Everyday life encapsulated? Two photographs concerning women and the Basel Mission in West Africa, c.1900 *

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ABSTRACT Photographs can have a transforming effect on our thoughts about the history of everyday life in Africa since 1850, in particular offering evidence of active indigenous participation in determining contacts with locally resident Europeans, in this case on mission stations. But if they are to be used as sources, the study of the individual image needs great care. The examples discussed here show that images without the documentation which offers us a localization in time and space are virtually useless – and that the quality of documentation available can vary widely. Beyond documentation, integrating visual sources in historians’ discourse challenges us to develop imaginative and open-ended trains of thought.

One of the images presented here is a unique source, depicting African women performing ‘Born House’ for a missionary baby in inland Cameroon in 1909. It indicates that relations between women as women on and around mission stations cannot merely be subsumed under the concept of a racial hierarchy. The other – an example of a widespread genre in the Basel Mission archive – leads into a discussion of the history of girls’ and women’s handwork classes in what is now southern Ghana, where participation was energized by an indigenous sense of aesthetics and dress. The Ghanaian fashion industry of today (and the women’s profession of dressmaker) have their origins on mission house verandas in the nineteenth century.

It could be argued that the incorporation of visual sources in our work on the African past should be having the same profound impact on what we write as the campaign to record and utilize oral sources a generation ago. But this expected revolution is not yet happening. There are one or two evident reasons for this. Unlike oral tradition in its various forms, photographic sources are not universally available in Africa. Furthermore, as a category of source they are not distinctively African. Nor is their use fired by a patriotism for Africa, as was the case with many pioneer investigators of oral tradition.

There are probably, however, deeper reasons inherent in the nature of photographs as sources which are inhibiting their use by historians. In practice historical reflection using photographs turns out to be by no means simple. One may well find that each individual photograph relevant to a piece of work has to be subject to its own specific mini-investigation as one seeks to incorporate it in a particular historical analysis, so varied are photographs in their content and usability. Indeed, many of us have learned from teaching that historical photographs, when presented to a group for analysis, can turn out to be

* A shorter and earlier version of this paper has been published in German: Jenkins (2000).
very multivalent – the reactions they provoke can prove to be very different from person to person. There is no reason why they should prove less multivalent when we incorporate them in a written analysis. This places an immediate burden on the texts we write, which may well have to include an exegesis of the individual images used in order to make it clear why each appears in its specific slot in our chain of argument.

The two photographs discussed in this article have been chosen with such issues in mind. On the one hand they present us with contrasting methodological problems – as photographs, as documented photographs, and as images related to an institution-based genre of photographs. And both need exegesis, if they are to be incorporated accurately in historical argument. On the other hand they offer us more than merely an academic exercise. Sources on the social history of women are scarce in the Basel Mission archive. ¹ Photographs may help to redress the balance between the worlds of men and women in discussions about the interaction between the Basel Mission and surrounding societies and cultures in West Africa. The two photographs under consideration are, currently, the images which most clearly suggest to the present writer that women in West Africa, even before the First World War, were developing as yet uncharted activities in response to the presence of European missionary women in their vicinity, and instrumentalizing in their own way the innovations they offered. If this claim can be substantiated, we shall have made something approaching a great leap forward in our understanding of, and approach to, the social history of women on and around the Basel Mission stations in Southern Ghana and in Western Cameroon during the early colonial period.

1. The photographs, their documentation, and their relation to other images in the collection

Pictures 1 and 2, then, present us with very different problems when we try to establish the content of the ‘documents’ we are ‘reading’.

Picture 1 is technically very unsatisfactory. The main action in the foreground is badly focussed, and the white figure at the centre of attention so over-exposed as to be difficult to interpret unassisted. If we are to be kind to our forefathers in the Basel Mission archive – i.e. if we are not to impute to them sexist motivation over against a photograph with an emphatically female theme – we would regard the quality of the image as the main reason why it was weeded out of the collection in the 1920s (see the diagonal cross on the image, quite clearly visible in the reproduction). With this image the question is more than implicit: can we really use such a bad photograph as an historical source? The answer, as we shall see, is determined by the flanking information available. Without it the image would remain a badly-focussed puzzle picture.

Picture 2 is, by contrast, technically good. True, the camera was pointed a shade too high – we have too much palm tree, and no human feet. There are one or two other small technical problems which I refer to in the course of this analysis. But the clarity of the image offers us attractive possibilities for a detailed discussion of its visual content, especially a discussion of dress.

Turning now to their documentation the two images again present us with a striking contrast.

¹ This statement should perhaps be made more carefully. We do not have easily accessible sources on the social history of women in the Basel Mission archive. But as, for instance, Haenger (2000) with his case-study of the Akppong ‘slave’ Rosina Opo in the 1860s has shown, concentrated and reflective reading of the archive can enable one to write women’s social history at a profoundly innovative level: see especially ibid. ch. 2.
Two photographs from the Basel Mission in West Africa c. 1900

Picture 2 is, so to speak, a fully paid-up member of the Basel Mission’s ‘official collection’ of photographs, a facility which seems to have been started as a visual resource for mission publications in about 1900. As such it is equipped with at least minimal documentation. We have the name of a probable photographer – Fritz Ramseyer. We can date it to between 1888 and 1890. And the caption, carefully handwritten on the backing cardboard, tells us that it depicts the Basel missionary Emma Kies, headmistress of the Basel Mission Girls’ Boarding School in Aburi, Ghana, with her indigenous members of staff.

