*The Journal of African History* (2024), 1–3
doi:10.1017/S0021853724000379

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

BOOK REVIEW

# Missionary Internalizations of Ghanaian Christianity

## *Healing and Power in Ghana: Early Indigenous Expressions of Christianity*

### Paul Glen Grant. Waco: Baylor University Press, 2020. Pp. 327. $67.99, hardcover (ISBN: 9781481312677).

Marleen de Witte

Utrecht University

(Received 6 September 2024; accepted 6 September 2024)

**Keywords:** West Africa; Ghana; Christianity; missions; health; ritual; indigeneity

*Healing and Power in Ghana* is a compelling account of how Christianity became an African indigenous religion, long before the rise of African-initiated churches in the twentieth century.[1] In this well-written study, Paul Grant unpacks the encounter in the mid-nineteenth century between Pietist missionaries from Basel and the various people of the Akuapem hills in southeastern Gold Coast. The core story takes place between 1835 — when the first Basel missionary Andreas Riis visited the Akuapem King Nana Addo Dankwa to propose a mission station in the town of Akropong — and 1874 — when the British military liberated the abducted Basel missionary couple Ramseyer from their Asante captors, a process that resulted in the mission's incorporation into British imperial hegemony. That period, just before "the colonial interlude" (3; 250) of missionary imperialism, presents a unique and crucial moment in the history of world Christianity, and Grant offers his reader an eye-opening view on it. With sharp historical precision, the book portrays how, during those late precolonial decades, the missionary encounter could unfold as a creative space for cross-cultural experimentation, in ways impossible during later decades. In this space, West African men and women molded Christianity according to an enduring social and cosmic vision and, in so doing, transformed the German missionaries in turn, with far-reaching consequences. Missionaries, Grant argues, "increasingly internaliz[ed] Ghanaian religious paradigms" (*xi*). This is not just a book about the Ghanaian reception and reformulation of missionary Christianity — an approach we know from earlier studies (notably by Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, Birgit Meyer, and John Peel, with whose work Grant engages).[2] Rather, it is a book — that is most innovative — about the missionary reception of Ghanaian Christianity. Grant's overall argument is that the form of Christianity that took shape in this encounter was "an autochthonous product of West African intellectual history" (3) resulting from local people's pervasive and sustained attempt at subjecting the foreign missionaries to their

[1] See, for instance, Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, *Contemporary Pentecostal Christianity: Interpretations from an African context* (Oxford: Regnum, 2013); Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion*; (New York: Orbis, 1996); Allan Anderson, *African Reformation: African Initiated Christianity in the 20th Century* (Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, 2001); Ogbu Kalu, *African Pentecostalism: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

[2] Asamoah-Gyadu, *Contemporary Pentecostal Christianity*; Birgit Meyer, *Translating the Devil: Religion and Modernity among the Ewe in Ghana* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999); John Peel, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003).

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own problem-solving ritual program. Extending from the nineteenth century to the present, the book presents the early indigenous expressions of Christianity as a genealogical ancestor of today's Ghanaian Pentecostalism. It convincingly argues that the latter's West African roots run much deeper than usually acknowledged and refutes the foreignness that (more casual) observers tend to read from the movement's conspicuous globalism and institutional genealogy. Reinstating African agency as well as African ancestry to Christianity, Grant makes an important contribution to the ongoing debate about the relationship between Christianity and colonialism in Africa.

Based on a wealth of Basel Mission and other archival sources, and ethnographic fieldwork, the book anchors the story of African Christianity in life experience and West African and European macropolitics. The first part of the book relates the dense historical backstory to the missionary encounter. Chapter One paints the landscape of violent social-political-economic disruption in nineteenth century Akuapem. This was a time of widespread warfare and displacement, much of it driven by the Atlantic slave trade and its aftermath, and the kingdom became home to a very heterogenous population, including many refugees and formerly enslaved people. This made Akuapem a fundamentally cross-cultural and open society, where religious innovation was often a matter of pragmatic experimentation in response to pressing needs for healing, power, and the incorporation of outsiders. Chapter Two deepens this point with an illuminating discussion of the preexisting "ritual toolkit" (55) for dealing with life's challenges. Centuries of religious experimentation had yielded an "elastic spiritual ecosystem" (169) where deities (*abosom*) had come and gone and could fundamentally change as religious praxis demanded. Grant argues that the Christian deity was incorporated into this "elastic ecosystem," but only when the indigenous toolkit was able to insert the Christian deity and its priests into extant categories of sacrifice and sanctuary shrines. This happened only after indigenous ritual tools seemed no longer effective, which explains why Christianity, despite three centuries of presence on the Gold Coast, had hardly gained ground among locals (Chapter Three): until the mid-nineteenth century, Africans in this part of the continent had simply found it impotent to meet their needs.

