

Kwabena Parry

"A campaign to get fetishes destroyed"

The Basel mission's pupil recruitment and missionization in the Gold Coast 1850-1877.

In de loop van de negentiende eeuw hadden de Europeanen op diverse plekken aan de Afrikaanse kust handelsposten gevestigd. Behalve voor de handel, trokken in toenemende mate Europese zendingsgenootschappen naar het donkere continent om de Afrikaanse bevolking te bekeren tot het christendom. Zo waren er ook pogingen tot christianisering in Goudkust, het gebied dat tegenwoordig Ghana heet. Kwabena Parry onderzoekt hoe dit proces in Goudkust verliep en beschrijft de moeilijkheden die de Europeanen daarbij ondervonden.

Introduction

This study examines the Basel mission's pupil recruitment drives and conversion of Africans to Christianity in the Eastern Province of the Gold Coast (southeastern Ghana). The study investigates how the mission dealt with the powerful institution of indigenous priesthood, a formidable obstacle to the mission's pupil recruitment drives and consequent missionization. It examines the period from the early 1850s to the early 1870s, indeed, the watershed of formal British colonial rule. This period witnessed the Basel mission's active attempts at winning converts and recruiting pupils in the Eastern Province. The study relies on scattered sources, but it is based on Paul Jenkins' English translation of the Basel mission's correspondence in German regarding the activities of the Basel mission in the Gold Coast.¹

1 Paul Jenkins, *Abstracts of Basel Mission Gold Coast Correspondence* (Legon 1970).

Pupil recruitment as an agency for the expansion of the church in Africa has been considered as the absolute factor before which all other reasons for the growth of mission Christianity are held to be relative. Thus, an important aspect of the literature on the Christian missions in Africa is the inexorable conclusion that pupil recruitment, essentially the school, provided the fertile grounds for the growth and expansion of the church. While the role of the school has been clearly studied, it is equally evident that analysis of the subject remains vague. A few examples of this staple trajectory of the literature will suffice here. Writing in 1957, F. H. Hilliard, noted that one of the 'observations contained in the instructions given to the Basel missionaries leaving for the Gold Coast, stated that "The beginning of Mission-work is Schooling."' Accordingly, when the missionaries arrived in the Gold Coast on December 12, 1828, they immediately opened a school at Christiansborg in the coastal part of the Eastern Province.² In fact, the same can be said for the arrival and activities of the Basel Mission in the states of Akuapem and Akyem Abuakwa in the interior of the Eastern Province respectively in the 1840s and 1850s.³ Similarly, Noel Smith in his account of the evolution of the Presbyterian Church [Basel Mission] in Ghana concluded that 'the growth of the Christian community came mainly from the schools.'⁴ Shiame Okunor, concentrating on Ghana, but writing about the development of colonial universities in Africa, notes that the 'push for education took no other priorities besides serving as a vehicle for proselytizing the Africans.'⁵

In other parts of Africa, scholars have pointed out the same phenomenon without discussing it. For example, Kenneth Blakemore and Brian Cooksey state that 'the strategies used by the missions to convey their Christian messages changed through time, but they always involved some kind of schooling.'⁶ For his part, David Scanlon, in his study of education in Uganda, writes, 'with the beginning of missionary activity, Western education

Specific documents will be cited.

- 2 F.H. Hilliard, *A Short History of Education in British West Africa* (Toronto 1957) 63-64.
- 3 See, for example, Kofi Affrifah, "The Impact of the Christianity on Akyem Society," *Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana* 16, 1 (1966) 70-71.
- 4 Noel Smith, *The Presbyterian Church of Ghana, 1835-1960* (Accra 1966) 51.
- 5 Shiame Okunor, *Politics, Misunderstandings, misconceptions: The History of Colonial Universities* (New York 1991) 37.
- 6 Kenneth Blakemore and Brian Cooksey, *Sociology of Education for Africa* (London 1980) 29.

became an important part of the process of conversion to Christianity.⁷ It is patently clear from the above conclusions that the complexity of pupil recruitment or the school as an agency and its processes are yet to be fully studied.

