

# JOURNAL OF AFRICAN CHRISTIAN BIOGRAPHY

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The *Journal of African Christian Biography* was launched in 2016 to complement and make stories from the on-line *Dictionary of African Christian Biography* ([www.DACB.org](http://www.DACB.org)) more readily accessible and immediately useful in African congregations and classrooms.

Now published quarterly, with all issues available on line, the intent of the *JACB* is to promote the research, publication, and use of African Christian biography within Africa by serving as an academically credible but publicly accessible source of information on Christianity across the continent. Content will always include biographies already available in the database itself, but original contributions related to African Christian biography or to African church history are also welcome. While the policy of the *DACB* itself has been to restrict biographical content to subjects who are deceased, the *JACB* plans to include interviews with select living African church leaders and academics. All editorial correspondence should be directed to: [jjbonk@bu.edu](mailto:jjbonk@bu.edu) and [joacb@bu.edu](mailto:joacb@bu.edu).

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## Guidelines for Book Reviewers

### *Journal of African Christian Biography*

In reviewing books for the *Journal of African Christian Biography*, please adhere to the following guidelines.

**Objectivity.** We ask that a note of respectful objectivity be maintained in all reviews, no matter how critical. If personal vested interests, opinions, or animus make such a review unlikely or impossible, please do not attempt to review the book. Harsh, one-sided reviews are generally not credible and will not be published in the *JACB*.

**Length.** Unless you have been invited to submit a full critical review essay, your review should run between a minimum of 400 words to a maximum of 1000 words.

**Format.** Book review manuscripts should be single-spaced, using a 12-point font such as Times New Roman, with one-inch margins. Reviews should include some word about the author(s) or editor(s) of the book. Any quotation in the review should be followed by the page reference (or inclusive page numbers) in parentheses.

**Headings.** The following style should be used for headings:

#### **African Christian Biography: Stories, Lives, and Challenges.**

*Edited by Dana L. Robert. Pietermaritzburg, South Africa: Cluster Publications, 2018. Paperback. Pp. xx, 364. No price given.*

**Reviewer's identification.** The name of the book reviewer should come at the **end** of the review. Please include a brief (1 or 2 sentences) **biographical note** indicating your present position (with full name and location of academic institution).

Please **proofread your review carefully**—especially proper names, technical terms, foreign phrases, dates, and numbers. Try to ensure accuracy in every detail.

Send your book review as MS Word or PDF attachment to [jjbonk@bu.edu](mailto:jjbonk@bu.edu).

The review is due within 60 days after you receive the book. Complimentary copies of the journal issue featuring your review will be sent to you when it is published.

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The manuscript portrayed on cover is an illustrated Zema chant text and notes from the *Book of Digua* (Metshafe Digua Zeqidus Yared), p. 3.

## Introducing *African Christian Biography: Stories, Lives, and Challenges*

By Dana L. Robert, editor

Beginning with this issue, the *Journal of African Christian Biography* will serialize the papers from the proceedings of the 2015 conference on African Christian Biography. The conference was held at Boston University to celebrate the 20<sup>th</sup> year anniversary of the *Dictionary of African Christian Biography*.

The volume *African Christian Biography* (Cluster Publications, 2018) explores the creative spaces generated by the intersection of three concepts: African . . . Christian . . . Biography. What can be learned about African cultural and political identity through the lens of Christian biography? How is the meaning of the Christian faith broadened and deepened through studying the lives of Africans? The mutual engagement of “African” and “Christian” and “Biography” opens multiple new worlds of imagination and meaning.

Biography is powerful. On a popular level, biography introduces ordinary people to the excitement of history by exploring the loves, hates, struggles, and victories of actual human beings. Biography illustrates how people construct meaning in the midst of social, cultural, and political processes that often seem overwhelming and uncontrollable. When hearing about or reading about the life of someone with whom we identify, our own lives are validated, and we are strengthened for the struggles ahead. In short, through biography people become, to borrow a concept made popular by liberation theology, the “subjects of their own history.”

Biography is an increasingly important form of scholarship. According to David Nasaw, biography “has been and continues to be a vital genre of historical writing.”<sup>1</sup> It is uniquely suited to the present age because it allows for the construction of multiple identities by the subject in question: biography allows for the perception of a life to differ depending on its context and the nest of relationships in which it finds itself. It reconfigures “class, gender, and ethnicity as they interact at the level of the individual” and transcends “the theoretical divide between empiricist social history and linguistic-turn cultural history.”<sup>2</sup> Biography, as historian Lois Banner notes, reveals women’s lives (and those of

- g. Do you have any regrets?
- h. What are your concerns for Africa (or for your church, your country) as you contemplate the future?
- i. What are your dreams and hopes for the Church in Africa? If you were to return to this continent 100 years from now, what would you hope to find? What would you fear you might find?
- j. Do you have words of advice for readers of the JACB?

3. Processing the interview
  - a. Whether the interview has been conducted by email or face to face, read through the responses carefully, and flag points that need to be clarified or expanded upon.
  - b. When you return the text to the interviewee for approving, invite the person to address the points that you have flagged for elaboration or clarification.
4. Postscript to the interview: Please send a mini-bio of yourself, the time frame within which the interview was conducted, and—if the interviewee is a published author—a list of key publications.
5. Publishing the interview. Once the interviewee has approved of the interview, submit it to the DACB/JACB editorial offices in Boston. The interview will appear in the JACB and in the DACB simultaneously.
6. The DACB will provide the interviewee with multiple (10) copies of the JACB issue in which the interview appears, accompanied by a letter of thanks that will be copied to you the interviewer.

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<sup>1</sup> David Nasaw, “Historians and Biography: Introduction,” *American Historical Review* 114, no. 3 (June 2009): 575.

<sup>2</sup> Nasaw, “Historians and Biography,” 576–77.

## Suggested Interview Guidelines and Questions for the *Journal of African Christian Biography*

The JACB seeks to engage with contemporary African Christian theologians, Christian leaders, and scholars through the use of interviews. The following guidelines are meant to help structure the process.

1. Preparation
  - a. Who is the person you want to interview?
  - b. What is your relationship to him or her? The questions you ask will emerge from what you already know.
  - c. Why do you want to interview this person?
    - i. What do you already know about this person?
    - ii. What is it about this person that makes him or her a notable subject for the JACB?
2. Interview questions and the Interview itself. The interview can be conducted face to face or by email correspondence. Usually a combination of both methods is ideal. Questions should be open-ended, and should be tailored to fit the person who is being interviewed.
  - a. Can you share something of your family background, childhood, education?
  - b. Where did you grow up, and what were the circumstances of your upbringing?
  - c. Where were some individuals (parents, siblings, spouse, relatives, friends, teachers, mentors, role models) who particularly influenced you? What was it about them that made an impact on you?
  - d. Where were events, circumstances or books that were somehow pivotal in your life?
  - e. What were some of the greatest challenges/obstacles that you encountered in becoming who you are?
  - f. What do you feel were your most significant accomplishments?

other neglected subjects) to provide new role models for changing cultures.<sup>3</sup>

The subject of African biography has barely scratched the surface of scholarly possibilities. Full-length individual biographies of Africans are rare. Depth perspectives on African history through scholarly critical biography remain scarce. With the exception of political figures and a few famous literary giants, the number of biographies of great African cultural and social personalities lags behind those of Europeans and North Americans.

*African Christian Biography* takes the discussion of African biography a step further and argues for the unique importance of African *Christian Biography*. Christianity in Africa dates to the beginning of the faith and to its Jewish origins. The Bible refers to Africa in verses about the land of Cush, the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon, and the Ethiopian eunuch baptized by Philip. Egypt and Ethiopia retain Christian communities whose origins date to antiquity. During the modern period of European colonialism, Christianity played a major role by educating nationalist elites and intellectuals who led the subcontinent to independence starting with Ghana in 1958. Indigenous African leadership has been key to the expansion and growth of Christianity from the days of sixteenth-century King Afonso I of Kongo to the present.

With Africans in the limelight as leaders in Christian churches worldwide, the collection and writing of African Christian Biography has become an urgent task for understanding the cultures, societies, and politics of sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>4</sup> Given the demonstrable importance of African piety and practices for World Christianity, including the huge African diaspora, the biographies of African Christians are also essential for understanding World Christianity.

Studies of African Christian lives need to influence academic discourse with consideration of such issues as the contemporary Africanization of Christianity and the Christianization of Africa, the construction of individual African identities, and the role of Christian discourse in contested visions of community. Now the time is right for scholarly biographies of African Christians to join the older hagiographies and popular treatments. African Christian Biography has become an essential tool for the study of both Africa and contemporary World Christianity.

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<sup>3</sup> Lois Banner, "Biography as History," *American Historical Review* 114, no. 3 (June 2009): 579.

<sup>4</sup> Achim von Oppen and Silke Strickrodt, "Introduction—Religious Biography: Transcending Boundaries," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 38, no. 3 (2012): 429–32.

This issue of the *JACB* includes two introductory articles, one by director Jonathan Bonk on the vision of the *DACB* and one by Archbishop Emmanuel Egbunu on the use of biography in the *DACB*.

*Text adapted and excerpted from* "Introduction: Why African Christian Biography?" by Dana L. Robert in *African Christian Biography: Stories Lives and Challenges*, ed. by Dana L. Robert (Pietermaritzburg, South Africa: Cluster Publications, 2018).

## DISSERTATIONS AND THESES

Can you recommend a dissertation or a thesis on an important figure in African Christianity, or on the history of an African church, mission, region or country?

The *Dictionary of African Christian Biography (DACB)* wants to tap into the rich resources of the libraries and educational institutions in Africa in order to publicize and to make available any dissertations and theses on African Christian biography and African Christian history.

Please help! Send your recommendations or your manuscripts in PDF form to **Michèle Sigg**, Associate Director, at [dacb@bu.edu](mailto:dacb@bu.edu).

## Guidelines for Article Contributors *Journal of African Christian Biography*

The *JACB* is an academic journal devoted to the preservation, publication and dissemination of original scholarly articles relating to African Christian biographical subjects. The journal is not hagiographical, and subjects are treated with candor and honesty while at the same time acknowledging and appreciating the subject's contribution(s) to Christianity in Africa at local, regional, denominational, national, or continental levels. Articles on local, regional, or national church histories are also welcome, as are critical reviews of publications related to African Christian biography.

Biographies that are not prepared with academic objectivity, rigor, and care will not be published, except possibly as examples of hagiography. In addition to the quality of the text itself, each article should include appropriately supportive endnotes, including documentation of time and location of interviews. Brief supportive bibliographies, when available, should be included.

### Preparing and submitting article manuscripts

**Format.** Manuscripts (including endnotes) should be single-spaced, using a 12-point common font such as Times New Roman, with one-inch margins. Manuscripts should ideally be submitted as MS Word documents, and sent to the editor as email attachments. Articles should be from 3,000 to 5,000 words in length, including notes.

**Author identification.** Please include with your article a brief biographical note indicating your present position (with full name and location of your academic institution).

**E-mail address.** Some authors desire to include their e-mail address with their article. Please indicate whether or not you wish to have your email address included with your author identification.

**Author photo.** Please provide a recent digital head and shoulders photograph of yourself to be published with your article.

**Photographs.** The *JACB* welcomes photographs with articles. Please send these to us as JPEG digital files.

### Address correspondence to:

Jonathan J. Bonk, Editor  
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singing in order to define and express a distinctively African concept of civilization. In this process, *amakwaya* performance developed into a powerful means whereby class identity and consciousness could be constructed and communicated. The second part looks into the framework of *amakwaya*, and at the mission schools and colleges they attended and the competitions they organize. As a result of the practice of hymn singing, participation in a choir soon became an important part of the leisure time activities of the early mission converts. This formative phase of *amakwaya* is illustrated in a case study of one of the most influential schools in Natal, Adams College, near Amanzimtoti, where the first black South African School of Music was established. In order to promote the values important to the missionaries as well as their converts - discipline, progress, and success - competitions were encouraged at the mission stations. These became models for the competitions which today are the main feature of *amakwaya* practice. The voices of various members of the community are used to present a critical evaluation of the positive and negative aspects of present-day competitions. The last part of the thesis concentrates on *amakwaya* repertoire, particularly as it is represented at important choral competitions such as the National Choir Festival. This part also attempts to facilitate an understanding of the genesis, structure and aesthetic of the sectionalized repertoire, which consists of neo-traditional songs, Western compositions, and choral works composed by mission-educated musicians. Strict adherence to the sectionalized repertoire is a unique feature of *amakwaya* performance practice to the present day.

## Modern African Church History and the Streetlight Effect: Biography as a Lost Key

By Jonathan J. Bonk, Project Director

*For [post-Columbus] cartographers, maps became ephemera, repeatedly redrawn to new information. The sea monsters and ornamental flourishes disappeared to make way for new landmasses of increasingly accurate shape.*

—David S. Landes, *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations*

A drunk stumbled into a dark back alley after a night of heavy drinking at the local bar. Pulling out his keys, he fumbled and dropped them. Despite searching, he was unable to locate the keys in the pitch black darkness. Noticing a light on the street at the end of the alley, he shuffled over to the lamp pole, where, a short time later a policeman asked him why he was crawling around on his hands and knees, peering at the sidewalk.

