

The Dictionary of African Christian Biography's Pursuit of Historical Recovery, Equitable Collaboration, and Transformed Relationships in the Global Church: A Status Report

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Over the half last century, the Christian population in Africa has undergone an explosive growth that the historical record has failed to fully document. In 2020, out of a total population of 1.3 billion across the continent of Africa, 654 million Africans (48%) self identified as Christians.¹ The *Dictionary of African Christian Biography* (DACB.org) was created as a repository of history and a resource for future generations of the church in Africa to root its tremendous growth in a robust understanding of its Christian roots and in the legacy of the Mothers and Fathers of African Christianity. The DACB is an online, nonproprietary, open access *memory base* created out of reverence for a past that is being lost, as African elders, men and women, die and their stories fade from human memory. The DACB is 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.²

The project was born in 1995, the fruit of a meeting of scholars convened at the Overseas Ministries Study Center (OMSC) in New Haven, Connecticut, and funded by a small Pew Research Enablement Grant. The original website went online in 1998, with the help of volunteers. In October 2000, Founding Director Jonathan Bonk secured a grant to fund a part time position for a project assistant and the project was launched.³ For the next twelve years, the project could grow its collection of biographies and extend its reputation globally, thanks to generous funding and support from the OMSC.

In 2015, on the occasion of the DACB's twentieth year anniversary, Bonk estimated that, "It is 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 instructors increasingly require their students to develop the habit of using the database for their African church history assignments."⁴ In 2020, he retired from directorship of the project.

Now, as 2023 begins, how can we assess the progress of the DACB's mission? The following case stories will illustrate some of the successes and challenges the project currently faces.⁵

¹ Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds. *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed February 2023). By contrast, 557 million or 41% identified as Muslims.

² The DACB mission statement is on the DACB homepage: <https://dacb.org/>.

³ Jonathan Bonk was the Executive Director of the OMSC at that time. His tenure with OMSC ended when he retired in 2013.

⁴ Jonathan Bonk, "Modern African Church History and the Streetlight Effect: Biography as a Lost Key" in *African Christian Biography: Stories, Lives, and Challenges*, ed. by D. Robert (Cluster Publications, 2018), 9.

⁵ There is a lack of hard data to measure the project's effectiveness. Without a large scale research study—which may or may not yield accurate insights—we must rely on circumstantial evidence and testimonies from users.

Case Study 1: Accessing History: A User's Experience

On Wednesday, October 31, 2019, I received the following email from Mr. Nosakhare Smart:

From: nosakhare smart
Sent: Wednesday, October 30, 2019 8:49 PM
To: Christian Biography, Dictionary of <dacb@bu.edu>
Subject: Thank you

I am the great grand son of Smart Simeon Jackson.
I am so happy and thankful to see in reality especially online the recognition of my great grand pa.
All I had were stories from my father Mr. Roderick Godwin Bolahan Smart his grand son.
If you have further information about my great grand pa please let me know.
Especially where he is from.
Thank you and God bless you and everyone who has kept this information safe.

Yours truly,
Mr. Nosa Anthony Smart.

After reading this message, I pulled up the biography from the DACB website. It was one of the first entries I had uploaded in 2001, when I first began my work as project assistant with the *Dictionary of African Christian Biography*.

Smart, Simeon Jackson⁶
1800s
Anglican Communion (Church Missionary Society)
Nigeria

1887, May 29, ordained a deacon, and 1889, February 24, ordained a priest by Bishop Crowther at Onitsha. Stationed at Lokoja, Niger. 1891, disconnected and to Sierra Leone.

Source:
Church Missionary Society, *Register of Missionaries (Clerical, Lay and Female) and Native Clergy from 1804 to 1904*.