Historiographical Framework

The history of the Basel Mission, later the Presbyterian Church, in the Gold Coast has attracted an avalanche of studies. Themes that have received considerable attention include the arrival and expansion of the Basel mission, challenges posed by the mission to indigenous states and African social structures, and the role of the mission in the British colonial abolition of slavery in the Gold Coast starting from 1874-75.⁸ Other studies have examined the role of the mission in the imposition of colonial rule, how the mission engendered conflicts between African communities and the colonial state, and the mission's contribution to the rise of African nationalism. Also, topical issues have included the mission and the development of Western education and its function as vehicles of social change and social mobility.⁹ Lastly, some studies have assessed the effects of the Basel Mission: whether the missionaries were noble altruists or agents of cultural benightment and colonial rule.¹⁰

- 7 David Scanlon, *Education in Uganda* (Washington DC. 1964) 7.
- 8 See, for example, Seth Owusu Amoako, 'Political Institutions of the Coastal Areas of the Gold Coast as Influenced by the European Contact' (M.A. thesis, University of Chicago 1954); Raphael M. Wiltgen, *Gold Coast Mission History* (Techny, Illinois 1956) 109-111; and Affrifah, 'The Impact of the Christianity' 67-86.
- 9 See, for example, Smith, *Presbyterian Church of Ghana*; C.K. Graham, *The History of Education in Ghana* (London 1971); E.A. Kyerematen, 'A History of the Presbyterian Church at Bompata in Asante-Akyem', *Ghana Notes and Queries* 12 (1972) 20-23; and Robert Addo-Fening, 'Akyem Abuakwa 1874-1943: A Study of the Impact of Missionary Activities and Colonial Rule on Traditional State' (Ph.D. thesis, University of Ghana 1980).
- 10 For various polemical conclusions on the impact of Western education in the Gold Coast, see, for example, A. Asiedu Akrofi, 'Education in Ghana' in: A. Babs Fafunwa and J.U. Aisiku, eds., *Education in Africa: A Comparative Survey* (London 1982) 98-99; and A. Adu Boahen, *Ghana: evolution of change in nineteenth and twentieth centuries* (London 1975) 78-88. For other parts of Africa, see, for example, Dickson A. Mungazi, *Colonial Education for Africans: George Stark's Policy in Zimbabwe* (New York 1991), 1-6; Kilemi Mwiria, "Education for Subordination: African Education in Colonial Kenya," *History of Education*, 20, 3 (1991), 261-273;

In 1828, the first batch of four missionaries of the Basel Evangelical Association, headquartered in Basel, Switzerland, were invited to the Gold Coast by the Danish Governor, De Richelieu.¹¹ Once in the Gold Coast, the Basel missionaries began their Christianizing work in the Ga region. Within three years, all four missionaries perished from malaria. Apart from the high mortality rate,¹² the Basel Mission had to operate under the watchful eyes of the Danes, then controlling the eastern portion of what is now modern coastal Ghana. Overall, the initial Christianizing work of the mission in the Ga area failed to gain any lasting roots.¹³

Another attempt at planting Christianity was made in 1843 in Akuapem, a hilly region with a healthier climate than the Ga area. The work of the European missionaries in Akuapem was facilitated by a group of Jamaicans - six families and three bachelors - recruited to assist the Basel Mission in its endeavors to spread Christianity in the aftermath of the dismal failure in the Ga region.¹⁴ The Jamaicans were settled in Akropong, the capital of Akuapem, and became crucial to the dissemination of Christianity. Indeed, from the 1850s, African catechists and teachers trained at the Akropong Seminary took up the mantle of spreading Christianity to other parts of what became known as the Eastern Province, including all of Akuapem, Krobo, Ga, Anum, Kwahu and Akyem.¹⁵ During its work in these states, the Basel Mission had to confront indigenous institutions, the most formidable

and Clive Whitehead, "Education for Subordination?: Some Reflections on Kilemi Mwiria's Account of Education in Colonial Kenya," *History of Education*, 22, 1 (1993), 85-93. For a general reassessment of the impact of the Christian missions on indigenous societies, see, for example, Clayton G. Mackenzie, "Demythologizing the Missionaries: A reassessment of the functions and relationships of Christian missionary education under colonialism," *Comparative Education*, 29, 1 (1993), 45-66.

11 For an account of the development of the Basel Evangelical Society, see, for example, Wiltgen, *Gold Coast Mission History*, 109; Smith, *Presbyterian Church of Ghana*, 17-22; and H.O. McWilliam and M.A. Kwamena-Poh, *The Development of Education in Ghana* (London 1975), 29-30.

12 Thomas Jesse Jones, *Education in Africa* (New York 1922), states that during the first sixty years the Basel Mission lost about one hundred European missionaries through death.

