Looking for Traces of Hybridity: Two Basel Mission Reports and a Queen Mother: Philosophical Remarks on the Interpretation of a Political Deed[1]

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Summary

This article undertakes the rereading of two texts that had been written at the very beginning of the twentieth century in the western part of the former Gold-Coast colony, today's Ghana. Guided by the concept of "hybridity", this reading tries to show that a close look at the construction of identity – in this case the identity of a missionary and a native pastor – can open up ways for new textual interpretations. Thus, the two authors who are located in the power struggle between the local politics, the colonial government and the Basel Mission seem to contest the official interpretation of a political deed in their reports and thereby negotiate its meaning.

Opsomming

Hierdie artikel onderneem die herinterpretasie van twee tekste wat geskryf is heel aan die begin van die twintigste eeu in die westelike deel van die voormalige Goue Kus kolonie, die hedendaagse Ghana. Gelei deur die konsep van "hibriditeit", poog hierdie interpretasie om te wys dat 'n noulettende ondersoek van die konstruksie van identiteit – in hierdie geval die identiteit van 'n sendeling en 'n boorling-pastoor – weë kan baan vir nuwe tekstuele interpretasie. Die twee outeurs wat gelokaliseer is in die magstryd tussen die plaaslike politiek, die koloniale regering en die Basel Sending skyn dus die offisiële interpretasie van 'n politieke akte in hulle rapporte te betwis en daardeur die betekenis daarvan te skik.

On 29 July 1907, Queen Mother Akua Oye called together the chiefs of the small kingdom of Akuapem (today in the eastern region of Ghana). King Akufo, who had been the cause of this meeting, refused to take part. Akua Oye accused him, her biological nephew, of selling the royal family's property and destroying the unity of the state. She was thereby exercising her right as queen mother, the only person in the state with the right to criticise the King in open court and to demand his destoolment. As a consequence of his destructive

behaviour, Akufo should be destooled in absentia. The chiefs agreed. One week later they met again and confirmed Akufo's destoolment with an oath and their signatures. In addition, they wrote a petition to the colonial government asking that their decision be accepted. Akufo protested against his removal, and since both parties started to arm their followers, a formal enquiry was carried out into the situation by the British colonial rulers. This sixteen-day procedure finally confirmed the legitimacy of Akufo's destoolment. Akua Oye's son Owusu Ansah, who was next in line, became the new king of Akuapem (cf Gilbert 1993).

The Basel Mission, which had started its activity in Africa in this very region more than sixty years before King Akufo's destoolment, observed the political changes carefully. Wilhelm Rottmann, one of the Akropong missionaries at the time, described Akufo's removal in his regular reports to Basel (Rottmann 1908). He considered the new king Owusu Ansah to be more open towards the Christian faith and thus concluded that not only the people but also the Mission were content with what had happened. In his annual report to Basel, the native pastor Theophil Opoku also took up this important incident (Opoku 1908). He pointed out that it must have been God's will that had made possible the destoolment of King Akufo since it "came unexpectedly and like a dream".

This is a short summary of a very complex event, an event that seems to be simultaneously both extraordinary and normal. It is extraordinary in the sense that we are confronted with a rebellious act. It is normal because we face one of many changes that happened in the dynamic histories of African states in this period of the colonial occupation of Africa. What interests me here is not an exact description of the historical event. If we started looking at the facts more closely, we would immediately find ourselves in a confusing and complex situation, in a triangle of tension between the political state of Akuapem, the Basel Mission and the Gold Coast Government, as Michelle Gilbert has pointed out in her excellent paper on the issue (Gilbert 1993). What I want to do instead is to look at two texts handwritten in Akuapem a hundred years ago, now found in the Basel Mission archives. Intended to inform the headquarters in Basel of the current situation in the mission field, these annual, quarterly or sporadic reports established, from the mid-nineteenth-century on, a circulation of information from the peripheries to the centre and back. This does not mean a simple exchange of information was taking place. It means rather that the positions of the centre and periphery had to be continually reconstructed by means of this circulation. While the Basel Mission stations in China, India and Africa were in fact the sites of the mission's central activities, they were at the same time never allowed to become the mission's centre of power and meaning. Thus, the heads of the Mission in Basel had to deal with the paradox of being a centre of activities that in fact took place at

the periphery – and they did it quite effectively. The central Basel position was guaranteed by a strong hierarchy and by the institutionalised ways in which meaning and sense were created and distributed. According to the Basel view, "meaning" was *made and supervised* in Basel and *mediated* to the fields. Basel had the right to decide what a *real* Christian was and what a *real* missionary did (cf Middleton 1983; Haenger 2000). On the other hand, the missionary in the field had to confirm that he and his native Christians followed the Basel line. Thus, meaning was thought to flow from Basel to the stations where it had to be adapted to local circumstances, reported and sent back to Basel where it was controlled and readjusted. The reports were means of controlling the dangers that went along with the transformation of meaning from Basel to the "field". The missionary's report documented the way he represented the centre at the periphery and proved that he had not "gone native". The native pastor's report showed his ability to understand and his perseverance in distributing Basel ideas. The Basel letters on the other hand answered, commented, advised, confirmed and reprimanded.