These three lines belong to one of the entries in a nineteenth-century missionary registry, the Church Missionary Society *Register of Missionaries (Clerical, Lay and Female) and Native Clergy from 1804 to 1904*. It was one of the first documents I added to the rudimentary DACB website from the archives at the Yale Divinity School library. Entries in the CMS *Register* were, for the vast majority of the Africans listed there, the only trace of their nineteenth century pioneer mission work for the Anglican Church in the Niger Delta. Many, like Simeon Jackson Smart, worked as evangelists, catechists, and priests under the leadership of Bishop Samuel

⁶ <https://dacb.org/stories/nigeria/smart-simeonj/>

Ajayi Crowther, the first African bishop of the Anglican church and a prominent pioneer in African Christian history.⁷

The next day, I began an email exchange with Mr. Smart who was eager to share what he had discovered about his grandfather, the son of Simeon Jackson. I found out that my interlocutor is from Benin City, Edo State, Nigeria. He holds a BSc in Computer Science and is an entrepreneur who recycles plastics to make building bricks. He did his research on his Android phone to try and find out more about where his family came from. It is probable that his ancestor Simeon Jackson Smart was a Sierra Leone returnee or “recaptive,” originally captured somewhere in West Africa by local slave traders and loaded onto a ship bound for the Americas. After it was intercepted by the British anti-slavery squadron, he likely was released in Sierra Leone to begin a new life. But in the historical account, nothing from Simeon Jackson Smart’s former life was preserved, not even his African name.⁸

Mr. Smart responded with deep gratitude to our email exchange, saying, “On behalf of my immediate and extended family I say a very big thanks to you, a custodian of our history.”⁹ The generosity of this honorific title was overwhelming. The status of “custodian of our history” expressed a painful and tragic irony: The CMS record in the DACB, by its very minimalism, pointed to the *silence* of history—the *absence* of Simeon Jackson Smart’s story and of those of so many other African Christian figures. But for his great-grandson and many others today, to gather up even the tiniest shreds of their ancestor’s memory was a sacred act. This act connected them to the great cloud of ancestor-saints who had gone before them.¹⁰

Professor Nimi Wariboko, chair of the DACB Executive Committee, points to this testimony, the story of Mr. Nosakare Smart’s research into his Christian genealogy, as an indication that Christianity has sunk deep roots into Africa’s cultural conscience:

if Christianity is not rooted in the conscience of the people who receive it, it will last for only one generation and then it will go away. So when I look at the work of the DACB, something tells me that effort we are making to capture what people are doing at the grass roots—you know, asking people to write about individuals in their communities living out their Christian faith—that, for me, is a way of recording, of bearing witness to history (...) People submit biographies of great men of women, people at the top. That is good, but oftentimes it is from that kind of grassroots report that you know that Christianity has penetrated deep into the crevices of Africa, and we [the DACB] will capture that.¹¹

These few lines of a cryptic historical record gave hope to Mr. Smart and to his community. The DACB provided access to that knowledge.

⁷ <https://dacb.org/stories/nigeria/crowther4-samajayi/>

⁸ As a result of our email exchange, Mr. Smart shared with me the information he had collected about his ancestor and the family tree, and I added it as a supplementary document to his great-grandfather’s biographical details and to preserve this memory.

⁹ Email received from Nosakhare Smart on Thursday, October 31, 2019.

¹⁰ The only encouraging element that counterbalanced this dubious honor was the fact that Mr. Smart was able to find and access this tiny scrap of information about his ancestor because of the work of the DACB.

¹¹ Nimi Wariboko, introductory presentation, Launch of the Founding Chapter of the DACB Friends, September 22, 2022. See <https://dacb.org/connect/news/>. Dr. Wariboko is Walter G. Muelder Professor of Social Ethics at Boston University School of Theology.

Case Study 2: Knowledge that Transforms: Conversion, Connection, Restoration

In late 2021, in a classroom in Burkina Faso, spellbound students in theological training from various churches in West Africa listened to a lecture by Dr. Anicka Fast, a Mennonite missionary who teaches African Christian history in francophone institutions in West and Central Africa. She has designed the curriculum of her classes using biographies from the DACB which serve as fundamental texts and models for the students' final project: the writing of the biography of a local Christian to be published on the DACB website.¹²

First movement – A conversion of consciousness: When Fast first started teaching in West Africa, the students were skeptical about the curriculum and the final biography project. At first, they simply could not see how they would overcome all the obstacles of oral history research. What is this project anyway—this DACB—they asked? Just another project conceived by a foreign researcher that had no relevance to them and would not benefit them or their church? However, as these students read biography after biography of *African* missionaries, pastors, evangelists, catechists, and teachers, they began to see African Christian history in a completely different light. This new narrative deviated sharply from the Eurocentric history they already knew that stated, formulaically: “missionaries brought the gospel to Africa and then.... there was an African church.” They realized that the missing actors in the old narrative were the innumerable African men and women who built the church in Africa. When the students finally understood that the history of Christianity in Africa could not be told without African Christians at the center of the story, their outlook was transformed.