13 See, for example, Wiltgen, *Gold Coast Mission History*, 109; and Smith, *Presbyterian Church of Ghana*, 29-34.

14 See, for example, Smith, *Presbyterian Church of Ghana*, 35-44. Wiltgen, *Gold Coast Mission History*, 109, puts the number of Jamaicans at twenty three and one Antiguan.

15 Smith, *Presbyterian Church of Ghana*, 45-64.

of which was the indigenous priesthood.

Numerous scholars have noted that the Basel Mission maintained a policy to work in the interior instead of concentrating its work along the coast¹⁶ as the Methodist mission was doing in the Cape Coast region.¹⁷ The Basel Mission believed that the interior states with their traditional values intact would yield more souls to the Christendom than the coastal states. This was because the coastal states had already come under the unsettling influences of the Afro-European contact. Paradoxically, the political cultures and religious institutions of the interior states were unaltered. As a result, the mission faced resistance from the political and religious elites of those societies. Additionally, the Basel Mission's pupil recruitment was informed by several frameworks and choices that were not always derived from official policy, but were initiated by individual missionaries.¹⁸ Consequently, as we will show, individual missionaries devised strategies to counter the opposition of the indigenous priesthood.

Pupil recruitment and conversion: the Basel mission and the indigenous priesthood

The competence of the missionaries to undermine and weaken the indigenous priesthood or the so-called 'fetish'¹⁹ institution became crucial to pupil recruitment and the expansion of the church. The ability of the mission to do so distilled African worldview and ontology in the eyes of the African populace and convinced them to embrace not only the Christian faith, but also the cultures of the European missionaries. The indigenous priests were healers, they embodied normative culture, interpreted worldview, and served as epistemological agents. The underlying message of Christianity was that those African cultural practices and religious

16 See, for example, Jones, *Education in Africa*, 135; and Wiltgen, *Gold Coast Mission History*, 111;

17 See, for example, Wiltgen, *Gold Coast Mission History*, 111-112; and Graham, *History of Education in Ghana*, 51-54.

18 See, for example, T.O. Beidelman, 'Social Theory and the Study of Christian Missions in Africa' in: *Africa*, 46 (1974) 237-239.

19 I use the term indigenous religion instead of fetish priest, because the latter has attained pejorative connotations. See for example, John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London 1979) see especially 166-193. According to Mbiti, it was only recently that African religions have been taken seriously as an academic subject. See 6-14.

worldview epitomized by the indigenous priest had to be swept aside to make way for Christianity, indivisible from European 'civilization'. Thus the epistemological thrust of the Basel mission did not only pose formidable challenges to the authority of the priesthood, but also the time-honored nuances of African society constructed and ordered by the African elites for centuries.

The indigenous priests proved difficult in several ways. They vehemently rejected what they considered as presumptuous, alien ways of the missionaries. For instance, an indigenous priest in Kotropee in Akwamu 'forbade the catechist trainees from entering any of the houses' because they were 'wearing European clothes'.²⁰ Also, the indigenous priests opposed the building of segregated Christian quarters. As late as 1876, Werner wrote that 'the building of a Christian community is not proceeding very fast' because the Atia priest was bent on sabotaging it.²¹

Overall, the indigenous priest controlled the reins of society: where they were not the chiefs themselves, they influenced the decisions of the chiefs by controlling the chiefs' actions through ritual prescriptions and prohibitions. For example, while in Kotropee, Mader could not meet with the chief because 'there was a fetish prohibition on the king meeting them'.²² With regard to land, the missionaries faced the same problem. The indigenous priest and the chiefs were the custodians of land. But, more important, the indigenous priesthood was the sole ritual interpreter of matters pertaining to land regarding religious practices associated with the Earth Goddess, Asase Yaa. Therefore, the indigenous priest had significant bearing on land matters and had the ritual prerogative over the chief.