Although this seems to be the dominant Basel idea of how meaning was supposed to circulate between the centre and the periphery it also opened up a space for unexpected routes. As Michel Foucault points out, each system of power produces unofficial and hidden means of circulation which constantly work against the centre-periphery model and place it in question. In my reading of two Basel Mission reports, I will try to trace elements of such subversive routes within the official one.

One of the ideas guiding this is the concept of "hybridity" as it has been elaborated by Homi K. Bhabha. Originally meaning "bastard", hybridity used to be a biological term for something with several different hereditary characteristics. In the nineteenth century it was applied to human beings, describing very negatively the mixture of different races. Thus, "hybridity" appeared in texts on eugenics and slavery and was later taken up by the German National Socialists. In the 1990s a subversive reappropriation of this term took place in postcolonial theory. Focusing on the boundaries of identity, the term hybridity thereby points to a need to think beyond cultural dichotomies. Instead of simply using, and thereby reproducing dichotomies like "black" and "white", Bhabha asks us to analyse how such oppositions are in fact strongly intertwined with one another. They can only be constructed by constantly referring to each other but they do also contain a space "beyond" those dichotomies that makes it possible "to be part of a revisionary time, a return to the present to redescribe our cultural contemporaneity" (Bhabha 1994: 7).

This way of thinking implies that identity is not a given fact that can be traced back to its ontological foundations. Identities are effects of discourses which continuously reproduce the dichotomic patterns of one identity and its

opposition(s). The process of reiteration might stabilise a certain identity or it might shift its meaning. In any case it operates within the logics of dichotomies, inclusion and exclusion, the self and the other. At the same time, those identities and their opposites structure the way people talk and perceive. One might say that although they are not "real" in an essential sense, they have an impact on what we experience as "reality". What Bhabha and other post-structuralist thinkers try to do – and one might add that Hegel was the first poststructuralist in this sense – *is to shift the focus from the stabilised moment of meaning to the process of stabilising meaning*.

The concept of hybridity thus allows us to find an in-between space, where the ambiguous and undecided aspects of identities become visible and where the process of creating and stabilising dichotomies is still at work. Instead of eliminating this indecision in favour of a clarity that implies a constant transformation of differences into oppositions, hybridity offers a chance to reformulate identity by focusing on its *process* of construction and to analyse "the discursive and disciplinary place from which questions of identity are strategically and institutionally posed" (Bhabha 1994: 47).

Applying this to our case in the early-twentieth-century Gold Coast, we might ask: what is a real missionary? What is a real native pastor? What is a real queen mother? Can we read the reports from the African mission station to Basel as documents that *negotiate* rather than assume those identities? Can we thereby reread the story of Akufo's destoolment?

I have mentioned above that the Basel Mission had strong and rigid ideas of the identities involved in their business. There is, first of all, a *border of faith*. On one side of it is the leadership in Basel, above all the "Inspector" and the "Committee" guiding the whole enterprise. Then there are the missionaries in the fields who are in turn assisted by those natives who had "crossed" the border. On the other side of it are the "heathens", at the same time despised and desired. Of course, the border is also a cultural border. Being on the side of "truth" means to be on the European side. It is not in the same sense a gendered border. Women are on both sides but nowhere are they allowed to play the important part: a missionary's wife is important only in relation to her husband. Conversion is – on the conceptual level of the very early-twentieth-century Basel mission project – men's business.[2]

These identities, developed and enforced by the Basel Mission, are strongly linked to its politics. In fact, they are meant to reproduce the discursive and performative power of the Basel Mission and its agents. Now, my question is whether the notion of hybridity offers us a new way of understanding the Basel Mission's identities – not only as a means of power but also as a space of *contested meaning*. That involves looking at these identities as concepts that carry along with them the ambiguities that tried to be undone by the continuous reconstruction of dichotomies: the Christian and the heathen; the missionary

and the traditional priest; man and woman; self and other.

