

Nigerian Christian Biography Consultation

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Presentation: The Dictionary of African Christian Biography (DACB.org): Writing a Strong Biography for the DACB

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The *Dictionary of African Christian Biography* or DACB is an international, collaborative research initiative, established as a digital project, www.DACB.org, beginning in 1995. It was created to recognize and to document the explosive growth of African Christianity that began in the 20th century and continues, unabated today. In 2020, 654 million Africans—48% of Africa’s total population—self identified as Christians. Looking ahead to 2050, it is projected that almost 40% of the world’s Christians will be African.¹ Those of us involved in the work of the DACB believe it is time that the global church know and recognize the importance of the African church and the leading role it is destined to play—and indeed is already playing—in the world.

The DACB’s **mission**, stated on the homepage (<https://dacb.org/>), is to “to collect, preserve, and make freely accessible biographical accounts and church histories – from oral and written sources – integral to a scholarly understanding of African Christianity.” Complementing this work of recovery and documentation, the DACB is also committed to the task of resourcing—that is, creating tools for research and for teaching African Christian history in theological institutions and universities. The DACB documents the biographies of pioneers, church leaders, catechists, prophets, evangelists, healers, lay women, theologians, missionaries across all centuries, countries, and Christian expressions: from historic to independent churches.

The DACB prioritizes **accessibility**. All DACB content is non proprietary and freely available online. There are no access requirements or subscription fees, for the website or the *Journal of African Christian Biography*. Our technology makes the website easy to load and accessible on mobile phones (over 66% of our site traffic). The DACB is accessible even beyond the reach of the Internet because the full site can be distributed on USB drives. Furthermore, being non proprietary, DACB content can be reproduced locally in booklets, flyers, and educational materials with attribution to the source.

Our open access ethos is dictated by our **target audiences**: Our primary audience is African Christians from all walks of life, whether students or scholars in higher education (researchers, teachers) or members of Christian churches. Our secondary

¹ Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2023).

audience is the global church. We want DACB content to be accessible as possible to all groups of people. These stories belong to everyone and everyone should hear them.

Our open access ethos has also dictated the choice of biography as our primary historical medium. This leads me now to talk about the craft of religious biography and what constitutes a model biography for the DACB.

Writing a Strong Biography for the DACB

On the submissions page (<https://dacb.org/connect/submit/>), the “Guidelines for writing a biography” provides a comprehensive list of all the data that should appear in a biography (included below). This includes such things as baptismal and kinship names, one’s ethno-linguistic group and lineage through father and mother, the important landmarks of the subject’s life such as education, conversion, calling, ministry, and an overall assessment of their legacy. The suggested maximum word length is 3,000 words (not including the bibliography and notes) but biographies can be longer if there is a wealth of material. The subjects must be deceased.² In addition to professional church leaders and prominent figures, subjects may also include lesser known lay persons important to local communities. Stories of women are particularly desirable as the DACB has only a few stories of women—only 276 out of a total of 2,083 subjects.

But writing a compelling biography for the DACB goes beyond just reporting the important data facts, titles, and accomplishments of an individual. There are three areas to consider when writing a biography for the DACB: First, the biographers’ respect for their audience and their subject; second, the art of the storyteller in an African and Christian context; and third, the use of sources.

1. The biographers’ respect for their audience and their subject

The audience. DACB biographers write for an African *and* a global audience. To tell a successful story to such a diverse audience, they must keep in mind the wide range of readers. This diversity includes: gender, age, cultural/national heritage (Global North vs Global South), religious/non religious upbringing, levels of education, socio-economic status, urban vs rural, and a wide range of Christian experience. The rich details of an African life in a particular context will have to be interpreted to those outside that immediate context—this includes Africans from other regions and individuals outside of Africa and the Global South. DACB biographers play an important role as interpreters of their subject’s story to their readers.

² If someone submits a biography that duplicates a story that is already on the website, it must contain significantly different or additional material than the pre-existing biographies.

The subject: The art of writing religious biography. In the DACB collection, exceptional biographies are created when biographers use their craft to paint an intimate portrait of their subject within their African cultural heritage as they take on their Christian faith and interact with their external context. These components of *religious* biography combine powerfully to describe not just a life lived, but also deep theological truths that reveal the inner workings of the subjects' spiritual life—how they act in the world, inspired by their beliefs. Unlike other forms of historical writing, religious biography is not abstract theory but a study of beliefs and actions in a real context—a human life. It requires a willingness to engage with the subject as a full person. Biographers must enter into the world view of their subject with a deep respect for their values, their beliefs, and their context:

The craft of religious biography therefore requires a basic respect for the subject's integrity. Respect for his or her integrity includes taking religious belief seriously and not dismissing it as a form of false consciousness. Only if we take religious world views seriously can we enter into the worlds of women and of persons in oral cultures, not to mention the worlds of theologians and ministers...³

And thus, biographers become intimately acquainted with their subject's story—a particular story within the universal story of God's mission in the world and a story to be treasured.

This element of **particularity**—African Christian particularity—in religious biography should not be downplayed because it is crucial component of the global Christian narrative. Religious biography avoids “the pitfalls of over-systematization.” Historical systematization originates with those who have the power and the voice to systematize, to stereotype, to reduce, to oversimplify:

Biography, with its respect for the human person, shows how beliefs develop gradually and in context, and in combination with other ideas that to later generations seem incompatible. (...) When we read snippets of a person's work in a book or journal, we tend to put that person into a box that supports our scholarly conclusions. (...) If the purpose of the historian is to keep the theologian honest, then perhaps one of the roles of the biographer is to keep the historian honest. We simply cannot systematize a person's life because there are too many cross currents and ideas in different stages of development, being expressed during different life stages.⁴

³ Dana Robert, “The Craft of Writing Religious Biography,” paper presented at the American Society of Church History Conference, Jan 2006, Philadelphia, PA. Reprinted at: <https://dacb.org/resources/writing-biography/#dana>. Dr. Robert is a member of the DACB Executive Committee.

⁴ Robert, “The Craft of Writing Religious Biography.”

The primary calling of DACB biographers is to “keep historians honest” —especially those western historians who are working with an incomplete perspective on global Christian history. DACB biographers, as African Christian storytellers, have an important role to play in filling that gap.

2. The art of the storyteller in an African and Christian context

The task of the DACB biographer is to convey to their readers both the Africanness of their subjects’ Christianity and the Christianity of their subjects’ Africanness, without the one diminishing the other. This is what Archbishop Emmanuel Egbunu spoke of as the portrayal of “authenticity and identity” and the healing of “the separation between African identity and Christian identity.” Since the problem is due, in part, to lost historical memory, it is through the writing of African Christian biography that it will be redressed.⁵ Christian biography can, in fact, be considered an African literary genre.⁶ Dr. Stan Chu Ilo calls the DACB “an African Christian ancestral project. It locates the words and deeds of our ancestral African Christian witnesses showing them to be in continuity with the historical Christian witnesses.”⁷

As the collection grows, the DACB becomes the repository of a “pointillist history’ [providing] thousands of points of light that cumulatively illuminate African history.”⁸ And this history, through its emphasis on particular stories “challenges master narratives by making visible the the hidden people of history, such as women and working classes.”⁹

Adding strength and insight

What follows are a few ways DACB writers and African Christian biographers in general can add strength and insight to their narratives.

Being aware of their autobiographical bias. Writers should pay attention to why they chose to write about a particular person and how it may influence the way they tell the story. Readers should be aware of the author’s personal rapport with the subject of their biography.

⁵ Emmanuel A. S. Egbunu, “Both African and Christian: Authenticity and Identity in African Christian Biography,” in *African Christian Biography: Stories, Lives, and Challenges*, ed. by D. Robert (Pietermaritzburg, South Africa: Cluster Publications, 2018), 63.

⁶ Dana Robert, Introduction, in *African Christian Biography: Stories, Lives, and Challenges*, ed. by D. Robert (Pietermaritzburg, South Africa: Cluster Publications, 2018), xviii-xix.

⁷ Stan Chu Ilo, “Stories my Grannies Never Told Me,” in *African Christian Biography: Stories, Lives, and Challenges*, ed. by D. Robert (Pietermaritzburg, South Africa: Cluster Publications, 2018), 46. Dr. Ilo is on the DACB International Editorial Board.

⁸ Robert, Introduction, xiii.

⁹ Robert, Introduction, xiii.

Opening windows into the formation of cultural, religious, and political identity. A good biography does more than simply tell one individual's life—it also gives insights into the context in which they live and move. Themes that are prominent in identity formation for African Christians include African traditional religion, missions, colonialism, racism, slavery, political subversion, marginalization (short list!).

The work of highlighting these connections between the subject's lived experience and society or church is crucial to the healthy reconstruction of a history that has too often been silenced, to the detriment of African Christians.

