

# BOOK REVIEW

**Paul Glen Grant. *Healing and Power in Ghana: Early Indigenous Expressions of Christianity*.** Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2020. 327 pp. \$57.99. Hardcover. ISBN: 978-1481312677.

Paul Glen Grant's *Healing and Power in Ghana* is a remarkable study of the imperial encounter in the southern Gold Coast, told through the experience of German missionaries entering the Akuapem region in the nineteenth century. The middle decades of the nineteenth century were a period of upheaval in the Gold Coast; European powers, including the British government, were expanding on the shore, and the Asante Empire to the north was convulsing from the abolition of slavery and warring with nearby kingdoms. Into this volatile landscape entered missionaries from Basel, intent on bringing the word of God to a "heathen" people. In what is a riveting portrait of this dialectical encounter, Grant demonstrates how Christianity eventually took hold in the hilltop community, but not until its gods and priests had proven their power. The process of demonstrating God's protection not only convinced many Akuapem to join the Christian faith, but it also changed the faith of the Basel mission itself. As Grant writes: "The longer [the missionaries] lived in Africa, the more they thought like Africans" (153).

Chapter One situates the reader within the diverse landscape of Akuapem, providing a regional history that closely studies transformations to political authority, spiritual power, and migration from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries. Chapter Two provides an in-depth examination of spiritual power and sacred kingship in Akuapem prior to the imperial encounter; this "thick description" serves to underscore how Christian ideas of sacrifice and sanctuary would coincide with the Akuapem people's understanding of godly protection. Most fascinatingly, Chapter Three recounts the long history of Christianity in Ghana to underscore why the religion had not successfully penetrated the country before the nineteenth century. Grant shows how the religion was fundamentally tied to slavery, and how Gold Coast people did not consider it useful—it was an "asocial religion." The fulcrum of this chapter revolves around an inscription etched in the wall of Elmina castle—a social artifact that Grant deconstructs with masterful historical insight.

Chapters Four through Seven study the activities of the Basel missionaries themselves in Akuapem. Chapter Four makes the crucial point that the missionaries who arrived in the Gold Coast were “not representative Germans” (122). Hailing from marginalized communities in Europe and staunchly opposed to the evils of the slave trade, “the missionaries were strange people,” writes Grant, “They were eccentrics at home and abroad alike” (123). Chapter Five studies how the missionaries came to be viewed as “shrine priests.” As vulnerable people flocked to the missions for sanctuary, the chapels turned into shrines, sites protected by the Christian god who operated like any other powerful *obossum* (god). Grant writes: “The process of seeking sanctuary would become Christianity’s breakthrough in cultural translation” (169). Chapter Six studies how missionaries then competed with the shrine priests in Akuapem, forming a rival site of ritual authority; this presents the chapel as a “counter-shrine” (208). Chapter Seven focuses on the resurrection of a young boy in 1858, making the point that the success of Christianity ultimately came through indigenous missionaries performing vernacular miracles—events that the Basel Mission was loath to write home about, but which convinced the Akuapem of Christianity’s powerful possibilities.

Importantly, Grant also suggests a genealogical connection between Christianity in Akuapem and the Pentecostalism that thrives in Ghana today. Although charismatic Christianity has traditionally been studied as a post-colonial phenomenon, Grant shows that many of its essential components existed from the beginning of conversion history. In particular, the attention to sacrifice, miracles, and the indigenous formation of the “salems” demonstrate a genealogical precedent which profoundly shapes Ghanaian communities today.

In sum, *Healing and Power* testifies to the mutual transformations that the imperial encounter represented in the Gold Coast—a collision that changed spiritual practices and missionaries’ edicts, and which ultimately threatened pre-existing political authorities. Although the title of the book would suggest more of a focus on “healing” than what this study offers—healing itself is rarely mentioned, although the concepts of sanctuary and protection prove to be important—this monograph provides an unusually insightful lens on how the Christian message was translated in the nineteenth century. With careful attention to the dialectics of the encounter, Grant unpacks mutual incomprehension, mistranslations, diplomatic bumbles, and the varying motivations of the actors. Overall, the study is smart and sensitive. The prose is exceptionally clear and a pleasure to read. Without a doubt, this book is required reading for any student interested not only in missionary activities in Africa, but also in landscapes of power, shrines, and the spiritual dimensions of imperial confrontations.

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