Centre and periphery rotate in this discursive struggle of the Basel mission. The claim that the European missionary brings the *real* faith to Africa competes with his own status as stranger. Against every sense of geography, the European missionary's foreignness to Africa had to be constantly transformed into a "homelike" state since he had to tell the natives the *real* meaning of their world and everything around them. This reversion of being strange / being at home is reinforced by the idea that the natives live in an "unreal" state of mind unless they cross the border of European faith in order to become "real Africans".

Again, I am talking here about the *conceptual level*. Throughout the reports we are being told that the missionary in the field *was* a stranger and that he *became accustomed* to culture, people and places.[3] This is exactly where the aspect of negotiation comes in. Between the lines, the regular reports to headquarters in Basel (as well as their sporadic answers) can be read as a way of negotiating the positions of missionaries, native pastors and "heathens". They can be read as ways of dealing with the officially inexistent, and therefore more dangerous, question of hybridity.

I would like to turn now to two main contemporary sources describing the destoolment of King Akufo: the reports of the Basel-trained missionary Wilhelm Rottmann and of the native pastor, Theophilus Opoku**.** I will take some ambiguities in the text as points of departure that allow me to question the writers' identity. Their hybrid status that thereby comes to light opens up a possible rereading of the reports, a task, however, that I can only touch upon.

Missionary Wilhelm Rottmann's report starts by saying that the year 1907 marks "a milestone" in Akwapem history. He makes it clear from the beginning that the incident he is about to describe has to be interpreted as an important political and historical act. After giving a description of what led to the destoolment of King Akufo, he discusses at length an aspect that Opoku in contrast hardly touches upon: Queen Mother Akua Oye was not just a political figure, she was also married to Pastor Simeon Koranteng and thus, as a pastor's wife, part of the Basel Mission congregation and under special missionary observation. Rottmann writes:

> Die Seele der ganzen Bewegung, der Mund des Volkes war die Mutter Owusu ansa's, Frau Pfarrer Korantang. Man wird vielleicht verwundert fragen, wie eine Pfarrfrau eine solche Rolle spielen konnte; aber man muss sich diese auffallende Erscheinung aus den hiesigen Verhältnissen erklären.
>
> [The soul of the whole movement and the mouthpiece of the people was

> Owusu Ansah's mother, the wife of Pastor Koranteng. One asks, perhaps with surprise, how a pastor's wife could come to play such a prominent role. But one has to find the explanation in our local situation here.]
>
> (Rottmann 1908)

This passage continues to fascinate me. Pastor Koranteng's wife not only holds one of the most important roles in the Kingdom of Akuapem, but she also agrees that her son, who had worked as a catechist for eight years, becomes the new king and thus – according to the missionary definition – "falls back into heathenism". How can a missionary ask his headquarters staff to understand and appreciate the local meaning of an event of this kind? There are reasons related to the power balance between the mission and the political system in Akuapem that might be part of a useful answer to this question: "Better to lose a Christian soul and gain a king friendly to us". However, as I am interested in the possible impact of the author's hybrid position, let me go beyond this and turn to Rottmann's own background and its possible significance here.

Wilhelm Rottmann's connection to the Gold Coast goes back to his birth and before. His mother, Regina Hesse, was the daughter of a Danish merchant and a woman from Shai on the Gold Coast. The relatives of his African mother played an important part in establishing the Basel Mission Trading Company in Accra whose pioneer was Wilhelm's father, Ludwig Rottmann. This unusual marriage between a German missionary and a woman coming from an influential Euro-African family had consequences for both sides. Many of Regina Hesse's relatives converted to the Christian faith. Her extended family, on the other hand, supported Ludwig Rottmann's first and quite successful steps as a Basel Mission merchant (cf Miescher 1996: 35 et sec.). Wilhelm Rottmann mainly grew up in Basel, as did most Basel Missionaries' children. Taking up his work as missionary in Ghana as an adult, his position was formally the same as that of his full European colleagues. His description of the events in Akuapem, however, might carry traces of his being part of an extended African family on his mother's side, and his own experience as not quite white in Europe and not quite black in Africa.

