"I NOW GO TO CHURCH, I AM NOT UNDER THE CHIEF"
THE COLONIAL ORIGINS OF RELIGION AND POLITICS IN GHANA

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ABSTRACT

Today traditional chieftaincy in Africa has become a topic of public and academic discussions about good governance, democracy, civil society and the like. Chieftaincy is perceived increasingly as a 'political institution' and the religious quality of the chiefly offices that the classic ethnographies emphasized has been largely forgotten. The essay seeks to explain this disjuncture by looking at the case of the Asante people of Ghana, claiming that one of the most dramatic changes brought by the colonial rule was the secularization of indigenous leadership, which permanently transformed the ways in which the traditional institutions were conceptualized. The origin of the contemporary 'political discourse' about chiefs is traced to the conflicts between Christian missions and chiefs during the early colonial period.

Keywords: divine kingship, Christian missions, colonialism, Asante people of Ghana

Introduction

This essay discusses the impact of Christian missionary work on the institutions of sacred kingship and chiefship among the Asante people during the early colonial period. The thrust of the paper is that separate categories of religion and politics emerged in Asante[1] society as the colonial administration sought to facilitate missionary work and conversion while at the same time it supported the chiefs as the sole political rulers of the country. Concurrently, a modern notion of citizenship was planted. This paper is a part of larger research project titled "Divine rulers in a secular state" that deals with the significance of so-called divine kingship in colonial and post-colonial politics in Ghana.[2]

Since chieftaincy in Africa has not faded away, as some proponents of classical modernization or underdevelopment theories predicted, traditional rulers have revived as a topic of study in anthropology, political science, history, development studies and other related disciplines. Accordingly, chiefs have also been given a role in grand theories about political processes in Africa. The recent literature offers two main perspectives. On the one hand, there are those who juxtapose traditional political institutions, such as chieftaincy, with centralized bureaucratic states and study the different ways this relationship has been arranged (e.g. Mamdani 1996). On the other, there are those who stress the hybrid nature of African political institutions and therefore regard the division between traditional and modern institutions as outmoded for the analysis of political processes. Instead of

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Suomen Antropologi: Journal of the Finnish Anthropological Society
33(3) Autumn 2008
PO Box 59, 00014 University of Helsinki, Finland

institutions, these latter studies focus on strategies of local elites, who re-appropriate certain aspects of both indigenous and imported political cultures in order to consolidate their own hold on power (e.g. Bayart 1993). What these approaches have in common is the assumption of a separate political sphere of society, where institutions, agents, or groups compete, co-operate, or co-exist. These studies define, even if implicitly, politics as what is relative to power, and that is what both traditional chiefships and modern states are supposedly all about. However, even a superficial glance at the classic ethnographies of African societies reveals that the kings and chiefs of the pre-colonial era were not 'political leaders' in the same sense as modern political theory suggests. They were characterized as rain-makers, diviners, healers, priests, magicians, or controllers of witchcraft, and the origins of their offices were traced to the spiritual realm. The contemporary political theorists who write about chiefs rarely address this spiritual quality of the chiefly office and, in fact, the whole community that the chiefs ruled.

For instance, in Mahmood Mamdani's book *Citizen and Subject* (1996), which was one of the most influential pieces on African politics in the 1990s, one finds a great deal of talk about chiefs but hardly anything about their religious significance. Mamdani's thesis is that colonial rule was based on "institutional segregation", which the independence of African states later failed to abolish. Faced with the dilemma of establishing control over their conquests, colonial powers reserved a space of civic rights and direct rule for themselves, a white civil society in urban areas, and dominated the rural African population through indirect rule by either reconstituting or imposing tribal leadership as the local extension of the colonial state. (Hence the urban whites were the citizens, while the rural Africans were the subjects.) This is what he calls the "bifurcated" nature of the colonial state. Mamdani claims that post-colonial African elites have sought to sustain this differentiation by ruling the countryside through patrimonial alliances with local, tribally-defined leadership. This total arrangement has also given shape to the resistance against the state, which often assumes a "tribalistic form". Mamdani stresses that colonial rule severely distorted the political structures of the pre-colonial era, but this discussion revolves around political concepts like "popular sanction" and "despotism" or the control of vital resources like farmland and cattle (Mamdani 1996: 3–27).