“I’m looking for my lost keys,” he replied.

“Are you sure this is where you lost them,” the policeman asked?

“No, I lost them on the other side of the street,” the man responded.

“Then why are you looking for them here?” queried the puzzled officer.

“Because,” the man responded edgily, “anyone can see that the light is better here. My eyes can see under the streetlight.”

What academia has dubbed *the streetlight effect* has its analogue in the study of African church history. Research on the continent of Africa—where Christianity is growing most rapidly today and where theologies are proliferating as the Christian Scriptures are brought to bear on questions and perspectives unanticipated by either their authors or their emissaries—can be tedious, time consuming, expensive, and frustrating, so scholars search beneath the reassuring glow of academic streetlights: university and mission libraries, archives and materials collections in Western lands. Not surprisingly, such studies yield more or less predictable Christendom and neo-Christendom histories and theologies. There is nothing wrong with such histories, of course, except that they no longer tell the story of African Christianity as it really is. That story can only be found elsewhere, beyond the reassuring rays of the streetlights.

The challenge of documenting the lives of persons who, rarely literate,

leave scarcely any paper trail is considerable.<sup>5</sup> Failure to rise to the challenge compounds the troubling tendency of standard reference works to perpetuate the illusion that the Christian world ever revolves on a Western axis. Given the realities of world Christianity in AD 2016, such scholarly tools and the myths they perpetuate constitute disappointing proof that

Africa and Asia and Latin America and the Pacific and the Caribbean—now major centers of Christianity—are [still] underrepresented in works that are meant to cover the entire field of Christian knowledge.<sup>6</sup>

### Africa as Terra Incognita—Christian Maps and the Invisible Continent

The fourteenth-century Hereford Mappamundi, a commonly referenced medieval map, is a striking example of historical and theological projection onto an image of the physical world.<sup>7</sup> The map is congested with familiar European and Mediterranean towns and cities, from Edinburgh and Oxford to Rome and Antioch. Onto this familiar terrain the most significant historical and theological events are projected—the fall of humanity, the crucifixion, and the apocalypse. The rest of the world is vague and largely speculative. Most of Africa and Asia blur into margins featuring elaborately grotesque illustrations of prevailing myths and savage demonic forces.<sup>8</sup> Evelyn Edson comments,

The . . . southern edge of the map contains a lineup of the monstrous races, from the “Genus sine auribus” (people without ears) at the top to the four-eyed people of Ethiopia and the Gangines “with whom there is no friendship. . . .” A number of other monsters are shown in Africa, including a mandrake, . . . a unicorn,

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<sup>5</sup> Even William Wadé Harris, hailed in 1926 as “Africa’s most successful evangelist” in consequence of his astounding impact upon the establishing of the Christian faith among the peoples of the Ivory Coast, “left no writings except a half-dozen short dictated messages.” See David A. Shank, “The Legacy of William Wadé Harris,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 10, no. 4 (October 1986): 170.

<sup>6</sup> Andrew F. Walls, “Structural Problems in Mission Studies,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 15, no. 4 (October 1991): 151.

<sup>7</sup> Evelyn Edson, *The World Map, 1300–1492: The Persistence of Tradition and Transformation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2007).

<sup>8</sup> Peter Whitfield, *Image of the World: Twenty Centuries of World Maps* (London: British Library, 2010), 20–21.

conclude that ethno/musicological claims that early black choral music contains “African” musical content conflate “race” and culture under a double imperative: in the names of a decolonizing politics and a postcolonial epistemology in which hybridity as resistance is racialized. The final chapter explores how “the voice” was crucial to identity politics in the Victorian world, an object that was classed and racialized. Proceeding from the black reception of choral voice training, I attempt to outline the beginnings of a social history of the black choral voice, as well as analyze the sonic content of that voice through an approach I call a “phonetics of timbre.”

Detterbeck, Markus. *South African choral music (Amakwaya): song, contest and the formation of identity*. University of KwaZulu-Natal. Thesis (Ph.D.) 2002. <http://hdl.handle.net/10413/3083>

**Abstract:** *Amakwaya* refers to the tradition and performance practice of choirs in South Africa that emerged from the mission-schools in the nineteenth century and is manifest today in the annual competitions held by various Teachers' Associations or company-sponsored events like the National Choir Festival. This choral practice, combining Western music styles with African tradition, bears the marks - both social and aesthetic - of colonial and missionary influences, and is closely linked to the emerging black middle class, their process of negotiating identity, and their later quest for a national culture. Many aspects of contemporary *amakwaya* performance practice, it is argued, including the recent interest of many members of the *amakwaya* community in opera, can be understood through an analysis of the social dimensions of these choirs. Particular attention is given to the role played by competitions and the sectionalized repertoire. The criticisms made in this regard flow from an understanding of the social meaning and aesthetic thrust of the tradition, from the author's practical involvement with the choirs, and from extensive discussions with choristers and conductors. The first part of the thesis is concerned with identifying the role played by European values such as those of education and progress, in the self-understanding of the emerging mission educated black South African elite in the second half of the nineteenth century. An initial tendency towards uncritical imitation and attempts at assimilation ended in the experience of rejection by the settler community and isolation. It was followed, in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, by a complex negotiation between traditional and modern values. With political, social and economic mobility restricted in white South Africa, the black middle class turned towards artistic expression such as choral



David Tonghou Ngong (Editor). *A New History of African Christian Thought: From Cape to Cairo*. First Edition. Routledge; 2016. \$47.95. [Amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com)  
ISBN-10: 0415857562, ISBN-13: 978-0415857567

#### Description:

David Tonghou Ngong offers a comprehensive view of African Christian thought that includes North Africa in antiquity as well as Sub-Saharan Africa from the period of colonial missionary activity to the present. Challenging conventional colonial divisions of Africa, *A New History of African Christian Thought* demonstrates that important continuities exist across the continent. Chapters written by specialists in African Christian thought reflect the issues—both ancient and modern—in which Christian Africa has impacted the shape of Christian belief from the beginning of the movement up to the present day. ([Amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com))

## Dissertations

Olwage, Grant. *Music and (post)colonialism: the dialectics of choral culture on a South African frontier*. Rhodes University. Thesis (Ph.D.) 2004.  
<http://hdl.handle.net/10962/d1007717>

**Abstract:** This thesis explores the genesis of black choralism in late-nineteenth-century colonial South Africa, attending specifically to its dialectic with metropolitan Victorian choralism. In two introductory historiographic chapters I outline the political-narrative strategies by which both Victorian and black South African choralism have been elided from music histories. Part 1 gives an account of the "structures" within and through which choralism functioned as a practice of colonisation, as "internal colonialism" in Britain and evangelical colonialism in the eastern Cape Colony ... Throughout, the thesis explores how the categories of class and race functioned interchangeably in the colonial imagination. In part 2 I turn to the black reception of Victorian choralism in composition and performance. The fifth chapter examines the compositional discourse of early black choral music, focusing on the work of John Knox Bokwe (1855-1922). Through a detailed account of several of Bokwe's works and their metropolitan sources, particularly late-nineteenth century gospel hymnody, I show that Bokwe's compositional practice enacted a politics that became anticolonial, and that early black choral music became "black" in its reception. I

and a centaur.<sup>9</sup>

While considerable cartographic clarity has since been achieved by geographers and ethnographers, ecclesiastical "maps" continue to badly misrepresent, underrepresent, or simply ignore the actual state of affairs in much of the world, perhaps especially in Africa. We are prone to silly generalizations about Africa, forgetting that it is geographically huge, culturally complex, and linguistically diverse. The sheer immensity of the continent is belied by projections of it onto our consciousness by maps such as the Gall Projection, where Africa assumes modest proportions, seemingly smaller than North America, its surface intersected with neatly drawn borders demarking fifty-three discrete nation states, six of these islands.<sup>10</sup> These national boundary lines trace their origin to a Berlin Conference in 1884 when—with nary an African present—European powers neatly carved up the entire continent among themselves.<sup>11</sup> The simplicity of the European scheme obscured then, and acerbates now, more complex cultural, linguistic, and topographic realities on the ground. Since cartographic studies are as much the *cause* as the *result* of history, continued reliance on such scholarly "authorities" ensures the ongoing confusion of Christian guides attempting to locate themselves and their protégés ecclesiastically.

This most polyglot of all continents—home to as many as 3,000 "mother tongues"—is notorious for its "vampire" states, savage civil wars, overwhelming pandemics, predatory politicians, rickety infrastructures, and intractable poverty. What is seldom noted in the depressingly predictable reports and images from which we construct our impressions of the continent is the presence of its burgeoning Christian and Muslim countercultures.

To the surprise of those who predicted its disappearance with the end of colonialism, Christianity in Africa continues to flourish. As Lamin Sanneh reminded us some time ago,

In 1962 when Africa had largely slipped out of colonial control, there were about 60 million Christians, with Muslims at about 145

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<sup>9</sup> Edson, *The World Map, 1300–1492*, 19.

<sup>10</sup> For a graphic illustration of Africa's actual size, see Kai Krause, "The True Size of Africa," <http://kai.sub.blue/en/africa.html>.

<sup>11</sup> See St. Clair County Community College, Port Huron, Michigan, "Subsaharan Africa: Berlin Conference of 1884," *World Regional Geography, Unit C: Subsaharan Africa*, [www.sc4geography.net/hunckler/internetclass/SubsaharanAfrica/berlin.html](http://www.sc4geography.net/hunckler/internetclass/SubsaharanAfrica/berlin.html).

million. Of the Christians, 23 million were Protestants and 27 million were Catholics. The remaining 10 million were Coptic and Ethiopian Orthodox.<sup>12</sup>

Today the number of Christians in Africa has multiplied nine times to nearly 555 million, making it the religion of a majority of Africans south of the Sahara.<sup>13</sup>

A survey by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, made public on August 15, 2010, showed Africa to be the most religious continent in the world. In a summary of the survey, Chika Odoua of the *Huffington Post* reported that religion was “‘very important’ to more than three-quarters of the population in 17 of 19 sub-Saharan nations.”<sup>14</sup> The share of Africans who described religion as “‘very important’” in their lives ranged from 98 percent in Senegal to 69 percent in Botswana. Those numbers compared with 57 percent of Americans, 25 percent of Germans, and 8 percent of Swedes. The survey also found that “the number of Christians in sub-Saharan Africa grew faster than the number of Muslims, from 7 million in 1900 to 470 million” in 2010. Today, approximately one out of four Christians resides in sub-Saharan Africa. The conclusion drawn by Luis Lugo, who conducted the research and issued the report, was that “on a continent-wide basis, sub-Saharan Africa comes out as the most religious place on Earth.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion Is Christianity? The Gospel Beyond the West* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 16.

<sup>13</sup> Todd M. Johnson, Gina A. Zurlo, Albert W. Hickman, and Peter F. Crossing, “Christianity 2016: Latin America and Projecting Religions to 2050,” *International Bulletin of Mission Research* 40, no. 1 (January 2016): 26. See, also, “Profiles of the 270 Largest of the 10,000 Distinct Religions Worldwide,” in *World Christian Encyclopedia: A Comparative Survey of Churches and Religions in the Modern World*, 2nd ed., ed. David B. Barrett, George T. Kurian, and Todd M. Johnson (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2001), 2:3–12.

<sup>14</sup> Chika Odoua, “Survey Finds Africa Is Most Religious Part of World,” *Huffington Post*, June 15, 2010, updated May 25, 2011, [www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/04/15/survey-finds-africa-is-most-religious-part-of-world\\_n\\_539704.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/04/15/survey-finds-africa-is-most-religious-part-of-world_n_539704.html).

<sup>15</sup> Odoua, “Survey Finds Africa Is Most Religious Part of World.” Odoua reports, “According to the survey, 98 percent of respondents in Senegal say religion is very important, followed by 93 percent in Mali. The lowest percentage was reported in Botswana, 69 percent, which is still a healthy majority. . . . The study was part of the Pew-Templeton Global Religious Futures Project. More than 25,000 sub-Saharan Africans responded in face-to-face interviews in more than 60 languages.”

Publisher: Iccs Press, 2017. \$43.97. [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com) ISBN-10: 1624280609; ISBN-13: 978-1624280603

**Description:**

In *The Songs of Africa*, the authors present evidence that the oldest written form of African music with embedded musical notation in the sub-Saharan region was Ethiopian chant, song, dance, and instrumentation. Those who are looking for the most ancient known roots of African song, jazz, musical phrases, composition, and scripted musical notation may find them echoing from the Ethiopian highlands from the fifth century and codified in a stable manuscript tradition dating to the fourteenth century.