Thus, in their search for land, the mission encountered the opposition of the indigenous priest. For example, the mission was unable to obtain a parcel of land in a hilly area of Gyadam because the 'hill was fetish land'.²³ Additionally, the mission faced the wrath of the indigenous priest in their educational and missionization work. Werner, for example, wrote:

'People are avoiding any sort of positive commitment... the great fetish Atean [Atia] has forbidden the children from attending school and adults from attending [church] services.'²⁴

20 Jenkins, *BMC*, Mader to Basel, dd. September 1, 1856, No.IV.21, 26.

21 Jenkins, *BMC*, Werner to Basel October 25 1876, No. 257, 60.

22 Jenkins, *BMC*, Mader to Basel, dd. September 1, 1856, No.IV.21, 26.

23 Jenkins, *BMC*, Baum to Basel, April 1, 1857, No. Gyadam, 6.

24 Jenkins, *BMC*, Werner to Basel October 25 1876, No. 257, 60.

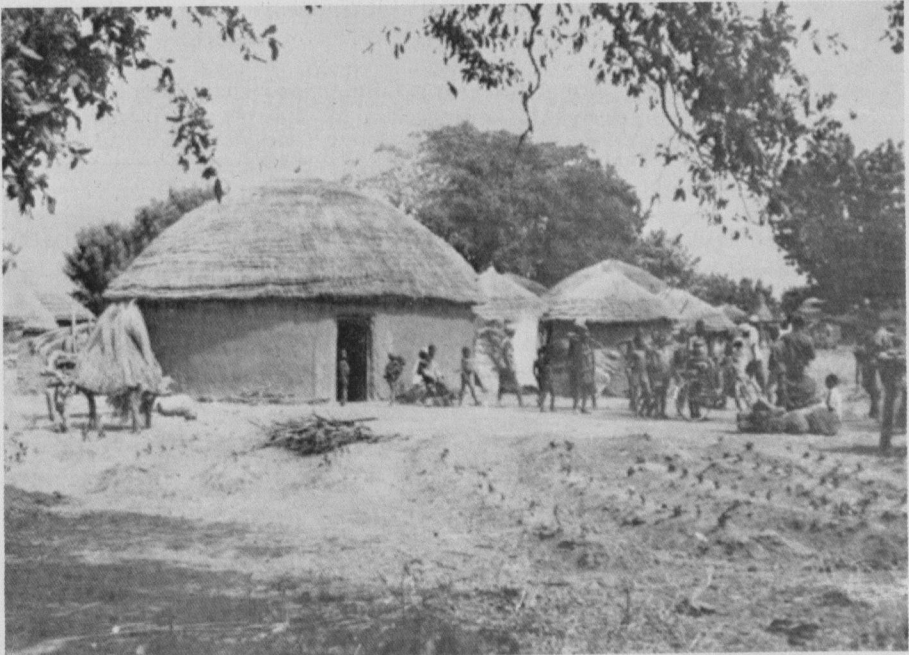
'A campaign to get fetishes destroyed'

The fact that the indigenous priests' injunction superseded and invalidated parental interests and control was an indication of the authority and power exercised by the indigenous priesthood over the African communities.

The missionaries came to the realization that the indigenous priesthood, the epitome of African traditional religion and cultural values, was a barrier to the church's pupil recruitment drives. As a result, the mission wasted no time in confronting the indigenous priesthood by brazenly undermining the preexisting indigenous religious lore embodied in the role of the indigenous priests. As early as 1853, Zimmerman wrote that

'...it appears that a campaign has been opened to get fetishes destroyed as a preparation for more directly encouraging people to become catechumens.'²⁵

Also, Mohr noted that 'people often say to him that they do not believe in



Village of Kasuliyili (Northern Ghana). In the center the reception antechamber, flanked by groundnut granaries. From: Labelle Prussin, *Architecture in Northern Ghana. A study of forms and functions* (Berkeley en Los Angeles 1969) 34.

25 Jenkins, *BMC*, Zimmerman, Quarterly Report dd. March 29, 1853, No. 173, 16.

26 Jenkins, *BMC*, Mohr's Second Quarter Report for 1877, May 28, 1877, No. 248, 72.

the fetish but they are afraid'.²⁶ While Mohr may have read too much into what was said to him, it is clear that the 'fetish' exercised significant control over people.

Indeed, it was not only a question of adherence to the indigenous religion, but there was also the inscrutable fact that the indigenous religion was at the core of African life and thought.²⁷ Africans believed that any violation of the mores of indigenous religion could lead to one's misfortune and death, sometimes with calamitous effects on the offender's family. The missionaries, however, were able to destroy one of the most important symbolic representations of indigenous religion - the grove²⁸ - without dying or suffering from any calamity.