In the case of the Akan, the Asante and Fante peoples in particular, Mamdani describes their pre-colonial polities as "conquest states" structured as "loose confederations". According to his reading, based on the accounts of the government anthropologist R.S. Rattray, the authority of the pre-colonial chief was limited and severely defined. The chief could not take any action without the advice and consent of his councillors, who on their parts were subject to similar restraints from their own communities. Consequently, state politics was discussed on several levels before any decision could be made in council. The community of freemen, the citizens of the chiefdoms, constituted the legitimate "public opinion", and the officeholders installed by them, the chiefs and councillors, were merely "vehicles of communication". According to Mamdani, the British colonial rule put an end to all of this. The colonial administration reserved the rights to appoint and dismiss chiefs and rewrote and manipulated customary laws, overriding the local decision-making bodies. The traditional system with its layers of representation and democratic tendencies was thus replaced with a colonial system of "decentralized despotism" (Mamdani 1996: 47–48).

Mamdani is certainly correct when he points out that the African rural populations did not have any citizenship rights in the colonial state. However, because questions of religion are excluded from his 'political' approach, he fails to notice some important negotiations about citizenship, representation, and contract that went on in the colonial 'native states' that he describes. The claim of this paper is that one of the most dramatic changes brought by the colonial rule was the secularization of indigenous leadership, which permanently transformed the ways in which the African political formations were conceptualized. In fact, it was only after chieftaincy was conceived as a 'political institution' that it could be discussed in terms of freedom, citizenship, despotism, and the like. This idea was achieved through different, sometimes mutually contradictory, historical processes: the growth of colonial trade based on European ideas of economic value, dissemination of Christianity, implementation of indirect rule, and rising demands for African self-government. This paper examines how two of these processes, Christian conversion and indirect rule policy, together contributed to the new notion of secular politics.

Emergence of the modern idea of politics

When discussing these changes I am using Louis Dumont's theories on the differentiation of the political category and the birth of the modern state in the West as a starting point. Dumont did not become famous as a post-colonial theorist. On the contrary, his celebrated works on the Indian caste system (e.g. Dumont 1980 [1966]) have been criticized precisely for not recognizing the impact of the British rule in the Indian society during the Raj (Dirks 1992). However, recently his theories have been successfully used in analysis of religious change in a colonial setting (Robbins 2004) and I wish to continue that here.

According to Dumont (1971: 32), in so-called traditional societies "the configuration of values has a hierarchical form where the all-embracing normative consideration which we usually call religion contains and limits whatever other social considerations are recognized". Politics, if such category exists at all, is subordinate to religion. In such societies, states and rulers are intermediaries between God or a spirit world and society, which consists of collective elements, such as estates, orders, or clans. An Asante chiefdom of the pre-colonial era can be described in these terms. Such a polity was composed of several matrilineages that were established on the basis of common descent from a known female ancestor. An Asante person was considered a whole person or a human being through his membership in the lineage. The matrilineage has often been called a 'perpetual corporation' meaning that it was understood to be comprised not only of its living members but also of the dead ancestors and the unborn. The most important ancestors were those of the chiefly lineage, because they were considered the 'original owners' of the territory, where the chiefdom was located. The office of the chief held a nodal position, since it stood between the living, who were considered the guardians of the fortunes and affairs of the chiefdom, and the ancestral spirits who had absolute power over the former. Generally, the ancestors were considered to use their powers to help the living in their worldly undertakings, but the bad deeds of the living also brought shame on the ancestors, who did not hesitate to punish them. Thus the prosperity and welfare of the living were believed to depend directly on good relations with the ancestors. Because of the fragility of this connection it was vital that the office vested in the chiefly lineage was occupied by a person who was a matrilineal

descendant of the founding ancestor of the lineage and thus close enough to the ancestors to communicate with them. This communication took place through sacrifice. In addition to the ancestral spirits, the chief also made sacrifices to the local deities in order to guarantee the well-being and success of his people. The kingdom of Asante was a union of several chiefdoms, and the king, the *Asantehene*, performed similar ritual duties to his royal ancestors and gods on behalf of the kingdom.