Picture 1, on the other hand, was rescued from oblivion by an act of exemplary alertness on the part of Claudia Fritz-Herth, at that time a research assistant working on a project to order and make accessible the Basel Mission archival photographic collection. As we have seen, the image was taken out of the collection. It survives there only because the rear of its cardboard mount had been used later as backing for a new image. It was during the processing of this other image that Ms Fritz realized that she had two photographs in her hand, and not one. But all the supporting documentation had been lost. We had no idea, when the photograph was rediscovered, what it depicts, where or when it was taken, or who the photographer was.

We have, however, been able to document it by a process which indicates how good it can be if a living institution like the Basel Mission maintains its archive itself, and tries to keep it linked with its contemporary fellowship and operations. Many people in the present-day Basel Mission were asked en passant what this image might depict. Women colleagues who had given birth to a child in Cameroon suggested that it looked like ‘Born House’ being celebrated for a baby held by the white women in the foreground. (‘Born House’ is a pidgin English name for a ceremony held by women to welcome a new baby; it is carried out widely, in different forms, in the South-West and North-West Provinces of Cameroon). And, indeed, during a history workshop with members of the Spellenberg family to discuss the nature and significance of their ancestors’ missionary work in Cameroon before 1914, it turned out that a copy of this image is held by the family. Their copy has a caption: ‘Women of Bombe doing a dance of congratulation on Werner’s

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2 The photographs in the ‘official collection’ are mounted on card, on which has been written identification numbers for each image and a caption. Information collected about the images when they were incorporated in the ‘official collection’ is available in registers (ref. Nos. D-30-0 for Ghana and E-30-0 for Cameroon), which give some indication of when the picture was passed over to the Basel Mission headquarters and usually also give the name of the person responsible. Unless there is good reason to doubt this identification we assume that this name is also the name of the photographer.

3 Fritz Ramseyer, a French-Swiss missionary, first travelled to Ghana in the service of the Basel Mission in 1864 and left for the last time in 1908. From 1869 to 1874 he was held hostage in Kumasi, along with his wife, another missionary colleague and the French trader Bonnat. Later in his life he was no mean photographer – four large albums which he prepared (some for his grown-up children in Europe) are held in the Basel Mission archive, and one is in the hands of Yale University Library. See also note 13.

4 Ramseyer’s first datable photograph (according to our present state of knowledge) was taken in 1888. Emma Kies (see footnote 5) got married in 1890. These two pieces of information give us the chronological limits 1888 and 1890.

5 Emma Kies, a qualified handwork teacher from Württemberg, travelled to Aburi in 1885 at the age of 23. In 1890 she married her missionary colleague Johannes Lehmann. Lehmann died in Akropong in 1896. Emma Kies herself died in Germany in 1910.

6 I am grateful to Elizabeth Hartwig for sharing with me her experience, as an anthropologist, of ‘Born House’ in Cameroon.
PICTURE 1: ‘Born House’ to celebrate the birth of Werner Spellenberg, Bombe, Cameroon 1909.

Rejected in the 1930s this image, despite its poor quality, comes into its own when we seek sources for women’s history. Photographer: probably the missionary Gottlieb Spellenberg. (© Basel Mission Archive, ref. QS-30.001.1474.01/R, used with permission.)
Two photographs from the Basel Mission in West Africa c. 1900

So Picture 1 is, indeed, a photograph of ‘Born House’ being celebrated for a Basel Mission baby in 1909 in front of the Mission House in Bombe on the River Mungo. The photographer was probably Werner Spellenberg’s father, Gottlieb, one of the most active mission Basel Missionaries with a camera in Cameroon before 1914, and in 1909 a member of the mission staff in Bombe.

The precision of the documentation gathered above is important, if we wish to assess the significance of these photographs as historical sources. But it is nevertheless also useful to point to another category of information – their genre character or lack of it, i.e. their congruence or incongruence with other images in the Basel Mission archive pictorial collection. In the case of Picture 2 its genre character would have taken us some way towards the reconstruction of its documentation, even if there had been no direct information on this image in our registers. It belongs to those photographs, much beloved in the Basel Mission before 1914, of women’s handwork classes. This link alone would have enabled us to place it chronologically and geographically in a region of West Africa not too far distant from the (last!) turn of the century. It also allows us to point out the fact that this image is somewhat unusual in being taken out of doors (and not on a mission house veranda) and in declaring itself specifically as a photograph of teachers. This kind of link to parallel images is some degree of surety that we shall not build whole towers of argument on the basis of a single unusual image of unknown provenance. Our problems with Picture 1 are no longer as extreme as that. We do have a useful amount of documentation, and an identification of a time, place, and cause for the event we see depicted. But this does not completely solve the problem posed by the image. It is unique in our collection before 1914 in its depiction of non-Christian activities in the grounds of a mission house, of African reactions to a missionary birth, and of this particular women’s custom. It is in no sense a genre image. Deciding what weight to assign to it in a chain of historical analysis remains, as a result, difficult.