These manuscript sources predate by many centuries most other oral traditions found in traditional African religions. Despite their crucial importance in centuries of culture-formation, the Ethiopian Canticles have never before been the specific subject of rigorous critical textual investigation. In this volume one encounters significant implications for jazz history, African studies, and Christian culture in eastern Africa. ([Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com))

Binns, John. *The Orthodox Church of Ethiopia: A History* Publisher: I. B. Tauris; New edition, 2018. \$ 26.12. [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com) ISBN-10: 178831395X; ISBN-13: 978-1788313957

**Description:**

Surrounded by steep escarpments to the north, south and east, Ethiopia has always been geographically and culturally set apart. It has the longest archaeological record of any country in the world: indeed, this precipitous mountain land was where the human race began. It is also home to an ancient church with a remarkable legacy. The Church of Ethiopia is the only pre-colonial church in sub-Saharan Africa; today it has a membership of around forty million and is rapidly growing. This book is the first major study of a community which has developed a distinctive approach different from all other churches. John Binns explains how its special features have shaped the life of the Ethiopian people, and how political changes since the overthrow of Haile Selassie have forced the Church to rethink its identity and mission. He discusses the famous rock-hewn churches; the Ark of the Covenant (claimed by the Church and housed in Aksum); medieval monasticism; relations with the Coptic Church; centuries of co-existence with Islam; missionary activity; and the Church’s venerable oral traditions of poetic allegorical reflection. ([Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com))

## Recent Print and Digital Resources Related to Christianity in Africa

Compiled by Beth Restrick, Head African Studies Librarian

Odozor, Paulinus Ikechukwu, *Morality Truly Christian, Truly African: Foundational, Methodological, and Theological Considerations*. University of Notre Dame Press, 2014. \$50.00. [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com/dp/9780268037383) ISBN 9780268037383; 0268037388.

### Description:

Given the largely Eurocentric nature of moral theology in the history of the Roman Catholic Church, what will it take to invest the theological community in the history and moral challenges of the Church in other parts of the world, especially Africa? What is to be gained for the whole Church when this happens in a deep and lasting way? In this timely and important study, Paulinus Ikechukwu Odozor brings greater theological clarity to the issue of the relationship between Christianity and African tradition in the area of ethical foundations. He also provides a constructive example of what fundamental moral theology done from an African and Christian (especially Catholic) moral theological point of view could look like.

Following a brief history of the development of African Christian theology, Odozor examines responses of African theologians to African tradition and Christian responses to the reality of non-Christian religions. In a context where the African religious experience and heritage are powerful sources of meaning and identity, Christian evangelization raises questions both about the African primal religions and about Christianity itself and its claims. Odozor takes up the subject of moral reasoning in an African Christian theological ethics and concludes with case studies that show how the African Church has tried to inculcate moral discourse on a religiously pluralistic continent and relate the healing gospel message to African situations. Students and scholars of moral theology and ethics and church leaders will profit from the issues raised in *Morality Truly Christian, Truly African*. ([Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com/dp/9780268037383))

Thomas C. Oden (Editor), *The Songs of Africa: The Ethiopian Canticles*.

The Christian scene in Africa is bewildering for most observers.<sup>16</sup> Although a majority of Africans today self-identify as “Christian,” standard definitions of the term are hard pressed to accommodate on-the-ground realities. Frequently, comfortably established old Christendom formulations and practices have been displaced by much that is unfamiliar and even shocking. Scholarly observers such as Harold Turner, David Barrett, Bengt Sundkler, Kwame Bediako, and Marthinus Daneel have been pioneer chroniclers of the phenomenon variously referred to as African Independent Churches, African Initiated Churches, or African Instituted Churches. Acronymically known as AICs, these unique expressions of Christian faith and life can be disconcertingly pre-Enlightenment in their worldviews and pre-Christendom in their theologies. While churches elsewhere tend to stress Christology and individual salvation, the emphasis in AICs tends to be on the Holy Spirit and community. And the Holy Spirit is not simply a vague, ethereal sanctifier, but the healing, delivering, and persuading power of God.

AIC names only hint at a religious epistemology and ontology more reminiscent of fourth-century Edessa than of twenty-first-century Rome or Geneva. Thousands of denominations not found in the United States—their membership often numbering millions—include such ecclesiastical entities as Prophesying and Evangelizing Daughters of God, Celestial Church of Christ, Redeemed Christian Church of God, Church of the Lord Aladura, Sweet Heart Church of the Clouds, Musama Disco Christo Church, Spiritual Healing Church, Church of Christ on Earth by the Prophet Simon Kimbangu, Church of the Cherubim and Seraphim, Ethiopian Christian Church in Zion, Holy Five Mission, Patmos Church, Star Gospel Church, and so on.<sup>17</sup>

In his groundbreaking book *Schism and Renewal in Africa: An Analysis of Six Thousand Contemporary Religious Movements*, published in 1968, David Barrett first drew attention to the explosive emergence and profusion of AICs.<sup>18</sup> Matthew Ajuoga—an Anglican clergyman excommunicated by a missionary bishop in 1957 because of his affiliation with what the established church dismissed as “a bunch of disgruntled nut cases”—became chairman of the

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<sup>16</sup> Much of the material in the following three paragraphs first appeared in Jonathan J. Bonk, “Africa Unbound,” *Christianity Today*, November 2007, 47–51.

<sup>17</sup> The bewildering profusion of new denominations in Africa is typified in the partial listing of churches in Lesotho given by Craig W. Hincks, in his massive *Quest for Peace: An Ecumenical History of the Church in Lesotho* (Morija, Lesotho: Heads of the Churches in Lesotho and Christian Council of Lesotho, 2009), 944–49.

<sup>18</sup> David B. Barrett, *Schism and Renewal in Africa: An Analysis of Six Thousand Contemporary Religious Movements* (Nairobi: Oxford Univ. Press, 1968).

Organization of African Instituted Churches (OAIC), an Africa-wide confession linking ninety-two national councils of independent churches, by conservative estimates now some 60 million strong.<sup>19</sup>

While most attempts by church historians over the past ten years to locate themselves in the terra firma of contemporary world Christianity have taken scarcely any note of Africa, the academy is at last beginning to reflect the reality that Christianity is no longer a so-called Western religion. Most of its adherents now reside outside of the West. This new reality was most emphatically evident in the groundbreaking *Atlas of Global Christianity*, published in 2009.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, the *Cambridge Dictionary of Christianity*, published a year later, contains substantial non-Western content.<sup>21</sup> But these tools are in some ways still anomalous, since the imbalance in standard reference tools remains, and antiquated maps continue to dominate. The fact is, scarcely anything is known about the *persons* chiefly responsible for the astonishing explosion of Christianity across the African continent: the catechists and evangelists.<sup>22</sup>

There is, however, an even more disturbing dimension to the problem. In his 1991 essay mentioned earlier, “Structural Problems in Mission Studies,” Andrew Walls observed that despite the global transformation of Christianity, not only do Western syllabuses fail to adequately register this phenomenon, but they

have often been taken over in the Southern continents, as though they had some sort of universal status. Now they are out-of-date even for Western Christians. As a result, a large number of conventionally trained ministers have neither the intellectual materials nor even the outline knowledge for understanding the

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<sup>19</sup> See Organization of African Instituted Churches (OAIC), [www.oaic.org](http://www.oaic.org). The OAIC figures compare favorably with those of the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC) (in French: Conférence des Églises de Toute l’Afrique [CETA]), the ecumenical fellowship with headquarters in Nairobi that represents more than 120 million African Christians in 133 member churches and 32 associate councils of churches in 39 African countries. See World Council of Churches, “All Africa Conference of Churches,” [www.oikoumene.org/en/member-churches/africa/aacc](http://www.oikoumene.org/en/member-churches/africa/aacc).

<sup>20</sup> Todd M. Johnson and Kenneth R. Ross, eds., *Atlas of Global Christianity, 1910–2010* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 2009).

<sup>21</sup> Daniel Patte, ed., *The Cambridge Dictionary of Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2010).

<sup>22</sup> Elizabeth Allo Isichei, *A History of Christianity in Africa: From Antiquity to the Present* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, and Lawrenceville, NJ: Africa World, 1995), 98–99. It is only recently that standard reference works have begun to include African subjects.

When Bokwe first arrived at Ugie, there was no school for either black or white in the district. He at once opened a school for children in the town, at first with no government grant. He then went out into the outlying areas, opening schools and churches. In 1906, through his efforts, the town of Ugie built its first European school. He also served as town clerk. After years of hard work, his schools flourished until, under the provisions of the Native Private Location Act, African squatters on white farms were turned out, and all but two of Bokwe’s schools and churches were obliged to close.

In 1905 Bokwe became a member of the committee, composed of Africans and members of the United Free Church of Scotland, which sought, as a memorial to the late Dr. Stewart, to establish a college of higher education for South African men and women. As a result, largely on the strength of donations collected among the people, Fort Hare College was opened in 1916. In the same year Bokwe was elected general secretary of the Native Teachers Association in the Transkei.

In 1920, already in poor health, he appeared before the Native Affairs Commission. He died at his home at Ntselamanzi, near Lovedale, on February 22, 1922. He was buried in the Gaga Cemetery, alongside other missionaries associated with Lovedale.

Phillis Ntantal

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Rex Collins, *Freedom For My People: The Autobiography of Z.K. Mathews*, London, 1891; S.E.K. Mqhayi, *Ubom bo Mfundisi u John Knox Bokwe* (“The Life of Rev. John Knox Bokwe”), Lovedale, 1925.

This article was reprinted from *The Encyclopaedia Africana Dictionary of African Biography* (In 20 Volumes). Volume Three: South Africa- Botswana-Lesotho-Swaziland. Ed. Keith Irvine. Algonac, Michigan: Reference Publications Inc., 1995. All rights reserved.

flood, and passed by the mission station, he was attracted by some beautiful music, which he had never heard before. Drawing nearer, he saw a white lady sitting in front of a box from which the music seemed to come. When she saw him, she beckoned to him and asked him: “Where can we get clean water?” He went and brought her the water. The woman was Mrs. Stewart, wife of the newly-arrived missionary, Dr. James Stewart. From then on young Bokwe ran errands and worked for the Stewart family. It was also in their house that he learnt to play the organ and the piano. In the same year Dr. Stewart took him into the general office of the Lovedale Mission as messenger, and later as his secretary, a post he filled until he left Lovedale in 1897. Meanwhile, in 1869, he was admitted into the mission’s college department, where he was to remain until 1872. In 1870 he helped in the printing and production of *iNdaba*, a Xhosa newspaper produced at Lovedale. When, in 1874, Lovedale obtained its own postal service, Bokwe was appointed manager, and later became head of the telegraph office. As a student, Bokwe was active in the literary society, of which he became chairman. (His paper on “The Native Land System as Operating Today,” presented some years later, in 1894, is still relevant a century later.) He also became conductor of the mission’s brass band, and also became known as a composer. His collected compositions were produced in book form in 1885. His compositions “Vuka Deborah,” “Plea for Mrica,” and “Marriage Song” are still known as are his musical arrangement of the hymns of the prophet Ntsikana.

In 1892, at the invitation of friends in Scotland and England, Bokwe visited these countries, preaching sermons in churches, and telling his listeners about the work of the Lovedale Mission. In 1897, after 24 years of meritorious service, he left Lovedale to collaborate with John Tengo Jabavu in producing the newspaper, *Imvo Zabantsundu* (“*African Opinion*”) in King Williamstown. Many Africans, however, were critical of the views expressed by Jabavu, in part because Jabavu was a *Mfengu*, a group regarded as subordinate to and unrepresentative of the Xhosa people. Opposition to Jabavu’s opinions found expression in another newspaper, *iZwi la Bantu* (“*The Voice of the People*”) published in East London, under the editorship of N. C. Mhala. It was to discourage these accusations that Bokwe, a Xhosa, went to join Jabavu. Bokwe’s two years on the newspaper, however, were most frustrating and unhappy and this began to tell on his health. In 1899 he left for his wife’s home at Tsomo, in the Transkei, to recuperate. This gave him the opportunity to fulfill his boyhood dream, and to become a minister of the church. He left Tsomo for Ugie in 1900, where he served first as an evangelist, and then as a probationer. In 1906 he was ordained as a minister of the United Free Church.

church as she is.<sup>23</sup>

Walls then reminded readers that discoveries in other fields—one thinks of such pathfinders as Copernicus or Louis Pasteur, for example—were resisted by those whose personal or institutional vested interests were threatened. The implications of new discoveries made their acceptance difficult. Similarly, Western Christendom’s dawning awareness that her old strength is gone and that her vitality is ebbing inexorably away is

intellectually threatening, requiring the abandonment of too many certainties, the acquisition of too many new ideas and skills, the modification of too many maxims, the sudden irrelevance of too many accepted authorities. It was [and is] easier to ignore them and carry on with the old intellectual maps (and often the old geographical ones too), even while accepting the fact of the discovery and profiting from the economic effects.<sup>24</sup>

But this troubling deficiency might also be due to an absence of basic, easily accessible reference tools—and the absence of such tools might be the result of the observational bias identified at the beginning of this essay as the “streetlight effect,” sometimes known as the “drunkard’s search.”