It would, however, be incorrect to say that the Asante chiefs were only ritual rulers, ceremonial figure heads or symbols. On the contrary, the chief had many functions that we could describe as political, legal, military or economic. For instance, he presided over a decision-making council of elders and a judicial court, he commanded an army, and he also allocated farmland to his subjects. Nonetheless, what must be emphasized here is that all these functions were derived from the chief's connection to the spirit world. He did not distribute farmland because the land belonged to him, neither did the land belong to the community, who would then have vested the right of allocation in the chief. He did so because the land belonged to the ancestors and he was their representative, or better said, their reincarnation, among the living. Hence, all the other functions of the chief were hierarchically subordinate to the value of his 'religious' functions.

One of Dumont's major contributions has been his detailed examination of how holistic, or traditional, societies become individualistic, or modern, as a result of an internal process of transformation. He has documented the successive differentiation of the political category and the expansion of the modern state from the dawn of the papal state to the English, American and French revolutions. This has been done with reference to relevant developments in religious doctrine, philosophy, and law. The space here does not allow me to review these processes in any detail or length. I will only very briefly sum up the most important characteristics of the modern state as they help me to analyze of the transformation of the Asante chieftaincy under the colonial rule. According to Dumont, modern society is separated from traditional societies by a displacement of the main value stress from the social whole to the individual taken as an embodiment of humanity at large. Power, rights and property, among other things, are seen as attributes of the individual. The relationship between man and God is an individual matter and therefore religion has lost its all-embracing quality and it has become one among other considerations, for instance politics. In this scheme of things, politics address the question of how these individuals, with similar needs, objectives and powers, and who are considered equal in principle, organize themselves, how they associate with each other. States emerge through contracts made by individuals in their capacity as citizens and consequently rulers only represent the ruled, and the power of the state is nothing more than the powers of its members delegated to another level. Hence, the state does not 'transcend' itself; it exists only for itself and not for any 'higher cause' like ancestral spirits or gods. This way it does not need any external reference point to explain its own existence (Dumont 1971, 1992 [1986]: 60–103). In what follows, I will discuss how similar divisions and categories were introduced in colonial Ghana by European Christian missionaries and colonial administrators as they sought to redefine the relationship between the African 'native' and his/her ruler.

Christianity and civilization

The Establishment Christian missionary work among the Asante preceded the British occupation, but the missions were not able to consolidate their position before the full imposition of colonial rule in 1901. Christianity was first introduced to the Asante by the Wesleyan-Methodist mission in 1839. From the outset, the missionaries gained very limited and closely supervised access to the kingdom. Their public insistence on the abolition of polygamy, slavery and human sacrifices (which were central to the royal cult of ancestors), aroused suspicions in the upper echelons of the Asante state, and the missionaries were rather tolerated in the hope that they would help create contact with the European merchants on the coast.

In general, Protestant missionary work as an ongoing and consistent activity emerged only at the end of the eighteenth century and it was very closely connected to some major changes in the position of religion in European and North American societies (van Rooden 1996: 66–67). In his writings on Christianity in Africa, John Peel has repeatedly criticized the ways in which the missionary endeavour is too simplistically blended with "other grand narratives". According to Peel, Christianity in Africa should not be treated as "a religion of the conqueror", an inevitable result of European imperialism or colonialism. Equally, the adoption of capitalist ideology, scientific rationalism and other strands of modern European culture in Africa should not be seen as automatic by-products of the missionary project. Although Evangelical Christianity was born in the intellectual atmosphere of the Enlightenment, and the modern idea of civilization had religious roots, the premises and aims of missionary work—the sinfulness of human nature and the salvation of souls—were markedly different from secular projects that put their trust in human reason and fortunes of this world (Peel 2000: 2–7). In the pre-Enlightenment era, conquest and conversion had moved together: from the expansion of the Christian Roman Empire originating in the early fourth century, to the conquest of America by the Catholic kings of Spain and Portugal, the conversion of 'pagan peoples' to Christianity had been a part of a state policy. Later, however, the major colonial powers in Africa promoted Christianity only indirectly and sometimes even discouraged it (Peel 1978: 445–446). By the nineteenth century, religious denominations were regarded as forms of voluntary associations that were separate from states and the world of politics and power in general. Churches were expected to effect social change indirectly by furthering the moral education of individual citizens who, on their part, contributed to the welfare of the nation that they formed. Christian missions that aimed at the transformation of foreign societies were thus part of a larger social project (van Rooden 1996: 80–83). Many Christians had "become progressively estranged from the dominant culture" of their own societies (Peel 2000: 5) and thought that their own countrymen were badly in need of a reformation. The missionaries used expressions like "so-called Christian England" and characterized their fellow citizens as "at least nominally, Christian men" (see East 1844: 244), when they wanted to emphasize that the civilization of the 'Dark Continent' could not be a secular process conducted by administrators, merchants, and educators. The Christian anti-slavery movement, which in many ways preceded the missionary movement (Peel 2000: 7–8), exemplified this philosophy as it blamed both Europeans and Africans, whose greediness had created the slave trade and kept it extensive and flourishing, for the "evils of slavery" (see e.g. Buxton 1840: 69–70).

