

Basel Mission Archives

"Opoku's Report for the Year 1883"

Title: "Opoku's Report for the Year 1883"

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Description: Reports a major whooping cough epidemic in which 60-80 children died, none of them Christians. Most families in the heathen town suffered a death. Heathen parents in their perplexity took refuge to the fetishes, asking their aid and protection with vows of sheep, their own children etc., and the priests, taking advantage of this plague (as they called it) predicted an early destruction of the country by a forth-coming accident which is coming upon the people, asserting that some great calamity is now suspending in the air, and is ready to fall upon the whole nation if they tried not to avoid seeking the protection of some 'higher beings' who are able to remove. The poor people in their terror came as one man to the priests. 'To which higher beings shall we resort than to our great Obo and his sister fetishes' they said. 'No not to the fetishes, of course', said the priests. 'For how will you dare to resort to them in the time of your distress since you have all emancipated yourselves and are gone after the long tales of the white men?' 'No, we cannot take our freedom from the service of our dear fetishes, may they (the fetishes) not charge this to us', said the poor people. 'For how can we prove so disloyal to our fetishes to whom we and our forefathers owe our lives and existence? No it is impossible that we can be so disloyal. Great are our deliverer, the fetishes of our forefathers.' 'But are not some of you go now and then to the flatterers and tale-tellers to learn of them in the view of changing themselves white men?' asked the priests, meaning those who attend our divine services and the young men who have brought primers and slates and have begun to learn (there had been a movement of young men into the catechumenate). 'Oh, they go there for pleasure and just to amuse themselves, and will desist' replied the people. 'Well', continued the priests, 'then each head of a family must bring a cushion upon his head to prove his loyalty before the great fetish and to swear an oath of allegiance that you will remain faithful servants and true worshipers of the idols of your forefathers who have been their and your protectors'. The men accordingly brought the cushions on their heads, and heaped them on a certain spot before the priests, and were all stuck on some pile and placed them on the street behind the house of the senior fetish Obo. In this interview of the people with the priests the people were made to understand that they (the priests) were under the inspiration of the fetishes and were speaking the language of the fetishes and the words to be taken as the fetishes own words. The cushion on which loads are carried on the human head is the symbol of the a slave and a rebel, and signifies that as a rebel is subjugated to the yoke and as a slave is bound to carry his master on his head or on his shoulders by the support of his cushion so the people must remain under the yoke of the fetishes. This event was followed up by a general boycott of contact with services and preaching, and the young men gave up their learning. The fetish priests increased the frequency of their liturgies going

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into houses and breaking cooking or water pots if they thought that the inmates were being less attentive than they ought. Opoku adds later to his description of the cushion ceremony that the people were asked to sacrifice all kinds of provisions to the fetishes (he specifically names sheep and oiled mashed yams) and 'lighted torches' were put at the entrance to the village on the side of the Salem and then doused in water as a sign that the impending calamity had been averted. The people also asked the fetishes to bring back the snails in the plentiful supply which had obtained in times past, and more food was sacrificed (to the earlier list Opoku adds mashed oiled plantains) and 1d or 2d collection was made from everyone, and a live snail was buried in the earth under a pot. After this, however, things got worse, deaths began to occur among the adults (the priest losing two women out of his family) and the snails which before had been obtainable in twos and threes now almost disappeared. A woman was heard to question what had happened. Opoku meanwhile had taken up the battle with great rest. He identified the pending menace hanging in the sky as God's anger. He pointed out that the fetish priests were losing people by death just like everyone else (listing not only Kukurantumi's Obo, but also the Fofie priestess and the Asante priest of Tano.) Furthermore rather than death having its residence in the Salem it seemed to have picked out Kukurantumi town, so why put the 'lighted torches' as a symbol on the Salem side of the town? He advised them that sheep meat was better for them than snails; so why sacrifice the former to get the latter? And how can the priests bring snails - do not the priests thank you for gifts of snails, both when you bring them and again the next morning? And does not putting the snail under the pot symbolise having them hidden from human sight? In any case there is a simple answer for the shortage of snails - one part of the land had been sold to the Krobos, Akwapims etc., while the other part is now being settled by the Juabens - the faster the Kukurantumi people collect snails the faster the other people do so too. Half or at least 1/3 the quantity have now passed to other hands. At the meeting at which all these things were said Opoku's audience increased from 30 to 100 as people were attracted by the complimentary remarks of the hearers. The immediate result -as the conversion of two elderly women, one a widow of the late priest of Obo and then married to a long-standing backslider. Her husband joined her in regular attendance at services, and their 4 children were all sent to school and to be baptised with the mother. These two were backed by many others who had more or less decided to enter the community but had not yet summoned the courage to do so. No-one tried to stop them except the priest (presumably of Obo). Since then the priests have stopped appearing to speak the voice of the fetishes. Many sacred days had passed since without any fetish dances. 'One must admit what the Christians say that fetishes have no power but are supported by human hands' said one man. The priests had also apparently stopped predicting out fear of backlash from Opoku. At a visit to the Fofie priestess Opoku faced her complaint that he had turned the heart of the whole town against her - people no longer came to enquire about their 'lucks', and were not even interested in favourable messages from the priests. The rainy season has kept him away from Koforidua for 6 months, but he does not believe serious progress is being

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made there.

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