

Journal of African Christian Biography

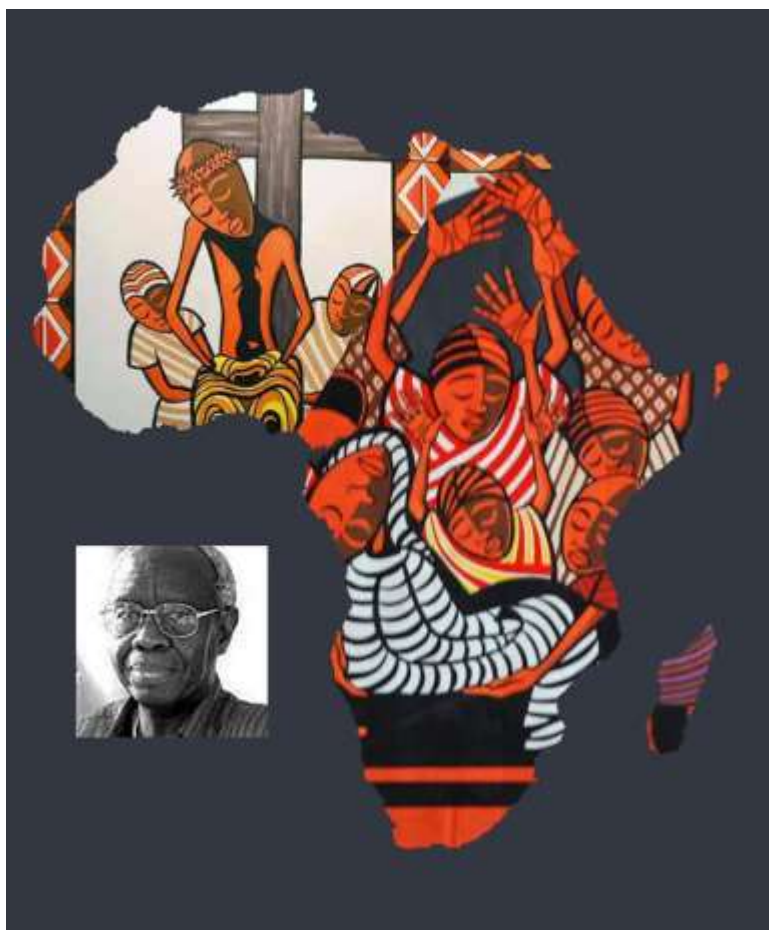
Vol. 4, No. 4 (Oct. 2019)

BILINGUAL ISSUE - Focus:

John Mbiti Tribute (Kenya)

Edward Francis Small (Gambia)

Englebert Mveng (Cameroon) [in
French]



A publication of the *Dictionary of African Christian Biography*

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Vol. 4, No. 4 (Oct. 2019)
BILINGUAL ISSUE

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

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

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Cover graphic: A digital collage of the 10th and 14th stations of the cross by
Engelbert Mveng, from the chapel at Hekima College, Nairobi, Kenya.

Introduction to the October 2019 Issue

By Michèle Miller Sigg

Another African giant has gone to join his ancestors. For the second time this year, the *Journal of African Christian Biography* announces the loss of one of the great scholars of African Christianity. Professor John S. Mbiti, the “father of the Christian theology of African Traditional Religion” (p. 4), died on Sunday, October 6, 2019 in Switzerland.

In his tribute, Fr. Francis Oborji highlighted Mbiti’s invitation to “theological pilgrimage,” a “gem” of his reflection on the dynamics of the global church. The concept was, essentially, his spiritual gauntlet to Western Christian scholars: “We have eaten with you your theology. Are you prepared to eat with us our theology? (...) There cannot be theological conversation or dialogue between North and South, East and West, until we can embrace each other’s concerns and stretch to each other’s horizons.” Mbiti believed that North-South dialogue was crucial to the healthy growth of the global Christian church.

In the next article, Stan Chu Ilo speaks of the importance of historical memory and narrative in another pilgrimage—Christian biography. For Ilo, Christian biography is a “spiritual pilgrimage” that is well adapted to the challenge of writing about the mission of God in Africa because it recounts both the history of an individual and of a community.

DACB Advisor Gabriel Leonard Allen brings us the story of Edward Francis Small adapted from an account by Nana Grey-Johnson. Initially a missionary of the Methodist Church, Small became a social advocate and worked tirelessly to defend the interests of his Gambian community against the abuses of colonial authorities and greedy local traders.

Finally, Jean Luc Enyegue, SJ, offers us the account, in French, of the life of Father Engelbert Mveng, SJ, a radical historian, theologian, and artist who was brutally assassinated in 1995. As a priest he worked for the Christianization of Africa but at the same time, like John Mbiti, a central goal of his scholarly work was the Africanization of Christianity in Africa. On this issue’s cover, the images of two stations of the cross by Mveng in Hekima chapel (Nairobi) portray an African Jesus and a group of female mourners, hands in the air, grieving the

loss of their Savior after the crucifixion. **Mveng's art embodies an African** appropriation of the entombment narrative in which the actors (Jesus, the women) and the act of mourning are Africanized. The image even takes on an auditory dimension as it calls up, for African observers, the familiar ululations of grieving women from their own experience of funerals.