Unlike his/her medieval Roman Catholic predecessors, the nineteenth-century Protestant missionary was not interested in converting pagan kings and their kingdoms. The unit of salvation was the individual soul and for that reason the conversion process did not have to start from the top. Accordingly, the first missionaries in Asante merely asked the *Asantehene* to adopt a tolerant attitude towards missionary work. For instance, in 1862, Reverend William West pleaded with *Asantehene* Kwaku Dua Panin for permission to reopen the Wesleyan mission house in Asante by stating the following:

> I told them, that, (…) I wished (…) to ascertain the mind of the King with regard to our Mission; that I was desirous of impressing upon the mind of the King that *we had nothing whatever to do with politics, or the affairs of the Government, but were solely engaged in spreading the Christian religion*, which we know to be of God; that in fact we had no other end in view. I ventured to express a hope, that, as our only object was the happiness and salvation of his people, he would in no way oppose the preaching of the Gospel, nor hinder his people in making a profession of Christianity; and that, should I wish at any time to return to Kumasi myself or to send any one up to take charge of the station, there might be no obstacle thrown in the way, but that both they and I might be allowed to come and go as we pleased. (Wesleyan Missionary Notices, August 25, 1862: 157–158; italics added)

However, this seemingly compliant attitude was more or less a front that covered a design for large-scale changes. As one writer of a missionary magazine *The Friend of Africa* (August 1841: 157) put it, they intended to bring whole nations from darkness into light. The foundation of this operation was the idea that the religious conviction of an individual could provide a basis for major secular developments. The missionaries saw the human soul as the original source of all social ills and therefore the prerequisite of the civilizing of the African society was the reformation of the individual. Civilisation could not be achieved by the implementation of any 'human policy'. For instance, one could change the laws of a 'heathen country' so that they would be in agreement with the principles of Christianity, but in the long run society would not improve because laws could always be abused by the 'wickedness', 'love of gain', or 'passions' of humans. Similarly, economic progress brought on by the introduction of new technologies, improved trade relations or more effective extraction of natural resources could not take place before the people were liberated from their superstitions concerning nature, time, geography and such things. Therefore, a true Christian conviction was seen as the only way to civilization: "No man can become a Christian in the true sense of the term, however savage he may have been before, without becoming a civilised man" (East 1844: 238–243). Consequently, the missionaries did not have to overthrow or convert the African rulers; the Christian Africans themselves would build a new society. This way Christianity could provide the Africans with "[a] taste for the comforts and conveniences of European life" and the "spirit of industry and the desire for improvement" (ibid.: 289).

Despite the great objectives set, several decades of missionary work in the nineteenth century produced only a handful a converts in Asante. In addition to the negative stance of the chiefs, the work was constantly hindered by illnesses and language problems and finally interrupted by wars between the Asante and the British (McCaskie 1995: 136–140). Towards the end of the nineteenth century, when the Asante kingdom had become a significantly weaker regional power, the missionaries started to make more outright political demands. One of these was the "liberty of conscience" for all Asante (ibid.: 139–142). However, they still had to wait for the final downfall of the kingdom for this to happen.

Conversion

After 1901, when Asante was permanently placed under British occupation, both the Wesleyan-Methodist and Basel (later Presbyterian) missions were able to secure a footing in Asante and they were also joined by the Roman Catholic mission. The early missions made slow and steady progress, though most of their churches and schools were primarily attended by non-Asantes. For instance, in 1912, after a good ten years of missionary work, only 2% of the total population had converted (Colonial reports No. 771). To some extent, the slow conversion of the Asante reflected the general hostility towards the military occupation, but more importantly it had to do with the fact that the teachings and way of life endorsed by the missions put the converts very radically at odds with their communities.

