CHAPTER FIVE

THE ROOTS OF BAHÁ’I CONVERSION IN BRITISH CAMEROONS

Since the British Cameroons was the place where the Bahá’í religion was most successful in the 1950s in West Africa, at least in terms of conversions and the establishment of Bahá’í institutions, this study will attempt to look in depth at the origins of the Cameroonian Bahá’í community. But I will not be so much interested in the institutional growth of the religion as I will be in discerning the message that was being delivered by the Bahá’ís there and how it was received and understood. I am ultimately interested in asking why some people decided to adopt the Bahá’í faith as their own, how they reshaped the message, what that meant to them, and the effect that their conversions had on the larger Bahá’í international community.

Cameroon appears to be one of the only places in West Africa during this period where the Bahá’í message overwhelmed its institutional boundaries to become an organic religious movement—especially among African Christians within the Basel Mission. The religion not only grew openly and publicly, as elsewhere, but also as an underground movement within this Basel Mission community. I am interested in why this should have been so: What were the vulnerabilities of the Basel Mission that allowed it to become the locus of the development of a new religious movement within its midst? Why did whole communities of Basel Mission Presbyterians become Bahá’ís? And how did the Mission respond to this development?

This chapter, in an attempt to answer these questions, will introduce the ‘underground movement’ and look briefly at the history of the Basel Mission in Cameroon and in Ghana—taking particular note of the dynamics of that mission community at the end of the colonial era. It will then discuss the conversion of large numbers of Africans to the Bahá’í faith in Uganda in 1952, as a result of the efforts of Enoch Olinga, then a recent convert, and the impact of these conversions on the Bahá’ís of the world. Attempts will be made to determine the
nature of the Baha’i message in Uganda—both as it was taught and as it was received. It was this message that Olinga carried to West Africa, and it proved to be successful. In Chapter Six, I will turn my attention to the British Cameroons and the history of the Baha’i community there, a history that begins with the arrival of Olinga in Victoria (Limbe) in 1953.

The Underground Movement

On November 29, 1959, Samuel Kima—a native of Bakebe Village in Cameroon, who was working as a teacher within the Basel Mission system—sat down to write a letter of inquiry to Valerie Wilson, an African-American Baha’i pioneer living in Liberia. By then, Wilson was, within the Baha’i administrative system, an Auxiliary Board member, and perhaps the Baha’i in the West African region who was in most direct contact with sources of funding coming from the United States.¹

The letter is of singular interest, as it demonstrates how the Baha’i faith, by 1959—in Cameroon, at least—had broken out of its organizational mold and become an organic social movement, spreading in unofficial and sometimes clandestine ways, especially within the Basel Mission system. The brief exchange of correspondence between the mission teacher and the Baha’i pioneer also demonstrates the clear disconnect between the African version of the Baha’i teachings, which seems to have had reproduced itself with great success in Cameroon by then, and the American Baha’i understanding of things held by organization-minded pioneers like Wilson. The letter is, therefore, worth quoting in full:

¹ She had no control over those funds, though this may not have been known to Kima.