As Fr. Oborji urged in his conclusion, may the accounts of these ancestors who have gone before us encourage and instruct the present generation of African Christians to “be true witnesses to their legacy—alive to the challenges of [this present] time as Africans and as theologians.”

Michèle Miller Sigg
Managing Editor

John S. Mbiti – Father of African Christian Theology: A Tribute by Francis Anekwe Oborji¹

Prof. John S. Mbiti (1931-2019), in the introduction to his seminal book, *African Religions and Philosophy*, published in 1969, wrote:

Although many African languages do not have a word for religion as such, it nevertheless accompanies the individual from long before his birth to long after his physical death. (...) Chapters of African religions are written everywhere in the life of the community, and in traditional society there are no irreligious people. To be human is to belong to the whole community, and to do so involves participating in the beliefs, ceremonies, rituals and festivals of that community. A person cannot detach himself from the religion of his group, for to do so is to be severed from his roots, his foundation, his context of security, his kinships, and the entire group of those who make him aware of his own existence.²

The Kenyan theologian, philosopher and pastor, Professor John S. Mbiti, generally acclaimed as the father of the Christian theology of African Traditional Religion (ATR) and of indigenous efforts for the inculturation of the Gospel on the continent, has gone to meet his ancestors. The global community of African theologians and scholars mourn the loss of a leading African intellectual who breathed his last on Sunday, October 6, 2019, in Switzerland where he was hospitalized. That was the day Professor Mbiti—the greatest mind to shed intellectual light on the ancestral religious world and heritage of the African people—joined his ancestors.

Upon hearing of the demise of Prof. Mbiti, one of my former students in Rome, wrote, “We are today proud as Africans because of the dignity he gave to the African tradition up to where it is now. He has left a memorable legacy of

¹ This tribute is reprinted with permission from the author. Email to M. Sigg, dated 10/11/2019.

² John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Nairobi: Heinemann, 1969), 2.

cultural values of Africa. We are proud of him, and he will forever be quoted through all ATR related studies.”

Another admirer wrote, “Really sad news. Prof. Mbiti’s resonating academic works testify to his greatness.” To this another added, “We lost a gem! Not only deep in thought, but also warm as a person. I remember his visit to Bigard Seminary, Enugu. He challenged us students with his remarks: ‘If you don’t change change, change will change you.’” Yet another wrote, “It is sad news, a big loss for the academic world, especially for Africa. May God rest his good soul in peace. Amen.”

One other person eulogized him as follows, “The death of Prof. Mbiti is another heavy blow on Africa, happening within a short space of time after the demise of Prof. Lamin Sanneh of the Gambia.” Finally, an Italian young scholar who studied African theology and traditional religion under me, added her voice in the following words, “*Che brutta notizia, uno studioso eccezionale che con i suoi libri ha aiutato tante persone a capire Africa*” (What sad news, an exceptional scholar who, with his books, had helped many to better understand Africa).

His Life

John S. Mbiti was born on November 30, 1931 in Kenya. He studied, first in his native Kenya, and thereafter in Uganda before taking his doctorate in 1963 at the University of Cambridge, United Kingdom. Ordained a pastor in the Anglican Church, he taught theology and religion for many years at Makerere University in Uganda. Thereafter, he served as director of Ecumenical Institute Bossy, World Council of Churches (WCC), in Geneva, Switzerland. He was visiting professor at many universities in Europe, America, Canada, Australia, and Africa, and had travelled widely in many countries within and outside Africa.

Mbiti published over 400 articles, reviews, and books on theology, religion, philosophy, and literature. In all these, Africa remained the center and context of his academic scholarship. He retired a few years ago as part-time professor at the University of Bern, parish minister in Burgdorf, Switzerland. He was married to Verena and they had four children, Kyeni, Maria, Esther and Kavata.

As a junior lecturer at Makerere University, Mbiti challenged Christian inferences that traditional African religious ideas were “demonic and anti-Christian” in his first work, *African Religions and Philosophy* (published in 1969

by Heinemann Publishers). In the preface to the second edition of the book, Mbiti did not hide his feelings and frustration about the rejection the book went through before being accepted for publication. He wrote, *inter-alia*:

I also thank the publishers (Heinemann Press) very heartily, for promoting the book, for facilitating its translation into other languages and for asking to have a new edition of it published. It is amazing to think that the original manuscript was rejected by several other publishers before being accepted by the current publisher!³

Upon hearing of Mbiti's demise, one commentator wrote in his condolence message, "His first book (*African Religions and Philosophy*) has been hailed as an enlightenment by many but it also earned him an equal share of criticism from those with contrary beliefs (and philosophy of life)." In the same context, Raila Odinga, former prime minister of Kenya in his condolences to Mbiti's family, tweeted, "His book was an eye-opener and groundbreaking work."

Other major published works of Mbiti include *Concepts of God in Africa* (1970); *New Testament Eschatology in an African Background* (1971), which was a revised edition of his PhD thesis at Cambridge; *Love and Marriage in Africa* (1973); *Introduction to African Religion* (1975); and *Bible and Theology in African Christianity* (1986). Other titles of his published books and articles are too numerous to mention.

