crucial hint to Johann Gottlieb Christaller (assigned to specialise in linguistic work in Akan) concerning the tonality of Akan in 1855.³ The interest in, contribution to, and influence on the comprehensive approach from local actors becomes tangible in a comment Christaller made after the event. In the preface to the 1881 first edition of his published Akan Dictionary he was slightly apologetic about the size of the opus. He explains how this was at least in part owing to the contribution of ‘intelligent natives’, since they had shown such zeal in collecting material.⁴ Indeed the entries in the Dictionary make it much more than simply a word list giving an English word for an Akan term: it contains examples from speech practice, references to

¹ In the case of this chapter a separate note of thanks is due. Erika Eichholzer, a linguist who has considerable experience with the Twi language, has offered me my first insights into the world of African linguistics and translations of some key terms.
³ ABM, D-1,6 Akropong Nr. 33, Johann G. Christaller 30.09.1855.
⁴ Johann Gottlieb Christaller, A Dictionary of the Asante and Fante Language called Tshi (…), Basel 1881, Preface, p. V.
proverbs and Akan literature published by that time, synonyms and explanations – in short a wealth of ethnographic information. In the first decades after 1843, a whole community of European and African women and men emerged which was interested in coming to terms with the practice of a language, practice consisting not only in lexicon and syntax, in dictionary and grammar, but in the more complex patterns of usage as social interaction.

When the European male and female missionaries wanted to communicate on religious matters in local African languages, they had to find terms which would appear appropriate to their hearers. It looks as though this was often done by borrowing English words, especially in Fante. As Erika Eichholzer has pointed out, the Basel policy was to avoid borrowing from other languages whenever possible. Instead, the preferred strategy was to find new terms either by an expansion of meaning (re-interpretation) of existing terms or by derivation and composition. The key idea was to build on what was already ‘there’, and to a large extent this was done by re-semantising existing terms. This had far-reaching consequences, because it linked existing religious concepts with those of Christianity. It also was a process which was integrally linked to the missionary community in which women played an active role. One of the episodes concerning six-fingered children will illustrate this. As chapter 7 has argued, negotiations in Akuapem over these children played a crucial role in establishing the perception of the mission station as a ‘quarter’, i.e. as a socio-religious sphere and territory of its own.

Friederike Dieterle reported about a passionate debate among local women in Aburi in 1860, who strongly advised the mother of a six-fingered child to suckle the child and so to secure its survival. Translating literally from the German report, the women argued that “...if you [i.e. the mother] do this, your next child will have nothing wrong with it [i.e. will not be a six-fingered child], because God will bless you.” In her report Dieterle puts the word ‘God’ into the mouths of the Aburi women. This word was exclusively used by European Basel missionaries to refer to the Christian god as they understood this concept.

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5 Christaller remarked on this: ABM, D-1,18a Akuapim Distr.-Conferenz 13.6.1866, Nr. 28–30 Beilagen: Br. Christaller.
7 ABM, D-1,11 Aburi Nr. 18, Friederike Dieterle 06.11.1860.