Consequently, the actions of the missionaries created a magnetic attraction to Christianity and Western education. In fact, by 1875, Mohr had won the enviable accolade of Obroakomfo, that is the 'great fetish-priest-breaker'. He claimed that

'...in one village, some fetish procession... approached them but several members of the party called out 'Look out the great fetish-priest-breaker (Oboroakomfo) is here' and the people ran away leaving behind two small bells which were used to call the fetish.'²⁹

There is no doubt that the 'breaking' of the 'fetish' or the destruction of the ritualistic and symbolic essences of the indigenous priesthood was an important turning point in the confrontation between the Basel mission and the indigenous states. It gave the mission the opportunity to project the strength of the Christian message to the disadvantage of the indigenous priesthood.

The missionaries' destruction of the symbolic representations of indigenous religion, including the grove and other religious artifacts, were not the only actions that subverted African worldview and institutions. Writing from Begoro, Cornelius noted that the inhabitants there 'have a fetish prohibition over eating fish either from a well-stocked nearby pond or from the rivers'. Disregarding the prohibition, he caught 'two fish and

27 Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 1-5.

28 The grove housed the symbols and paraphernalia of lesser gods, the medium through which the Supreme Being was reached.

29 Jenkins, *BMC*, Adolph Mohr to Basel Concerning an Exploratory Journey to Begoro, March 2, 1875, No. 254, 51.

30 Jenkins, *BMC*, Two Letters from Cornelius to Basel, May 13, 1875, Nos. 184 and 185, 55.

cooked them for his supper'.³⁰ Mohr also noted that contrary to the injunctions of a fetish priest, he buried a corpse at the mission cemetery.³¹ Certainly, these subversive actions, and more important, the operative challenges they posed to established African traditions and norms, did not go unnoticed by the Africans. There is no doubt that the mission's revolutionary challenges to established African institutional practices drummed home the superior position of the mission and accounted for the Africans' misgivings about their own indigenous institutions.

Despite the hostility of the indigenous priesthood, some of the indigenous priests converted to Christianity. In fact, some of the conversions occurred as early as 1853.³² The paucity of sources makes it difficult to ascertain the actual numbers and patterns that conversion took. Whatever be the case, the conversion of indigenous priests continued unabated in the period of formal colonial rule, when the enormous political weight of the colonial state was placed behind the mission. This made it possible for the mission to be more aggressive and purposeful in its pupil recruitment in the precolonial period.

Undoubtedly, the conversion of some of the indigenous priests provided a major boost to the morale of the mission. It certainly freed ordinary members of society, subjected to the circumscribing constraints of indigenous institutional practices and the paternalistic ritualism of the indigenous priesthood, to accept Christianity. In other words, the missionaries used conversion and baptism of indigenous priests to win more converts to Christianity, creating an avenue for Western education.

It should be added that the missionaries succeeded in weakening the indigenous priesthood largely as a result of the fact that the mission established segregated quarters within African communities.³³ Indeed, the segregated quarters provided the spatial stronghold and ideological turf which the mission needed in its clash with the African institutions, for example, the indigenous African priesthood, that posed barriers to

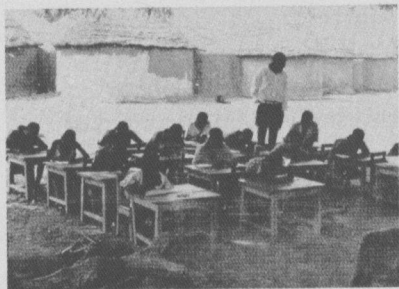
31 Jenkins, *BMC*, Mohr's Second Quarterly Report for 1877, dd. May 28, 1877, No. 243, 72. The fetish priest claimed that her fetish had killed a relative of two Christians, Jacob Su and Petro Sawi, therefore, instead of a proper burial, they should deposit the corpse in the bush.

32 Jenkins, *BMC*, Second Half-Yearly Report of the Osu Station 1853 Stanger's Section No. I.1, 19.

33 Jenkins, *BMC*, Adolp Mohr to Basel Concerning an Exploratory Journey to Begoro, March 2, 1875, No. 254, 51.

Christianity.

The segregated mission quarters became an alluring gleam that attracted the Africans to mission Christianity, and all that it entailed. The Christian quarters consisted of mission schools, church buildings, farms and gardens³⁴ and were referred to by Africans as *sukuum*, *oburonikrom*, or Salem.³⁵ One significant component of the Christian quarter was the mission school. It enabled the missionaries to maintain control over the pupils they recruited, removing them away from the precincts and reach of the indigenous priests. Additionally, pupils in the boarding schools provided labor that facilitated the expansion of the mission.³⁶ In 1875, missionary



Open-air primary school in Kasuliyili (Northern Ghana). From: Prussin, *Architecture in Northern Ghana*, 28.