2. Looking at the photographs themselves

With this flanking information in the back of our minds we can look at the images in detail.

Picture 1. A fairly typical two-storey Ghanaian or Cameroonian Basel Mission House forms the backdrop to the photograph. We know that the missionaries’ living quarters were on the top floor of such buildings (and it looks here as if the bottom floor was used for storage). Note, however, that the spectators on the veranda of the first floor are exclusively African. Presumably other Europeans are grouped around the photographer, presumably on the veranda of another two-storey house opposite the one depicted.

In the foreground stands a European woman, and we now know that she is holding a baby on her arm. The Spellenberg family think this is not Werner’s mother but probably the Basel Mission’s peripatetic midwife (the ‘Stork Sister’) who used to appear with her

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7 My translation. This workshop took place in the Mission House Basel in February 1996. I would like to extend my grateful thanks to Armin and Dore Spellenberg, children of Gottlieb and Hedwig Spellenberg-Arndt, for stimulating contact extending over many years.

8 Gottlieb Spellenberg, a bookbinder by original training, travelled to Cameroon for the first time for the Basel Mission in 1896, returning to Europe for the last time in 1912. He was active as a missionary in the forest region, where the Basel Mission propagated the use of the Duala language. About 200 photographs are ascribed to him in the Basel Mission collection. He died in Germany in 1925.
capacious bag on a mission station when a birth was due. Standing behind her is apparently an African woman (we see her bare arm) who, judging by her clothing, does not belong to the dancing group. She is perhaps a member of the Spellenberg’s domestic staff, sheltering the baby from the tropical light (not the sun – there seem to be no shadows).

Around them dance a circle of more than twenty African women, some with babies on their backs. The atmosphere seems relaxed. The women are naked above the waist. Their leader stands within the circle. It would appear they have brought a gift of firewood. There seem – see the lower left- and right-hand corners – to be more women, dressed like the dancers, who stand as spectators or who have perhaps not yet joined the circle. We see no drums or other musical instruments.

The women are not posing – this is that very rare thing in the Basel Mission pictorial collection from before 1914, an action photograph. They may, indeed, have been unaware that the photograph was being taken.

PICTURE 2. The image’s main theme is clear – it is about handwork in a Basel Mission girls’ school in Ghana. But again the two images present us with contrasting possibilities. In this case we can not only perceive the main thrust of the photographer’s purpose in taking this photograph, as is the case with Picture 1, we can also reflect on details, some of them fine.

A first point is that Emma Kies, at the focal point of the picture, is dressed in a neat and attractive way. Her frock is well cut from a patterned cloth, and even her pinafore is at least partly a decorative accessory. She seems to be wearing a crocheted collar (this is one point at which the photograph fails to give us unambiguous signals). The collar is fastened by a brooch.

The African teachers seem to be wearing what we regard in the second half of the twentieth century as traditional women’s dress in southern Ghana – a skirt (probably a wrap-around), a blouse and a cover- or carrying-cloth.

An anthropologist colleague noted, with her most recent Ghana experiences fresh in her mind, that the African teachers are wearing their cover-cloth over the wrong – i.e. the right – shoulder. Normally nowadays, if a woman is wearing a cover cloth in this way, she would have draped it over her left shoulder, leaving her right hand free for its many important tasks. We asked ourselves if the image had been printed with right and left reversed (a clear possibility in a mission archive) but came to the conclusion that this is not the explanation, since the women are holding their crochet needles in the correct – i.e. their right hands. The cloths are draped over their right shoulders.

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9 Hedwig Arndt from Zürich married Gottlieb Spellenberg in Cameroon in 1903. They had twelve children, ten of whom survived childhood. Mrs Spellenberg died in Germany in 1960. Katherine Link (‘Sister Cathy’) was born in Württemberg in 1875 and worked for the Basel Mission as a nurse in Cameroon 1909-13. She died in Basel in 1948. I hesitate to question the Spellenberg family’s identification of this figure, but Mrs Spellenberg and Sister Käthi do seem to have a similar build and similar hairstyles in the photographs we have from this period. Mrs Spellenberg had also, by all accounts, the necessary chutzpa to take part in the celebration of ‘Born House’, and considerable openness to what was going on in her African environment.

10 On a recent visit to Basel the Chief of Bombe explained that the music for ‘Born House’ is provided by singing to a dance rhythm.

11 On presumably the same day (Emma Kies and her colleagues are photographed wearing the same clothes) a photograph was taken in which all the pupils of the school are shown with their teachers. Kies is standing in front of the school, presenting her profile to the camera, which allows us to appreciate the lines of her dress right down to its bottom hem (D-30.09.034).