This realization prompted two initial reactions. First, they grieved that these stories were largely unknown. One student pondered that “the church in Africa seemed to be ‘like a canoe that passes without leaving a trace.’” Secondly, they heard an implicit call to action. They realized that “the Church has a great responsibility” to tell such stories for future generations. One [student] marveled that ‘God wants to use us to unveil’ the stories of the ‘Africans that God used.’”

Second movement - connection: As the students participated in the process of writing a biography in the collaborative setting of the DACB, the students gained a sense of connection with the global church. The stories not only brought them together as Africans (these were *their* stories!) but also connected them to other global Christians (they were *shared* stories). The collaborative process empowered them and gave them dignity as authors. Several students had their biographies published in a special issue of the JACB (April 2022) which was distributed at the Mennonite World Conference that took place in Indonesia in July 2022. At that event, their biographies served as a bridge between them, the global missions of the Mennonite church and the world church.

Final movement - restoration: Dr. Kyama Mugambi has pointed out that many scholars and graduates of theological institutions in Africa feel a growing sense of disillusionment because, for them, “the academic study of religion in Africa is an imported product” and the courses are not relevant for ministry in Africa.¹³ But here, Fast’s students engaged with issues

¹² This section summarizes Dr. Fast’s case study with her students. For her full account, see her article “Biography as Bridge within the Global Church,” *Journal of African Christian Biography* 7.2-3 (Apr-July 2022), 66-81. Dr. Fast is a member of the DACB International Editorial Board. See <https://dacb.org/about/editors-and-elders/>.

¹³ Kyama Mugambi, “Stories of Faith and Leadership: Reconciling history and identity through selected African Christian Biographies,” presentation at the American Society of Missiology annual meeting 2022. Dr. Mugambi is assistant professor at Yale Divinity School and a member of the DACB International Editorial Board. See <https://dacb.org/about/editors-and-elders/>.

deeply relevant to their own contexts. In one session, she led her students in the discussion of Andrew Walls' biography of Anglican pioneer Samuel Ajayi Crowther.¹⁴ Crowther was liberated from slavery as a boy, then went on to become a brilliant theological student, then priest, missionary, Bible translator in the Niger Delta and finally the first African bishop of the Anglican Church. In class discussions, the students had the opportunity to wrestle with the painful stories of racism and unequal power dynamics between young white missionaries and Crowther. Focusing on the life story of this African Christian and his suffering opened a space for the students to lament grievances that they also shared, leading to a first step towards healing and restoration of relationships in the church—the global church, in particular.

Taking Stock of the DACB's Trajectory up to the Present (2023)

These three movements of conversion, connection, and restoration summarize and expand on the the DACB's original vision, formulated in 2008, by Founding Director Bonk.¹⁵ The following represents a retrospective reflection on the evolution of the DACB's work over the past two and a half decades.

The initial movement of the *conversion of consciousness* was the primary focus of the first twelve active years of the DACB.¹⁶ From 2000 to 2012, the yearly oral history workshops and Bonk's numerous presentations to promote the project were key to awakening the consciousness of both westerners and Africans. He underlined the urgent task of documenting the lives of African Christians before their memory was lost, shining light on the African agents responsible for the explosive growth of Christianity in Africa.

The DACB's reputation grew during this period. The Project Luke Fellowship brought a total of twenty-one African writers to OMSC to write biographies for the DACB. At oral history workshops in Africa, the project was always enthusiastically received. In a few African institutions, students and scholars were trained to write biographies that made their way to my office in New Haven. Thanks to their contributions and many others, the online collection slowly expanded. Nevertheless, something else was needed to expand the DACB's vision and reach—a network.

The second movement, *connection*, began in 2012 when, at the invitation of Professor Dana Robert, the DACB moved to Boston University's School of Theology.¹⁷ There it became an integral participant in the vision of the Center for Global Christianity and Mission (CGCM) and gained new and far-reaching connections through academic networks.