Documenting, through biography, the struggles of Africans as they relate to foreign missionaries and colonial authorities as well as to their Christian peers—indigenous catechists and evangelists—builds a body of knowledge that can be of help as the people of Africa construct new collective identities in their own Christian communities. Biographical writing shows how difficult it is to form identity, especially in the case of African Christian pioneers who, as liminal figures, faced racism, discrimination, persecution, and sometimes physical violence every time they crossed cultural or religious boundaries.¹⁰ By recounting these struggles, biographers wrestle sympathetically with the underlying causes of the *particular* suffering their subjects experience and thus highlight a *universal* truth related to justice, peace, and love as understood in the Christian faith.

Rejecting western epistemological bias and creating new categories of knowledge. Some categories of African Christian experience are totally foreign to western readers. For example, in Africa, the Christian experience of the supernatural is alive and well, much like in the Early Church. By describing the full array of the African Christian experience, DACB biographers enlarge the categories of historical knowledge that are necessary for the work of theologizing in the African church. These experiences, often rejected outright by western missionaries and academics, include visions, dreams, supernatural healings or interventions, and witchcraft.¹¹

Giving voice to the marginalized. It is urgent, for example, to document the stories of African Christian women. When DACB authors write the stories of women, they must do so differently, using “new categories, new frames of reference, and new structures to capture the reality of their lives.”¹² Documenting women's lives is

¹⁰ Michèle Miller Sigg, “Pointillist History and the Essential Role of Biography in the DACB” in *African Christian Biography: Stories, Lives, and Challenges*, ed. by D. Robert (Pietermaritzburg, South Africa: Cluster Publications, 2018), 27.

¹¹ As a counter example of a western scholar who values this epistemological category, see Craig Keener's two volume book titled *Miracles* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011).

¹² Sigg, “Pointillist History,” 36.

challenging because women often work behind the scenes and do not keep written records of their ministry. More women writers are needed for this task.

Using new research methods to fill gaps. Capturing stories of African Christians often encounters the challenge of the lack of sources, especially written sources. The use of oral history methodology fills gaps in knowledge and helps to document a memory that would otherwise be lost. Oral history can also call into question written records, such as discriminatory colonial records.

Creating an engaging narrative. By making the subject come alive through personal stories, testimonies, and the reading of diaries or sermons, biographers help the reader to glimpse the inner life of the subject and to experience their shared humanity. Giving detailed attention to origin stories such as the circumstances of the subject's birth, their conversion, and calling is also a powerful way to capture the reader's imagination.

Showing, not telling. The role of the biographer is to paint a picture of the subjects that allows the reader to see them with their own eyes. This is done by describing the subject in such a way that the reader can draw their own conclusions about their character, beliefs, and Christian testimony. This will help biographers resist the temptation to glorify their subjects using hyperbolic language. The role of the biographer is neither to glorify or to judge their subject but to show evidence of who they were by describing how they acted on their beliefs. The biographer has a responsibility to be persuasive through a proper use of sources.¹³

3. The use of sources

The extent to which DACB biographers write a powerful story depends on their skill as writers, and on the richness and reliability of their sources. It is therefore very important to gather good sources. And for the more skeptical readers, the astute and systematic use of sources is the key to writing a convincing story that the audience will respect.

As many as possible, carefully chosen, and diverse sources. DACB biographers should assemble as many sources as possible to create the best portrait. The diversity of voices in the choice of those interviewed will make the portrait richer.

Written, if possible, and oral. Written sources are valuable if they can be found. But, like all sources, they should be looked at critically. Oral interviews should be done and catalogued, with transcriptions and detailed notes, as much as possible.

¹³ Example of an exceptional biography: Lydia Mengwelune
<https://dacb.org/stories/cameroon/mengwelune-lydie/>

First person sources / texts, if possible. If the subject's voice can be heard through their own writings, the portrait will be that much more intimate.

* * *

A "Cheat sheet" for Writing a Strong DACB Biography

A DACB biography:

- Speaks to a global audience
- Shows respect for the subject by entering into their world view and experience
- Gives insight into the formation of the subject's cultural, religious, and political identity; does not shy away from narrating their struggles
- Rejects western epistemological bias and creates new categories of knowledge such as the supernatural
- Gives voice to the marginalized, such as women
- Uses new research methods such as oral history.
- Creates an engaging narrative
- Shows, not tells, using written sources and oral testimonies.
- Uses sources to show reliability and create an intimate portrait.

See the following pages on the DACB website for more resources:

Oral History Training resources: <https://dacb.org/resources/oral-history/>

Submission guidelines: <https://dacb.org/connect/submit/>

Introductory Materials: <https://dacb.org/resources/introductory/>

Addendum: Additional Resources

Guidelines for Writing a Biography (<https://dacb.org/connect/submit/>)

In preparing a biographical study for inclusion in the Dictionary, please insure that your article includes information on as many of the following categories as possible. The author should integrate this information into an **article** between 200 and 3000 words long.

1. Given name(s) of Person. As necessary, provide explanations of these names.

- Baptismal names
- Kinship names
- Nicknames

2. Family names. If there is more than one spouse, list the children under the appropriate mother or father.

- Ethno-linguistic group
- Kinship group
- Father
- Mother
- Wife/Wives
- Husband/Husbands
- Children
- Grandchildren

3. Life Story

- Date or approximate date of birth
- Place of birth: village, city, province, nation
- Unusual circumstances associated with birth
- Formative experiences, such as illnesses, personal misfortunes, tragedies, visions, etc.
- Education, degrees (including dates)
- Conversion (including date, if applicable)
- Calling and/or ordination to ministry (including date)
- Date or approximate date, place, and circumstances of death

4. Nationality / citizenship

5. Languages, including first, second, third, fourth, fifth, etc.

6. Church affiliation

- Roman Catholic
- Orthodox; Coptic
- Protestant (Conciliar, Evangelical, Anabaptist)
- Independent (African initiated, Spiritual, Pentecostal / charismatic)

7. Names, locations, and descriptions of churches begun or served by the Subject

8. Ministry details: Where? How long? What happened? Short term and long term impact? (Please provide detailed information wherever possible, including anecdotes, stories, and hearsay)

9. Continuing influence and significance of the Subject

10. Publications, reports, writings, letters, musical compositions, artistic contributions by the Subject

11. Sources of information about the Subject

- Unpublished
 1. Eyewitness accounts (give names and addresses of storytellers who are or were eyewitnesses; include details of their relationship to the Subject)
 2. Oral and anecdotal (give names and addresses of storytellers wherever possible, and include details of their relationship to the Subject)
- Published (include full bibliographic data wherever possible: book title, author, publisher, year of publication; title of chapter within a book, author of the chapter, title of the book, name of the editor of the book, full publication data; title of article in periodical, author of article, periodical title, date of periodical, page numbers of article, place of publication.)

12. Other pertinent information

The Craft of Writing Religious Biography

My interest in religious biography extends to my undergraduate days at Louisiana State University, when in the 1970s I wrote an honors' thesis on Daniel Berrigan and the Catholic left. I still remember the thrill of wading through years of the *New York Times* and documenting each draft card burning and anti-war protest, of reading Berrigan's prize-winning poetry from the 1950s, of hunting down his essays and articles, and ordering all his books through interlibrary loan. As I constructed my pioneer biography—that I now in hindsight realize I should have published—I came to know the late 1940s until the mid 1970s from inside the world of an Irish-American Jesuit activist. As a young public school student from southern Louisiana, I learned all about life in a Catholic seminary, about places I had never been like New York City and Block Island. I experienced the birth of revolutionary theology in Latin America, the first anti-Vietnam protests, the angst over civil disobedience and incarceration in Danbury prison. Living the 1960s through the eyes of Daniel Berrigan meant that I, too, began reading books by Thomas Merton, and holding political discussions with William Stringfellow, and pouring blood on draft files in Catonsville, Maryland.

What drew me to write about Daniel Berrigan when I was 20 years old, is the same thing that has drawn me to interview numerous church workers in Zimbabwe and missionaries, to write three dozen entries for the *Biographical Dictionary of Christian Missions*, and two biographies of Arthur T. Pierson. More than any other genre, biography allows me to get inside the relationship between religious beliefs and the activities of life. Biography tests the relationship between faith and action. It bridges intellectual and social history by demonstrating how ideas grow and change in the context of a particular life, and how life circumstances shape beliefs. Before scholars began talking about "lived religion," religious biography exemplified it.

My attraction to religious biography therefore flows from the chief question that drew me into religious history, namely, what is the relationship between beliefs in ultimate reality, and human action.