In promoting the idea of 'civilization', the missionary attitude remained disapproving of Asante 'customs' and the traditional way of life. For the missionaries 'fetishism', as the Asante belief system was branded, was not considered only an obstacle for achieving civilization, but also something truly influenced by the devil (see Pietz 1987, 1988). Hence, the missionaries understood their work in terms of calling the converts from pagan associations and surroundings to a Christian way of life by all means possible. Using scriptural injunctions the missionaries insisted that the converts had to be, at least spiritually, separated from their old allegiances and live apart as individual men and women.[3] However, in a social setting where the spirit world was all-pervasive, an attempt to separate oneself from it spiritually could mean ultimately that one had to abandon it completely. Every aspect of Asante society could be brought under suspicion and condemned. For instance, such fundamental and at first sight commonplace matters as village living arrangements could become an insurmountable problem. Customarily, every Asante village or town was divided into quarters, where the members of a single lineage were supposed to live in several households. The lineages also had their own burial grounds in the same locality. Each of these quarters stood under the protection of its own ancestors and gods and was directed by the elders responsible for the ritual veneration of these spirits as well as the chief (Debrunner 1967: 198). Consequently, for the Christians, even everyday activities in the domestic circle with relatives could put them in contact with 'fetishes'. Sometimes this was avoided by moving the Christians from their 'ancestral quarters' to detached settlements around the missions. These new communities were called Salems, Jerusalems, or 'White man's towns'. Hence, the idea of 'religious separation' led to an actual physical separation. There, drawn away from their past lives, they entered a new type of society, built around the mission house, the church and the school, where new ideals and concepts were expressed in terms of European culture (Williamson 1965: 56–57). An old school master reminisced about the attitudes of early Christians in the following way:

> The first biblical command, "You shall have no gods except me" (Exodus 20, 3) was to be rigidly enforced and forcibly observed. In consequence, despising or showing downright contempt for all and every traditional belief was often a mark of good membership of the Salem community. Anything and everything about fetishes was regarded profane, ungodly, a sin, and was therefore to be shunned like a plague. (Kyei 2001: 46)

Although it has to be remembered that these changes touched only a very small minority of the Asante people and not even the majority of the Christians, it is clear that such

radical renunciation of society—and indeed of personhood—as it had been previously understood must have had a widespread shock effect.

In the early decades of colonial rule the government received an enormous number of complaints from chiefs, whose converted subjects refused to heed their summons or to provide services on the grounds that service to the chief was 'fetish worship' (Tordoff 1965: 197–198). "I now go to church, I am not under the chief", was a common reply from the converts when asked why they refused the services (Busia 1968 [1951]: 137). In some localities, these differences had led to violence between the Christians and 'traditionalists' (Tordoff 1965: 197–198). Furthermore, there was evidence that some people had first turned to Christianity in order to avoid their traditional obligations. Some were said to be Christians in name only and to have converted for 'worldly gain', so as to avoid paying taxes collected by the chiefs, for example. It was also understood that the introduction of cocoa, a cash crop that demanded a low labour input, was making people selfish and greedy and conversion to Christianity provided a way for some of the newly rich cocoa farmers "to protect their money" from the claims of their kinsmen and chiefs (Allman and Tashijan 2000: 28–39). In some places it was reported that opposition to a particular chief had taken the form of conversion and subsequently a wholesale rejection of chiefly rule (Tordoff 1965: 197–198). In 1905 the Governor of the Gold Coast wrote:

> The tendency of Christian converts to alienate themselves from the communities to which they belong is very marked, and is naturally resented by the chiefs, who claim their hereditary right, in which they are supported by Government, to make the converts in common with their fellow tribesmen obey such laws and orders as are in accordance with native custom, not being repugnant to natural justice, equity and good conscience. (Quoted in Busia 1968 [1951]: 133–134)

These developments presented a dilemma for the British officials who tried to implement indirect rule, a policy of conserving African society and culture and ruling the colonial subjects through traditional institutions, but who also had to facilitate Christian missionary work. The missions wanted to stay out of 'politics', as they understood it, but did not want their religion to become branded as subversive, and therefore assisted the government in enforcing the principle that Christians can not shirk "ordinary obligations imposed on them by native custom" (Tordoff 1965: 198).