Adolph Mohr commenting on his journey to Begoro, stated that the Christian village there 'consisted of 7 huts and was 5 minutes away from the main village'.³⁷ The lands for the development of Christian quarters were given to the mission for free by African rulers and communities.³⁸ Also, some lands were leased to the Mission for a number of years,³⁹ while other lands were bought by the Mission.⁴⁰ The acquisition of land was crucial to the building of mission schools and houses for the missionaries and

converts.

Overall, the Christian quarter was a segregated place where the missionaries and their African converts lived separately from the

34 See, for example, Jenkins, *BMC*, Suss to Basel, December 3, 1858, No. Gyadam 19, 39; and Jenkins, *BMC*, Suss Station Report, dd. March 1, 1859.

35 See, for example, Affrifah, 'Impact of Christianity on Akyem Society' 70 and 76. *Sukuum* means the place where the school is located and *oburonikrom* means the white man's town.

36 Jenkins, *BMC*, Zimmerman Quarterly Report, dd. end [of] May 1852 (no. 132) 12.

37 Jenkins, *BMC*, Adolph Mohr to Basel Concerning an Exploratory Journey to Begoro, March 2, 1875, No. 254, 51.

38 See, for example, Kyerematen, 'History of the Presbyterian Church at Bompata' 21.

39 See, for example, Jenkins, *BMC*, General Conference Report signed 12 May 1852 (no. 53 in volume 5 of the correspondence received from Africa).

40 Jenkins, *BMC*, Zimmerman's Report of Journey to Gyadam in May 1858, Letter No. Christiansborg 20.

indigenous community, removed from the control of the indigenous priest. Primarily, the development of the Christian quarter was a laborious scheme to deter African converts from returning to what the missionaries perceived as heathen lifestyles of the indigenous quarters: polygamy, drunkenness, and idolatry.⁴¹ The Christian quarters with their distinctive gardens, quaint European accessories, and novel architectural forms attracted Africans.⁴²

The Christian quarters served as a place of refuge for culprits fleeing from the laws, mores and norms of the indigenous society. Thus, the development of the segregated Christian quarters with their inherent divisive politics toward indigenous states led to problems between church and state. The indigenous rulers struggled to come to terms with the incongruous role of the Basel Mission in undermining African worldview, especially the power and authority of the indigenous priests. For example, Mohr wrote in 1877 that the 'station [Christian quarter] now has a teacher in addition to cat[echist] Obeng and though a fair number of boys have come regularly, the school has suffered... from opposition between the town and the mission [Christian quarter] during the epidemic'.⁴³

Whatever problems the Christian quarter posed, it attracted Africans, especially the underprivileged in society and hence served as a formidable platform for pupil recruitment.

Conclusion

By the early 1870s, on the eve of colonial rule, the anti-'fetish' preoccupations of the missionaries had gradually weakened the power and authority of the indigenous priesthood. In 1877, Mohr wrote that:

'The fetish priests are in a precarious position because they see that their religion is laughed at and no longer believed in, and they do not want to lose their influence. Yet their efforts to impress people with their mad liturgies carry little weight with the younger people, and more and more people are

41 See, for example, Kyerematen, 'History of the Presbyterian Church at Bompata' 22.

42 See, for example, Jones, *Education in Africa*, 134.

43 Jenkins, BMC, Mohr's Annual Report for 1877, dd. January 15, 1877, No. 252, 70. African community leaders blamed the outbreak of diseases on the European missionaries' denigration of African institutions. Africans attributed diseases and their consequent deaths to the Europeans' breaking of normative taboos etc.

conscious that they are not working for the good of the people.⁴⁴

While Mohr's observation is certainly tinged with condescending prejudice, it is patently clear that the indigenous priest could no longer wield total control over the populace. Indeed, gradually people began to question the efficacy of the magico-religious and ritualistic practices of the indigenous religious medium. This did not lead to wholesale abandonment of traditional practices, but rather people began to rely on the mission to fulfill some social and spiritual needs that reliance on aspects of the indigenous religion had failed to meet. The missionaries' weakening of the hold that the indigenous religion had over Africans facilitated pupil recruitment. It enabled Christian converts and those who had been constrained by the indigenous institutions to enrol their children in the mission schools.

44 Jenkins, *BMC*, Mohr's Quarterly Report for 1877, dd. May 28, 1877, No. 248, 72.