Since the idea of religious biography is composed of two elements, religion and biography, let me consider each of these in turn and then reflect on how together they are greater than the sum of their parts. First religion. To write a biography of a self-consciously religious person means accepting that religious belief is an independent variable, not reducible to class, race, gender, or social location. Although all these non-theological factors must compose an interpretive framework in a classic "life and times" biography, basic respect for the person means that we cannot reduce everything to factors of social location. After all, most human beings experience themselves as self-conscious actors—if not as subjects of their own history, then at least as persons who make choices with the hand of cards they have been dealt. Real people may experience oppression, but they do not think of their own faith as reducible to race, class, gender, or social location. The craft of religious biography therefore requires a basic respect for the subject's integrity. Respect for his or her integrity includes taking religious belief seriously and not dismissing it as a form of false consciousness. Only if we take religious world views

seriously can we enter into the worlds of women and of persons in oral cultures, not to mention the worlds of theologians and ministers and presidents of the United States.

The benefit of a respectful approach is that it allows the biographer to enter the world view of persons quite dissimilar from herself. I've had people ask me how I as a southern Methodist woman have been able to portray with such understanding the viewpoint of a New York Yankee Presbyterian premillennial dispensationalist male like A.T. Pierson. Because I respected him as an autonomous human being, I sought to understand and to portray Pierson's theological formulations as logical and making sense, given his context. Being an outsider to his religious viewpoint was beneficial, since I carried no baggage about dispensationalism either for or against it. Once I understood Pierson's religious worldview from a position of sympathy, I could understand why he made decisions against his own self-interest, such as being re-baptized, an action for which he lost his livelihood and was defrocked as a Presbyterian minister.

And this is another reason why the religion part of religious biography is so fascinating: Religious belief can explain why people act against their own obvious immediate self-interests. I think this factor is why I am so interested in the biographies of missionaries. Was it really in her own self-interest for Baptist Sarah Comstock in Burma around 1840, to send away all of her children for education in the United States, knowing she might never see them again? Was it really in Simon Kimbangu's self interest to break the law and preach the gospel for six months, and then be imprisoned by the Belgians for thirty years without ever being permitted to see his family? Was it really in Daniel Berrigan's self-interest to be imprisoned for opposing the war in Vietnam?

The attraction of studying individual religious motivation is that it so often leads to the heroic—of people living beyond the limitations of their human nature. And the heroic is interesting precisely because it constantly skirts on the edge of the tragic. Living according to principle can lead to death and destruction, just as easily to success and glory. For scholars, the religion part of religious biography, with its stress on exploring human decisions based on belief in ultimate truths, is what makes people interesting subjects. For believers, at a popular level, the heroic/tragic potential of Christian belief has long made the hagiographic form of religious biography a classic aid to Christian piety. Although I hope that my biographies are not hagiographies, I do wish them to respect persons of faith.

Now to the second part of the equation: biography. To my mind one of the greatest benefits of biography in the study of religion is that it avoids the pitfalls of over-systematization. We historians, with the benefits of hindsight, tend to read later trends back into the historical record and then systematize them in such a way that confirms current configurations—for example the idea that evangelicals are social conservatives, or that Darwinists and modernists are social progressives. Biography, with its respect for the human person, shows how beliefs develop gradually and in context, and in combination with other ideas that to later generations seem incompatible. The biographer must be careful not to jump ahead and to read foregone conclusions into a life in process. When we read snippets of a person's work in a book or journal, we tend to put that person into a box that supports our scholarly conclusions. But when

we read his or her work in the context of a life, we better see competing and even inconsistent trends. One example I dealt with in my biography of A.T. Pierson was the assumption that late nineteenth-century premillennial dispensationalism by definition was so concerned with the Second Coming of Jesus that evangelism crowded out concerns for the poor and for social justice. Yet in 1893, A.T. Pierson gave one speech on how the poor were being ground down by rich capitalism and another speech that connected the idea of the kingdom of God with the premillennial Second Coming of Christ. These speeches were delivered a week apart. What historical systematizers would normally keep separate cohere in the life of one person. The biographical approach to the development of late nineteenth century evangelicalism shows how premillennial eschatology did in fact co-exist with social concern for the urban lower classes. To give another example from 1893– Historians and especially theologians in retrospect assume that the Parliament of Religions was a visionary effort by far-seeing liberals who were eager to promote religious pluralism. Yet the organizer of the proceedings of the Parliament of Religions, the Rev. J. H. Barrows, pastor of 1st Presbyterian Church in Chicago, was also giving speeches to groups of Christian Endeavorers in which he referred to himself as a very conservative old-fashioned Presbyterian.

If the purpose of the historian is to keep the theologian honest, then perhaps one of the roles of the biographer is to keep the historian honest. We simply cannot systematize a person's life because there are too many cross currents and ideas in different stages of development, being expressed during different life stages. For example, what a person thinks about spirituality at age 25 is far different from what he might be thinking at age 75. Changes in intellectual emphasis might signify a change in life stage more than a deliberate repudiation of earlier priorities. The words of Emerson apply well to the craft of writing religious biography: "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines."

Finally, my closing words about the relationship between religion and biography: the combination of these two is so interesting because it is naturally accessible. Theological ideas clothed in a real life are more easily understood than when they are naked. History itself is more enjoyable when seen as a succession of real people's lives intersecting with events they cannot ultimately control. My teacher Edmund Morgan tried to teach us something he learned from his teacher Samuel Eliot Morrison—seeking to write in an accessible manner is one of the most important goals of the historian. Biography is a good way to make religious ideas accessible.

The hardest thing about writing a religious biography is the inevitable death of the subject. Just like our own death, we know it is coming, but we dread turning that last page.

Dr. Dana Robert

Boston University, *DACB* Editorial Committee

Paper presented at the American Society of Church History Conference, Jan 2006

Philadelphia, PA

Full text: <https://dacb.org/resources/writing-biography/#dana>

Pointillist History and the Essential Role of Biography in the *Dictionary of African Christian Biography*¹⁴

Michèle Miller Sigg

At its inception twenty years ago, the *Dictionary of African Christian Biography (DACB)* was conceived as a project to redraw the maps of Christian history in Africa—imperfect maps at best, informed almost entirely by the records of foreign missionaries and mission agencies. As the *DACB* project creator Jonathan Bonk has poignantly observed,

While Christian numerical growth in Africa has burgeoned from an estimated eight or nine millions in 1900 to some 424 millions in 2008, scarcely anything is known about the persons chiefly responsible for this astonishing growth: African catechists and evangelists.¹⁵

Bonk noted the absence of basic reference tools on African Christian history due to the inaccessibility of sources such as crucial “paper trails” left by important historical figures.

Therefore, the critical question confronting the *DACB* project at its creation twenty years ago was this: How does one attempt to draw even the simplest historical outline of Christianity in Africa in light of its explosive growth there in the twentieth century? With roughly 575 million Christians in Africa, in approximately 2,208 denominations—which in 2015 represented 48 percent of the continent’s total population—needless to say, the task is still overwhelming.¹⁶

The initial vision of the *DACB* stipulated that biography would be the principal means for collecting historical data. Biography, like narrative history, prefers description over analysis, eschews generalization and quantification in favor of particularity, and focuses on humans rather than on structures.¹⁷ The strategic choice to use biography intentionally placed the emphasis on people over events as central agents in the historical development of Christianity in Africa.

Choosing to employ biography—or what I will refer to as “points of light”—can be characterized as a *pointillist* way of writing the history of Christianity in Africa.¹⁸ If one were to draw a pointillist map of *DACB* biographies collected over the last twenty years, it would show an uneven distribution of lights across the continent: very few points of light in North African countries, slightly more in Francophone

¹⁴ Originally published in *African Christian Biography: Stories, Lives, and Challenges*, ed. by D. Robert (Cluster Publications, 2018).

¹⁵ Jonathan J. Bonk, “Ecclesiastical Cartography and the Invisible Continent: *The Dictionary of African Christian Biography*” (paper presented for African Studies Lecture Series, Yale University, Council on African Studies and MacMillan Center, October 15, 2008; updated October 19, 2009), available online at *Dictionary of African Christian Biography* (hereinafter *DACB*), www.dacb.org/xnmaps. Bibliographic information on earlier versions of “Ecclesiastical Cartography and the Invisible Continent” can be found in note 1 of the article online. All citations in this chapter from www.dacb.org were accessed October 2015.

¹⁶ Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., *World Christian Database*, www.worldchristiandatabase.org/wcd/, accessed October 2015.

¹⁷ Lawrence Stone, “The Revival of Narrative: Reflections on a New Old History,” *Past and Present*, no. 85 (November 1979): 3–4.

