

# Revision of the Twi Bible in the Gold Coast

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It is more than three quarters of a century since the Gold Coast received the Word of God in Twi, one of its principal languages. The Gold Coast has been rather fortunate in its language situation as it has not the Babylonian multiplicity of small tribal languages to be found in other parts of West Africa. Akan, as the group of dialects to which Twi belongs is commonly called today, is widely spoken in the country. It is subdivided into a number of dialects, differing more or less from each other, which, however, can be mutually understood without too much difficulty. It is further the language of the chief's courts, of folklore and songs of a number of small tribes, namely the Kyerepongs, Guangs, Afutus and others, which were pushed to the periphery of the area now occupied by the Akans and which most probably formed an earlier wave of immigrants pressing down south towards the coast and which were subjected and in part absorbed by the Akans, when they arrived later.

The first of the Akan dialects I wish to mention here is Fante, which is spoken chiefly in the centre of the coastal strip of the Gold Coast Colony, extending also some scores of miles inland. Twi, the next of the Akan dialects from which the whole group has often taken its name, is spoken roughly between the rivers Volta and Densu, its centre being the Akwapem tribe with its capital Akropong. The tribes speaking Asante-Akyem, the third dialect or dialect group, extend over the area of the river Birim and its tributaries and over the whole of Asante. Thus the whole Akan-speaking area comprises roughly one half of the Gold Coast. Its influence, however, is extending far wider and is still growing, and soon there will be scarcely a village or town in the Northern Territories of the Gold Coast or even far up into French territory in which there will not be one or more people who are able to understand and speak Akan.

The German Joh. Gottlieb Christaller, having early shown extraordinary linguistic gifts, was sent by the Basel Evangelical Missionary Society to the Gold Coast at the end of 1852, having already been introduced to Twi at Basel by one of the pioneers and the first explorer of the language, N. Riis, a Dane. Stationed in 1853 at Akropong at the Mission's Catechists' Seminary, he devoted all his spare time and energy to the study of the language and soon began translating the Bible together with other books, helped greatly by his students and supported by his African helpers. He chose for his translation the Twi dialect. This was not merely because of his being stationed at the centre of Twi-speaking country — for he made himself well acquainted with the other dialects also and was stationed for a number of years at Kyebi, the centre of the population speaking the Akyam dialects — but because after having carefully studied the situation he realised that phonetically Twi came between the two extremes of Fante on the one hand and Asante-Akyem on the other. In his choice of vocabulary Christaller did not stick slavishly to one dialect only, but used words of either of the

other dialects if this seemed convenient, provided they would be understood also by the other groups.

He was exceedingly conscientious and careful, and was occupied with teaching and missionary work besides his translation work, so it was not until 1868 that he had completed his translation and took his notes home to write the manuscript. During the winter 1870/71 he saw the Bible through the press at Basel, where the first edition was printed for the B.F.B.S. The result of his long and careful work was a Bible in idiomatic, dignified, really classical Twi, but understood and easily read also by people of the other dialects, though perhaps here and there the language may already have seemed a little bit too high to be always easily followed by the ordinary man or woman or by immature young people with a less advanced grasp of their language. That was eighty-five years ago. During these years the Twi Bible has become a truly popular book in the Gold Coast, chiefly among the population of the Eastern Provinces and wherever the Basel Mission and later the Presbyterian Church spread the Gospel particularly in the Akyem-speaking tribes and in Asante. It was also widely used among the converts of the Methodist Church in those areas whose native pastors and catechists were recruited chiefly from the Fante-speaking area where that Church had started its work, and who naturally worked and preached in their own dialect. That the Bible became so firmly rooted in the hearts of the people was also due in no small degree to the great efforts of the early missionaries who laid the greatest stress on the introduction of their converts and young Christians to the Bible and a thorough knowledge of its message and contents. Being able to read was in the early days normally a condition of baptism.