Separating religion and politics

The colonial authorities tried to come up with a solution for the conflict in 1912, when the governor of the Gold Coast visited Asante. He met a committee consisting of the Chief Commissioner, three other government officials, and representatives of the Christian missions—Wesleyan, Basel and Roman Catholic missionaries. This committee, made up of only European members, drew up rules for the chiefs and the churches. The two rules regulating chief-subject relations were:

1. No Christian shall be called upon to perform any fetish rites or service, but shall be bound to render customary service to his chief on ceremonial occasions when no element of fetish practice is involved

2. An effort should be made to draw a distinction between fetish and purely ceremonial service.
   (Quoted in Busia 1968 [1951]: 134)

When a Christian convert refused to perform a service required of him on the ground that it was 'fetish', the district commissioners were to decide whether it involved a 'fetish' or not (ibid.). Furthermore, it was stated that all Christians belonged to the jurisdiction of their chiefs' courts and they had to attend court when summoned (Allman and Tashijan 2000: 31). It would be impossible to list all the things that finally became included in the category of 'fetishism' and thus not mandatory for the Christians, but what is important is that a real attempt was made to separate in detail the religious from the political and thus secularize the Asante chieftaincy. However, the separation remained vague, to say the least. As Busia (1991 [1954]: 208) pointed out, in Asante thought the office of the chief was not divisible into secular and sacred, political and religious, and therefore such divisions were necessarily arbitrary. Through this distinction, a 'right-bearing individual' was also placed at the centre of the political society. From now on, a person's 'free choice' of religion determined the nature of his/her relationship to his/her chief and consequently the, up till then, dominant traditional view of the 'constitution' of the Asante polity was challenged. To put it another way, the Christian Asante of the early colonial period were depicted increasingly as 'citizens' of their natal chiefdoms.

The committee's ruling managed to clarify the relationship between chiefs and their Christian subjects to some extent. The following year, 1913, the Chief Commissioner of Ashanti wrote that the new rules "have so far had the effect of lessening the breach between the factions" and the relations now showed a "decided improvement" (Colonial reports No. 771). Nonetheless, ambiguity remained and disputes about the borderline between religion and politics did continue. Even nowadays, when Christianity is the majority religion in Asante and many chiefs are practising Christians, conflicts between churches and traditional rulers surface occasionally. One of the most significant incidents took place in 1942, when Christian clergy, both European and local, submitted a petition to the *Asantehene*, in which they requested that Christians should not be forced to treat Thursdays as days of rest. Previously, the *Asantehene* and his council had decreed that farm work on Thursdays, a sacred weekday for the Asante 'earth-goddess' Asase Yaa, was an offence (Busia 1968 [1951]: 135). The petition was titled "Memorandum on the relation between Christians and the State" and it argued that the converts were loyal to their chiefs but could not rest on Thursdays because Sunday was already their holy day. The petition was eventually turned down by the king, but it showed how a group of people that had been constantly growing in numbers was thinking about their relationship to their rulers. The three quotes that follow are from the memorandum and they reveal some notable changes in the ways the state was conceptualized:

On the part of the chiefs we would ask that they accept as a fact the existence of Christians as members of their State and lay down ways by which *they can show their allegiance to their chiefs without at the same time offending their Christian conscience* (e.g. if a chief orders community work, say on roads, to take place on a Sunday as being the day most suitable to the majority of his subjects, he might at the same time state that Christians may do their share of the work on the preceding Saturday. This taking of the initiative by the chief in remembering those of his subjects who are Christians would, we believe, go a long way towards relieving the strained feeling at present existing in such matters).

(…) We believe that *the Christian Community is large enough for the State to be the loser if Christians are cut off from a share in the country's political life*. If no recognized place exists in Native Customary Law for those who do not believe in 'fetish', has not the time come in view of many changing circumstances for the adaptation of Native Customary Law in order that it may include in its provisions all loyal *citizens*?