To return to the map analogy, since new maps have not been created, the old maps must serve. And on the old maps, the story of the church in Africa is a mere desideratum, a footnote to the story of European tribal ascendancy. It is seen as the religious expression of the West’s 500-year rise to world military, economic, and social hegemony: the complex phenomenon now neatly compressed into a single term—globalization. On most ecclesiastical maps, Africa remains *terra incognita*, a blur on the margins of world Christianity’s self-understanding.

### **The *Dictionary of African Christian Biography***

The *Dictionary of African Christian Biography* (DACB) was born in 1995.<sup>25</sup> Funded by a modest grant from Pew’s Research Enablement Program, a small

<sup>23</sup> Walls, “Structural Problems in Mission Studies,” 147.

<sup>24</sup> Walls, “Structural Problems in Mission Studies,” 149–50.

<sup>25</sup> The story of the *Dictionary of African Christian Biography* (DACB) has appeared in numerous scholarly publications over the years. The most up-to-date account can be found on the DACB website at [www.dacb.org](http://www.dacb.org).

group of scholars met that year at the Overseas Ministries Study Center in New Haven, Connecticut, to consider how these peculiar lacunae in African church history—an almost exclusive reliance on foreign sources and perspectives and the relative absence of African subjects or voices—might be redressed.<sup>26</sup> The *DACB* was the direct outcome of that meeting. Having intimated the reasons for the *DACB*'s existence, the final task of this essay is to tell the *DACB* story by answering three more, simple questions: (1) What is it? (2) How does it work? and (3) What is its future?

*What is it?* The *DACB* is an online, nonproprietary *memory base* committed to documenting, collecting, preserving, and making freely accessible biographical accounts and church histories, from oral and written sources, in order to advance a scholarly understanding of African Christianity. The database now contains more than 2,200 discrete biographies—a majority of these in English. At the time of this writing, an additional 160 English and 235 French language biographies are being processed for future incorporation into the *DACB*. A number of subjects also warrant alternative biographies, representing the distinctive orientations of their contributors.

From the very beginning, the *DACB* has maintained that publishing rights should be freely granted to churches, denominations, and national or international publishers wishing to produce a printed version of the entire electronic database or of any portion of the database deemed useful to them. Were the *DACB* to be conceived of as a proprietary, profit-making venture, it is doubtful whether it could gain significant Africa-wide circulation. Purchasing such a database would be out of the question for most Africans, making their stories unavailable to Africans themselves. The cost of producing and distributing the *DACB* in its annually updated, nonproprietary CD-ROM form is borne by the project management office at Boston University.

In August 2015 the *DACB* celebrated its twentieth anniversary. It is now a well-established, widely emulated, go-to source of information on those African figures chiefly responsible for the uniquely dynamic character and growth of Christianity on that continent. Awareness of the *DACB* continues to grow as

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<sup>26</sup> Members of this group included Jonathan J. Bonk (convener), Gerald H. Anderson, Joseph G. Donders, Charles W. Forman, Rosalind I. J. Hackett, Stephen Peterson, Lamin Sanneh, Francisco J. Silota, and Andrew F. Walls. The official announcement issued by participants at the conclusion of consultation (August 31–September 2, 1995) summarized the *raison d'être* and *modus operandi* of the envisaged *DACB*.

*The Christian Express*. 1 January 1898.

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\*MS 7902. Letter from J. Bokwe to Dr. Laws dated 19 November 1879. National Library of Scotland.

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**Bokwe, John Knox (B)**

**1855-1922**

**Presbyterian**

**South Africa**

John Knox Bokwe (March 15, 1855-February 22, 1922) was a Xhosa missionary, educator, and musician who played a role in the foundation in 1916 of what is now the University of Fort Hare (originally the South African Native College) in southeastern Cape Province. Bokwe was called *Mdengentonga*, a Xhosa word which describes a man short in stature but tall in deeds.

He was the youngest child of Cholwephi Bokwe, a Xhosa whose parents had left him, when he was one day old, at the Lovedale Mission in Cape Province, run by the United Free Church of Scotland. John Knox Bokwe's mother was Lena, daughter of Nxe, one of the first converts of Ntsikana, a Xhosa diviner who, converted to Christianity in 1816, had become the first Xhosa prophet.

Bokwe first went to school at the age of eight or nine, and was taught by William Kobe Ntsikana, grandson of the prophet. At age ten he expressed his wish to become a minister of the church. In 1867, when he was twelve, he encountered a family with which he was to become closely associated. He later related that, when he and two friends went to watch the Thyumie River in full

assisting with the publication of the Lovedale magazine, the Kaffir Express in 1870. He later took charge of the Lovedale telegraph station and in 1876 became a bookkeeper interpreter and a private secretary to the principal. Further tasks were added: postmaster, choirmaster, cashier and on occasion he also helped out as a teacher.

From 1875 Bokwe started to compose hymns. He visited Scotland and sang his hymns in a tenor voice at social gatherings. In 1897 he left Lovedale to join John Tengo Jabavu as joint-editor of *Imvo Zabantsundu*. In an address from the Lovedale staff dated 13 December 1897, his fellow workers expressed their “sincere regret” that he was leaving the institution. They handed him 25 pounds they had collected and a Bible, remarking that during the thirty years he had been at the institution he had come to be considered an essential part of Lovedale. After he left Bokwe soon realized that his real calling was to be a minister, not a journalist. He returned to Scotland for training and was ordained into the Presbyterian ministry in 1906. Bokwe was given charge of the congregation at Ugie and also took part in a number of evangelistic campaigns. He was forced to retire in 1920 because of failing health and moved nearer to Lovedale again. His last years were spent helping Dr. Henderson, the principal, to translate the metrical psalms into Xhosa.

Bokwe’s contribution to Xhosa religious music was exceptional. He helped with the publication of the first Xhosa hymnbook in 1884. He set to music the “great hymn” (*Ulothixo Omkhulu*) of Ntsikana and also wrote his biography. He published a book of his own compositions in 1885 called *Amaculo ase Lovedale* or “Lovedale music.” His works include *Ntsikana’s bell*, *Heavenly guide*, *Wedding song* and *Vuka Deborah*.

Bokwe was married twice and had five children: Barbour, Roseberry, Selbourne, Frieda, Pearl and Waterstone (Jabavu 1982:18). Roseberry Tandwefika (1900-1963) qualified as a doctor in 1933 and later became active in the African National Congress. Frieda married “ZK” (Zachariah Keodirelang) Matthews, the educationalist, church leader and African nationalist. Pearl became the wife of Mark Radebe, the composer.

J. A. Millard

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instructors increasingly require their students to develop the habit of using the database for their African church history assignments. Virtually the only central source of information on African Christian biography, the *DACB* website received more than 1.5 million unique visitors from January 2014 through July 2016.

For the first seven months of 2016, StatCounter tallies reported 385,190 page views (an average of 2,176 per day), 280,926 unique visits (an average of 1,587 per day), 241,379 first time visits (an average of 1,363 per day), and 39,547 returning visits (an average of 223 per day).<sup>27</sup> During the two months of June and July 2016, usage could be traced to 194 different countries, with the top five being Nigeria (22.57 percent), South Africa (14.19 percent), United States (13.77 percent), Kenya (7.07 percent), and Ghana (5.75 percent). During the same period of time, 1,536 pictures or PDF files were downloaded from the *DACB* website.

Also gratifying is the fact that the *DACB* has served as a modest stimulus for similar data gathering initiatives in other parts of the world. These initiatives include ones carried out by the Centre for the Study of Christianity in Asia (Trinity Theological College, Singapore), the Don Bosco Centre for Indigenous Cultures (Shillong, India), and Trinity Methodist Church (Selangor Dural Ehsan, Malaysia); each requested, and was granted, permission to adopt the *DACB* format. In September 2003, the *DACB* office was notified that an editorial team composed of members of the Contextual Theology Department of Union Biblical Seminary, Pune, India, and coordinated by Dr. Jacob Thomas, supported by an all-India Council of Advisors, had likewise embarked on a biographical project modeled after the *DACB*, but focusing on the Indian subcontinent. According to the public announcement,

The inspiration for this project comes from . . . the *Dictionary of African Christian Biography*. . . . The *DICB* project is grateful for the partnership by which there is mutual encouragement and sharing of relevant ideas.

I have not kept abreast of these initiatives, and I do not know how they have fared.

Similarly, ten years ago the *DACB* sparked the *Biographical Dictionary of Chinese Christianity (BDCC)*, playing a key consulting role for the consortia of

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<sup>27</sup> Statistics tabulated by StatCounter (<https://statcounter.com>) for [www.dacb.org](http://www.dacb.org) at 2:00 p.m., July 26, 2016.

church leaders and historians that served on its board and serving as project incubator while the managing director, Dr. Yading Li, spent two years getting the online memory base up and running. This English-language database is now flourishing.<sup>28</sup>

More recently (September 10–14, 2015), I was invited to demonstrate the *DACB* to a forum of indigenous leaders from across Latin America. We met in Lima, Peru, at the Centro Evangélico de Misiología Andino-Amazónica (CEMAA), where we discussed the all-too-common challenges faced by aboriginal peoples everywhere, “¿*Quién la historia? Espiritualidad e identidad indígena de la misión*” (Whose story? Spirituality and indigenous identity of the mission).<sup>29</sup> These indigenous leaders were acutely aware that while scores of autobiographical and biographical stories have been published in English by North American missionaries, detailing their work among aboriginal peoples, and that while the accounts of anthropologists and sociologists sometimes mention the impact of missionary work among Latin America’s indigenous peoples, “there has been little to no documentation of the histories of [any kind] from indigenous perspectives.”<sup>30</sup> Thirty-one individuals—representing thirteen different indigenous groups from seven Latin American countries—took part in the forum. At the end of the meeting, the group nominated a committee responsible for creating, administering, and promoting an online database to serve multiple functions consonant with rescuing and preserving the memory, and thus cultural integrity, of indigenous Christianity throughout the continent.<sup>31</sup> At their request, the *DACB* serves in a modest advisory capacity as, and when, needed.

*How does it work?* The story often attributed to Francis Bacon, Roger Bacon, or, less frequently, Aristotle—“How many teeth are there in the mouth of a horse?”—may be familiar. The methodology it implicitly endorses encapsulates the essence of the *DACB*’s approach.

In the year of our Lord 1432, there arose a grievous quarrel among

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<sup>28</sup> “Introducing the *Biographical Dictionary of Chinese Christianity*,” *DACB News Link*, no. 5 (Fall 2006), 4, [www.dacb.org/email%20newsletter%20fall%202006.pdf](http://www.dacb.org/email%20newsletter%20fall%202006.pdf). The *BDCC* can be found at [www.bdconline.net/en](http://www.bdconline.net/en).

<sup>29</sup> See [www.cemaa.org/quienessomos.htm](http://www.cemaa.org/quienessomos.htm).

<sup>30</sup> Drew Jennings-Grisham, email to Joel Carpenter, Monday, March 17, 2014.

<sup>31</sup> Further information about this significant endeavor can be found at [www.memoriaindigena.org](http://www.memoriaindigena.org).

## **Bokwe, John Knox (A)**

**1855-1922**

**Presbyterian**

**South Africa**

John Knox Bokwe is honored as one of the most celebrated Xhosa hymn writers. He was a member of the Ngqika Mbamba clan and was born as Ntselamanzi, near Lovedale, on 15 March 1855.

He grew up in the district and it was here that he later became a leader in the Presbyterian Church. His father, Jacob, was one of the first pupils to enroll at Lovedale when it opened as a teaching institution on 21 July 1841.

Jacob named his youngest son after the Scottish Presbyterian churchman John Knox. As a boy, John first attended the local mission school and had as his teachers William Daniel Msindwana and William Kolbe Ntsikana, grandson of Ntsikana, the Xhosa prophet and hymn writer. In 1866 he was admitted to the preparatory classes at the Lovedale Institution. He continued on to the college in 1869 and finished his schooling four years later (Stewart 1888:22).

From the time he was a young boy Bokwe worked at the institution to help pay his fees. In 1867 he started by helping in the missionary house earning half-a-crown (25 cents) a month and his food. Gradually both his salary and his responsibilities grew until he became secretary to the head of the institution. During this time he was given piano and organ lessons by Mrs. Stewart and became proficient on both instruments. He also joined the Lovedale Brass Band (Huskisson 1969:8).

A young girl, Lettie Ncheni, was also employed in the Stewart household. She worked there from 1868 to 1873 while attending night classes and from 1871 attended as a day scholar. Five years later she accompanied Mrs. Stewart when she went to Scotland. They remained overseas for three years and when they returned Lettie became the wife of John Knox Bokwe (Waterston 1983:31). In 1879 Bokwe wrote from Lovedale to Dr. Laws of the Blantyre Mission and told him: “As far as Lettie and I are concerned we are well and happy. God and everyone around us seems to be treating us so kindly and so friendly.” He went on to say how they appreciated having their own home (MS 7902:1879).