Eighty-five years, however, is a long time. In a country where the language is or was still largely a spoken and not predominantly a written or printed language this has inevitably meant a slow yet perceptible change of language. As time went on, therefore, the need for a revision became the more apparent. Intelligent African Christians occasionally sent lists of proposed corrigenda to missionaries; others complained about the too high or archaic language or wanted a more smooth and simplified rendering of this or that passage. A few words were found not to be in use in one or other of the dialect groups in which the Bible was in use, especially in Asante, which through the efforts of the different churches was more and more opened up for the gospel and where, therefore, with the spread of education, literacy spread. A revision was made in the first decade of this century which, however, confined itself to minor orthographical changes, in particular the dropping of the final 'w' in a number of words, which is not pronounced in Asante-Akyem. When in 1926 a visit of Prof. D. Westermann, Director of the African Institute, London, invited by the Gold Coast Government, brought changes in the orthography of Twi and other languages of the Gold Coast (change of symbols and dropping of diacritical marks in Twi and a more phonetic rendering of Fante) and when gradually all other vernacular literature was reprinted in the new 'Westermann script', it became apparent that the time for a thorough revision of the Twi Bible

had come. In 1932 the Basel Mission sent another scholar and philologist to the Gold Coast, namely Dr. E. L. Rapp, now Professor of Old Testament at the University of Mainz (Germany). In 1936 Dr. Rapp was appointed to revise the Twi Bible together with two African pastors of the Presbyterian Church, Rev. H. J. Keteku and Rev. Birikorang, one from Akropong and the other from Kyebi, thus representing both dialect groups concerned. (The Fantes had got their own Bible through the efforts of the Methodist Missionary Society shortly before this having made much use of Christaller's translation, which, however, had been thoroughly revised between the two world wars). The Twi Bible revision was done by Dr. Rapp and his helpers from 1936/38 at Akropong. The Bible Society immediately printed a tentative Gospel of St. Mark to watch its reception in the Gold Coast. Fortunately, Dr. Rapp had been able to return home at the end of 1938 just half a year before the outbreak of the war, having completed his notes but not finished the manuscript, and though the war years made printing impossible, there was time enough for further discussion. This was good and necessary, for during the war years many further developments had taken place with regard to the language problems of the Gold Coast. With the spread of literacy in Asante, this large and virile nation, formerly dominating politically the Gold Coast, made louder and louder claims, and pressed for more consideration of their particular dialect in further developments. Though this was as yet a claim raised only by a few scholars — the man in the street taking no part in the controversy whatsoever unless roused by the former, and this not from an understanding of what was under discussion but from national, tribal feelings — the Gold Coast Government, i.e. the Education Department, invited Dr. Ida Ward of the African Institute, London to study the situation and make further proposals. It should be said here also that though Twi and Asante differ slightly in tones and vocabulary, with some vowel and consonant variations, the difference is not nearly so great as that between Twi and Fante, for as already mentioned, speakers of these two can understand each other without too much difficulty. It is usually the case that if an Asante-speaker reads a portion of the Twi Bible, he reads it fluently but pronounces it in the tones and with the changes peculiar to his dialect. Dr. I. Ward made a number of very sensible proposals in regard to the writing of Akan, trying to bring the dialects and chiefly Akwapem and Akyem-Asante at least orthographically nearer each other. There was time enough to discuss these proposals, but it seems that in both groups these discussions unfortunately served rather to harden each group in its particular views and convictions than to ease the situation. However, it was hoped to use these proposals to come quietly to a few compromises on both sides, so that the resulting Bible would be received by the general public without much ado, provided no scholar insisted on the particular views of his group. This would be sure to arouse popular feelings on the grounds that their language was threatened by corruption.

To bring about the possibility of such a compromise, the Gold Coast Christian Council at the request of the B.F.B.S. invited a number

of representatives of the different Protestant churches concerned together with a few missionaries and a few neutral observers from neighbouring language groups who were acquainted with the problems to form an Advisory Committee for the revision of the Twi Bible. It must be added here that after the tentative publication of the Gospel of St. Mark in the revised version, criticisms had also been raised from different quarters, and a suggestion made that some larger body should once more go over the work done by Dr. Rapp.

The Advisory Committee was formed in 1950 and it at once appointed a group of revisers. The Committee agreed also that the work done by Dr. Rapp and his helpers should stand as a basis for further revision and should not be changed unless considerations of idiom or the fact that it was not understood by the other dialect group made a change necessary. It further passed a number of principal rules in regard to orthography and compromises to be made, the details of which were to be worked out by the revisers in the course of their work. In cases where they could not come to an agreement, the Advisory Committee should meet again and give its decision.