¹⁸ This pointillist metaphor is borrowed from Stone, “The Revival of Narrative,” 17, but is used here with a somewhat different meaning. Stone used the term to describe Peter Brown’s non-narrative method of describing the ancient world by being deliberately vague, using visual representations, and drawing on history, religion, literature, psychology, and art.

and Lusophone regions, and more in Anglophone Africa. This illustrates the unevenness of the *DACB* record. While countries Nigeria, Ethiopia, and South Africa have upwards of 280 biographies each, Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Eritrea, and Somalia, unsurprisingly, have less than ten stories each, and Djibouti, Sao Tomé and Príncipe, and Western Sahara have none.¹⁹

For the *DACB*, “pointillist history” is the use of biography to fill in the gaps in the history of African Christianity, one historical figure at a time. In other words, where traditional historical records are too rare to paint a general picture or to construct a chronology, even a few incidental and narrowly localized narratives tell a partial story of the Christian activity that took place in a certain region. Given the nature of the *DACB* project, no guiding or prioritizing principle governs the accession of materials for this pointillist history. The articles found in the *DACB* simply represent what has been collected so far.²⁰ A wider picture emerges where there are more lights. Nigeria, for example, where a few local historians have been working systematically for years to write biographies of important figures, presents an increasingly cohesive collection of historical narratives.²¹ Sadly, this strategic approach is the exception rather than the rule.

The purpose of this study is to justify the use of biography as a particularly pertinent and essential tool for historical research on African Christianity. Biographical examples from the *DACB* will serve as case studies, illustrations, and milestones. As an introduction, the first part will survey recent discussion on the issue of biography as history and take a brief look at the revival of narrative in the last thirty years to illustrate the evolution of attitudes toward biography as a way of writing history.

Biography as History and the Revival of Narrative

In academic circles, historians have long considered biography a “degraded form of historical writing” and history’s “unloved stepchild, occasionally but grudgingly let in the door, more often shut outside with the riffraff.”²² In the past decade, however, vigorous debates have emerged over the use of biography in the craft of history writing. In 2010, the *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* devoted an entire issue to biography and history, an issue that featured several eminent historians among the contributors. In his article “Biography as History: A Personal Reflection,” Stanley Wolpert observed that “at its best, biography is the finest form of history.”²³ Robert Rotberg, in an article on biography and historiography, elaborated on the point, stating, “Biography is history, depends on history, and strengthens and enriches history. In turn, all history is biography.”²⁴ Medieval historian Michael Prestwich added: “Biography is a form, perhaps the purest form, of narrative history.”²⁵ All the articles of this special issue celebrate biography as a methodology that has finally come into its own with respect to the writing of history.

Openness to the concept of biography as history can be traced to what Lawrence Stone identified in his seminal 1979 article as a “revival of narrative.” Narrative, which Stone defines as “a *mode* of

¹⁹. See map in Appendix 1.

²⁰. For an overview of the *DACB*’s modus operandi, see Bonk, “Ecclesiastical Cartography and the Invisible Continent.”

²¹. The in-country champion for ongoing Nigerian research is Dr. Deji Isaac Ayegboyin, professor and head of the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria, and *DACB* Advisory Council member.

²². David Nasaw, “Historians and Biography: Introduction,” *American Historical Review* 114, no. 3 (June 2009): 573.

²³. Stanley Wolpert, “Biography as History: A Personal Reflection,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 40, no. 3 (Winter 2010): 399.

²⁴. Robert I. Rotberg, “Biography and Historiography: Mutual Evidentiary and Interdisciplinary Considerations,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 40, no. 3 (Winter 2010): 305.

²⁵. Michael Prestwich, “Medieval Biography,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 40, no. 3 (Winter 2010): 330.

historical writing,” had fallen into disrepute in the 1920s and 1930s because of its perceived inability to answer the *why* questions.²⁶ At that time, Marxist ideology sparked an interest in explanatory systems while the social sciences provided the analytical and structural methodology. This led to the growth of a new historical research method developed in the French *Annales* School that favored the analytic over the narrative mode. Over time, however, historians became disillusioned with being confined to an analytic model of historical explanation that was subservient to social and economic determinism and the three-tiered argument of the *Annales* School.²⁷ The model produced a split between social and intellectual history, a split that became more problematic as recognition grew of the importance that ideas and power have for the unfolding of historical events. The return to narrative was also furthered by the bad record of quantification and the insufficiency of mono-causal explanations. In addition, interest in anthropology over economics or sociology increased, and the influence of anthropologists led historians to look more closely at human emotions, behaviors, attitudes, and values.²⁸

After forty years of social science interpretation in history, biography has, according to Jo Burr Margadant, come back into fashion in academic circles.²⁹ Her book—entitled *The New Biography: Performing Femininity in Nineteenth-Century France* and published two decades after Stone’s article—describes how the “new biographers” re-conceptualized biography. While not all the concepts involved in the new biography are pertinent to those who work outside of Euro-American history, a few of them are applicable to African studies.³⁰ The new biography brought new historical actors into the foreground—turning the spotlight on previously eclipsed social classes, women, minorities, communities, and groups of workers—and examined their cultures and their shared experience as a foundation for their social identity. Furthermore, the new biography fulfilled two classic objectives of writing about history: to create an engaging narrative for readers and to demonstrate how identity develops within a network of relationships and, often, conflicts. Finally, the greatest ambition of the new biographers may have been to change the “master narratives” of history, bringing women and minorities in from the margins and provoking a reevaluation of the historical record. Their work expanded historical understanding by revealing connections between individuals and established themes.³¹

The connection between the individual person and established themes in history is, in fact, one of the strengths of the use of biography as an integral component of history. As Robert Rotberg states,

Biography is not a method, or an art form, separate from history. Ideally, biographies are as integral to historiography as are the best standard social or economic histories. Biographical treatments must never be divorced from their temporal or spatial contexts. Choice, and rational action, occurs only within such a framework. The individual, in other words, is always within the historical web, not without it—whatever she or he, or biographers, might

²⁶. Stone, “The Revival of Narrative,” 4–5.

²⁷. According to Stone, “The Revival of Narrative,” 7, the three-tiered argument of the *Annales* School followed a hierarchical organization in which each element is built one on top of another, like three stories in a house: “first, both in place and in order of importance, came the economic and demographic facts; then the social structure; and lastly, intellectual, religious, cultural and political developments.”

²⁸. Stone, “The Revival of Narrative,” 8–14.

²⁹. Jo Burr Margadant, “Introduction: Constructing Selves in Historical Perspective,” in *The New Biography: Performing Femininity in Nineteenth-Century France*, ed. Jo Burr Margadant (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2000), 1.

³⁰. See Margadant, “Introduction,” 1–32. Margadant defines the subject of biography as “a self that is performed” rather than the “coherent self” (7). Also, the new biography uses a “method of analysis that recognizes the constructed nature of our conscious selves and views of others” (8).

³¹. Margadant, “Introduction,” 9, 16.

think.³²

The work of the *DACB* makes contributions to each facet of the project laid out by the new biographers. The quest to change the master narratives of African Christian history, for example, lies at the heart of the *DACB* project. One such master narrative is the view that the Christianization of Africa was a “foreign affair.” While Western missionaries may have sown the seeds, most of the subsequent conversions can be traced to the work of indigenous evangelists such as William Wadé Harris, who is said to have baptized over 100,000 Africans in the space of eighteen months in four West African countries.³³ The retrieval and preservation of indigenous Christian history in Africa is the only way to counterbalance the persistence of inherited misleading master narratives. Yet despite the strength of biography’s potential contributions, Achim Von Oppen and Silke Strickrodt argue that biography is still underutilized within African historiography.³⁴ One reason for this seeming oversight is that researchers encounter a lack of biographical material written by Africans. In his work, Kenyan historian William Ochieng’ underlines the scarcity of biographies and autobiographies in Kenya.³⁵ Though wishing to use biography to reconstruct Kenyan history, he was forced to rely on biographical materials written by Westerners in his analysis of the importance of indigenous political figures in Kenya’s struggle for independence. Making a modest contribution toward addressing this lacuna is part of the *raison d’être* of the *DACB*.

As has been stated, biographical insights give a better understanding of the social forces at work through human agency.³⁶ Biography may, in fact, become a favored form for historians of the twenty-first century, because even as it examines the interaction between society and individuals, its premise is that individuals are not captive to social structure.³⁷ Biography provides more insight when it comes to evaluating the points of contact between African Christians and Westerners such as the missionary, the church leader (e.g., Western bishops of African dioceses), or the colonial administrator. Accurate biography improves one’s understanding of the historical contribution of individuals in their cultural or religious contexts. In a colonial setting, biographical accounts can demonstrate how individuals made choices and acted in ways that distanced them from colonial systems, thus upsetting the commonly accepted notion that they were slaves to the dictates of colonialism.

The founding of the *Journal of Historical Biography* in 2007, which mostly showcased accounts from Western countries and a few from the Global South, further highlighted the growing importance of biography for the historian. Like traditional historians, those who write historical biography base their narrative on evidence, not conjecture. They hold the known facts in balance with what is unknown, stay close to their sources, reference facts and counter facts, and disclose the limits of their knowledge.³⁸ Rotberg notes that the attraction of writing biography is that “some historians (at least) clearly write biography in order to understand and write history, not because biography is the antithesis of, or some sort of substitute for, history. . . . Writing good biographies means writing good histories. The same evidentiary rules apply.”³⁹

But while the same evidentiary rules apply to writing biography as apply to history,

³². Rotberg, “Biography and Historiography,” 306.