"One asks perhaps with surprise how a pastor's wife could come to play such a prominent role" (Rottmann 1908): Rottmann's writing seems to be directed at the reader in Basel. There is something against the rules here, but it can be explained, Rottmann suggests. He describes Akua Oye's decision as completely understandable, although it must look terrible and unforgivable from an orthodox European Christian point of view. Rottmann explains that it is a queen mother who gives her country its king and that it is she who is responsible for his behaviour. Since Akufo was squandering the royal family's property, she "regarded it as her patriotic duty to intervene" (Rottmann 1908). Nothing in this passage reminds one of the European discourses on Africans'

or on women's inferiority. Akue Oye is regarded as a rational, responsible political player. This passage can thus be read as a site of contested meaning, opposing the prescribed routes of interpretation. Rottmann urges us to see a *political* event. Although he mentions this, he does not focus on the fact that the Mission's rules were broken by the un-Christian role that a pastor's wife took on or that through these events the Mission was losing a catechist. He rather tries to establish a positive view saying that the new king was

> linked to the Mission in gratitude, and knows what he owes to it. His way of relating to us is in no way patronizing but very obliging, and in relation to me, his former teacher, he behaves even with humility.
>
> (Rottmann 1908)

Here Rottmann suggests accepting the scandalous disregard for the Mission's rules by a pastor's wife who makes her catechist son become a heathen king. Pointing to the power balance that seems to have been consolidated by Owusu Ansah's enstoolment, Rottmann writes in a much more sympathetic way of Akua Oye than officially allowed by the Basel headquarters. He was able to describe the political change in Akwapem in terms that made it understandable and comprehensible to the European reader. Thus, Rottmann's writing mediates between the political system of Akwapem and the orthodox Basel Mission rules, thereby documenting the hybrid position of a mission "in the field" which is in fact not outside but part of the local political system and the hybrid position of a missionary who is not only accustomed to many aspects of Akwapem life but is also part of an indigenous family.

In contrast to Rottmann, Opoku's report seems to document a much less emotionally involved position. Reading Opoku's report, one becomes aware of his exact description of the incident. He lists the detailed reasons for Akua Oye's complaints against her nephew, King Akufo, and describes the events that led to the destoolment at great length. Thereby, as a writer, he maintains a personal distance from the incident, reporting rather than interpreting, using a dramatic style and describing the conflict in a colourful fashion. His narrative reaches a climax when Opoku describes Akua Oye's words to the chiefs. This longer passage written in direct speech is performative in a double sense. First of all, with her demand to destool the king, Akua Oye uses her legal power as a queen mother and *makes* a political act by *articulating* it. In taking up this significant performative act in the middle of his report, Opoku stages the strong political impact of the royal system in Akuapem without seeming to be personally involved. He introduces Oye's speech descriptively, saying that he had already noted above some of Oye's complaints made through the Okyeam, her spokesperson, and that he now cites her conclusion. This marks a radical change in Opoku's tone. The powerful words that follow are virtually a

quotation and Akua Oye's words are communicated directly to the reader:

> That, as a mother and the responsible person upon whom the peace and well-being of Akuapem depended, it was I who had Akufo placed on the stool .... His disrespect to me as a mother and the disregard he has shown to these Chiefs and nobilities has shown his unfitness for ruling. I therefore declare that it was I who gave him the Omanhene stool to be the Omanhene and I reclaim it and do destool him for today. He is no more Omanhene and is not to be considered as such.
>
> (Opoku 1908)

Akua Oye expresses her anger and her criticism and she finally carries out Akufo's destoolment. Her performance becomes the centre of the text, both rhetorically and in terms of content. As if to give more weight to Oye's words, they are followed by a semantic and acoustic explosion: guns are fired, the assembly applauds, the news spreads like wild fire, people dance "in ecstasy of joy ... round the town in a wild excitement" (Opoku 1908). When Opoku calls the destoolment a "remarkable and wonderful incident" one might ask whether the guarded observer had himself lost his carefully kept distance in the town's laughter and dance.[4]

After describing the Governmental Enquiry that followed Akufo's removal from the stool, Opoku's report turns to a personal remark. One does not know what to think of the whole affair, he writes, but the Lord must have had his hand in it: "It is the Lord's doing, what could we short-sighted mortals say or do?" (Opoku 1908). This disturbing sentence resignifies the revolutionary act that happened in Akwapem kingdom on July 29, 1907. It says that Akufo's destoolment has to be shifted from being the deed of the Akuapem Queen Mother Akua Oye to being the deed of the Lord. It is finally God who brought about the event. His invisible hands arranged it and it is up to him to interpret his own deed – a task that goes beyond a mortal's capability. Thus the deed wanders from Oye to the Lord and changes from being a political to a divine act. Opoku strengthens this view saying that the event came on both subjects, Akua Oye and Akufo, "like a dream". How was this shifting of a revolutionary deed possible, why was it transcribed from a political into a religious context?

