CHAPTER SEVEN

THE EMERGENCE OF A DII CHRISTIANITY

The establishment of a church on the Dii-plain was at times a turbulent project, but it was still a steady process of local acceptance and indigenization of the missionary message and the missionary media. In this chapter we will address the Dii interpretation of the missionary message, that is, the theological content of this new religious institution. The Dii were socialised through schools, meetings, and services into new patterns of organisation of their society, but what were the actual spiritual changes experienced among the Dii? How did this change in social structures affect personal beliefs and patterns of moral behaviour? In the following the spiritual reorientation of the Dii will be analysed through three different steps. First, some perspectives regarding the new Christian identity will be presented as a change both in Dii social relations and as a change in personal moral perception and behaviour. Second, Dii Christianity will be analysed according to two different concepts of assimilation. One is the concept of the ‘translatability’ of Christianity in terms of relating the message to Dii traditions, and the other consists of the new religious elements which were incompatible with Dii traditions and thus replaced or coexisted with tradition in various ways. The third step in my analysis will be to give a short presentation of Paul Hiebert’s theory of worldview and of how it can be related to my material. This presentation will be followed by an analysis of the influence of Christianity on Dii worldview, using Hiebert’s notion of cognitive, affective, and evaluative assumptions as human strategies to organise worldview.

A New Dii Christian Identity

It was argued in chapter four that the arrival of the mission schools gradually changed social relations among the Dii due to the creation of a new intellectual elite that challenged the existing power structures in the Dii villages. This new pattern of social relations gradually replaced the family and village identities with new markers of identity. Simultaneously a Dii Christian identity slowly emerged with its own
agenda and characteristics faced with material and spiritual changes. The emergence of this new identity was partly a reorientation of the entire Dii society as a result of the utility of the mission schools. A Dii chief who asked for a school for his village did not necessarily intend to change the religious identity of his village, but the result was most often that it changed both religious and social behaviour. This development took place in several parts of northern Cameroon; Philip Burnham argues that the American Sudan Mission to a large extent influenced the ethnic consciousness of the Gbaya in south-eastern Adamaoua the same way as the Norwegian mission influenced the Dii. Gbaya pastors became natural community leaders in a society which had never experienced indigenous organisational structures that could pursue collective interests (Burnham 1996: 85–89).

The interaction between people from different Dii villages increased as a result of the mission schools. The first villages that received schools became centres where youth from other smaller villages settled, and later young Dii from all the villages on the plain gathered in the mission dormitory, first in Ngaouyang, then in Mbé. These centres became crossroads for news and gossip from the whole Dii area, and they became places of exchange of ideas and gave birth to new ways to promote Dii values. This ethnic awareness developed both as a result of increased contact between Dii villages and increased contact between the Dii and other ethnic groups in the new Lutheran church.

This change of behaviour was not only due to collective changes in social structures, it was to a large extent an individual reorientation because the Gospel that was preached asked the individual to choose the course of his or her life. A young Dii could abandon his family based on either a personal religious experience or because of personal motivation of improved social status. In either case it could be a choice without the acceptance of the community that surrounded him. Hence, this chapter seeks to analyse the spiritual imagination of the Dii Christian pioneers who became ‘prophets’ in a weberian sense of the word and entrepreneurs in the reconstruction of Dii religious beliefs. It further seeks to investigate the specific changes in Dii religious beliefs which served as motivations for the Dii youth who, more often than not, had to base their move towards Christianity on individual experiences. Due to the lack of written sources from the first Dii Christians, it is still my informants’ testimonies that will be our main guide to the spiritual changes that appeared among the Dii, and I experienced these personal discussions with my informants as challenging encounters.