³³. For Harris’s story, see David A. Shank, “Wadé Harris, William,” in *DACB*, www.dacb.org/stories/liberia/legacy_harris.html. The *DACB* also contains several other versions of Harris’s biography.

³⁴. Achim Von Oppen and Silke Strickrodt, “Introduction—Religious Biography: Transcending Boundaries,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 38, no. 3 (September 2012): 429.

³⁵. William R. Ochieng’, *Place of Biography in Kenyan History, 1904–2005* (Kisumu, Kenya: Mountain View, 2005).

³⁶. Rotberg, “Biography and Historiography,” 305.

³⁷. Nasaw, “Historians and Biography,” 574, 577.

³⁸. Rotberg, “Biography and Historiography,” 321.

³⁹. Rotberg, “Biography and Historiography,” 318, 323.

biography offers new sources and new methodologies that enrich traditional historical research. These innovations are what make biography a particularly well-chosen mode of historical writing for the task of documenting African Christian history in the twenty-first century.

This brief overview shows that biography has become a critical tool for the historian's craft and that it is important to foster a healthy symbiotic relationship between biography and history. What follows is an examination of some of the new elements biography brings to traditional historical writing as exemplified in the *DACB*.

Biography Addresses the Inevitable Autobiographical Bias

Biography tends to keep historians more honest about their subjective position as authors and about their rapport with their chosen subjects. The relationship between a historian and the subject of a biography is more personal than the connection between a historian and a theme or time period. The difference begins with the author's choice of his or her biographical focus. Choosing to spend a significant amount of time researching and writing about one individual implies a particular attraction to that person, be it emotional (admiration, fascination, disgust), scholarly (curiosity, a quest for understanding), personal (family connection), or ideological (intellectual, professional, or religious affinity). Hence the importance of recognizing the author's "I" behind the third-person narration in a historical account. Granted, narration in the third person gives an aura of scientific objectivity that is prized in Western scholarship. But the integrity of any piece of historical writing, contends Kate Brown, requires that one consider the autobiographical bias of the author. She writes, "Biography, I suspect, is all the more suspicious for historians because it exposes the shading of history into autobiography. Yet, in many ways, there is no biography—nor history, for that matter—without autobiography."⁴⁰ In a 2001 article, anthropologist Robert Priest argued that an understanding of an author's autobiographical bias is indispensable to ensuring the integrity of the scholarly enterprise:

Postmodernists call for a recognition that the social location of a scholar (in terms of race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation/identity, or religion) is salient to knowledge production and should receive explicit acknowledgment. Indeed, subject positions provide angles of vision, perspectives, and motivations and affect fieldwork relationships in ways which potentially contribute to knowledge production in areas which might be missed by scholars with other subject positions.⁴¹

For example, in the case of a *DACB* article, a Western male biographer writing about an African woman would struggle to reach the same narrative depth as an African woman writer, especially when it comes to portraying her troubles with racism, paternalism, gender roles, and sexism. Autobiographical bias, therefore, reveals the author's worldview and life experience just as much as it underscores what is missing.

The *DACB* database currently contains 606 biographies written for the project by Africans. Of that total, 230 were written by Project Luke Fellows who received fellowships from the *DACB* so that they could reside for one academic year at the Overseas Ministries Study Center in New Haven, Connecticut, to complete the writing of ten biographies. These twenty-one African scholars came from eleven different countries: Cameroon, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Madagascar, Nigeria, South Africa, Sudan, Tanzania, and Uganda. Not all of them were trained scholars or historians. About half were self-made historians at the time they wrote their biographies,

⁴⁰. Kate Brown, "A Place in Biography for Oneself," *American Historical Review* 114, no. 3 (June 2009): 599.

⁴¹. Robert J. Priest, "Missionary Positions: Christian, Modernist, Postmodernist," *Current Anthropology* 42, no. 1 (February 2001): 43.

motivated by the task of writing the stories of local Christian figures who had made an impact on their country, their denomination, their region, or, more personally, themselves. Some later went on to seek training as scholars and teachers and inspired their students to write biographies for the *DACB*.⁴² The life experience of these African writers influenced their choice of biographical subjects; some chose to write about family members, church figures they had known personally, or individuals who had had an impact on their lives of faith.

For many writers, the autobiographical influence runs both ways. In September 2015 I met with a former Project Luke Fellow from South Africa, George Sombe Mukuka. I had recently learned—to my great surprise—that he was living in Connecticut and working as a Catholic priest. When George came to the United States in 2008, he was a single man who had grown up in a practicing Catholic family and he had been working as faculty research manager at the University of Johannesburg, South Africa. Holding several degrees, including one doctorate, he was a brilliant and thorough scholar, as his biographies attest.⁴³ After his fellowship, he returned home and published his sixteen biographies in a book.⁴⁴ When I asked him how he had become a priest, his answer was simple. His work on the first black Catholic priests of South Africa, Zulus like himself, had changed him. He told me that he had been an altar boy while growing up and had wanted to become a priest from early on. Nevertheless, he had pursued a career in academia. Then, years later, his research into the lives and struggles of the first black South African priests had reignited that call to the priesthood, which he said would have “fizzled” had he not come to know their stories.⁴⁵

Not all biographers have such a strong reaction to their subjects. But in Mukuka’s case, his autobiographical bias and his identification with his biographical subjects affected him so strongly that he changed his vocation.

Biography Provides a Window into the Formation of Cultural, Religious, and Political Identity

George Mukuka’s story highlights an important reason why biography is crucial to the work of documenting African Christian history: the whole complex of cultural and religious identity. Good biographies focus not only on one individual’s life but also on the social, religious, cultural, and political forces that influence the subject’s motivations and behaviors. Observes one historian of modern South Asia,

It is also possible to probe key social changes, as well as questions of identity and agency, through the life histories of families. . . . [Life histories] also illuminate important intellectual, social, and political issues, adding depth and complexity to our analyses by anchoring these

⁴². For a list of the fellowship recipients, see “Project Luke Fellows,” *DACB*, www.dacb.org/plfellows.htm. Yossa Way and Fohle Lygunda both went on to get doctorates and to teach in religious institutions, incorporating the use of the *DACB* into their curricula. Only two of the twenty-one Project Luke Fellows have been women.

⁴³. For a list of his biographies see “Biographies by Dr. George Sombe Mukuka,” *DACB*, www.dacb.org/pluke-part-inst--indexes/mukuka-index.html.

⁴⁴. George S. Mukuka, *History from the Underside: The Untold Stories of Black Catholic Clergy in South Africa (1898 to 2008)* (Baltimore: PublishAmerica, 2011).

⁴⁵. The stories that had the most impact on him, states Mukuka, were the lives of “the first four native priests.” See in the *DACB*, all by George Sombe Mukuka, “Mnganga, Edward Müller Kece,” www.dacb.org/stories/southafrica/mnganga_edward.html; “Mncadi, Alois Majonga,” www.dacb.org/stories/southafrica/mncadi_alois.html; “Ngidi, Andreas Mdotswana,” in www.dacb.org/stories/southafrica/ngidi_andreas.html; and “Julius uMkomazi Mbhele,” www.dacb.org/stories/southafrica/mbhele_julius.html.

firmly in lived experience.⁴⁶

The shared experience in related life histories can then be used strategically for historical research to shed light on the larger context.⁴⁷

African Christian history must include reflection on questions of cultural and religious identity. Documenting, through biography, the struggles of Africans as they relate to foreign missionaries and colonial authorities as well as to their Christian peers—indigenous catechists and evangelists—builds a body of knowledge that can be of help as the people of Africa construct new collective identities in their own Christian communities. Biographical writing shows how difficult it is to form identity, especially in the case of African Christian pioneers who, as liminal figures, faced racism, discrimination, persecution, and sometimes physical violence every time they crossed cultural or religious boundaries. In Mukuka's accounts of the first four black Catholic priests in South Africa, these struggles became the leitmotif around which his biographies were structured. Mukuka demonstrated how these difficulties negatively affected and sometimes crippled the ministry of the four pioneers in spite of their success as priests. In this way, he succeeded in rehabilitating their reputation in the historical record.