Theophil Opoku was born in Akropong as a member of a family closely connected to the royal court of Akwapem. He joined the household of a missionary as a child and started mission school a little later. Taking part in the first class of the newly established pastors' seminary, Opoku belongs to the first small group of Africans who became native catechists and were finally appointed as fully ordained pastors. Although he seems to have been a faithful mission worker throughout his life, the historical sources document his position as a cultural in-between. Opoku did not totally leave the surroundings

of his family, most of the time living in, or close to Akropong, the capital of Akwapem. The Basel Mission had established itself as one of the local centres of power at this time. As a deacon and later an ordained indigenous pastor in the strongly hierarchical mission structure, Opoku had reached a new position as an African. On the one hand, the rise of natives in the Mission hierarchy reduced the differences between the European and the African mission workers. But these hierarchic differences provided a fundamental structural base for the mission work and thus had to be continually reconstructed. To make matters more difficult, Opoku had knowledge and connections at his disposal that made him understand, more than any missionary, what was going on behind the scenes in the palace. Many reports of the missionaries at this time describe how irritating it was to be superior to the native workers while they in turn knew more than the missionaries themselves and also more than they were prepared to tell the missionaries. In this sense, a horizontal axis of power existed among the native pastors that was informal and cut across the official, vertical axis of power of the European missionaries.

Against this background, the transforming of Akua Oye's political deed in the middle of the text to the Lord's divine deed at the end can be read as a strategy that makes the text talk in different voices. The receiver of this report in Basel may hear the voice of a faithful and humble pastor. But the reader might also hear the voice of a sharp observer describing and reconstructing the political events in detail. Through Akua Oye's strong voice, one can even perceive the voice of a powerful politician. The intertwining of different narratives allows Opoku to write a highly political report that would pass the Basel censorship. The official author of the text, an obedient native pastor, is, as it were, covering a politically involved writer who was also Theophilus Opoku.

By this, I do not mean that Opoku consciously chose this writing strategy. If his identity as a native pastor was continuously endangered by his involvement with Akwapem politics, such a strategy might have helped him here to resolve his personal ambiguities too. The conclusion that it is God's deed could have been a means of readjusting his affiliation with the Mission.

As discussed above, the events in Akropong were not easy to judge for the Basel Mission. In fact, the Mission would have had good reason to oppose the situation. Opoku's text, as well as Rottmann's report, can be read as a means of telling the headquarters in Basel that Akufo's destoolment had to be accepted. While Rottman has interpreted Akua Oye's deed, despite her conflict with the Mission's laws, as a rational, politically meaningful act, Opoku chose differently. His reference to the Lord's hand in the act must, however, be seen as a powerful metaphorical signal to Basel that requires his readers to accept the recent development in Akwapem.

In looking at Opoku and Rottmann in more detail, the simple image of a

missionary working in Africa and of an African working for a European mission have begun to oscillate. Their reports on this destoolment case, and their positions as writers do not seem to be as clear as they would have been defined in Basel. This reading has presented their identities as ambiguous rather than fixed and given. Placing well-known patterns of identities into crisis and looking for their hybridity seems to offer new readings of texts and subtexts. Mission reports thus become vivid platforms to study the negotiation of meaning – meaning that seems to be stable and predetermined by the European subject, but only at first glance.

Notes

1. I am most grateful to Michelle Gilbert and Paul Jenkins for bringing the Opoku Reports to my attention. In addition, they put me on the trail of Opoku's history in the Basler Mission archive; a project that has turned me into, if not a full historian, then at least a hybrid philosopher.

   I would also like to thank Paul Jenkins, Stephan Meyer, Jürg Schneider, Ulrike Sill and Kylie Thomas for their valuable comments on this article.

2. This aspect was in fact about to change at the beginning of the twentieth century since the Mission had decided in 1901 to reorganise the Women's Mission (cf Haas 1994: 46 et sec.).

3. Paul Jenkins has done a lot of valuable work reading texts and photographs as documents of the exchanges, encounters and everyday contacts between missionaries and natives that had usually *not* been part of the official Basel Mission concept. Thus, he was able to show that there was presumably a lively exchange between the missionary women and the native women going on, a fact that as an unplanned intercultural contact and as a "women's matter" was officially double-censored (cf e.g. Jenkins 2002).

4. This interpretation of Opoku's description of what took place in Akropong as a "remarkable and wonderful incident" is somewhat provocative. Why does Opoku speak of an "incident" and not an "event"? Why does he use the word "wonderful" in this context? One would have to investigate his use of English in this situation. The complexity of this issue can only be touched on here. Opoku's mother tongue was Twi. His use of English, learnt in the mission school, was most probably influenced by missionaries in Akropong who were native speakers of German. In addition, his English is strongly influenced by biblical discourse.

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