12 I am grateful to Michelle Gilbert for this and many other stimulating conversations on life in southern Ghana.
Two handwork techniques linked to dressmaking are being shown – sewing and crocheting. And it is not only Emma Kies who seems to have crocheted decorations on her dress. Some, at least, of the necklines of the African teachers also appear to be decorated in this way.
None of the indigenous teachers seem to be wearing earrings or studs – those unmistakable signs of femininity from birth on in contemporary Southern Ghana. But they are not without (costume) jewellery. The second teacher from the right has a necklace and a bracelet visible, and her colleague on the extreme right seems to be wearing an elaborate and matching set of bracelets and necklace.

The necklines of the African teachers’ dresses are attractive and – at least in two cases – rather deeply cut (the teacher on the extreme right again, and her colleague second from the left). Are these two women wearing a sort of modesty vest with a high neck made from a thin dark cloth under their blouses? At first sight the quality of light reflected above their blouse necklines might seem to suggest this – but this is another point where the photographic print fails us, and we are not given an unambiguous visual signal. In any case the teachers’ arms are bare – they are evidently not under an obligation to cover their whole bodies with clothes. And in my view the collarbones of the woman on the right are too prominent for them to have been covered even by a lightweight material.

The picture is posed – and yet not perfectly. The palm-tree stands somewhat asymmetrically to the left. And one feels that the African teachers have placed themselves, rather than been placed by the photographer. Were the African ladies perhaps eager to finish with the photograph and unwilling to go in for further complications? Were their pupils already audible, ‘making hay’ while their teachers were otherwise engaged?

And the rather undashing, helmet-like head-dresses? Fritz Ramseyer wrote in 1895 about another image: ‘Our Christian girls hold fast to their national hairstyles. They usually spend their free Saturday afternoons on producing these works of art. On the other days of the week they cover them with a colourful scarf.’\(^{13}\) The wearers of these headscarves are adult women and not girls. But it seems likely that this quotation describes their attitude to hairstyle and headgear as well.

3. **African women and their missionary sisters: an attempt to ‘read’ the indigenous side of these photographs**

I chose to study these photographs in depth because they seemed to me to have a bearing on our attempts to define the quality of interracial contact among women in the context of Basel Mission stations in Ghana and Cameroon in the two decades around 1900, and as indicating something of the continuing initiatives taken by indigenous women over against European missionary women living in, or on the edge of, their communities. By calling the missionary women their ‘sisters’ I am not trying to avoid the issue of hierarchy in colonial relations between women.\(^{14}\) My main concern here is to perceive and, as far as possible analyse, the complexity of indigenous women’s attitudes to such women and their local implications. This is at least indirectly linked to the question which seems to me to force itself on our attention, when we experience the Basel Mission’s contemporary ‘Partner Churches’ in West Africa: what is the historical background to the intense focus of female energy in these movements today?\(^{15}\)

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\(^{13}\) Ramseyer 1895, photograph 23. This album was also published with a French title and texts in Neuchatel in the same year.

\(^{14}\) See, for instance, Susan Thorne’s reflections on this theme (1999).

\(^{15}\) The Presbyterian Church in Cameroon and Ekklesiyar Yan’uwa a Nigeria (the Nigerian Church of the Brethren, active above all in north-east Nigeria) count as Basel Mission partner churches in West Africa which are directly linked to the Mission’s headquarters in Basel. Relations between the Presbyterian Church of Ghana and German-speaking Protestantism are mediated
Two photographs from the Basel Mission in West Africa c. 1900

Picture 1: the central point documented here – and as far as I know documented nowhere else in the Basel Mission Archive – is that indigenous women were carrying out ‘Born House’ for missionary babies even before 1914.

It is true that, since this is a unique document, it can inspire two possible and mutually contradictory trains of thought. We can argue, with this photograph before us, that ‘Born House’ must usually have been celebrated for missionary babies in this period but not recorded in our sources. But we could also conclude that, for some reason ‘Born House’ was celebrated only on this one occasion before 1914, and a camera was soon set up to attempt to add this image to the photographic documentation of the Spellenberg’s family life in Africa.

I propose to settle, provisionally, for the first alternative: that ‘Born House’ was normally celebrated for Basel Mission babies in Cameroon as early as this.

I take shelter firstly under an observation made by Heinrich Balz: ‘Born House’ was probably the first element in Cameroonian culture to be taken up wholeheartedly into the life of the Basel Mission church.16 Looked at in the long term it was the cultural practice with the fewest contra-indications from the point of view of missionary regulations and theology, and one most likely to be acceptable to this pre-1914 generation of missionaries.

I refer, too, to an observation offered to the Basel Mission’s own project on women’s history, by Christian Baeta (Haas 1994: 172): contact from woman to woman on and around the Basel and Bremen Mission stations in Ghana was much freer and more broadly conducted than contact from man to man. The missionary men were too much surrounded by their trappings of office – desk, pulpit, and what has become the whole ‘Reverend Pastor’ complex. Missionary wives, on the other hand, lived recognisably feminine lives. And until the arrival, in the twentieth century, of clearly better and more reliable medical care for pregnant missionaries and their offspring, the two groups faced the same hazards in childbirth, and knew the same anxieties and sorrows because of illness and death among their small children.