The pioneer of the four, Edward Mnganga, a highly-educated Zulu, received his training in Rome. Within just a few years of the start of his ministry, however, his superior, a Mariannahill priest from England named David Bryant, had him locked away in an asylum for seventeen years because Mnganga, incensed at Bryant's racist provocations, attempted to assault him physically. Mukuka argues at great length that Mnganga was neither psychologically unbalanced nor in any way mentally unfit for his role as a priest. He uses testimonies from African bishops Biyase and Khumalo, a school prefect, the diocesan priest Natalis Mjoli, a woman who became Mnganga's cook, and a report by a medical doctor from the asylum. The historical situation that Mukuka describes is completely different from what had been recorded in the official church records. Mukuka demonstrates that even though Mnganga reacted angrily to his mistreatment, the light shed on Bryant shows him to have been racist, petty, paternalistic, jealous of Mnganga's success, maliciously dishonest, arrogant, and vindictive, even to the point of spying on Mnganga in an effort to find evidence of misconduct. For Mukuka, it was important that the historical record show that Mnganga was not insane but that his violent outburst was rooted in anger against Bryant, who obviously suffered from a severe lack of Christian character.

The other three pioneer priests, Alois Mncadi, Julius Mbhele, and Andreas Ngidi, had to fight for the ownership of their farms. These priests, also educated in Rome, were keenly aware of their financial insecurity as single men outside of the traditional African family network and of the precariousness of their positions if they dared to speak out against discriminatory practices in the church. In one of several communications, Bishop Fleischer told Mncadi that the farm put his soul in danger of "eternal damnation" and demanded that he get rid of it. Because the priests refused to sell their land, all three were viewed by church authorities as insubordinate. Mukuka's research, however, reveals the sinister backstory to this issue of landownership.

In fact, the problem that arose with the farm was much more than a matter of ecclesiastical obedience. During the first decades of the twentieth century, as a result of the 1913 Land Act and several other pieces of colonial legislation, the people in the black middle class were systematically dispossessed of their property. The white colonial government wanted to own not only the land but also the means of production. In this matter, the (white) bishops—and in this case Bishop Fleischer—blindly followed the government's discriminatory policies.⁴⁸

⁴⁶. Judith M. Brown, "'Life Histories' and the History of Modern South Asia," *American Historical Review* 114, no. 3 (June 2009): 593, 595.

⁴⁷. Brown, "'Life Histories,'" 595.

⁴⁸. Mukuka, "Mncadi, Alois Majonga."

Mukuka's careful investigation into what, on the surface, appeared to be a case of insubordination to ecclesiastical authority revealed what it really was: resistance to an instance of missionary collusion with racist colonial policies.

The relationship between missions and colonialism is a theme in many of the biographies in the *DACB* as well as an important factor in identity formation. Many African Christian leaders started their spiritual journeys while being imprisoned by colonial authorities. Modi Din, an evangelist of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Cameroon, received his calling to the ministry while a prisoner of the German occupation authorities between 1914 and 1916.⁴⁹ A more well-known figure, Simon Kimbangu, spent thirty years in prison in the Belgian Congo after an astounding ministry of only six months. His living martyrdom and eventual death in prison sealed his reputation among his followers as a Christ-figure.⁵⁰ Biographies of William Wadé Harris tell how he experienced a trance-visitation from the Angel Gabriel while in prison which launched him on his journey as a prophet and evangelist in Liberia, Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire, and Sierra Leone.⁵¹ These prison experiences are examples of disruptions that are best highlighted in biographical studies.

Von Oppen and Strickrodt underline the point.

Life stories of individuals, groups and cohorts show especially clearly the disruptions and constraints caused by colonial and post-colonial rule, and by the boundaries they imposed. . . . For Africa in particular, recent biographical research has shown that personal lives, as processes reconstructed by the researcher but also as narratives (texts) produced by actors themselves, have much to tell us about the production of new individual and collective identities in the face of different, changing and often oppressive conditions.⁵²

The descriptive and interpretive resources of biographical writing demonstrate how imprisonment at the hands of the colonial authorities proved to be not only a negative disruption (an act of racism), but also a positive turning point in the lives of Modi Din and Harris, because it was in prison that their identities as powerful evangelists were forged.

In addition to documenting colonial disruptions, biography underscores how individuals struggle with their identities as they confront cultural and religious boundaries. Religious biography in particular often focuses on the struggle of missionaries and evangelists to transcend these boundaries.⁵³ In writing the story of Apolo Kivebulaya (ca.1864–1933), an Anglican missionary from Uganda, Project Luke Fellow Rev. Yossa Way described Apolo's cross-cultural struggles upon arriving in Boga, in northeast Congo. Some people responded to his teaching, but most people, including the chief, rejected his message and ordered that he not be given any food. Apolo had traveled with his Bible *and* his hoe, however, so he could cultivate food for his own survival.⁵⁴ He eventually had a successful ministry and went on to become known as the apostle to the Pygmies.

In reality, not all cultural and religious struggles ended happily for African Christians. Project Luke Fellow Kehinde Olabimtan introduces the story of Henry Johnson (1840–1901) by describing the difficult cultural context that local Africans faced in the mid-1800s:

⁴⁹. Robert Amadou Pindzié, "Modi Din Jacob," *DACB*, www.dacb.org/stories/cameroon/modi-din.html.

⁵⁰. Multiple biographies of Simon Kimbangu are found in the *DACB*. See "Democratic Republic of the Congo," *DACB*, www.dacb.org/stories/demrepcongo/demrepcongo.html.

⁵¹. See the many biographies of Harris listed in "Liberia," *DACB*, www.dacb.org/stories/liberia/liberia.html.

⁵². Von Oppen and Strickrodt, "Introduction," 429.

⁵³. Von Oppen and Strickrodt, "Introduction," 430.

⁵⁴. Yossa Way, "Apolo Kivebulaya," *DACB*, www.dacb.org/stories/demrepcongo/kivebulaya_apolo.html.

Henry Johnson, son, was born at a time when the fledgling Sierra Leone community of creoles was beset with the problem of identity in a westernizing but ambivalent social environment. . . . The colony, as a meeting point of European and African cultures, became a source [of] temptation to these colony-born young people. They despised their parents' African culture while being attracted to the European lifestyle they saw in Freetown for which they had no resources or qualifications.⁵⁵

Henry Johnson worked for many years to translate the New Testament into Mende and held a strong desire to see Mende children benefit from the education that the Church Missionary Society could offer them. Unfortunately, his rise as a leading figure in the mission was halted by the envy of Western missionaries who were less qualified, less energetic, and less passionate than he was. This is the way that Olabimtan concludes Henry Johnson's story:

Johnson represented a double liability because he came from Sierra Leone, where nationalist fervor was a cause for concern among European missionaries in the Yoruba mission. . . . The archdeacon was, therefore, a victim of the times in which he lived, but the inherent ambivalence that made and unmade him continues to characterize the relationship between Africa and the West. The continent and its people must not be allowed to sink, but they must also not be allowed to excel and escape the control of the West. Will the time ever come "for [them] to be believed?"⁵⁶

One cannot help but hear Olabimtan's autobiographical voice in this closing plea—for him, Johnson is a model for the struggles that modern Africans face in the contemporary globalized world.

For many *DACB* authors such as Mukuka, Way, and Olabimtan, the biographical lens has served as a powerful tool for exploring, in depth, the formation of their subjects' social, cultural, religious, and political identities. Sometimes the rapport they have formed with their subjects has served as a catalyst for their own reflections on questions of personal and collective identity.

Biography Provides New Methodologies, Categories, and Subject Matter That Challenge Stereotypical Views of History

As is true for history in general, to achieve a well-rounded view of any given subject the biographer must employ interdisciplinary research methods. For example, biography, like social history, uses what anthropologist Clifford Geertz called "thick description," which can be harvested using the methodologies offered by oral history.⁵⁷ Oral history interviews allow the researcher to gain deep insights into her or his subject's history, relationships, and contexts. In addition, the interviewer can cross-check facts during exchanges with individuals holding different and sometimes opposing viewpoints. Interviews allow narrators to give an alternate perspective on written documents such as colonial or ecclesiastical records and may, in some cases, prove these sources wrong.⁵⁸ Mukuka, for example, used interviews in several instances in his studies of the first black Catholic priests in South Africa. As with Mukuka, oral history

⁵⁵. Kehinde Olabimtan, "Johnson, Henry," *DACB*, www.dacb.org/stories/sierraleone/johnson_henry2.html.

⁵⁶. Olabimtan, "Johnson, Henry."

⁵⁷. Lois W. Banner, "Biography as History," *American Historical Review* 114, no. 3 (June 2009), 580–83, referencing Clifford Geertz, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, Geertz (New York: Basic, 1973), 3–30.

⁵⁸. David J. Mitchell, "'Living Documents': Oral History and Biography," *Biography* 3, no. 4 (Fall 1980): 283–85.

methodology is essential in the research of many *DACB* biographers because it provides an alternative to received narratives and historical stereotypes.