He became the first African to translate the Bible into his native Kamba language. Mbiti was indeed a tireless and groundbreaking theologian. A towering figure in the world of academia, he was a mentor to many younger African theologians and scholars of all times and places.

Mbiti left Makerere University in 1974 after he was appointed director of the WCC Ecumenical Institute in Bogis-Bossy, Switzerland. Thanks to him, the presence of Christians from Africa, Asia, and Latin America started to be felt in the WCC as their participation increased. He became vocal on matters of contextualized theological education as he traversed in various universities worldwide.

³ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 2nd rev. & enlarged edition (Oxford: Heinemann, 1989), xiii.

In this tribute, the main focus will be on two aspects of his contribution to African theology: a) His theology of African religion, and b) his perspective on the new southward shift in the Christian landscape.

Mbiti's Theology of African Religion

Mbiti, is highly appreciated as Africa's greatest scholar in ATR. In his work on African Christianity, he expressed his conviction that the God revealed in the Bible is the same God worshipped as "Creator and Omnipotent God" in the Traditional African Communities before the advent of Christianity and Islam on the continent.

In his writings, one finds an honest attempt by an African scholar to correct the prevalent Afro-pessimism pervading Western scholarship on African people, culture, and religious heritage. Mbiti addressed and corrected the age-old prejudice and scorn often directed against African religious values, culture, and traditions in Western scholarship. In addition, his theology focused on reasons why, Africa, in spite of it all, has emerged as the fastest-growing center of Christianity in the contemporary history of evangelization and in the New southward shift in Christian landscape.

Thus, Mbiti, *ab initio*, set out to rehabilitate the wounded African dignity by striving through his writings, to link African cultural and religious heritage with Christianity by promoting theological dialogue between Judeo-Christian religion and African religious values and traditions.

However, in all his writings, Mbiti never equated the two different religious traditions (Christianity and ATR) as being exactly, the same. No. Rather, he was always conscious of their basic differences just as he was of their commonalities in the logic of the theology of inculturation and *praeparatio evangelica*.

The generic concept of God as "Creator and Omnipotent" in ATR does not mean identical with the God revealed in the Bible. The Judeo-Christian theme of the covenant in the Old and New Testaments, and especially, the special revelation of God in the New Testament as Trinity through Christ (and the Holy Spirit), as well as the inner-life of the Trinitarian God Himself are new to the African adept of traditional religion. The same thing applies to the themes of the Holy Spirit, the Blessed Virgin, and so forth that are completely new to the religious consciousness of the African traditional religionist.

This shows that the two religions, Christianity and ATR, are not the same. But as we say in traditional Christian theology, ATR was a way God in His divine wisdom had prepared the forbears of Africa for the reception of the Christian message through proclamation. This is the fact Mbiti tried to explain to us all in his writings on the meeting between the Gospel and ATR. In the new order, ATR, as the religious background from which the African forbears come, has an important pedagogical role to play in the introduction and inculturation of the Christian message on the continent and among Africans anywhere in the world.

Again, in his theology of African religion, Mbiti began with the question of whether we should use the term “African Traditional Religion” or “ATR” in the plural or in the singular. He followed this up with his treatise on the African sense of time to establish African metaphysical knowledge and sense of eschatology vis-à-vis Christian beliefs.

In the first edition of his *African Religions and Philosophy*, Mbiti had favored the use of ATR in the plural. He reasoned that there is no evidence of a common origin or rather of a historic movement in the development of African religion. “Every member grows assimilating whatever ideas and practices that are held in his/her family and community. Besides, African religions have no founders or reformers, so that the beliefs among the different communities would differ greatly especially as each group would incorporate its national heroes.”⁴

However, Mbiti later modified his position in preface to the second edition of *African Religions and Philosophy*. Thus, he writes:

In the first edition I spoke of “African religions” in the plural to keep alive the diversity of African religiosity. Since then I have felt the need to emphasize also the commonalities and potential unity (not uniformity) within this diversity. Consequently, in lectures and other publications, **I now use the singular, “African religion,” more than the plural expression.**⁵

This means, on one hand, that “ATRs” (plural) may be used since there are no officially accepted common doctrines as there are in religions with historic

⁴ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (1969), 1-2.

⁵ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (1989), xiii.

founders and dogmas. On the other hand, there is the common denominator of beliefs and practices among Africans that would warrant the use of ATR in the singular.

The latter opinion is the position of the African Catholic Bishops at the Synod of Bishops for Africa, which took place in Rome in 1994. The *Instrumentum Laboris* (Working Document of the African Synod), states that there are sufficient common features in the practice of the religion to justify its usage in the singular.⁶

In addition, Mbiti agreed with most of his contemporaries such as Bolaji Idowu and Stephen Ezeanya, among others, who had argued strongly in the favor of the use of African names for God in the biblical translation of the name of God into African languages.