Sensitive to the often unintended outcomes of mission work, the second part of the book presents the core story of the Basel missionaries, their activities and interactions in the Gold Coast. Chapter Four argues that "these were not Christians-in-general," nor were they Germans-in-general; these were "strange people, eccentrics both at home and abroad" (123). Combining a millenarian view with a socially activist attitude, they demonized their own civilization and called the European legacy in Africa satanic. Although that would radically change a generation later when the Basel Mission embraced British colonialism and retreated into a paternalistic attitude of civilizing mission, in the 1850s–1870s it made the Basel missionaries uniquely open to African innovations. One such multiply-authored innovation is described in Chapter Five on "how the missionaries became shrine priests" (155). When vulnerable people began to settle around the mission stations in search of sanctuary, they were imposing upon the mission longstanding practices of spiritual protection at shrines. Before the missionaries realized what was happening, and before their successors turned these so-called *Salems* into authoritarian Christian settlements, they and their god were put to work in a spiritual economy that hinged not on salvation from sin, but on deities' effective and proven power to offer protection, food security, and communal belonging. Grant shows that the Twi translation of the Bible (Chapter Six) played a key role: it turned the Christian god from a silent and lofty deity into an accessible and speaking one. Moreover, it enabled indigenous Christians to read his words in radically different ways, laying emphasis on sacrificial economy, on victory over disease or over enemies, on power in the here and now. The consecration of a chapel as functionally a "counter-shrine" (207) is a beautiful illustration of the divergent hermeneutics of indigenous clergy, who in their prayers called upon the powerful deity to take up residence in the new building and in their sermons read power encounters out of the bible where the missionaries read darkness and suffering. Chapter Seven deals the final blow to the myth of missionary control over their project: they were simply too sick most of the time and dying in great numbers. Not only did this allow space for indigenous clergy to develop a program of miracle-healing, but it also transformed the missionaries themselves. The latter were, "in

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021853724000379 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the cracks of their program, in their grief, trauma, and sickness, in their failures and contradictions to their dreams and goals" (219), uniquely able to meet their African hosts "and they became new people as a result."

The book's most notable insight perhaps is how missionaries became subject to Ghanaian religious innovations. Grant goes further, suggesting that although the home office in Germany censored missionaries' accounts of the supernatural, what they learned in Ghana flowed back to Europe, to impact the religious life of Pietism in Germany. This is a fascinating sub-plot (used to critically reverse Birgit Meyer's notion that missionaries "translated the devil" from rural Germany into Ghana) that calls for more substantiation — another book perhaps. In a spirit of "theorizing from the South," there is much to learn from the Akuapem people's profound reinvention of Christianity. What stands out is their centuries-long experience with "cultivating moral and intellectual tools for turning strangers into neighbours" (30), for devising a world in which we may live with people unlike ourselves, in which ethnic purity is an absurdity and "Afrocentrism need not conflict with honouring foreign missionaries as ancestors" (14). Such tools are of vital importance today, as we see worrying trends towards essentializing and purifying identities and excluding outsiders. And they reach far beyond the sphere of religion to human civilization at large. As such, this book has much to offer not only to readers interested in the history of religion in Africa or world Christianity, but also in African Studies, Postcolonial Studies, and beyond. *Healing and Power in Ghana* deserves a wide readership.

**Cite this article:** de Witte M (2024). Healing and Power in Ghana: Early Indigenous Expressions of Christianity. *The Journal of African History* 1–3. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021853724000379

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