One of the most entrenched stereotypes in the history of Christianity in Africa is that of the “bad white missionary.” Even though one cannot deny the many mistakes missionaries have made, this stereotype is based on a superficial understanding of mission history and on the fallacious tendency to judge the past with the yardstick of today. More thorough research into the legacy of foreign missions in Africa reveals that many Western missionaries played positive roles among the people whose culture they embraced. Many devoted their lives to advocacy in the name of human rights, to preserving culture by teaching in the local language, to the social uplift of women and girls, to education, and to defending the local people against the encroachments of colonial systems. Catholic bishop Pierre Claverie is one example.

Pierre Claverie, Catholic bishop of Oran and protagonist of Islamo-Christian dialogue, was assassinated by Islamic militants in a booby trap explosion at the entrance to his house. His young Algerian driver, Mohammed Bouchikhi, died with him and the mingling of their blood was seen by many as a symbol of the bishop’s desire to find a home in the hearts of the Algerian people and to participate in their sufferings.⁵⁹

This kind of devotion is common for many missionaries, numbers of whom came to see Africa as their adopted home and chose to die and be buried among “their people.” For example, missiologist Roland Allen (1868–1947) is buried in Nairobi, Kenya, and missionary-activist John Philip (1775–1851) lies in a graveyard for “coloreds” in South Africa, to mention only two. Many *DACB* biographies tell the story of what might be, for some, a new category of subject matter in African history: that of the *good* Western missionary.

Biographies of African Christians offer new subject matter which the Western academy considers to be of questionable historicity because of Western epistemological biases. Perhaps the most controversial of these categories is that of supernatural phenomena such as accounts of miraculous events, healings, and visions. The use of biography to recount these phenomena makes it possible to present the material within the worldview of the biographical subject, preserving both the account and the integrity of the narrator’s perspective. Berthe Raminosoa Rasoanalimanga, a Project Luke Fellow in 2008–09, wrote the stories of three major leaders in the *Fifohazana* Revival in Madagascar, a movement that has been ongoing since October 15, 1894, when the first leader, Rainisoalambo, received a vision of Jesus telling him to throw out his fetishes.⁶⁰ In addition to being a trained archivist, Berthe is also a shepherd, or evangelist, within the revival movement. Her accounts of the two women *Fifohazana* leaders are perhaps her most remarkable and—to Western ears—incredible biographies. Ravelonjanahary (ca.1850–1970) was the second leader of the revival and ministered during the last sixty years of her 120-year life.⁶¹ Nenilava (Germaine Volahavana; 1920–98) was the revival’s fourth leader.⁶² There are common themes in the two women leaders’ life stories: both were illiterate and grew up in families that practiced traditional religion with fathers who were healers and seers; both received a direct call from Jesus and visions instructing them in their ministry; both had gifts of miraculous healing; and both were said to have died for several days and to have come back to life after going to heaven, where they saw visions.

⁵⁹. Aylward Shorter, “Claverie, Pierre,” *DACB*, www.dacb.org/stories/algeria/claverie_pierre.html.

⁶⁰. Berthe Raminosoa Rasoanalimanga, “Rainisoalambo,” *DACB*, www.dacb.org/stories/madagascar/rainisoalambo.html.

⁶¹. Berthe Raminosoa Rasoanalimanga, “Ravelonjanahary,” *DACB*, www.dacb.org/stories/madagascar/ravelonjanahary.html.

⁶². Berthe Raminosoa Rasoanalimanga, “Nenilava (Volahavana), Germaine,” *DACB*, www.dacb.org/stories/madagascar/nenilava.html.

In her biography of Ravelonjanahary, Rasoanalimanga tries—through her use of sources—to address the skepticism such stories provoked among local Malagasy. She quotes from a journal for former students of the Protestant Mission, entitled *Gazety Ranovelona* [Living water], that collected reactions from four different newspapers to the miraculous events surrounding Ravelonjanahary's ministry. The article in *Gazety Ranovelona*, published on January 31, 1928, includes this response taken from *La Grande Ile* [The great island], one of the newspapers:

Putrefaction can only come from the dead. Was there really an occurrence of this nauseating odor that is putrefaction? If the answer is yes, then it is true that Ravelonjanahary really did rise from the dead. According to what people are saying, the blind are recovering their sight, the deaf their hearing, the mute are speaking, paralytics are standing on their feet and other ills are being healed as well. The Gospel that she is preaching to sinners is not a shame, but rather an honor for the Protestant Church. . . . But the most remarkable thing is that Ravelonjanahary is not asking for money from anyone. . . . The number of people who have come to see her over the last five weeks or so is up to 871, and that number includes six *vazaha* (Europeans). There were also Indians and Chinese, as well as childless people who came asking to have children.⁶³

The sources Rasoanalimanga references in this article and in her biography of Nenilava are written rather than oral—something that, for Western-educated scholars, lends them more credibility than would oral sources. One of the sources to be found in the bibliography of her biography of Nenilava is a booklet of collected stories and eyewitness accounts, published in 2007.⁶⁴ In 2011, when Berthe did her research, there were people still living who had known Nenilava and could talk about their encounter with her.⁶⁵

DACB biographies showcase new methodologies, categories, and subject matter that are not commonly used in Western history writing. In Africa, the conduct of oral history research is important to the retrieval of history that is in danger of disappearing.⁶⁶ The perspectives of African biographers challenge historical stereotypes and introduce new subject matter, such as supernaturalism, to the toolkit of historians.

Biography Is a Response to the Scarcity of Sources

The scarcity of written sources creates considerable challenges for biographers working on the life stories of African Christians. The difficulty is compounded when it comes to writing about women, and the ideas and practices of women generally must be culled by exploring their lives as practitioners. In her history of American missionary women, Dana Robert underlined the “raw and uncharted state of the sources” related to women's mission history and theory. She noted,

⁶³. See Rasoanalimanga, “Ravelonjanahary.”

⁶⁴. Rasoanalimanga, “Nenilava (Volahavana), Germaine”; *Ankaramalaza-Germaine Volahavana Nenilava: Histoires et Témoignages* [Ankaramalaza-Germaine Volahavana Nenilava: Stories and witness accounts] (Antananarivo, Madagascar: Imprimerie Luthérienne Malgache, 2007).

⁶⁵. The *Fifohazana* movement has not had any nationally recognized leader since Nenilava's death in 1998. Mama Christine, a woman from among the Bara people in the southern part of the island, however, is rumored to be the next leader. As part of my research on this revival movement in 2011, I was able to meet with and interview Mama Christine through the intermediation of Berthe Rasoanalimanga, who served as my research assistant. See Appendix 2 for an excerpt from an interview in which she tells the story of her heavenly encounter with Jesus and Nenilava.

⁶⁶. A classic oral history resource book is Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1978).

It is impossible to track their mission theory through reading formal documents, theological treatises, or by following debates over mission theory in various denominations. In the early nineteenth century, published diaries and letters are the major source from which women's mission thought must be inferred against the more general history of the American missionary movement itself.⁶⁷

Paper trails for African Christian women, however, are even more rare, for the women often received little or no education. Many of the major female leaders of independent churches were illiterate when they received their calling. Agnes Okoh, founder of the Nigerian independent church, Christ Holy Church International, received her calling when she heard a voice repeating "Matthew 10." Confused about what this meant, she had to ask a young man to read that chapter of Matthew's Gospel to her. That revelation eventually led her to become a powerful prophetess and spiritual leader, and the church she founded now numbers nearly 850 congregations in Nigeria, Togo, and Ghana.⁶⁸ Fortunately, though Okoh never left a paper trail, the many oral testimonies to her life's work made it possible to construct a full account of her legacy.⁶⁹

Most of the *DACB*'s 226 biographies of women list very few written sources, for the biographers were forced to rely on oral material. For example, the biography of Hakalla Amale lists only four sources: an interview between the author and the subject before her death and interviews with three other individuals from her church or family. Her story is brief, focusing mainly on one powerful incident of persecution.

While Hakalla was pregnant with her second son, the persecution increased. The village elders came to her home, forced her outside, and demanded that she deny Christ, threatening to curse her if she refused. On that particular day she was preparing a traditional medicine which people believed made labour and delivery easier. In their presence, she drank the medicine in the name of Christ. The men then cursed her. Hakalla was willing to die rather than deny Christ. Later that day, she gave birth to a healthy second son and the people saw that the power of Christ had overcome the curse.⁷⁰

The vividness of this scene gives it a lively and performative quality that reflects the oral testimonies on which it is based. It also implies that this confrontation was probably a memorable village event that many individuals could corroborate.

According to historian David Nasaw, the lack of written documents and archives is not necessarily a handicap for biography, a judgment that can give courage to biographers working in Africa, for as just illustrated, oral history is sometimes the only source of historical data available there.⁷¹ One scholar has pointed out that it is the responsibility of historians to use all possible means to rescue the history of ordinary people from oblivion. This may mean, in some cases, "abandoning the comfort of texts" or stepping across disciplinary boundaries into archeology and forensic anthropology as means for exploring the physical remains of mummified individuals or abandoned places that may retain some

⁶⁷. Dana L. Robert, *American Women in Mission: A Social History of Their Thought and Practice* (Macon, GA: Mercer Univ. Press, 1997), xx.