Idowu had argued alongside Mbiti, that the concept of God and the names given to Him, for example, are not only common across the entire continent, but one finds that He goes with the same or similar names over wide areas of Africa. Idowu added that many translations of the African's names for God suggest that God is the Creator, the Almighty in heaven. Since the real cohesive factor of religion in Africa is the living God, and without this factor, all things would fall to pieces, "it is on this identical factor that we can speak of African Traditional Religion in the singular."⁷

In the same vein, Stephen Ezeanya argues from the perspective of African (Igbo) attributes to God which are often expressed in the names which they give to their children. We therefore have these examples: "*Chukwunwendu*" (God owns life), "*Chukwuma*" (God knows), "*Chukwukodinaka*" (everything is in God's hands), "*Chukwubundum*" (God is my life), "*Ifeanyi-chukwu*" (nothing is impossible to God), "*Chukwukelu*" (God created), "*Chukwubuike*" (God is strength), etc. Underneath these names with "*Chukwu*" as the substantive noun, is the predicate and desire for life rooted in the benevolence of the same "*Chukwu*."⁸

⁶ *Instrumentum Laboris*, Synod of Bishops for Africa, nos. 101-102 (Rome, 1994).

⁷ E. Bolaji Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1973).

⁸ S. N. Ezeanya, *A Handbook of Igbo Christian Names*, 2nd ed. (Onitsha, Nigeria: Trinitas Publications, 1994).

Furthermore, there is Mbiti's treatise on the African concept of time. His phenomenological interpretation of the African concept of time is one aspect of his theology to have received the most severe criticisms not only from outsiders, but especially from African scholars. Mbiti was seen by most of his critics of misrepresenting the concept of the future in African time. While highlighting the past and the present that are concrete concepts in African time, Mbiti described the future in the African sense of time as something virtual since the event had not yet taken place.

Be that as it may, the fact remains that none of the critics had produced anything concrete that was comparable to the pioneering work of Mbiti on the subject. Moreover, Mbiti himself was a storyteller. In Africa, it is often said that "a story tells us about the past, supports us in the present, and prepares us for the future." Mbiti's interpretation of African time with the Swahili word *Zamani* was another way he could describe the African concept of time as the memory of the past and the memory of the future, happening in the present.

More significantly, Mbiti's African concept of time was a big warning to all those who, like Hegel, denied that Africans had the capacity for the metaphysical and eschatological realm of human knowledge and philosophical thought. The African sense of time involves a promise and tells us we should not move forward without looking back. Moreover, "since African memory is future-oriented, we look back to the past, to the myth of our ancestors for the sake of the future and future generations."

Mbiti's Perspective on the New Southward Shift in the Global Christian Landscape

Mbiti is a seminal voice on the new southward shift in the global Christian landscape. On this most important topic, Mbiti's greatest contribution was his call for "North-South mutual theological dialogue through 'theological pilgrimage.'"

Speaking always from his African perspective, Mbiti proposed what he called "theological pilgrimage" on the part of European theologians into the African wells of theological scholarship and people's daily struggle for survival. Rhetorically, he asked Western colleagues and theologians, the following questions:

We have eaten with you your theology. Are you prepared to eat with us our theology? ... The question is, do you know us theologically? Would you like to know us theologically? Can you know us theologically? And how can there be true theological reciprocity and mutuality, if only one side knows the other fairly well, while the other side either does not know or does not want to know the first side?

Continuing, Mbiti said:

You have become a major subconscious part of our theologizing, and we are privileged to be so involved in you through the fellowship we share in Christ. When will you make us part of your subconscious process of theologizing? How can the rich theological heritage of Europe and America become the heritage of the universal church on the basis of mutuality and reciprocity?⁹

Like most other African and Third World theologians, Mbiti saw this new southward shift as a sign that Christianity was really becoming the world religion that it was meant to be. But Mbiti was quick to add that the southward shift in the Christian landscape presented us with two realities that were in sharp contrast, almost in contradiction.¹⁰

While, on the one hand, the church has become universal in a literal, geographical sense, thanks to the great missionary movement of the last 200 years, on the other, theological outreach has not matched this expansion. For Mbiti, this was a serious dilemma, and if we do not resolve it, it will destroy our foundation as the Church in the world.

Thus, he suggested that as the Church becomes global, as it affirms the universality for which God's dispersal of history has destined it, theology must strain its neck to see beyond the horizon of our traditional structures, beyond the comforts of our ready-made methodologies of theologizing. For Mbiti, this meant that, "Our theology should be with the church where it is, rubbing shoulders

⁹ Mbiti, "Theological Impotence and Universality of the Church" in G. Anderson & T. Stransky (eds.), *Mission Trends No. 3: Third World Theologies*, (1976), 17.

¹⁰ Mbiti, "Theological Impotence and Universality of the Church" 6-18.

with human beings whose conditions, concerns, and worldviews are not those with which we are familiar.”

Furthermore, Mbiti suggested that the dichotomy between older and younger churches, between Western Christianity and the Christianity of the southern continents, was a real one, but it was also a false dichotomy. We can overcome this false dichotomy if we really want to. The background for overcoming it, according to Mbiti, lies in our preparedness to embark on theological pilgrimages.