Bokwe in the meantime held a number of positions. He graduated from being the house and stable assistant in the Stewart household to becoming a clerk,



disciples to the Semén mountains, where he died on 11 Genbot (19 May) and where, according to his *gädl*, he was buried.

Yaréd stated in his collection of hymns, “Mäzgäbä Degwa,” that he learned this music from God. Previously it seems that the liturgies and chants had been murmured in a low voice; Yaréd introduced the three modes, *ge’ez*, *’ezel* and *araray*, which, like the hymns, which cover the whole year, are still used in the Ethiopian Church. His book also lays down the principles of education, acknowledging the need to adjust teaching to the slow development of a young intellect, and pointing out that a teacher should not only guide his students to knowledge, but must also divert them from idleness, if necessary with a stick. Yaréd is said to have received the Hymns of Mary at a meeting at May Kérwah, near Aksum, from the “Potter of Syria,” Simeon of Geshir; while this is somewhat unlikely, there appears to be a strong Syriac influence in much that is attributed to Yaréd.

A. K. Irvine and Sergew Hable-Selassie

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Aklilä-Berhan Wäldä-Qirqos, *Yä-Qeddus Yaréd Tarikenna Yä-Zémaw Meleketoc* (Addis Ababa, 1959 E.C.).

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the brethren over the number of teeth in the mouth of a horse. For thirteen days the disputation raged without ceasing. All the ancient books and chronicles were fetched out, and wonderful and ponderous erudition, such as was never before heard of in this region, was made manifest.

At the beginning of the fourteenth day, a youthful friar of goodly bearing asked his learned superiors for permission to add a word, and straightway, to the wonderment of the disputants, whose deep wisdom he sore vexed, he beseeched them to unbend in a manner coarse and unheard of, and to look in the open mouth of a horse and find answer to their questionings.

At this, their dignity being grievously hurt, they waxed exceedingly wroth; and joining in a mighty uproar, they flew upon him and smote him hip and thigh, and cast him out forthwith. For, said they, surely Satan hath tempted this bold neophyte to declare unholy and unheard-of ways of finding truth contrary to all the teachings of the fathers.

After many days of grievous strife the dove of peace sat on the assembly, and they as one man, declaring the problem to be an everlasting mystery because of a grievous dearth of historical and theological evidence thereof, so ordered the same writ down.<sup>32</sup>

In like manner to the youthful friar and despite however useful may be information about African Christianity that might be garnered from standard archival, library, and mission resources in the West, the *DACB* is committed to uncovering, documenting, preserving, and disseminating on-the-ground accounts of the lives of those remarkable men and women without whom there would be only the most threadbare understanding of how the religion called “Christianity” came to be what it is across the continent.

The *DACB* approaches its task by means of two functionally distinct but complementary entities: (1) the operational center of the *DACB* at Boston University and (2) African collaborating institutions (research centers, academic

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<sup>32</sup> C. E. Kenneth Mees, “Scientific Thought and Social Reconstruction,” *Sigma Xi Quarterly* 22, no. 1 (March 1934): 17; reprinted from *Electrical Engineering* 53 (1934), 381–87. Mees—at the time Director in Charge of Research and Development for Eastman Kodak Company—attributes the parable to Francis Bacon (1561–1626). It has occasionally been attributed to Roger Bacon (1214–1292), and more rarely to Aristotle.

departments, graduate schools, seminaries) committed to biographical and historical research integral to understanding local, regional, national, or denominational expressions of Christianity, and to the dissemination of this research through the online *DACB*. Boston University assures the institutional and technical integrity of the *DACB*'s website and database. The project manager, with a small staff of one or two graduate assistants, monitors and maintains the editorial standard of entries as they are prepared for inclusion in the *DACB* database.

*DACB* affiliates in Africa serve as sources, researching, writing, and verifying biographical and church histories. *DACB* affiliates also regularly host and facilitate practical training forums in oral history. Scholars and students at these centers are encouraged to research, write, and contribute stories of both individuals and churches to the *DACB* database for preservation and dissemination. Stories that comply with *DACB* content, documentation, and writing guidelines are published, with full attribution, in the database, but may thereafter also be freely published as monographs, articles, or chapters in books.<sup>33</sup>

The project's data collection network is thus not *hierarchical*, but *lateral*—a kind of “spider's web,” with the *DACB* office at Boston University as the nexus for as many data collection centers as emerge. The web already extends to numerous points across Africa, as indicated earlier. The registry of “Participating Institutions” is kept current on the website.<sup>34</sup> Affiliated academic institutions agree to incorporate biographical research and writing assignments into the syllabi of certain departments and courses, utilizing *DACB* standards and guidelines that are available in print or downloadable as PDF documents.<sup>35</sup>

An effort is made to ensure both the merit of the biographical subject and the accuracy of the resulting story by associating the names of the participating institution, the liaison coordinator, and the author with each biographical entry. On request, participating institutions can receive an updated CD-ROM or flash drive version of the database for use in the preparation of syllabi, supplementary readings, or booklets. No restriction other than simple attribution is placed on use of the material.

Biographical subjects are identified on the basis of their perceived local, regional, national, continental, or denominational significance. No subject is excluded if, in the opinion of local communities, his or her contribution is

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<sup>33</sup> See, for an example, George S. Mukuka, *History from the Underside: The Untold Stories of Black Catholic Clergy in South Africa (1898 to 2008)* (Baltimore: PublishAmerica, 2011).

<sup>34</sup> *DACB*, [www.dacb.org/particip\\_instit.html](http://www.dacb.org/particip_instit.html).

<sup>35</sup> *DACB*, [www.dacb.org/resources.html](http://www.dacb.org/resources.html).

circa 570), permitted him to retire to the land of Tsalamat, in northeast Bagemder province, beyond the Takkazé river, as a hermit.

Sergew Hable-Selassie

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### **Yaréd** **500s** **Ancient Christian Church** **Ethiopia**

Yaréd, the Deacon, was a writer and musician who became a saint of the Ethiopian Church. Born near Aksum, he was the son, according to oral tradition, of Enbäräm and Tāwleya, and was educated by a kinsman, *Abba Gédéwon*, or, according to another tradition, by Zä-Mika'él 'Arägawi or some other of the Nine Saints. A faulty pupil, Yaréd was unable to memorize the Psalter. He went out to the desert to the tomb of Ebnä Hakim and witnessed the repeated attempts of a caterpillar to climb a tree, which it eventually did.

Impressed, he returned to his teacher, his memory improving miraculously. He became a deacon at the church of Mādhané-Aläm, and became Ethiopia's first composer of church music. The royal family were particularly moved by his songs, but Emperor Gäbrä-Mäsqäl allowed him to go to the land of Sällämt, beyond the Täckké river, as a hermit; some say he retired with many

## Yared (Saint)

6<sup>th</sup> century

Ancient Christian Church

Ethiopia

Yared (who lived in the 6th century) was a scholar, musician, and ecclesiastic who was a formative influence on the cultural life of Ethiopia, and became a saint of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

He was born near Aksum, which was then the political, economic, and cultural center of the empire, during the period in which the Nine Saints of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church helped to revive and to change the country's cultural life. According to oral tradition, he was the son of Enbaram and of Tawaleya, and was educated by a kinsman, Abba Gedewon. Another tradition, however, holds that he was educated by Saint Za-Mikael Aragawi (*q.v.*), or another of the Nine Saints. He was certainly closely associated with the Saints and, as a mark of gratitude for their help, dedicated a hymn to each of them, still sung in the Ethiopian Church.

Yared's contributions to the cultural life of the country can be divided into three categories - education, literature, and music. The educational system he developed remained in use, unchanged, until modern times. It stressed the need to adapt teaching to the pace of development of a young intellect, and also held that pupils should not only be taught but should also be diverted from idleness, by means of a stick of necessity. In literature, his work occupies the highest position, and his collection of hymns, *Mazgaba Degwa* ("Treasury of Hymns") is the oldest literary work written in Ge'ez. It is said that before Yared there was no music in Ethiopia, the liturgies and chants being murmured in a low voice; he is therefore believed to be the first Ethiopian composer. He stated that he was inspired by God in his composition, and presented his music in three modes—Ge'ez (the simplest plain chant, used on ordinary days), 'Ezel (a slow and dignified heavy-sounding mood, usually associated with fasts and funerals), and Araray (the most complex mood, freer and lighter, with musical embellishments, sung on great festivals). It is uncertain, however, whether the Ethiopian musical notations in use today can be attributed to him.

Yared spent the last years of his life composing hymns and teaching many students. He and his students left Aksum and retired to the Semén Mountains, where he lived until his death, which occurred on May 19. Another tradition holds that the emperor of the day, Gabra Masqal (reigned circa 550 to

deemed to be somehow singular. In addition, printed materials of all kinds—church and mission archives, church histories, mission histories, denominational histories, doctoral and masters' theses, in-house denominational and mission society magazines, as well as existing reference tools and biographical dictionaries—are routinely culled with a view to discovering the identities and stories of Africans whose contributions to the shape and dynamism of local, regional, or national expressions of Christianity on the continent is in some way remarkable.

*Chronologically*, the *DACB* spans twenty centuries of Christian faith on the African continent, thus counteracting the notion that Christianity in Africa is little more than the religious accretion of nineteenth- and twentieth-century European influence. "Christianity in Africa," as John Baur aptly reminded his readers, "is not a recent happening, nor is it a by-product of colonialism—its roots go back to the very time of the Apostles."<sup>36</sup>

*Ecclesiastically*, likewise, since Christian expression in Africa does not readily lend itself to standard Euro-American tests of orthodoxy, the *DACB* aims at inclusiveness rather than exclusiveness.<sup>37</sup> Self-definition as "Christian" is sufficient to qualify for the category. As is customarily the case with encyclopedic works of any kind, exclusion is the prerogative of the user. Thus, for example, key figures associated with what some might consider to be heterodox organizations such as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints or the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society, as well as those in sometimes highly-controversial African Initiated Churches, are included.<sup>38</sup>

*Individually*, inclusion criteria are as broad and as flexible as possible. In general, those persons deemed at local, regional, national, or denominational levels to have made a significant contribution to African Christianity, and whose stories are indispensable to an understanding of the church as it is, are included. While main entries are generally restricted to subjects who are African either by birth or by immigration, non-African subjects such as foreign missionaries,

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<sup>36</sup> John Baur, *2000 Years of Christianity in Africa: An African History, 62–1992* (Nairobi: Paulines, 1994), 17.

<sup>37</sup> As Professor J. F. Ade Ajayi, former vice-chancellor of the University of Lagos, observed (in a letter to the author, April 9, 1998), the issue of just who is and who is not a "Christian" is not always so clear-cut in Africa as it is in some parts of the world. He mentioned as an example a well-educated woman, a devout Christian, "who moved from the Christ Apostolic Church to Jehovah Witness without necessarily realizing that she had thereby lost her initial focus on Christ."

<sup>38</sup> See Andrew F. Walls, "Conversion and Christian Continuity," *Mission Focus* 18, no. 2 (1990): 17–21.

friendly pagans, or government officials, whose contributions to African church history are regarded by Africans themselves to have been significant, may be included.

*Linguistically*, most entries appear in English, with growing numbers of stories in French, Portuguese, and Swahili. The hope is for the database to be freely available in the four languages most broadly understood in those parts of Africa where the Christian presence is most notable. Since the material is nonproprietary, there is nothing to prevent research institutes, academic departments, or enterprising individuals from translating the stories into any language.

A *data collection template* has been designed to ensure a measure of uniformity in the cognitive fields around which the details of each subject's life are arranged.<sup>39</sup> Insofar as such data as birth dates are actually available, these are included. Otherwise, authors and editors attempt to link the birth of a subject to a particular period or an auspicious event. Wherever possible, they utilize published as well as oral sources of information. While documentation can pose a serious challenge, contributors utilize the standards commonly employed by those working in the field of oral history.

The database contains two levels of information. One, the *DACB* itself, is accessible online; the other, the *DACB*'s working database, is accessible only to the editors. The former contains information on figures who, if not deceased, are advanced in years; the latter stores, in addition, information on still active subjects who are likely to merit inclusion in the database eventually.

*What is its future?* Now more than twenty years old, the *DACB* has entered the

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<sup>39</sup> These simple guidelines—initially adapted from the venerable but still useful British Association for the Advancement of Science, *Notes and Queries on Anthropology* (London: E. Stanford, 1874) and subsequent editions—have gradually evolved into the *Dictionary of African Christian Biography: Instructional Manual for Researchers and Writers and Procedural Manual for Participating Institutions* (New Haven, CT: *DACB*, 2004), which offers resources for persons researching and writing biographies for the *DACB*. Professor Kehinde Olabimtan, who was *DACB* liaison coordinator at the Akrofi-Christaller Institute of Theology, Mission, and Culture in Akropong-Akuapem, Ghana, expanded the original *DACB* guidelines to produce the 84-page booklet published in 2004. Michèle Miller Sigg—*DACB* project manager since 2000 and now at Boston University—edited the second, revised edition, a 41-page resource that elaborates the essential techniques of oral history as well as providing examples of a range of stories already appearing in the dictionary. PDF versions of the booklet are available in English, French, Portuguese, and Swahili at [www.dacb.org/guidelines-writers.html](http://www.dacb.org/guidelines-writers.html).