Baeta’s observation seems to be borne out here in a Basel Mission station in Cameroon. For the women of Bombe, apparently, a birth was a birth. There is a new baby on the mission station? We celebrate ‘Born House’ there too.

Most literature on everyday life in high colonial Africa, and most approaches to mission and church history at the time, stress the distance imposed between the races by the white actors in the situation. Other photographs indicate (as does the row of African spectators on the veranda in front of the missionaries’ living quarters) that there was intensive interaction in daily life on the mission stations between missionaries and indigenous Christians. This photograph offers us indications of close intermeshing between European and indigenous women, even if the latter were living in traditional communities.17

It thus also suggests to us the play of indigenous mental structures in the approach to missionary women on the part of indigenous women. White women – and their children –

via the Association of Churches and Missions in south-west Germany (EMS) in Stuttgart, an umbrella organization of which the Basel Mission is a member.

16 Heinrich Balz is a colleague who worked in Nyasoso, Cameroon in the 1970s and 1980s and was then appointed Professor of Mission and Religious Studies in a Theological Faculty which became part of the Humboldt University in Berlin. His detailed grass-roots knowledge of Bakossi social history is minutely in a massive 3-volume study (Balz 1984, 1995). He chaired the lecture when I first showed this image in public, and made this comment on that occasion.

17 See, for example, Wirz (1980), especially his case study of Duala, pp. 227-231.
were apparently being regarded as human beings of the same order. Judging by this photograph, indigenous women seem to have been applying their structuring of everyday life to the missionary women nearby – a perfectly natural procedure, and one which, working from first principles, we would expect to see. And again, judging by this photograph, the missionaries seem to have allowed this to happen, at least in some circumstances, even if this is not well documented in their reports to the guardians of True Orthodoxy at home.¹⁸

Picture 2. In evaluating Picture 2 I have been much helped by ideas which have been developed by the folklorist and art historian, Suzanne Gott, whose dissertation was concerned with the role of seamstresses in Kumasi and involved 12 months’ fieldwork there (Gott 1994). Gott subsequently examined the hundreds of photographs bearing on the history of women’s costume in Southern Ghana held in the Basel Mission archive, and has evolved ideas about the link between the missionary training in girls’ and women’s handwork classes in the nineteenth century, and the current small workshops producing fashion in Ghana, which she studied for her doctorate.¹⁹

A first point is that clothing is not only intensively integrated with identity and culture in contemporary southern Ghana, and a fit subject for substantial personal investment. It has also been a major element in the culture for both men and women ‘since time immemorial.’ I am not aware that one can point to literature which deals with this theme in a satisfactory way historically, but my own argument would be that nakedness (always as defined locally) is seen negatively in southern Ghana, and that people of high status, or ‘ordinary people’ on festival days, have, for centuries now, hoped and expected to dress themselves richly. Certainly the ‘traditional’ sumptuary laws which were incorporated into British procedures under Indirect Rule indicate that wealth of attire and the control of political assertions made through attire were a deeply anchored part of Akan life at the beginning of modern colonialism.²⁰

If we link these fundamental observations with Picture 2, I argue that we see an image documenting an existing interest in clothing which was developing and growing in and around the context of Basel Mission work – and not an image documenting the imposition of an alien clothing culture in the name of puritan morals.

We can approach this issue more closely by looking at both the supply and demand side in relation to clothing in and around Basel Mission stations.

On the supply side, Suzanne Gott is of the opinion that the skill of making shaped and fitted clothes (i.e. the use of scissors to cut cloth and the activity of dressmaking) was first introduced into southern Ghana in an effective and long-term way by missionary women in the nineteenth century – and indeed that the current profession of seamstress in Ghana was born in the sewing classes on the mission house verandas and in groups like these. Before this training became widespread clothing produced in Ghana consisted, for

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¹⁸ I am a little concerned about taking celebrations for birth under the rubric ‘everyday life’, but I take it that what was by no means an everyday event for the mother or the directly concerned family was an event of everyday life if one takes the level of the broad community.

¹⁹ Gott presented these ideas in a paper at the ASA Conference in San Francisco in 1996. In finalizing this paper I have also benefited from conversations with Rev. Ulrike Sill, who is currently working on a thesis on women in the Basel Mission in Ghana in the nineteenth century.

²⁰ I was revising this paper while staying in Abetifi (Kwahu, Ghana), and found myself taking part in an evening in which the participants exchanged riddles and songs. One young man offered the following riddle: ‘My father gave me a room. When I go in I go mad. When I come out again I am sane.’ The answer was: the bathroom. ‘When I go in I take off my clothes like a madman [my italics]. And I put them on again before coming out.’
women too, of cloths wrapped round the body, as is still the case the with ‘toga’ style of robe worn by men and queen-mothers in Ghana on festive or traditional occasions.21

On the demand side: the Basel Mission created demand by setting new standards for women’s clothing, perhaps in the sense of what items women should wear (blouses for adult women, dresses for schoolgirls), certainly in the sense that these standards applied to all women everywhere in both public and domestic space. The Basel Mission also created new occasions on which women and girls were expected to take particular care of their appearance – school attendance, and church services. It also created new categories of women and girls who were under specific clothing rules, especially schoolgirls, especially in the boarding schools.22 As we shall see, we have to ask if the Mission did not have its own sumptuary laws – or if it did not exert pressure for simplicity of dress. But at the same time I think we can be sure that the Mission created space which was free of sumptuary laws of traditional provenance.