Theologians from the new (young) churches have made their pilgrimages to the theological learning of older churches. They had no alternative. But it has been, in a sense, one-sided theology. Therefore, the new southward shift in Christianity challenges us to embark on a pilgrimage of true theological reciprocity and mutuality. Because, as it is now, it is only one side that knows the other side fairly well, while the other side either does not know or does not want to know the first side.

Mbiti concludes, thus:

There cannot be theological conversation or dialogue between North and South, East and West, until we can embrace each other's concerns and stretch to each other's horizons. Theologians from the southern continents believe that they know about most of the constantly changing concerns of older Christendom. They would also like their counterparts from the older Christendom to come to know about their concerns of human survival.¹¹

Mbiti left us with this legacy of “theological pilgrimage” as a viable step towards confronting the dichotomy between the older and younger churches, between the “West and the Rest of Us.”¹²

Mbiti's theory of “theological pilgrimage and mutual reciprocity” is a gem. It challenges the emerging new emphasis on “interculturality” as a new missiological language in Western theology. In the first place, “interculturality” and “inculturation” are not the same thing, and ultimately, they don't have the same theological origins and goal in the missiological sciences. Therefore, for

¹¹ Mbiti, “Theological Impotence and Universality of the Church” 17.

¹² Apologies to Chinwizu.

someone to suggest that interculturality should replace the theology of inculturation in Western missiology portrays a great betrayal of the basic differences between the two terms.

In the first place, inculturation has the mystery of the incarnation of Jesus Christ in human flesh and cultures as its theological basis. Inculturation theology is therefore about the meeting between the Gospel and the culture of a people in a determined context. It is a **theological reflection on the “mystery”**—a symbiosis that occurs whenever the Gospel meets any human culture through proclamation and the Church’s **missionary activities**. Inculturation, therefore, will always remain valid as an important aspect of evangelization.

Interculturality, on the other hand, does not concern itself with the same encounter between the Gospel and cultures as such. Rather, it privileges a dialogue between two or more cultures – that is, among different groups and races, in a divisive manner – a replica of the era of theologies of **“Multi-racialism”** or **“Multi-culturalism,”** with their hidden seeds of preserving racial classification of humanity.

This is why one must be wary about the emerging concept of interculturality because it **“assumes in the first instance, that people are going to be arranged in different compartments based on colors (or cultures) – Europeans in one compartment, Asians and colored in second compartments, and Africans in another compartment.”**

The fact is that as soon as we accept interculturality as a new missiological language, basically we are accepting as a starting-point that cultures are not only different but that some cultures are classical and scientific, while others are demonic, primitive, or at best underdeveloped, and that these differences must be recognized. This is what happened with the old theories of multi-racialism or multi-culturalism.

This error is, actually, what Mbiti’s proposed **“theological pilgrimage, mutuality and reciprocity,”** intended to correct in our theological languages and ways of relating one to another as peoples of diverse cultures. His view was that our theological approach should be such that we should regard an individual as an individual. Everybody must be accorded his or her full rights, theologically, religiously, culturally, politically, economically, etc. This is regardless of whether one is European, African, Asian, Latin American, rich or poor or whether one is educated or not.

The concept of “theological pilgrimage,” in my estimation, is one of Mbiti’s greatest legacies to contemporary global theology and the world.

Conclusion

The news of Prof. Mbiti’s death at this critical time in the history of African Christian theology is received with mixed-feelings of gratitude and sadness. Yes, gratitude to God who blessed Africa with such an intellectual giant, a groundbreaking theologian. Gratitude also to Mbiti for allowing himself to be used by God to restore the wounded dignity of the African people through his intellectual work and publications.

Sadness, however, because, in the last few years alone, Africa has bid a final farewell to the finest minds in Mbiti’s generation of pioneers in African theology and African philosophy. The present generation of young Africans do not appear as interested in upholding the veritable intellectual tradition and treasure left behind by these pioneer African theologians. The majority among the emerging new crop of young Africans love robotic and artificial knowledge more than intellectual scholarship – due to the influence of social media. This is too sad a development!

This is why we mourn, with hearts full of sorrow, the disappearance of the greatest of pioneer African theologians, John S. Mbiti. That today we can speak with dignity and a sense of pride of the African ancestral religious heritage as Christians without fear of contradiction, is thanks to the pioneering works of Mbiti and his contemporaries. Mbiti baptized and Christianized the ancestral religion of African people. He rehabilitated African Traditional Religion and made it come alive, years after the colonial onslaught against the African religion.

Dear Prof. Mbiti, now that you have gone on to the World Beyond, and are now in communion with the saints in heaven, please greet all our other great ancestors of African theology and philosophy. Tell them we need their prayers, ancestral spiritual inspiration, and guidance, so that we may be true witnesses to their legacy, and be alive to the challenges of our time as Africans and as theologians.

Adieu, Great Teacher of African religious heritage and theology, Prof. John S. Mbiti. May the Angels of God welcome you into a better home in heaven! Amen!

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This article, received in 2019, was written by Francis Anekwe Oborji, a Roman Catholic Priest who lives in Rome where he is professor of Missiology at the Pontifical Urbaniana University.