This issue of the *JACB* presents biographies of two important figures in the history of African Christian music. The first, Yared, was a saint of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church who lived in the sixth century. In church tradition, he is considered the first Ethiopian composer. The second, John Knox Bokwe, was the first major Xhosa hymn writer in late 19<sup>th</sup> century southern Africa.



The *DACB* is collecting biographies of

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Musicians, artists, and women play an essential role in giving voice to African Christianity in its many local expressions.

Please send submissions to [dacb@bu.edu](mailto:dacb@bu.edu).

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Carol Brinneman, and "How a West African Evangelist Unleashed Musical Creativity among New Believers" by James R. Krabill, in *Worship and Mission for the Global Church: An Ethnodoxology Handbook*, ed. by James Krabill et al. (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2013): 144-148, 199-201, 207-208, 245-248.

## Musicians and Composers in African Christianity

By Michèle Sigg, *JACB* Managing Editor

In 2004, Eritrean gospel singer Helen Berhane was arrested during a raid on a secret Bible study and thrown in jail for evangelizing through her singing. During her two-year imprisonment, she wrote many songs that are sung in Eritrean Christian communities today. In another restrictive African country, missionary outreach using the JESUS film yielded no response among the population for six long years. Finally, one day, a local believer appeared at their headquarters to tell them that he had translated the script, put it to music, and taught it to his compatriots. This new musical composition unlocked the message of the film for the local people and resulted in the founding of forty-eight new churches.

These stories illustrate how the creation of indigenous music is central to the development of African Christian communities. James Krabill explains that many Zambians express their desire to embrace Christianity by exclaiming “*Ndiyanda kurinda!*” (“I want to sing”) because song is the only way to express their faith in all its fullness.

But what can be done to encourage the creation of local Christian music in the spread of the church in Africa? A story from West Africa offers some insight into this question. In the early 1900s, the eighteen month ministry of local evangelist William Wadé Harris in Liberia, Ghana, and Côte d’Ivoire led to the conversion of an estimated 100,000 to 200,000 people, many of whom had never had any contact with western missionaries. Krabill recounts that new converts asked Harris what music they should sing and begged him to teach them the “songs of heaven” so they could truly glorify God. Harris answered, “I have never been to heaven so I cannot tell you what kind of music is sung in God’s royal village. But know this, that God has no personal favorite songs. He hears all that we say in whatever language. It is sufficient for us to offer hymns of praise to him with our own music and in our own language for him to understand.” Harris instructed the people to use the music and dance they already knew as a starting point for creating their own Christian songs. He cautioned them to use discernment in the choice of genres and to avoid those that were not appropriate for the worship of God. Harris’ wise teaching inspired believers in the Harrist movement to create thousands of new indigenous Christian hymns.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Sources for this introduction include “What Happens to Music When Cultures Meet? Six Stages of Music Development in African Churches” by James R. Krabill, “Eritrea and Sudan: Worship in the Midst of Suffering” by George Luke, “God Will Make a Way” by

final stretch of its “Bonk phase.” For the immediate future, the *DACB* has adopted six interrelated, measurable goals to be achieved by 2020: (1) the addition of five hundred stories to the database; (2) the inclusion of stories from every country in Africa; (3) the incorporation of brief overviews of five hundred African denominations, cross-referenced to biographical subjects; (4) publication of an anthology of biographies and church histories for use in university and seminary classrooms; (5) with the Africa Advisory Council, fostering use of the stories in primary and Sunday school curricula; and (6) the publication of an online *Journal of African Christian Biography (JACB)*.

*DACB* staff at Boston University have identified African countries for which we have fewer than twenty biographies. They have also produced a useful database of the continent’s major universities, seminaries, and church denominations, together with the names and contact information of key persons within those organizations. Efforts to conduct annual collaborative oral history workshops and biography conferences in various African countries are ongoing.

The *Journal of African Christian Biography* was inaugurated in June of 2016. For now, it is appearing in monthly fascicles which are to be assembled in a cumulative issue at the end of each year. Its purpose is to showcase, interpret, and make more readily accessible biographical and historical resources in the field of African Christianity. These resources are intended for use in classrooms and churches to foster a deeper understanding of the history of African Christianity at the local, regional, national, and continental levels. The *JACB* will thus provide tools to undergird the development of contextual African theologies.<sup>40</sup>

## Conclusion

Maverick economist E. F. Schumacher once stood on a street corner in Leningrad, trying to get his bearings from a map provided for him by his Russian hosts. He was confused, because while there was some correspondence between what the map registered and what he could see with his own eyes (for example, the names of parks, intersecting streets, and similar entities), several enormous churches looming in front of him were nowhere indicated on the map. Coming to his assistance, his guide pointed out that while the map did indeed include some churches, that was because such churches were now museums. Those that were not museums were not shown. “It is only the ‘living churches’ we don’t

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<sup>40</sup> The *Journal of African Christian Biography* is available online at [www.dacb.org/journal-acb.html](http://www.dacb.org/journal-acb.html).

show,” he explained.<sup>41</sup>

Since the greatest surge in numbers in the history of Christianity has occurred in Africa over the past one hundred years—and appears set to continue its remarkable trajectory into the twenty-first century—it would be both disappointing and tragic if yet another generation of Christian leaders, scholars, and their protégés, relying upon existing, “up-to-date” reference sources, were to learn virtually nothing of this remarkable phenomenon, or of the men and women who served and who serve as the movement’s animators and catalysts. Africa will remain “the dark continent” so long as emerging scholars—including Africans themselves—confine their research to the well-lit streets of Western academic and missionary archives and to ignore the living churches all over the continent.

In *The Lost City of Z*, David Grann reminds readers that

one of the most incredible feats of humankind [has been the] mapping of the world. Perhaps no deed, not the building of the Brooklyn Bridge or the Panama Canal, rivals its scope or human toll. The endeavor, from the time the ancient Greeks laid out the main principles of sophisticated cartography, took hundreds of years, cost millions of dollars, and claimed thousands of lives, and, when it was all but over, the achievement was so overwhelming that few could recall what the world looked like before, or how the feat had been accomplished.<sup>42</sup>

It is becoming increasingly possible to imagine a time when few will be able to recall what the ecclesiastical world looked like before African Christianity assumed its rightful position and scale on world ecclesiastical maps. The *DACB*—the fruit of international cooperation across Africa that also reaches beyond the expansive bounds of the continent and yet is in some ways a laughably limited enterprise at the levels both of conception and of implementation—is offered as a modest contribution toward bringing our ecclesiastical maps up to date.

**About the author:** Jonathan J. Bonk is research professor of mission studies at Boston University and director of the *Dictionary of African Christian Biography*

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<sup>41</sup> E. F. Schumacher, *A Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 1.

<sup>42</sup> David Grann, *The Lost City of Z: A Tale of Deadly Obsession in the Amazon* (New York: Vintage, 2014), 55–56.

Biography and history pursue the same scholarly and literary ideals. Both aim to record the important events of the past, to meditate on these events, and to draw from meditation a measure of understanding. They aim, in short, to profit by the success or failure of the lives of individuals or of nations and institutions. To achieve this, they are dedicated to the discovery of evidence, the unearthing of facts, the verification of source material, and the patient comparison of authorities. Ideally, they are faithful in reporting all the evidence and in interpreting it according to the laws of logical inference and deduction.<sup>14</sup>

While Christian fiction has its place in teaching great lessons—as in the parables of Jesus or in such postbiblical classics as John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* (first published in 1678)—Christian biography reveals frail humanity dwelling in a broken world, yet living out the reality of being earthen vessels carrying a treasure. Such biographies are not about perfect people, but about people who have tasted the grace of a faithful God in an imperfect world. Each life worth documenting has a unique contribution to make to our understanding of African Christianity as blessed by God, both fully African and fully Christian.

**About the author:** Emmanuel A. S. Egbunu is bishop of Lokoja Diocese and archbishop of Lokoja Province in the Church of Nigeria (Anglican Communion). Contributor of a chapter to *Mission in the 21st Century: Exploring the Five Marks of Global Mission* (Orbis Books, 2008), he has published several titles on the spiritual disciplines, including *Passion for God’s Kingdom*; *Shaped for God’s Use*; *O for a Closer Walk with God*; and *Signposts on Heaven’s Highway*.

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<sup>14</sup> Connolly, *The Types of Literature*, 771.

case of commissioned biographies, biographers may hold different convictions about certain Christian doctrines and find reason to disagree with the “hero.” The path of integrity for the biographer lies in being honest and responsible with the facts available, while also being cautious not to slide into libellous pronouncements. Assessment of the facts should be left to commentators and those who will critique the work. When a single person has been the subject of multiple biographies, we can easily see why some accounts are drab and others vibrant, even though the person written about is the same.

### Does the Person Exemplify Credible Christian Values?

Commissioned biographies may not need to concern themselves with questions of relevance, but biographies undertaken without such sponsorship, especially those written for research purposes, need to pay attention to the question: What are the compelling lessons worth learning from this particular person’s life? Musa Gaiya has written several commissioned biographies, besides being the author of over a dozen entries in the *DACB*. Yet he acknowledges that patronage of biographies is generally low: family members and probably a few members of a denomination will buy copies. All too frequently the author has to give away many copies of a publication, one that in some instances the biographer, like Musa Gaiya, may have had to fund personally. For the few who buy, the content itself must encourage them to find value in exchange for their money. The inspiration and compelling factor for writing biographies is the historical importance of the persons whose lives are recorded and the quality of their character, rather than the potential for making large sums of money.

There are more questions to ask: How does the world of the biographer—and his or her environment—shape the biographer’s understanding of issues, of others, and even of the biographer himself or herself? Is the biographical subject being portrayed as a member of a community, as a member of a family, as an individual? What is the outstanding quality that the biography seeks to highlight? Is the subject of the biography presented merely as a flat character or as a fully rounded person?

### Conclusion

Biography is history personalized. It relates to real persons in real situations, illustrating specific perspectives, meanings, and lessons. Biography must use facts in a creative way without compromising them. Decades ago, Francis Connolly articulated well the importance of history as biography.

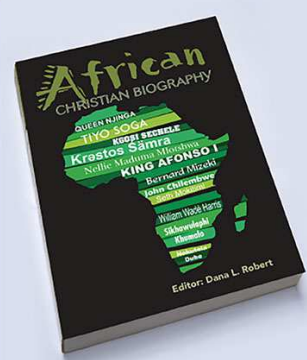
(*DACB*). The author of numerous articles and reviews, he has published five books, the best known of which is *Missions and Money: Affluence as a Western Missionary Problem* (Orbis Books, 1991), now in its eleventh printing. An ordained Mennonite minister, he is editor of the *Encyclopedia of Missions and Missionaries*, published in 2007 as Volume 9 in Routledge’s Religion and Society Series.

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## Both African and Christian: Authenticity and Identity in African Christian Biography

By Emmanuel A. S. Egbunu

*Setback and Recovery*, John Foster's memorable title, captures well the task that the *Dictionary of African Christian Biography (DACB)* placed before itself as its central focus during the past twenty years: that of writing African Christian biography. What is in danger of fading away, the *DACB* has sought to recover. The *DACB* has taken the bold step of seeking to amplify echoes from the historical shadows and to drag African names from the fringes and margins and onto the central stage of World Christianity. After Christianity's richly documented early years in Africa, a major setback ensued. A long period of silence followed, stretching over centuries, until Christianity in Africa became more like the missing link in mainline Christianity. Consequently, African Christianity has often been identified as the latecomer within Global Christianity and been seen as the faith of people who had to give up their "heathen" ways to embrace the "new" faith. In some cases, becoming Christian meant supplanting Africans' worldview and expecting them to give up their native names and mode of dressing as well as their musical forms of worship.

As an African church leader and a scholar, I am very concerned to heal the separation between African identity and Christian identity. The strange gap between African and Christian identities is partly a problem of lost or missing historical memory, and it is this gap that the writing of African Christian biography seeks to address. If African Christianity is to be authentic today, missing links must be traced out and gaps in the historical record of African Christian identity must be redressed. Writing of African Christian biography is an appropriate means for exploring and recovering the unique identity of African Christianity as shaped by the continent's history, culture, politics, and social changes. Whether in Christian history or in the themes that dominate different literary genres, the matter of identity looms large in the African mind. Articulation of this issue inevitably enmeshes individuals with their surrounding communities, for the African does not necessarily ask, "Who am I?" but more importantly, "Who do others think I am?"