The mission thus promoted demand for women’s clothes both quantitatively and qualitatively, and helped to create a female profession which responded to this demand.23

Turning now to Picture 2, we see adult women wearing the ‘traditional dress’ which this analysis would see as at least the indirect product of the missionary training in dressmaking. And we should note that, although the Basel Mission archive does contain photographs of Ghanaian women wearing European fashion before 1914, the style of dress shown in this photograph is much more strongly represented in the collection. Indeed, it would appear that the existence of indigenous styles of dress for women (like their persistence with indigenous hair style, see above) was an accepted, and indeed central, part of everyday life on Basel Mission stations by the 1880s at the latest. In this extremely visible sector of everyday life, touching, as it did (no pun intended!) all individuals with any sort of link to the Mission, there was an acceptance of difference between European and African, indeed a missionary acceptance of a certain autonomy on the African side, at a time when much of our literature urges that mission was engaged in a self-evident imposition of European orthodoxies.24

The argument about the approach which Ghanaian women took to their missionary sisters and their special skills goes further than this, however, and asserts that the

21 Gott (1994) notes that the Twi word for a blouse is *kaba*, and offers a provisional etymology: *kaba* is an Akan appropriation of the English word ‘cover’. If she is right in this detail it would provide powerful support for the idea that missionary intervention is near the centre of this development in women’s costume.

22 Ramseyer (1895), caption to photograph 37 is again very suggestive in this regard: ‘An elementary school…their dresses, Christmas presents, have been made by [older] girls in the sewing class, who used colourful cloth samples from Europe.’

23 I am not, here, asking the gender question as to whether this Mission also trained male tailors in Southern Ghana. Certainly the great majority of sewing classes shown in the photographs in our collection are exclusively female groups. In traditional cloth production in Southern Ghana, the spinning of cotton thread was done by women and the weaving was done by men. One interesting point is that the female role was becoming obsolete in the second half of the nineteenth century due to the importation of machine-made thread from Europe. Was the work of the seamstress an important substitute for the activity of spinning in the world of southern Ghanaian women?

24 This sentence could be drafted about the world of men, also. Men declared as Christians and even office-holders in the Basel Mission Church but wearing a toga-like cloth are not difficult to find in our photographic collection before 1914. Two published examples sprang to mind – a group portrait of pastors and presbyters in Akyem Abuakwa ca. 1890 (the presbyters – local church elders – wear cloth; see Jenkins 1989: 12) and a photograph of an Adult Sunday School class grouped around C.C. Reindorf in Osu/Accra at the beginning of this century, in which at least half the men present are wearing cloth, see Jenkins (1998: 55).
traditional interest in rich and attractive dress also energized the indigenous participants in the mission’s dressmaking classes. The problem with this assertion is, of course, that a Basel Mission must be placed quite firmly in the tradition of pietist and puritan Protestantism, and we have to ask if the corollary applies that its missionaries of both sexes did not carry a very simple style of dress and their own very strict sumptuary laws with them to West Africa. Must we not indeed postulate an opposition between traditional southern Ghana, with its interest in display and its focus on chiefs’ courts, and a puritan Basel Mission with a concentration on sobriety, non-display – and clothes which tend to conceal the female form?

In relation to this question Picture 2 needs to be looked at hard and without presuppositions. The missionary lady can be said to be engaged in a modest display of line and pattern – in a context of pietist sobriety, no doubt, but with a will to use whatever possibilities were open to her for an aesthetically pleasing expression of beauty. And the Ghanaian ladies, too, seem to be using the opportunities open to them to choose costume jewellery, cloth, and varieties of blouse construction, which pleased them as individuals. Given that the missionary ladies were teaching new dressmaking techniques and that this was an attractive possibility for indigenous women who turned out to have the gifts to benefit from this training, it seems to me clear that a group like this signals that indigenous women could take their existing sense of aesthetics and display into this new institutional framework and develop something which pleased them – and something which was evolving from the pre-existing construction of femininity.

It might, of course, be argued that the difference in dress between European missionaries and indigenous women could reflect the European assertion of hierarchy, and could in this sense be a means to consolidate the European assertion of racial superiority. How far one can go investigating this possibility by analysing a photograph like this I am not sure. But one possible pointer is suggested by the image: the fate of the pinafore. This garment, almost a universal badge of effectiveness among housewives in the circles from which the Basel Missionaries came, and a garment which was also strongly represented in the ensembles of missionary women in our photographs, is not transmitted to the ensembles of the Ghanaian women. One might expect that this would be the case – all the Ghanaian women in the missionaries photographs have, almost by definition, some degree of domestic responsibility. Some indeed are openly declared in the picture-captions to be ‘nurse-girls’ or housemaids in missionary families. So the pinafore’s direct function as protection for the main dress would make sense. And yet they are never photographed wearing pinasores. This suggests to me that the driving force in the evolution of the style of clothing displayed in Picture 2 was an assertion of status by the African women in both the European and indigenous status systems, and not the acceptance of subordinate status imposed by the missionaries.