African Christian Biography Serialized: Stories My Grannies Never Told Me: Memory and Orality in the Narrative of African Christian History¹³

By Stan Chu Ilo

An encounter with a professor that occurred while I was a doctoral student more than eight years ago motivated a deep interest in me regarding the place of oral communication in the writing of African Christian history. In a particular course I had an African classmate who was very bright and active in class discussion. The course dealt with a Western theologian on the study of whom my classmate had devoted much time and energy. Whenever he wrote an essay, however, he received low grades. He invited me to accompany him as a witness when he went to see the course professor to find out why he was not getting what he thought should be a good grade. When we met together, the professor explained to my friend that the reason he was doing well in class discussion was that he came from a memorial culture.¹⁴ But according to the professor, my classmate was not properly communicating his thoughts in writing because of limitations in translating his verbal discourse into text. My friend was furious about what he thought was a racist comment and I remember having to calm him down.

Without going into the details of what happened subsequently, this incident was the beginning of my search into what “memorial culture” and “oral culture” meant for me as an African and into whether what this professor had said was in fact true. I sought first of all to understand what memorial culture meant in the classical world (especially within Greek, Hebrew, and Roman societies) and in African societies. My investigation led me to study Aristotle’s analysis of language and communication in his *Rhetoric* and to delve into Plato’s

¹³ Reprinted from *African Christian Biography: Stories, Lives, and Challenges*, ed. by Dana L. Robert (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2018), 34-49.

¹⁴ As used in this essay, the term “memorial culture” refers to cultural groups in which oral tradition is the predominant means for preserving and transmitting cultural knowledge. In such cultures, memory becomes the central medium for documenting the cultural knowledge, artifacts, and symbols that, in turn, are transmitted through oral communication. Oral traditions are by nature memorial cultures.

Meno and *Phaedrus* as well as to pursue Augustine's rich writings on memory and semiotics, especially in *On Christian Doctrine*, *The Teacher*, and *Confessions*. I also decided for my doctoral thesis, on African ancestral traditions, to do ethnographic research by means of oral interviews. At the same time, I took a specialized African studies course that focused on the transmission of cultural knowledge, artifacts, and symbols in Africa—and on their transformation and retention as collective memory in multiple oral forms.

What struck me most was that in most classical cultures the development of literary traditions and the documentation of history through writing did not in any way vitiate the place of memory nor was rhetoric restricted to literacy and textuality. Rather, speech and memory had rich diversity and were performative in themselves as intentional modes for the communication of meaning, history, and knowledge beyond what is documented in a text. Thus, while a discourse or narrative might be rendered in proper grammar and transmitted via conventional textual forms, what is understood, whether by an audience or by receptor traditions, has a life of its own. What is conveyed has richer meaning and truth that goes beyond what is housed in any literary form.

This realization inspired me to search for the way or ways that oral communication really works among Africans, if indeed the claim is true that orality is a handmaid of memory and that memory is housed in orality prior to and beyond its retention in literary form. I was led to raise the questions: What is the relationship between orality and memory in the writing of the biography of individual Christians? How does the writing of the biography of an individual African Christian become, properly speaking, a genuine effort at writing African Christian history? A preliminary conclusion I formed, among others, is that preventing historical erasures or the loss of cultural memory in African Christianity is one of the significant impacts of the *DACB*. The *DACB*, in fact, finds itself to be a continuation of the development that sees African history being written through African literature—something that has blossomed with the vigorous stream that has emerged since the 1950s of novels, poems, and anthologies of stories and proverbs by African authors.

My choice of the topic "Stories My Grannies Never Told Me" was informed by my family history. I did not know my maternal and paternal grandparents. My grandfather died during the civil war in Nigeria (1967–70), before I was born. My grandmother never converted to Christianity and was never comfortable sharing our tribal history or the stories of our ancestors with

us. The history that I know of my ancestry does not go beyond what my parents told me and what I learned from the elders of the Achi clan in Eastern Nigeria. So I do not have access to a very distant collective memory of my ancestral past. This personal limitation is also true for Christian history in my part of the world. The Christian history I learned while studying in Europe and North America, before beginning serious personal search for the roots of my African Christian faith, was the history of what Catholic missionaries had done in Igbo land. It consisted largely of accounts of the courage and heroism of expatriates such as Bishop Shanahan, Fr. Fox, and Bishop Charles Heerey.

Given the scenario presented thus far, the importance of stories in conveying the meaning of the past becomes crucial. If memory is not only an instrument for exploring the past but also a “medium” for the past (as Walter Benjamin argues), then the challenge for me in seeking to tell the story of my people and their faith journey as Christians is formidable, for I have only limited access to the memory of my people.¹⁵ Limitations of access to the communal memory bank pose a fundamental challenge for any modern theologian in Africa. The epistemological privilege accorded to a historical account of Christianity that was consciously promoted in mainstream Christian schools of the North makes the challenge even more complex for Africans.