Progress, however, was very slow, as both sides were very reluctant to make compromises. The main changes from Dr. Rapp's version apart from changes in the rendering of idiom with regard to the coming nearer of dialects and in orthography were the following:

1. Numerals: from 1-10 and compounds with them. Here the Asante forms were accepted —
 

1. <i>baako</i> instead of <i>biako</i>	4. <i>nnan</i> instead of <i>anan</i>
2. <i>mmienu</i> instead of <i>abien</i>	5. <i>nnum</i> instead of <i>anum</i>
3. <i>mmiansa</i> instead of <i>abiensa</i>	6. <i>nsia</i> instead of <i>asia</i> etc., etc.
2. The Asantes often add a further vowel to the vowel-ending of words, and simple 'o' in Twi is in their dialect lengthened to 'oo', simple 'e' to 'ee'. It was agreed not to write these added vowels.
3. The Akwapems on their part have many words ending with a vowel and 'w' in 'aw', 'ew', 'iw', 'ow', 'uw'. It was agreed to drop the final 'w'.
4. For the reflective relative pronoun 'he, who' or 'that, which' the Asantes use 'deɛ' while the Akwapems say 'nea'. It was agreed to use 'nea' for the personal and 'deɛ' for the impersonal.
5. While the Akwapems pronounce words in which 'gu' occurs with hard 'g' and full short 'u' (as in English 'full'), the Asante pronunciation would, if written in Twi, have to be rendered with 'dw'. The 'g' changes into 'd', while the 'u' changes into a 'w' combined with 'u' (as in the English 'hue'). It was agreed to retain the Akwapem spelling.
6. There are a number of verbs in Asante which have their root vowel duplicated, as *koro*, *duru*, *firi*, etc., which are used unreduplicated in Twi as *kɔ*, *du* *fi*, etc. It was agreed that the simple unreduplicated form be used. A little later, however, it was discovered that likewise there are a number of adjectives in Asante used in a shortened form, like *ha*, *du*, etc., which are used in a lengthened form, *hare*, *duru*, etc.,

in Akwapem. The Akwapems were rather reluctant to compromise to the shorter form in this.

7. A few words which have no common synonym would need their equivalent in the other dialect to be added in brackets, e.g. *Atiridii* (*hurae*) for 'fever'.

So far compromises would have been possible. There was, however, one point where both sides stuck to their own version and in spite of much urging from the neutral observers were not ready to compromise. That was in the question of the so-called vowel harmony. This is a phonetic law peculiar to Twi, according to which the vowel of the pronoun if used with the verb is adapted, i.e. changed to a slight degree if followed by a narrow vowel ('u' and 'i' and sometimes narrow 'o') or by a consonant which has a narrowing influence (like 'ny', 'gy', 'dw' and 'tw'). This vowel harmony is not, or not as pronouncedly, observed by the Asantes. The latter were therefore for non-representation of the vowel harmony, while the former, though it might have considerably simplified the spelling, were afraid that it might change the language and therefore wanted a full representation of the vowel harmony.

Thus there was an impasse and no further compromise or progress being possible, the Advisory Committee then asked the Bible Society to agree to a printing of both dialect versions, which though being completely the same in the actual rendering would differ only in orthography and dialect usage as indicated above, and leave it to a later time to come to a compromise or to let the buying public decide which version alone should ultimately be printed. It is, indeed, a sad defeat of reason and mutual understanding, but we are grateful that the Bible Society, having realised the difficulties, has agreed to the request from the Advisory Committee, and the chief obstacles being for the meantime removed, there is much hope that the Revision work will progress now and that if one version is not possible for both dialects, yet a uniformity will be assured in the actual rendering of words and phrases.

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Ἀκούειν ἀκούετω — Mark 4 : 9, 23.

E. F. F. Bishop

Dr. Vincent Taylor's comment on the first of these verses that it "is clearly a characteristic expression by which (Jesus) impressed on His hearers the need to give *close attention* to His words", would receive full agreement.<sup>1</sup> The very fact that towards the close of each of the letters to the 'Seven Churches' the Seer puts a more than similar phrase into the mouth of 'the Son of Man' is proof enough.<sup>2</sup> As spoke the Jesus of History, so spoke the Christ of Revelation. The phrase in the Apocalypse is closer to the Matthean<sup>3</sup> abbreviation of Mark, the differences being 'ear' and the aorist imperative. On the eighth occasion in the Apocalypse<sup>4</sup> (not on the lips of Jesus) there is approximation

<sup>1</sup> The Gospel according to St. Mark, p. 254.

<sup>2</sup> Revelation 2 : 7, 11, 17, 29; 3 : 6, 13, 22.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 13 : 9, also 11 : 5 and 13 : 49.

<sup>4</sup> Revelation 13 : 9.