The only study I know of the social history of women in and around Protestant mission stations in Ghana or anglophone Cameroon which shows an appropriate social science rigour in its handling of evidence and in the build-up of its argument is Jean Allman’s essay (1994) on British Methodist efforts in the inter-war period to teach Asante women to be ‘good mothers’. The missionary women involved in my two photographs come from a different national and confessional background and from an earlier generation. So it is not Dr Allman’s analysis of the missionary side I wish to bring into my argument, but what she writes about the indigenous side. In one way there is an important contrast between her group and the women in Picture 2: it is clear that the Basel Mission had a senior cadre of indigenous women. I would maintain that their role and authority will not have been a pale shadow of their missionary mistres’s intentions.
No figures of this kind appear in Dr. Allman’s study. But if we are interested in examining the possibility that a certain pattern of motivation was energizing indigenous women in their relations with the missionaries, such a group would need to be a major priority for research. In another way, however, I would like to take up Dr Allman’s main conclusion about the Asante women who entered into contact with Methodist Motherhood programmes. In her view – and following interview work which rings very true in my Ghana-experienced ear – their motivation was in no sense a mirror image of, or complementary to, the missionaries’ ideology and motivation. This is, indeed, my argument about the indigenous women in the two photographs. For those with eyes to see they are acting to a very great extent out of their own motivation. Indeed, I would want to go further than Dr Allman in this respect. She identifies fragments of her Asante mothers’ motivations – politeness (if a visitor comes one is under a certain obligation to be courteous), interest in missionary hand-outs (free baby-powder!) and being tickled by the idea of one’s own black baby being solemnly bathed by a white lady. But Dr Allman seems not to be in a position to create a final synthesis of these motives or state the underlying Asante cultural values which may have made these mothers’ responses coherent, from their own point of view. I would argue that in the photographs presented in this paper one can sense underlying values at work – the attempt to use the traditional structuring of everyday life to structure relations with missionaries too (Picture 1) – and the long-term interest in dress and display among Akan women, democratizing itself, perhaps, through dressmaking classes offered by the Basel Mission, but energized by traditional concerns, traditional perceptions, and a traditional aesthetic (Picture 2).

4. Everyday life encapsulated?

It is tempting to see photographs as presenting us with genuine and representative glimpses – encapsulations – of everyday life in the different regions of Africa since the arrival of photography. But even the two images discussed here show how complex a response to this suggestion is going to have to be. Picture 1 offers a glimpse of social interaction in south-west Cameroon on one specific day. As a document with an almost total lack of correlative information the photograph is ambivalent in its significance, and if one has to come down on one side or the other as to whether it is representative or not, one’s answer is really determined by the assumptions and expectations one has about the social context in which it was taken. Picture 2 on the other hand may offer us a split-second view of five women and two girls, but we are probably not far from the truth when we assert that the photograph was taken to document what was seen as a permanent activity carried out by an established team, and paralleled by the work done by similar teams in similar institutions of this particular Mission in southern Ghana. Thus while perhaps at first sight the words ‘glimpse’ and ‘encapsulated’ may seem to indicate closely related metaphors for what we find in a photograph, at the end of this paper these figures of speech can develop an almost dichotomous meaning. Picture 1 is a glimpse, and perhaps even ‘stolen’ in the sense that the people depicted may not have been aware that a photograph was being taken. Picture 2 is, on the other hand, almost certainly an encapsulation in intent. The evaluation of both photographs as sources for the history of everyday life requires us to ask about their representativeness. But given the frailty of our information-base on the history of most regions of Africa the question of representativeness is almost insoluble. We can be glad to analyse the sources which we have, and the element of surprise which a photograph may bring into the discussion is therefore a reason to review our general understanding of that place and time, rather than
immediately to rule it out of court on the grounds that it contradicts what historians consensually hold to be the truth.

Could written sources ‘encapsulate’ everyday life better than photographs? It is possible to compare the potentiality of written documents and photographs as sources. But a preliminary remark in relation to the Basel Mission archive is that, though large and potentially, at its best, capable of supporting something like ‘thick description’, it is also very opaque and demands committed researchers with time at their disposal if it is to yield its best secrets.25 Our well-ordered collection of photographs is much more accessible than this written documentation, and I suspect that, as with Suzanne Gott’s interest in the history of costume as evidenced by materials in the Basel Mission archive, many projects incorporating Basel Mission materials in the next few years are going to begin with photographs.

If we, however, attempt a theoretical discussion about the comparative strengths of word documents and photographs, and assume that word documents exist which communicate something of the messages conveyed by Pictures 1 and 2, what would our conclusions be?