Christianity was presented to us as endogenous to cultural and civilizational currents in the West. Religious history and stories of the sacred in Africa prior to the entrance there of Western missionaries either were presented negatively or simply were passed over in silence. Our ancestors—such as our grandparents and great grandparents who had some traces of this memory—either were dead by the time we were born in postcolonial Africa or were simply swept aside by the cultural currents that were already redefining the canons of history, the map of the universe, and the limits and boundaries of what should be considered useful knowledge versus negative history. The tales of the grannies in Africa—brought forth from the rich memories of their African spiritual heritage, Christian or traditional—were then seen not as narratives of belonging that could be put to use in the construction and reconstruction of being and

¹⁵. See Walter Benjamin, “Excavation and Memory,” *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, 1927–1934, trans. Rodney Livingstone, ed. Marcus Paul Bullock, Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, Harvard Univ. Press, 2005), 2:576.

meaning in Africa, but merely as a celebration of some historical relics, useful for feeding the fancies of young Africans in order to show them “how it used to be in the past.” So folktales, proverbs, legends, myths of origins, religious history, and African spiritual traditions were not presented to us as sources of validation for our beliefs and for meeting the exigencies of present history. Rather, they were served to young Africans as a scattered patchwork, remnants from the past to be kept as past since they belonged to negative, bypassed, and uncivilized notions of God, life, world, society, cosmos, and so forth.

In the same vein, the stories of the contributions of Africans such as Majola Agbebi, Ajayi Crowther, Wadé Harris, Garrick Braide, James Johnson, Chief Onyema na Eke, Edward Blyden, and others to the shaping of the nature of the Christian mission in Africa and the success of the modern Christian mission on the continent were not presented to us either at home or in the schools and churches. Young postcolonial and post-Vatican II African theologians like myself continue even today to search for the roots of African Christian history. Our desire is to go beyond the normative reading of African Christian history as an account of Western missionary activities on the continent together with those activities’ successful or limited outcomes. For us, the *DACB* is an answer to our thirst to hear the stories of the Christian enterprise in Africa told through the lives of African Christians, expressed using African methods, and heard through the voices of Africans themselves. The wealth of *DACB* narratives has been enriched by contributions from many non-Africans who are convinced that the story of World Christian history is incomplete if it does not acknowledge, respect, and mine the rich contributions that Africa and Africans have made to Christian history in the past and are currently making in our times and as we move into the future.

In this paper I focus on two tasks, offering here only a suggestion of a third. The first of these is to highlight the importance of narrative and biography for the writing of African Christian history. I develop this aspect by looking at the writing of African Christian history through biographies as a subset of the African literary tradition of storytelling and oral communication as communal event. My second aim is to underscore the importance of biography as a narrative of the actual faith of African Christians, which is central to the mission of God in Africa. I develop this facet through biblical theological analysis of some of the principles at work in the collection and formation of the biblical canon. A third task, only adumbrated at the end of this essay, would show ways that the biblical

materials, as they passed from oral to written tradition in the development of the biblical canon, offer principles that can be seen to be already at work in the development of the *DACB* and that can be helpful to the work of harvesting African Christian biographies. I conclude with a few suggestions for how one might go about the work of collecting the biographical data of our African Christian ancestors.

The Importance of Narrative in Writing African Christian History

Pope John Paul II is reputed to be the pope who canonized more saints than all his predecessors put together. At the beginning of the new millennium, he issued an appeal to local churches to identify and celebrate their own local witnesses of the faith. From a Catholic perspective, this invitation for local churches to celebrate their own saints (*Tertio millennio adveniente*, 37) stimulated a more conscious effort for the churches to recognize men and women in their local history who had fully lived Gospel values and who had modeled in their lives the priorities and practices of the Lord Jesus Christ. It was an invitation to enter into the stories of heroic witnesses to the power of God's grace in our ecclesial bodies. For me, this step constitutes the greatest shift in Catholicism's recognition of African Christianity.

If this continent, through her appropriation of specific African Christian traditions, could give rise to these heroes of faith, then it stands to reason that the experience of faith present in African Christian communities can validly be proposed as a medium for encountering Christ. It shows African Christianity as being capable of forming men and women who embody virtues and values that reflect the priorities and practices of the Lord Jesus. When viewed against the backdrop of the negative framing of African Christianity found in some past and current writings, the significance of this inculturation of saint-making in Catholicism becomes evident.

The *DACB*, while not hagiographic in its documentation of African saints, gives strong testimony to the depth and strength of African Christianity. The stories it contains give evidence of men and women who have borne witness to God, church, society, and their local communities in fidelity to the message of the Gospel. The *DACB* is 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, and is analogous to a continuing account of the Acts of the Apostles.

Like the Acts of the Apostles, the *DACB* is transmitting the mighty works of God in Africa and from Africa to the rest of the world through the biographies of African witnesses to the faith. The stories reveal the footprints of God in African history. They challenge us to model ourselves after the example provided by these African Christian ancestors and to work hard in our times, using the resources available to us to build on what they have done, while all the time drawing inspiration from the Holy Spirit. The *DACB* opens new pathways and avenues in the writing of African Christian history. The essential point for me at this juncture is the communication of the love of God and God's mighty deeds in Africa through narration. The importance of this beautiful task can well be demonstrated by considering the challenges involved in documenting African history in general.