By putting into historical perspective what it means to be an African Christian, the *DACB* has, over the past two decades, accomplished a major feat. It has "resurrected" men and women of courage who paid the supreme price for their faith; it has revealed people who had to walk alone as they turned their backs on the gods of their fathers and tribes; it has amplified the echoes of men and

quotation provides valuable information about the biographical subject's character, his outlook on the Christian life, and his general spiritual and doctrinal formation.

### Josiah Olunowo Ositelu (1902–66)

Harold Turner also turns to the words of Josiah Ositelu (also spelled Oshitelu) himself to lend credibility to the experiences that beset the founder of the Church of the Lord (*Aladura*). Ositelu had been tormented by evil spirits for some time; victory finally came for him in a vision that he described briefly.

Assistance came through a Holy man in my dream, who dealt the witches with heavy blows until they were turned into cows, horses, rats, cats, and some deformed creatures. Despite their chameleonic attitude towards me I gained overwhelming victory over them.<sup>12</sup>

Biographers are responsible for finding ways to access the relevant facts in a way that can justify their interpretation and point of view. Too often biographies tend to be overly sentimental and preachy—an effect of the biographers' own sermonizing. To let the character of the person himself or herself emerge and make an impact on its own merit would seem to be of much greater value. Sometimes the embellishments of biographers make the person whose life they are reconstructing so flawless that he or she is not quite the person eyewitnesses and contemporaries knew. Great care needs to be exercised so as not to make the person so saintly, so angelic that he or she becomes unrealistic. Granted that the aim of biography is not to focus on people's flaws, we still need to recognize that the Bible records the character of the heroes of faith with their flaws: Abraham, Lot, Moses, Samson, David, Solomon, Jeremiah, Peter, Paul, Demas, and many others. The important thing is to capture the biographical subject's character as that person was, not as the biographer wishes that the person had been. We must let the subjects of our biographies be themselves, foibles and all, for each one represents a project of divine grace. Our embellishments distort the truth. Biographers, whenever they feel enamored of the person they are writing about, do well to remember the counsel of the British journalist C. P. Scott that "comment is free, but facts are sacred."<sup>13</sup> On another tack, as in the

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<sup>12</sup> Harold W. Turner, *African Independent Church: The Church of the Lord (Aladura)* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1967), 1:39.

<sup>13</sup> C. P. Scott, "A Hundred Years," *Manchester Guardian*, May 5, 1921, [www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2002/nov/29/1](http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2002/nov/29/1).



## Garrick Sokari Braide (1882–1918)

In a detailed account of the life of Garrick Sokari Daketima Braide, a local evangelist who became the founder of one of the earliest African Independent Churches, G. O. M. Tasié resorted to the words of Braide himself as recorded by an earlier biographer and contemporary. Tasié states, “We cannot do better than read the narrative in the words attributed to him.” He quotes:

As I knelt down with others looking at the Holy Table with the elements laid down on the occasion, but more so as the minister pronounced the words as I was about to receive the elements: “the body of our Lord Jesus Christ which was given for thee preserve thy body and soul unto everlasting life. Take and eat this in remembrance that Christ died for thee and feed on Him in thy heart with thanksgiving.” A thrill came over me; a bright light flashed over my eyes and as the elements entered into my mouth, as it were a still small voice said to me “Garrick Braide for you Jesus died, for you He gave His body and shed His most precious blood on the cross to wash away your sins. Have you been washed in His precious blood? . . .” I could not sleep the whole night; several times I had to get up from my bed and pray; at times I sat down and tears trickled down my eyes as I felt my own unworthiness and God’s goodness towards me. At about the still hours of the morning I heard a still small voice saying: Garrick! Garrick! are you prepared to be my servant? . . . [M]y wife who was awake then watching my movements unobserved by me, asked me at daybreak to whom I was speaking before the dawn of day as she saw no one. . . . [W]e knelt and prayed together.<sup>11</sup>

As with the story of his conversion that the Apostle Paul repeated in his own words (Acts 22:1–21; 26:12–23), the accounts of church founders abound with similar experiences and we must let them speak. In the account just given, we see how Garrick Braide strives to use the language of the biblical prophets to communicate his vision. We are also able to know that he had a believing wife and that they were part of an existing Christian worshipping community, encountering God through its rites. Though he later became the founder of the Christ Army Church, he began with the Church Missionary Society. This

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<sup>11</sup> Tasié, *Christian Missionary Enterprise*, 174–75, quoting A. C. Braide’s account of Garrick Sokari Daketima Braide’s words.

women and brought them from the shadows. Young and old have blazed new trails of faith expression that have blossomed into flourishing movements and denominations, affecting whole tribes, ethnic groups, and nations. In the *DACB* stories, we see more of the bumpy terrain they had to traverse and the difficult choices they made between the worship of God and the “image of Nebuchadnezzar,” between God and Caesar, and between the pilgrim’s desert wanderings and earthly splendor. The accounts in the *DACB* have served to overturn the picture—which often depicted a reversal of roles whereby Africans became mere recipients and converts rather than those who were at the forefront of propagating the Christian faith—painted by inherited narratives of the post-Reformation missionary movements up through those of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The eclipse of the Africanness of African Christianity could hardly be better stated than it is by Thomas Oden: “All Christians on the continent of Africa have a birthright that awaits their discovery. But in subtle ways they seem to have been barred access to it as a result of longstanding preconceived notions and biases.”<sup>1</sup> So estranged had Africa become from its role in the spread of Christianity on the continent that issues of cultural conflict and identity have long dominated discussions about the African encounter with Christianity.<sup>2</sup>

## Aspects of Characterization in Biographies

The biographies of the heroes of African Christianity must be viewed through the lenses of the social and political convulsions that were present in different periods of African history. The stories of these heroes must be reconstructed without resorting to the needless romanticizing that characterizes hagiography. We need to understand the ambivalent status with which these personalities grappled all the time: to some, especially Western missionaries, indigenous African Christians were heroes, and yet fellow Africans often viewed them as renegades. To pick a trustworthy path through these conflicting perspectives, the biographer needs to be clear about the following issues:

What is the biographer’s task?

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas C. Oden, *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind: Rediscovering the African Seedbed of Western Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2007), 11.

<sup>2</sup> Kwame Bediako explores the variety of responses the African church has made in its search for an African Christian identity that is credible and unashamed. See his *Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and in Modern Africa* (Oxford: Regnum, 1999).

What are the themes in African Christianity?  
What makes a story worth telling?  
What are the biographer's tools?

### The Biographer's Task: Presenting a Credible Character

Even though the primary aim of biography is more historical than literary—and therefore more informative than entertaining—the biographer is still constrained to observe certain literary traditions. Creating a believable account of a biographical subject's life and personal qualities is not wholly dissimilar to an author's achievement in creating a believable character in a literary work. It follows that an important component of biographical writing—whether Christian or not—is characterization. This factor becomes especially sensitive when the subject of the biography belongs to a different generation or cultural milieu. When—in reconstituting a biographical subject's story—the realities of that person's setting are taken into account and the individual is well portrayed, the biographer is able to give vivid expression to the impact a life had. Biographies, however, must be based on verifiable facts, and the authors of biography are not at liberty to give their imaginations free rein. The biographer must provide verifiable information about the subject's character, for many other accounts of the subject (by relatives and friends; in letters, journals, and legal documents; and from other witnesses) are available, and they constrain the account that the biographer can give of a subject's life. At the optimum, readers of a biography should be shown the subject's character as it presents itself to us in action. We should be enabled to know the person's passions, aversions, and relational dispositions, for we want to know what propelled the person to live as he or she did.

To be authentic, African biographical subjects must be anchored in a realistic reconstruction of their milieu rather than having their lives be interpreted by the standards of one or another Western worldview. An authentic African biographical subject straddles areas of constant friction between missionary Christianity and indigenous Christianity, namely, whether the person being written about is adjudged Christian because of having behaved like the Western missionary or because of having been able to figure out that the Christian message and lifestyle could be “incarnated” within the African setting. To be authentic, the subject of an African biography must be able to be seen as having been both truly African and truly Christian rather than appearing to have been a monstrous renegade.

The mere fact of cultural distance compels diligent retrospection to the

### Samuel Ajayi Crowther (1808–91)

Samuel Ajayi (or Adjai) Crowther occupies a place of honor in the annals of African Christianity, and many have written about this great man. Crowther kept a regular and well-updated journal. It provides an example of the power of personal testimony and the great help such testimony can be in a biography. In writing Crowther's biography, Jesse Page allows words from Crowther's journal to say what he could say best.

Sept. 14, 1862. This day at the morning service, though with fear and trembling, yet by faith in Christ, the great Head of the Church, who has commanded, “Go ye, therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost,” I took courage and baptized eight adults and one infant in our new chapel in the presence of a congregation of one hundred and ninety-two persons, who all sat still with their mouths open in wonder and amazement at the initiation of some of their friends and companions into a new religion by a singular rite, the form in the name of the Trinity being translated into Nupé and distinctly pronounced as each candidate knelt. These nine persons are the first-fruits of the Niger mission. Is not this a token of the Lord to the Society to persevere in their arduous work to introduce Christianity among the black population on the banks of the Niger, and that they shall reap in due time if they faint not? More so when the few baptized persons represent several tribes of large tracts of countries on the banks of the Niger, Tshadda, Igara, Igbira, Gbari, Eki, or Bunu, and even a scattered Yoruba was amongst them. Is not this an anticipation of the immense fields opened to the Church to occupy for Christ?<sup>10</sup>

Hardly any biographer's description of the missionary passion of Bishop Ajayi Crowther could match these words that bare Crowther's heart to us. A biographer must know when the language of the subject of the biography is more powerful than the biographer's portrayal. It is humbling in writing biography to realize that the readership is more interested in knowing about the character of the subject than in knowing about the biographer.

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<sup>10</sup> Jesse Page, *The Black Bishop, Samuel Adjai Crowther* (New York: Revell, 1908), 180.

to the end of the veranda, fixed me with his eye, and said: “You are a very proud young man!”<sup>7</sup>

The book, edited by Kevin Ward and Emma Wild-Wood, is replete with personal accounts of the men and women who lived through the East African Revival. Even those who went through the bitter experiences of the Rwandan genocide had their stories. There was Thérèse who “had lost her husband and two sons in the genocide.” She no longer believed in God, saying that if God were real, he would not have allowed what had happened. Following the genocide, she had persistent grief. She says that she “lived in trouble and grief. . . . I couldn’t sleep. I always had a headache. . . . I took so many medicines from various doctors, but those diseases couldn’t be cured.” When finally she made a commitment to Christ, she continues, “I received salvation and it was the end of my problems. . . .” She “now has an active role in the Church and preaches ‘wherever I meet people. It helped me and I want to help others with it. . . . It is in believing in God that I got happiness and peace.’”<sup>8</sup>

For Africa in general, we can state that the feminine voice needs to be heard more and more in biographies and accounts of religious experience, for females constitute a significant part of African Christianity. Unfortunately, women’s voices have often been smothered. Yet women have made major contributions that need to be heard from their perspective. When we read,

We have been told that after Vatican II there is a new image of the Church: the People of God with the basic equality of all, for all are children of God, but in practice it is still the old hierarchical pyramid with us women deep, deep down at the bottom,

the immediacy of the female voice speaking imparts a concreteness and compelling reality that otherwise might not be captured.<sup>9</sup>

We must let the characters—or biographical subjects—speak.

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<sup>7</sup> John C. T. Church, “A Personal Experience of the Revival,” in *The East African Revival: History and Legacies*, ed. Kevin Ward and Emma Wild-Wood (Kampala: Fountain, 2010), 63.

<sup>8</sup> Nick Godfrey, “Anglican Revivalists and the Rwandan Genocide: Survivors’ Narratives of Divine Intervention,” in Ward and Wild-Wood, *East African Revival*, 249–50.

<sup>9</sup> John Baur, *2000 Years of Christianity in Africa: An African Church History* (Nairobi: Paulines, 1994), 481.

dusty back roads. Cultural distance requires that facts be uncovered and the imagination engaged in a creative way, enabling the biographer to resurrect or recreate a character that is neither a ghost nor an angel. The biographer is often a child of a different era or setting. He or she must have a foot in each world and must find a way to connect the two worlds while still being careful to keep them distinct. To undertake such a task requires that boundaries and meeting points be carefully defined. Accommodation must be made for the interface and divergence of fact and fiction in justifiable, precise, and responsible proportions. This concession on the part of biographical reconstruction—made in varying degrees and for inevitable considerations, not least the natural loss of memory—arises because fact and fiction (that is, creative reconstruction) are sometimes mutually dependent, and both are indispensable.

### Exploring Themes in African Christianity

In considering the conflicts and consensus present in any particular encounter between traditional African worldviews and Christian worldviews, recognition must be given to the level of Christian understanding prevalent during the period in which the subject of a biography lived. Was it rudimentary or advanced, as in the case of a first, second, or later generation Christian? Judged in light of the tide of his or her times, what contrasts cause the biographical subject to stand out in relief? Such questions form the hermeneutical parameters that justify a particular story as one worth telling.