Connection is key to the DACB's mission, a characteristic that became more evident from the time it moved to Boston University. Thanks to its large repository of stories, the DACB connects language groups across Africa through the use of English, French, Portuguese, and Swahili. It fosters interaction with international networks of scholars and church agents. It builds bridges that connect people across national, regional, denominational, gender, socio-economic, political, and educational lines. It dismantles the “divide and conquer” legacy of colonialism and

¹⁴ <https://dacb.org/stories/nigeria/legacy-crowther/>

¹⁵ Jonathan Bonk, “Ecclesiastical Cartography and the Invisible Continent: *The Dictionary of African Christian Biography*,” The Council on African Studies and the MacMillan Center African Studies Lecture Series, October 15, 2008 [Updated 10/19/09]. See <https://dacb.org/about/bonk-article/>.

¹⁶ The “active phase” started when I was hired as project assistant to manage the DACB in October 2000.

¹⁷ Dr. Dana Robert is Director of the Center for Global Christianity and Mission and William Fairfield Warren Distinguished Professor at Boston University School of Theology. She is also on the DACB Executive Committee.

displaces the traditional gatekeepers of knowledge through its policy of open and equal access. The DACB creates unity in diversity and reflects, in all its richness, the common body of Christ. From 2012 on, the DACB continued to grow in the globally oriented, mission-minded, internationally networked context of the Center for Global Christianity and Mission. This generative period has witnessed several key milestones.

Conference(2015) and book (2018). One of the milestones was an inter-disciplinary conference on African Christian Biography organized by the CGCM at Boston University and led by Robert. The conference was the first of its kind: “The conference connected groups that rarely meet—scholars in religious history, those in secular African studies, and African ecclesiastics committed to the task of Christian narrative.”¹⁸ Professor Lamin Sanneh gave the keynote address and papers were presented by eminent scholars. New networks grew out of this shared experience. Second, the proceedings of the conference were published in a book, *African Christian Biography: Stories, Lives, and Challenges* (Cluster Publications, 2018), edited by Dana Robert. Robert illuminated the importance of African Christian biography in the writing of world Christian history in the introduction to the book:

The authors of this volume share the conviction that writing scholarly biographies of African Christians has now become an urgent task. 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. Spiritual biography has long been an important source of inspiration for churches, ranging from hagiographies in early Egyptian and Ethiopian Christianity, to popular studies of African “saints.” 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.¹⁹

Journal. In 2016, another milestone was the founding of the *Journal of African Christian Biography* (JACB). Its mission is summarized in the masthead:

The *Journal of African Christian Biography* (JACB) publishes research on biographies of African Christians. The primary focus is on the role of local agents in the spread of Christianity in Africa. The JACB is an open access publication committed to facilitating global conversations among scholars across cultures, nations, Christian traditions, and academic specializations, with particular emphasis on Africa. We invite contributions from individuals affiliated with religious and educational institutions in Africa and elsewhere.

CONTENT includes:

- Original biographies and African Christian histories
- Biographies highlighted from the DACB website
- Obituaries and tributes about recently deceased figures

¹⁸ Dana L. Robert, ed., “Introduction: Why African Christian Biography?” in *African Christian Biography: Stories, Lives, and Challenges* (Cluster Publications, 2018) xi.

¹⁹ Robert, “Introduction: Why African Christian Biography?”, x-xi.

- Excerpts of recently published scholarship
- Interviews with select African church leaders and scholars (still living)
- Resources for teaching with biography
- Reviews of scholarship on African Christian biography and history²⁰

The Journal has become an important tool for connection that extends the work of the DACB, being easier to distribute in churches or use in a classroom. Anyone can sign up for a **free** e-subscription. The subscriber list stands currently at 3,921 (Feb. 16, 2023). The subscriber base grows steadily at an average rate of 10 new readers per week.

Minimal computing technology. In 2017 and 2019, the original DACB website was redesigned using technology illustrative of our ethos of **open access** and minimal computing. African users can easily access the content on their mobile phones because the website requires very little bandwidth. Because mobile use constitutes upwards of 66% of our website traffic, the site uses adaptive technology to make sure mobile experience is optimized.

