

Basel Mission Archives

"Müller to Basel concerning Slaves and Pawns"

Title: "Müller to Basel concerning Slaves and Pawns"

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Description: This is a comment on Basel Committee Protocol 1895 paragraph 34, which in turn was a reply to questions on slavery and pawning put by the Twi District Conference and Twi Synod in 1895. Müller's own comment on the situation that as with many laws if there is no plaintiff there is no judge. Once the laws over slavery were vigorously pursued by the regime, but for about the last 10 years the colonial officials have left the people in peace and administered the slavery law in a very superficial way. Müller himself in the late 1880s knew of a case in which the Anum chief had received 7 boys as pawns involved in a debt someone in Buem had incurred - Müller told the DC who said they were in good hands and took no action. It is true that the slaves often have it better than free people - and when they are adult they can run away. Another case occurred in Akropong where a number of boys were given to the Akropong chief as pawns - the DC himself freed them when an accusation was made (2 of them later served Müller himself as houseboys) but no punishment was levied on the people responsible. Pawning is still carried on, the often pawns run away and leave their families to pay the debt. And it may involve working any number of days in the week for the master. Because the legal sanctions against slavery the Christians have become involved in slavery and pawning once again, and represents a great danger to the employees of the mission, and the community elders. The question had almost been discussed in 1889 and several missionaries pressed this warmly, but it was shelved on the grounds that it would thus become public and the regime would begin to get the idea that slavery and pawning existed in the community. The people hold slaves and pawns in such a way of course that they cannot easily find out about it - especially on remote farming villages, or under the immediate control of other relatives. If they wanted to have a more exact idea of what was going on, they would have to hold a formal investigation in each station - and then it is not certain that they would find anything out. Nevertheless it is to be said that heathen and Christian alike make a great distinction between different families, and between free and unfree. This is even the case with the pastors, who show it most clearly when the marriage of their sons is in question. In Akropong over the recent years there has been a case of an elderly Christian, one of the better ones who was not elected to the Presbytery because of his slave ancestry even though the missionaries supported him - eventually he was elected in a compromise arrangement whereby another man with weak gifts, but from a higher status family, was elected presbyter at the same time.

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