⁶⁸. Thomas Oduro, "Agnes Okoh," *DACB*, www.dacb.org/stories/nigeria/okoh_agnes.html.

⁶⁹. Oduro lists twenty interviews in his bibliography in addition to many written sources, though none by Agnes Okoh herself.

⁷⁰. Belaynesh Dindamo, "Hakalla Amale," *DACB*, www.dacb.org/stories/ethiopia/hakalla_amale.html.

⁷¹. Nasaw, "Historians and Biography," 574.

traces of Christian peoples who have long since disappeared.⁷² In the *DACB*, this means preserving as a “biography” of Samuel Johnson an account as cryptic as this one from a registry of catechists and evangelists:

1886, January 6, ordained a deacon and 1888, May 6, ordained a priest by Bishop of Sierra Leone, and stationed, 1886, at Ode Ondo. 1887, to Oyo, Lagos. Brother of Henry Johnson and Nathaniel Johnson.⁷³

In this case, some memory is better than no memory at all. The mission of the *DACB* is to recover and preserve, by all possible means, some memory of African Christian history, in spite of the scarcity of sources.

Biography Gives Voice to the Subaltern

In the 1960s and 1970s, writers became conscious of the fact that women’s stories could not be told in the same way as those of men. The stories of women needed new categories, new frames of reference, and new structures to capture the reality of their lives.⁷⁴ Biographies, which generally portrayed men, tended to be success stories, following a certain formula that focused mainly on the public aspects worthy of attention and praise. To tell a woman’s story, however, demands exploration of both public and private life, including inner life and specifically feminine physical experiences, such as childbearing. The concept of “success” must also be redefined, and the writer must demonstrate, through a variety of means, what it is that makes a woman’s life worthy of biographical attention.⁷⁵

Describing female experience and success in a biography depends on being able to hear a woman’s voice. When sources are scarce, capturing this nuance is an added challenge. In her study of the correspondence of German female missionaries, Lize Kriel shows that it is impossible to untangle the life stories of the German and African sisters simply because the records of the Berlin Missionary Society shed a greater light on the lives of German women than on the lives of African Christian women. In addition, she points out that “such letters are not only a reservoir of information about the daily life on mission stations, but also about the ways in which these lives were ‘staged’ for far-away audiences.”⁷⁶ The pressure missionaries felt to provide positive reports to their home agencies calls into question the understanding of the African women’s perspective expressed in these letters: How well was it represented? Were the descriptions of their lives accurate?

The story of Lydia Mengwelune, written by 2008–09 Project Luke Fellow Robert Pindzié, illustrates how devoted missionaries sometimes wrote detailed accounts of the lives of their African collaborators. Missionary Anna Rhein-Wuhrmann was a close friend, supporter, and overseer of Mengwelune’s ministry. Pindzié uses her testimony—along with the reports of several other narrators—to paint Mengwelune’s life in such a saintly light that his account borders on hagiography. But readers might ask: Does Mengwelune’s perspective come through in this story? Would Mengwelune have recognized

⁷². Robin Fleming, “Writing Biography at the Edge of History,” *American Historical Review* 114, no. 3 (June 2009), 613–14; Brown, “A Place in Biography,” 599, 605.

⁷³. “Johnson, Samuel,” *DACB*, www.dacb.org/stories/nigeria/johnson_samuel.html; original source: Church Missionary Society, *Register of Missionaries: Clerical, Lay, and Female, and Native Clergy from 1804 to 1904* ([London]: Church Missionary Society, [1905]).

⁷⁴. Linda Wagner-Martin, *Telling Women’s Lives: The New Biography* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1994), 4–5.

⁷⁵. Wagner-Martin, *Telling Women’s Lives*, 5, 7, 11.

⁷⁶. Lize Kriel, “A German-Christian Network of Letters in Colonial Africa as a Repository for ‘Ordinary’ Biographies of Women, 1931–1967,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 38, no. 3 (September 2012): 452–53.

herself in their accounts and in the *DACB* biography? The reality is that if Mengwelune comes across as a saintly figure, the glowing account reflects well on the missionaries—among whom is Mengwelune’s friend Rhein-Wuhrmann—and it serves as a personal as well as an official validation of their work in the field. *DACB* author Pindzié, a Bamoun like Mengwelune, also cannot hide his admiration for the legacy of this exceptional woman who is a national symbol of evangelical Christianity in his country. Perhaps, however, because he realizes that his account might come across as overly enthusiastic, he includes in the final note to his article—appended to the biography’s very last paragraph—an excerpt from a letter written by Mengwelune to her friend Rhein-Wuhrmann:

Foumban, July 9, 1927

Dear friend, my mother, do you think of me and do you have sleepless nights as I do because of you? Oh, I know that often you can’t sleep when you think of me. I want to thank you for having written the story of my life in a book. If everything is well with me in Foumban, it is thanks to you; if people love me and say good things about me, you are the reason why that is so. I have been very sick and my body was broken. I thought I was going to die (rheumatoid arthritis); now however, I am well again. (News of several people follows. . . .) I, who am your child, greet you warmly.

Lydia Mengwelune⁷⁷

Mengwelune’s reaction to her own story is not unexpected—she would have been naturally reticent to say anything critical to her “mother” in the faith for fear of appearing ungrateful. But her letter presents an interesting twist: she seems to say that local people now treat her with respect *because of* Rhein-Wuhrmann’s story, which has validated her ministry among her people. Conversely, Mengwelune’s reaction validated her missionary friend’s account of her and, implicitly, Pindzié’s retelling. But Pindzié’s use of this quotation seems to hint at his own motivation for telling Mengwelune’s story: he wants his audience—a worldwide audience—to recognize the importance of Mengwelune’s contribution to the growth of global Christianity. In any case, he has made sure that readers hear Lydia Mengwelune’s voice so that, in some way, she has the last say in her own story.

The *DACB* database is a collection of stories of those who have often been overlooked by historians of Christianity in Africa. Long considered as “subalterns,” African evangelists—men and women—have played an essential role in the spread of Christianity across the continent. The work of the *DACB*, a biographical project, is to make sure that their stories are told truthfully, as fully as possible, so that they take their rightful place in the greater story and are not forgotten.

Conclusion

Biography is essential to the *DACB*’s work of recovering and preserving African Christian history. Because biography addresses the autobiographical bias, biographers can examine questions of identity formation as they reflect on the lives of their subjects. Biography is particularly well adapted to the African context, provides new methodologies and frames of reference, and rises to the challenge of the scarcity of written sources. As a historical tool, biography gives voice to those who have not, thus far, had much of a voice in the writing of their own history.

Even though an enormous task remains for the *DACB*, the growing number of individual points of

⁷⁷. Robert Adamou Pindzié, “Mengwelune, Lydia,” *DACB*, n17, www.dacb.org/stories/cameroon/mengwelune-lydie.html; this letter extract originally appeared in Anna Rein-Wuhrmann, *Au Cameroun, Portraits de Femmes*, trans. E. Lack (Paris: Société des Missions Évangéliques, 1931), 44.

biographical light widens and deepens existing knowledge, creating a pointillist history of African Christianity. As the database grows, the hope is that the balance of historical truth will tip in favor of revising the master narratives of African Christian history. By challenging received narratives, biography has a truth-telling power that is critical. The recovery of lost or distorted history is the goal, even though this truth telling might be resented and attacked, and might sometimes lead to censorship.⁷⁸ As a pedagogical tool, however, biography can create a counterbalance, and a fresh critique of history.⁷⁹

Rather than prioritize events, biography helps to keep the central focus of the historical narrative on the people who shaped the history. It also allows the African agents to speak more powerfully through their life stories and the ideas they incarnated—ideas that biographers can eavesdrop upon in their narratives.⁸⁰ The task of the *DACB* is to guard the memory of these individuals so that ordinary Africans can tell the fuller stories of the great figures of African Christian history in their own denominations, communities, or homes. These stories can even be shared and republished in local newspapers. One day in Lagos, Nigeria, where I was teaching an oral history seminar, my hosts presented me with a short biography in the local newspaper that listed no sources. They kept telling me how important this figure was and that this biography warranted inclusion in the *DACB*. The story sounded strangely familiar. Intrigued, I did a quick search on my computer. It turned out that it was, in fact, a biography from the *DACB*. The story, once an oral narrative, now a written account, had taken on a life of its own.⁸¹

⁷⁸. Wolpert, "Biography as History," 408.

⁷⁹. Banner, "Biography as History," 585.

⁸⁰. Brown, "Life Histories," 589.

⁸¹. Biographies in the *DACB* are free to be reproduced without permission, but appropriate acknowledgement of the source should be included.