Open access to authorship. Our ethos of open access extends to authorship as well. We prioritize the contribution of African writers in telling the story of African Christianity. We publish biographies from students and scholars at all stages of their career as well as from lay people wishing to memorialize an important Christian figure or a family member. We believe strongly in promoting equity in knowledge production in the field of African Christian history.²¹ There are deep implications for relationships within the global church. Fast describes this effect in her work with her students:

the process of researching, writing, submitting, editing, and posting a biography in the DACB is a relational process that requires collaboration between North and South and so helps to develop webs of connection within the global church. It requires a level of trust from African students that the DACB project will not perpetuate the downplaying of local knowledge and the privileging of technical expertise that overwhelm many of their interactions with well-intentioned Westerners.²²

The final, and ongoing movement, is that of *restoration*. The DACB ultimately seeks to foster restoration on an intellectual, theological, and relational level within the global church. In the DACB's overarching vision, the act of writing a truer and more complete history of the church in Africa will lead to a deeper understanding of God's mission in the world, and to the restoration of relationships within the global church – across cultural and denominational boundaries.

Conclusion

This brief status report indicates that there is evidence of steady growth and innovation in the work of the DACB. Not analyzed here are the new funding schemes that are currently being explored to ensure a sustainable future for the project. Nonetheless, the DACB's core mission is continuing to influence educators and scholars. The many stories in the DACB online repository are living proof that Christianity is a global religion, growing much faster in Africa than in

²⁰ JACB masthead.

²¹ The standards for formatting and submissions can be found here: <https://dacb.org/connect/submit/>.

²² Fast, "Biography as Bridge."

western countries. One lesson in every DACB biography is that Christianity in Africa is *not* only the religion of the White colonizers but has sunk its roots deep into the African religious consciousness. The proof is in the sheer growth African Christians—from less than 10 million in 1900 to more than 667 million in 2022. Christianity is very much at home in Africa. In 2050, it is projected that Africans will make up 1.3 billion or 39% of the total Christian population (3.3 billion) worldwide.²³ To address this explosively expanding population, new institutions and resources for theological education are urgently needed in Africa. As an extension of the mission to create a scholarly record of the Mothers and Fathers of African Christianity, the DACB and the *Journal of African Christian Biography* are contributing to the work of creating materials for theological education in Africa.²⁴

The mission of the DACB is not only to memorialize the past or to train for the future but also, importantly, to encourage African Christians in their faith and, at times, to accompany them in their suffering. Somali Christians find particular comfort in reading the testimonies of the saints who have courageously lived out their witness.²⁵ These stories can also inspire a calling to Christian service. In January 2021, I was moved by a short email message I received from a young man in Tanzania. His words captured, so eloquently and simply, something of the work we are doing:

Dear sir

I have read several time of my grand father Missionary Yohana maula Malecela.²⁶ My name is Martin stephano Malecela, am fourth generation from Yohana Malecela and I am looking forward to start Church here at Dar Es salaam Tanzania. Am happy because the seeds of gospel is moving in our family we are serving God and his biography it is strengthen me to go ahead to speedy the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Thanks.

Martin Malecela²⁷

It is important to underline that the biographies that the DACB collects are not merely historical documents. These biographies are expressions of theology—a theology of imitation. These memorialized African Christians were imitators of Christ and so provide worthy examples to follow for Christians today. The *Dictionary of African Christian Biography* is working to preserve the sacred legacy of the imitators of Christ in Africa—the “great cloud of saints” who surround us and whose stories strengthen those who follow them, like Mr. Malacela.

²³ Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds. *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed February 2023). By contrast, 557 million or 41% identified as Muslims.

²⁴ Hypothetical calculation: If we say that for the round number of 1 billion African Christians in the future one trained pastor is needed for every 500 Christians, then we will need 2 million pastors. If a large, prosperous seminary could graduate 500 pastors per year, then we would need 200 large seminaries to produce enough pastors. Each seminary would need 30 faculty for a total of 6,000 faculty.

²⁵ Read some Somali stories here: <https://dacb.org/stories/somalia/xasan-liibaan-ibraahim/>; <https://dacb.org/stories/somalia/maxamed-xuseen-axmed-xaaji/>; <https://dacb.org/stories/somalia/marwaale-tabitha/>.

²⁶ Read his story here: <https://dacb.org/stories/tanzania/malacela-yohana/>.

²⁷ Email to M. Sigg received from Mr. Malacela, January 2021.

M. Sigg Bio:

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