(…) Against this background we look at the position of Christians in relation to the observance of Thursday. We recognize that this is an observance closely linked with ancient beliefs of the Ashanti people; beliefs which, however, are not to our mind wholly compatible with the Christian belief in God. Our members, if they observe the day, cannot do so for the ancient Ashanti reason. *The question arises should they be asked to observe the day out of respect for the beliefs of others in the community*. We feel that we cannot ask this of our members, in that to refrain from work on Thursday would be to them a confession of faith in Asase Yaa and her relation to harvest and famine and therefore a denial of the Fatherhood and providential care of God. A like difficulty of conscience holds in relation to other special days and observances which have a similar significance to Asase Yaa. If, however, the chief reason behind this observance is not so much the association with Asase Yaa as a desire for some *communal act to express the unity of the nation, we would ask whether there is not some other act of allegiance in which the Christians could take part*; an act which would not place the working life of farmers under the disadvantage of refraining from work on two days in the week. (Quoted in Busia 1968 [1951]: 220–222; italics added)

First of all, 'allegiance' and 'conscience' are separated, which corresponds to the divisions between politics and religion as well as citizenship and humanity as an attribute of the individual. In fact, the word 'citizen' is used here, along with terms like 'subject' and 'member of a state'. Secondly, when referring to 'traditional religion' it is spoken of as a 'belief of others in the community', which entails the idea of religion as a private matter that does not concern the community as a whole but rather each of its members separately. Thirdly, when a 'communal act to express the unity of the nation' is discussed, the authors of the memorandum seem to put forth an idea that the 'community' exists as a result of a conscious effort of the individuals that comprise it. In an indirect way this relates to the notion of contract, since the Christians see themselves here negotiating about how their individual contributions to 'unity' should be channelled.

Clearly, the talk on citizenship, representation, and contract had come to stay, and it was to become central in shaping the ways in which the Asante saw themselves in the past, the present and the future. Later on, as Ghana gained its status as an independent nation-state and chieftaincy became at odds with the administration of the post-colonial state, the legitimacy of chieftaincy has been both questioned and supported by arguments on how the chiefs 'represent' people. However, that would be a topic for a different paper. At this point I think it is sufficient to say that today, when traditional institutions are evaluated by the standards of Western democracy, good governance, and human rights, not only by states but also by NGOs and international development aid donors, it is important to know when, how, and why chieftaincy became known as a 'political institution'.

Concluding remarks

I am certainly not the first to discuss the importance of missionary encounters for the development of colonial structures. On the contrary, as Peter Pels (1997: 171–172) has pointed out, the study of Christian missions has been a major field of innovation in the anthropology of colonialism since the 1980s. These works often emphasize the autonomy

of missions and their separation from the colonial state. The capacity of the missionaries to act on African societies, to impose new ways of seeing, thinking and being, is considered to lie primarily in the diffuse processes of the civilizing mission, in the transmission of European values and conventions. These processes did not usually entail exercise of power and coercion and therefore they were markedly different from those of the colonial state (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991: 254). To put it in a simple way, the missionaries worked rather through conversation than compulsion. What I wish to highlight here is that the conversation and the possible conversion that followed required a specific socio-political setting that the colonial state provided by making rules about freedom of conscience and religion and politics. These rules affected the colonial society as a whole. Therefore, if one wishes to obtain a deeper understanding of political life in Africa, or indeed the relationship between religion and politics, one has to become sensitive to how these categories came into being historically, without presuposing concepts and Western ideologies.

NOTES

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[1] The Asante people belong to a larger ethnic and language group called the Akan. The Akan people live in the coastal and forest areas of Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire. In Ghana they are the largest ethnic and language group constituting roughly 40% of the total population. The Akan language and its dialects are classified under the Tano language family, including Asante Twi, Fante and Akuapem, which also have their own distinctive written forms.

[2] I am currently working on a monograph about religion and politics in Ghana. My research is based on fieldwork in Ghana, extensive archival sources and literature. The project has been funded by The Centre of Excellence in Global Governance Research (University of Helsinki) and the Ella and Georg Ehrnrooth Foundation.

[3] According to Williamson (1965: 56) the Basel missionaries often referred to the instructions of 2 Corinthians, Chapter 6, where the Christians are told to separate themselves from the "infidels" and not to touch the "unclean".

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