As the African Christian biographer seeks to capture and recreate the smells, sights, and sounds of the biographical subject’s world; or strives to lift up family traditions within the larger setting of tribal or ethnic culture; or endeavors to identify the religious, political, and social worldviews from which the biographical subject emerged, exploration of important themes in African Christianity becomes necessary. Some themes that have remained central to modern African Christianity and that cannot be ignored by biographers include martyrdom, identity and inculturation, colonialism and development issues, the supernatural world, African and Christian ethics, intellectual and oral expressions of Christianity, and gender roles in African and Christian worldviews.

### “Creating” an Authentic Biographical Character

With the *DACB*’s stated aim of focusing on African Christian leaders, local pastors, evangelists, and lay workers drawn from a wide spectrum of Christian expressions, discussion of characterization must be limited to a basic set of

features that are standard for this literary genre. This approach leaves room so that those who wish to explore further and to provide more extensive and detailed documentation can do so. Indeed, a good number of commissioned biographies, often highly detailed, can be found in the historical records of church denominations and Christian movements. But from whatever perspective one chooses to approach African Christian biography, whether small-scale or through extended treatises, certain parameters can either strengthen the work or, if ignored, weaken what has been painstakingly compiled. Throughout the Christian biographer's task, the following questions remain fundamental:

What makes a story worth telling?

What are the biographer's tools?

Who is an authentic Christian biographical character?

Biographical writing is intrinsically character oriented. Unlike the writer of fiction, however, who must create a character from imagination, the biographer must interpret the character of the biographical subject from his or her own point of view and angle of vision, but always within the context of whatever facts are available and verifiable. The writer of fiction invents reality; the biographer seeks to discover the facts about the subject of the biography and to explain them. As a result, the power to make or mar the subject of the biography lies in the biographer's hands. For those seeking to "create" an authentic biographical character, the following observations by Francis Connolly are helpful. He states,

[Biographical writing] is primarily concerned with setting forth the particular facts of human experience, of reasoning about these facts, of drawing inferences and judgments about them, and of evaluating them in the light of relevant principles of thought and conduct. . . . Like the writer of fiction, the interpretive writer is animated by a guiding purpose that is the principle of his selection and arrangement of facts. He attempts to reveal the conflict of a character with nature, with other men, and with himself.<sup>3</sup>

### "Image-Making" Devices

What are some "image-making" devices that can produce a character that will be

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<sup>3</sup> Francis X. Connolly, *The Types of Literature: Short Story, Novel, Poetry, Drama, Essay, Criticism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1955), 409, 411.

distance from the character whose real life is being written. The biographer and the subject of the biography are different in temperament, most probably are different in time, different in race, and different in many other ways. How can a biographer do justice to the subject while laboring under such multiple points of disparity? The biographer's aim must be to create a living person rather than a dead person.

### May We Hear the Character, Please?

Whether living or dead, the subjects of biographies that concern us in the *DACB* project are about people who have registered memorable legacies of faith that should enhance our understanding of African Christianity, and the biographer must endeavor to present a lively character, rather than a mere assemblage of cold historical facts. As much as possible the biographical subject or character should be pitched within the living context of dialogue and temperament, or disposition. Biography is strengthened by the inclusion of words from the biographical subject, especially, where possible, words in dialogue, for dialogue reveals character. The words of Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna—in his brief dialogue with the proconsul who said, "Swear, and I will release thee; reproach Christ," to which Polycarp replied, "Eighty and six years have I served him, and he never once wronged me; how then shall I blaspheme my King, who hath saved me?"<sup>6</sup>—or those of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and countless others whose statements have been recorded, however briefly, tell us more about them than any biographer could possibly describe in secondhand words.

Personal testimonies by individuals connected with the East African Revival make the accounts of it quite vivid. When we read about Simeoni Nsibambi (1897–1978)—his is one of the many stories to be found in *The East African Revival: History and Legacies*—the few words credited to him impart an impression of who he is.

I first met him in 1938, age seven, on the veranda of the Namirembe Missionary Guest House in Kampala, Uganda. He took me aside, looked me straight in the eye, and challenged me: "Have you asked Jesus into your heart?" I replied with a diffident "Yes. . . ." I next met Simeoni in 1952. . . . Joe took me to Simeoni at his home, below Namirembe Cathedral, in Kampala. He took me aside, down

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<sup>6</sup> William Byron Forbush, ed., *Fox's Book of Martyrs: A History of the Lives, Sufferings, and Triumphant Deaths of the Early Christian and the Protestant Martyrs* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1967), 9.

Max Lucado, a Christian author from the United States, begins his book *Outlive Your Life* with a brief fable titled “Finding Father Benjamin.” He tells of a ship driven off course by unfavorable winds, compelling the captain to go ashore on some unknown islands. On the first few islands he sees much sadness and poverty. Then he comes to the last and largest island, which presents an incredible contrast: the people are well fed and healthy.

Naturally the captain is prompted to seek for an explanation. The unnamed chief of the island gives a quick response: “Father Benjamin. He educated us in everything from agriculture to health. He built schools and clinics and dug wells.” The curious captain asks, “Can you take me to see him?” The chief and two tribesmen take him from one place to another, showing him, first, a medical clinic, then fishponds, but no sight of Father Benjamin.

Getting exasperated he says, “I don’t see Father Benjamin. Please take me to where he lives.” This time they take him up a mountain where, after many twists and turns, they arrive at a grass-roofed chapel. There the chief simply states, “He has taught us about God.”

Inside the chapel is an altar, a large wooden cross, benches, and a Bible. The expectant captain asks, “Is this where Father Benjamin lives? . . . May I talk to him?”

The chief and his men give the unexpected response, “Oh, that would be impossible.”

“Why?” asks the captain.

“He died many years ago.”

“I asked to see him, and you showed me a clinic, some fish farms, and this chapel. You said nothing of his death.”

“You didn’t ask about his death,” the chief explains. “You asked to see where he lives. We showed you.”<sup>5</sup>

Something of a Father Benjamin resides in many settings, something that makes us want to meet or to know more about the person who lives on through his or her legacy. Some biographies are commissioned by church denominations or Christian organizations that want to “immortalize” their founders and to preserve their denomination or movement’s history. Sometimes the task is undertaken because of the impact the biographical subject’s life had on the author, on a community, or on a generation.

Fiction is one thing; real life stories are another. The writer of fiction relies on imagination to create a character; in theory, there is nothing about the character that the author cannot know. The biographer, however, stands at a

seen as authentic? The question cannot be avoided, for the predisposition of Christian biographies toward hagiography can threaten their credibility. While it is true that hagiography inspires the faithful, we must insist that the justification for Christian biography is its portrayal of a personality who exemplifies certain Christian virtues at a given time and place and in a particular situation. Keeping certain criteria in mind will sharpen the focus with which African Christian biography represents the characters it depicts, whether they are presented in short stories or in large volumes.

The biographer starts out from the familiar premise: “Once upon a time there lived *N*” (where *N* is the name of the character). Oral tradition begins in the same place. Depending on the length of time that has elapsed and the limitations of human memory, in oral tradition, fact and fiction often intermingle—with varying degrees of embellishment, depending on the creativity of the one telling the story at any given time—to create a mythical figure whose story is freely circulated. Going beyond oral tradition, the biographer must embark on a journey of discovery/recovery, re-creation, and interpretation. The cold character of oral tradition must be made to breathe with credibility as one who is flesh and blood—a person who is able to feel, to laugh and cry, to relate, to react, and to respond. A living character must walk out of the ruins of time, emerging from the shadows of memory and history. Indeed, the biographical subject must step forth from the pages of the story into a vivid and vibrant personality in our minds, until we can find ourselves relating with a real person re-created by the biographer. We can love that person, we can name our children and pets after that person—or we can bury that person forever.

We may note certain safeguards built into African oral tradition. For one thing, while details may vary with the creative ability of each storyteller, the person’s essential character never changes. A villain never becomes a hero or vice versa. A notable warrior remains so—whether he killed a hundred or two hundred in a battle, and whether he killed a lion or a tiger to save his community. At the end of the day, he still emerges as a hero. Constancy of personality and role are the emphases rather than consistency in the details of presentation. In the same way, modern drama can present a historic character with a high degree of creativity on the part of an actor or actress without losing the essential portrait of the original hero. Constancy of image takes precedence over uniformity of detail.

To be credible, a Christian biography must span the gulf between ideal and reality. In a sense, every Christian life is an incarnation of the Christian message. Yet the biographer must carefully explore the traits and temperaments that can make the character credible. It is not enough to say that a subject or character was a generous man in his day. Certain actions must convey that

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<sup>5</sup> Max Lucado, *Outlive Your Life: You Were Made to Make a Difference* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2010), xx–xxi.

impression. For instance, the Bible, written thousands of years ago, presents us with characters that we can easily classify as great, villainous, treacherous, or amiable. What makes us visualise a Moses, a Samson, a David, a Ruth, a Peter, a Martha, a Judas Iscariot, a Barnabas, or the many other characters whose names are in wide circulation in Christian families around the world? It is because we see them in action—speaking, reacting, relating, and living out certain distinct lifestyles—that we like or dislike them.

The characterization must match the biographical subject's role. A story about a king will necessarily include princes and princesses, palace servants and subjects. The roles already contain certain character traits: a king behaves in certain ways, as do the princes, servants, and subjects. The point of conflict that creates a story worth telling occurs when the character crosses the boundary of expected behavior. A king, a CEO, will always call the shots; a servant or attendant will always be required to obey. The violation of the norm spawns the plot for a good story that is then charged with the task of resolving how the character gets away with deviation and survives—or dies, thereby making the point even more powerfully. Several accounts of Christian martyrdom take this shape. A biography that readily comes to mind is that of Joshua Hart (d. November 4, 1875) of Bonny, in Nigeria's Delta area, who is Nigeria's first recorded Christian martyr. Joshua, a slave, had converted to Christianity. His master, Captain Hart, wanted to honor his deceased father with a second burial which, as was believed, would secure the rightful place for the departed in the land of the dead. He required all in his household, including the Christian converts, to participate in the ritual. Believing this to be against Christian teaching, Joshua promptly refused, saying, "If my master requires me to do any work for him, however hard, I will try my best to do it. If he even requires me to carry the world itself on my head, I will try if I can to do it. But if he requires me to partake of things sacrificed to the gods, I will never do it."<sup>4</sup>

Two basic questions that the biographer seeks to answer about the hero are: Who was this person in his or her time and setting? and, What makes this person's life stand out as a story worth telling? An attempt at biographical characterization may fail if the biographer presents the person in a historically discordant way that makes him or her a stranger to that person's milieu. The danger of historical dissonance increases greatly if the biographer and the subject of the biography are widely separated in time and culture. In such cases the danger grows greater that the biographer might lapse into the hermeneutical error of

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<sup>4</sup> G. O. M. Tasje, *Christian Missionary Enterprise in the Niger Delta, 1864–1918* (Leiden: Brill, 1978), 44, quoting F. W. Smart to C.M.S. Secretary, November 10, 1875, CA3/M3.

imposing the ethical parameters and framework of the biographer's own day on the subject of the biography. The biographer must deliberately undertake a journey into the character's native conceptual landscape and, indeed, where possible, into her or his inner thoughts. Even in regular fiction (as contrasted with historical fiction and science fiction) or even in mysteries, careful research is required if the author is to construct the setting and to locate the character in a credible landscape. If the setting is constructed well, the hero can emerge from it as a credible character. In similar fashion, in biography a character from a bygone generation can literally walk off the pages, like the dead coming back to life. The character may be a stranger to the reader, but must not be a stranger to the world in which he or she lived.

The task of the biographer, therefore, is to create linkages between the world of the biographical subject and that of the readers. What norms were operative that are not universal? Are there mysteries and myths that were real for the character though nonexistent for the biographer? It is the biographer's task to wade through the labyrinth that leads to the cemetery of facts hidden away in the depths of history. Vividness of similitude might be considered to be more naturally the concern of the movie maker, but biographical writing cannot hold itself distant from a similar concern to evoke bygone realities.

### **Preserving the Uniqueness of the African Experience**

In its first twenty years, the *DACB's* coverage has grown to over 2,000 biographical sketches of individuals from different periods, countries, and faith traditions—and it is plausible that a *DACB* trend or tradition is already emerging. If not, one needs to emerge. Forming a *DACB* tradition has required and will require innovations that will align the biographies with the distinctive features and peculiarities of the African Christian experience. The biographies must have their own feel, mood, color, and style that sets them apart. They must convey the fact that the uniqueness of African Christian experience and expression sets it apart from Western or Asian Christianity at any given period. Further, they must do so while at the same time being alert to identify affinities with other cultural contexts.

### **What Makes a Story Worth Writing as a Christian Biography?**

Biography is a quest for the real life of the person being written about, but what makes a biographer decide to embark on the study of some particular person's life?