Picture 1 is probably vulnerable in this respect. It would not be difficult to imagine a word document which both makes it clear that this ‘Born House’ was celebrated, and which offers us, even if in a crude way, some of the missing details so much wanted by social historians. How was ‘Born House’ organized in Bombe in 1909? Who was the leading woman? What music was used? Were the missionaries surprised by the event (or gratified that they had succeeded in getting ‘Born House’ celebrated for young Werner Spellenberg)? Or was ‘Born House’ for missionary children already well established here?

With Picture 2, on the other hand, it is quite difficult to imagine a word document which would convey anything like as much visual information as the photograph or give us such a good basis for an open-ended analysis of clothing. Such a document would have to describe seven people’s dress and actions in exact detail. This might be possible for an expert, but it would be a long document. And if our curiosity about the colour of the ladies’ clothes could be answered in a written document, other elements in the picture would almost certainly be missing from the description. How would one describe, in words, the pose adopted by Ms Kies?

We can conclude from Picture 2 that any photograph which includes detail whose description in words would have to be elaborate, unwieldy and loaded with professional jargon is to be preferred to such a document. More, we can assume that – outside the documentation of museum professionals and advanced exponents of the relevant

25 This opacity has a lot to do with the fact that up to 1914 the archive consists overwhelmingly of hand-written documents, and the fact that they are almost all in the old German script. It also reflects the difficulty of the ‘material’ with which the Basel Mission was trying to work. It is true, as Jon Miller has remarked, that the nineteenth century Basel Mission was organized like a classical Protestant bureaucracy – the extent of the archive reflects the way the gentry in Basel expected their former village lads on the mission field to refer even small decisions to them. But the missionaries were really too few to maintain a truly bureaucratic flow of information to Basel. Names come and go in the archive. Processes are rarely pursued to their end. To use the archive successfully one has to have time for a relaxed search for specific people, places and issues – but time also for a reflective reading of the discourse between missionaries and their seniors in Basel, in order to sense the indigenous realities behind the missionary reporting. See, for an outstanding example of what is possible here, the dissertation by Haenger (2000) referred to in note 1.
Two photographs from the Basel Mission in West Africa c. 1900

It is unlikely that such word-documents are going to exist at all. In this sense the vulnerability to replacement by a word document which we have argued exists with Picture 1 would not be present if Picture 1 were a photograph of better quality. Better quality would have meant that the cloth and, possibly, the personal decoration worn by the dancers would have been visible, which would immediately elevate the image to the category of those not easily substituted by word documents.

The discussion about the relative power of photographs and word texts to encapsulate daily life is, in any case, in my experience, artificial. In practice in African history we are thirsty for sources, must take what we can get – and not least exploit the ‘stereo’ view which the presence of more than one category of source offers us. Photographs without documentation are, admittedly, close to useless. Even at the level of the intimate networking between an image and its documentation we see a clear symbiosis in which the two strengthen each other as sources. Although this essay has not demonstrated a broader symbiosis, we could argue that this is what we should strive for: a spiral of increasing depth in our analyses, which is created as historical photographs send us with new questions to texts, and the texts send us back to the photographs – or vice versa. Although it is legitimate to enquire generally about the characteristics of photographs as sources, it is more important to set up analyses of specific historical situations which incorporate the variety of sources available. And in this context I hope to have shown that, at least at the level of a hypothesis worth pursuing, there is a broad field awaiting our attention in which we study not so much the in-put of the colonial actors in everyday life in Africa, but the attempt of colonized populations to develop initiatives to maintain social, and indeed intellectual continuities over the years in the face of European intervention and its ambition to shape everyday life in Africa according to moulds brought in from outside.

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I know of no written collateral written information on Picture 1. Kies, on the other hand, wrote perhaps a half-dozen reports which she sent to Europe. One begins promisingly, from the standpoint of this paper: a pastor’s wife in Grossheppach, Württemberg, had asked what style was used for the clothes made in the Aburi Girls’ Boarding School. The answer is, however, short, and evidently applies to the younger schoolgirls: ‘Concerning the cut of the clothes, this is not so important. The simpler the better. I favour the loose, shirt-like wing-dresses [Flügelkleider] to those with a waist. The children are happier in such clothes – they have not grown up wearing much in the way of clothes.’ The document soon goes on to other matters, including the proposal (especially interesting in view of Picture 2) that crochet work could be done in the school and sold in Europe (letter of 10th May 1888, ref. no. D-1,49,3). Kies’ penultimate report before her marriage (22nd July 1889, D-1,51,15) discusses the obligation the school was under to earn £15 p.a. by producing clothes and selling sewing materials, and also yields some indications which can be built into the argument of this essay. She had found this responsibility to raise money locally counter-productive. She had had to spend too much time on this, because the market had changed and what the school could offer was no longer so attractive as it had been in earlier decades. Whereas formerly missionaries had ordered their clothes from the School, now they could get clothes direct from Europe. Indigenous women now had many places where they could buy sewing materials. And ‘indigenous women now know how to make their clothes themselves, which is, of course, an outstanding step of progress’. But it will be immediately evident that though this is interesting flanking information to the discussion I have followed here it is nothing like as comprehensive in its ‘message’ as was the case with Picture 2.
REFERENCES