How has history been documented in Africa? Especially, what has been the role of literature, of which the *DACB* is a subset, in documenting African history? In 1998 in his famous McMillan-Stewart Lectures at Harvard University, the late Chinua Achebe, Africa's foremost novelist, spoke of the "balance of stories" when it comes to writing about Africa.¹⁶ Achebe wrote that those who never learn how to write their own story will be condemned to live the story and images of themselves created by others. He also looked, however, toward a new world where we will be able to see each other's stories as interconnected.

It is not true that my history is only in my heart; it is indeed there, but it is also in that dusty road in my town, and in every villager, living and dead, who has ever walked on it. It is in my country too; in my continent and, yes, in the world. That dusty little road is my link to all the other destinations. To ask everybody to shut down their history, pack their bag and buy a one-way ticket to Europe or America is just crazy, to my way of thinking.¹⁷

¹⁶. This essay inspired the now even more famous TED presentation by Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie on the danger of a single story; see "The Danger of a Single Story," TEDGlobal, 2009,

www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story.

¹⁷. Chinua Achebe, *Home and Exile* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2003), 91.

In my encounters with fellow Africans as well as non-Africans, I am increasingly convinced that the African continent is burdened by what V. Y. Mudimbe calls the “invention of Africa.”¹⁸ It does not matter whether one’s image of Africa is negative or positive or a little in-between. What is important is to examine all that one has ever known about Africa and to refine one’s insight based on new information or on reinterpretation of that story when it proves to be inadequate and biased. We need to dig deeper and to go beyond generalizations and stereotypes, real or imagined. For this reason I call my own approach to African studies a “total picture method.” This theory simply states that any aspect of African history or the African condition reveals important and significant insights about Africa as a whole; at the same time, each challenge or facet of African history can be understood only in the light of the whole of African reality. I read African history seeking for intersections, connections, and hidden treasures in both ordinary and extraordinary social experiences as well as in the cross-cultural and intercultural forces found in African history.

If one enters fully into the high cultural context and noetic value of African history, some rich dimension can always be found in its narrative. Along with taking humble account of internal and external cultural forces, this approach pays attention to the diversity found within particular elements and local instantiations of the so-called African predicament. Every aspect of African reality can be scrutinized and evaluated from the vantage point of every other aspect of African reality; therefore, the story of any particular African Christian sheds light on multiple aspects of African history and on the path of any genuine search for the footprints of God in Africa.

In no place does the “invention” of Africa play out more prominently than in present narratives of the Christian religion and its peregrinations in the continent. Hackneyed phrases such as “Africa is the new homeland of Christ,” “Africa is the heartland of Christianity,” “Africans are incurably religious,” “African notions of God . . .,” and “Africa is a continent of Ubuntu and Sankofa” are too rarely critiqued by Africans themselves. And too often when those outside the continent challenge such claims, openness to dialogue is lacking. Heavy categories such as these—with their multiple meanings and interpretations—

¹⁸ V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1988).

continue to shape the lens through which many see the movement of the Spirit in African Christian history. At times they descend to the level of slogans that gloss over serious social, economic, theological, cultural, and political challenges facing Africa. When that happens, they work against local voices and the ingenuity of local processes midwived through local communities, local knowledge, and local memory and performance. Some African scholars show themselves to be insufficiently self-critical as to what traditions have endured, what cultural traces remain, and what new roads are opening for engaging, interpreting, judging, and evaluating African Christianity.

In this vein, as Godfrey Brown has noted,

History may be a matter of words and shards carefully dusted in libraries and museums in Europe; in Africa it is a living environment. Indeed the shortage of written documentation which is likely to be characteristic of some areas of African history and which is a curse for the historian can be a blessing for the history teacher.¹⁹

The biography of an African Christian opens up the living environment of faith from which the individual grew. In doing so it sheds light on new and unexplored roads to be followed that lead beyond documenting simply the life of some particular individual. As Ogbu Kalu argues, African history is

a means of transmitting and preserving culture, an instrument for organizing and interpreting collective and individual experiences so as to provide understanding of the present and a guide for the future. It [is] a means of providing political education and leadership elites. . . . It [serves] as a means of promoting understanding and respect for the institutions and practices of the

¹⁹. Godfrey N. Brown, "The Place of African History in Education in Africa," in *Africa in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, ed. Joseph C. Anene and Godfrey Brown (Ibadan, Nigeria: Univ. of Ibadan Press, 1967), 7.

community. The court historians [combine] oratory with historical expertise.²⁰

Kalu draws attention to three contending patterns that appear in written African Christian history: the institutional model, the missionary model, and the native agents model. For my purposes, I focus here on Kalu's institutional model, which assumes that church history begins only with the arrival of a missionary. "From that point, church history reconstructs the vertical and horizontal growth of the institution, the pattern of responses, and the impact of the change-agent on the community."²¹ Among other problems, this approach ignores the past spiritual heritage found in particular contexts of faith; it neglects and sometimes demonizes local processes in the translation of the faith.

As Kalu strongly argues about African Christianity, when the church is idealized as the bearer of salvation, a dichotomy is created between the people and the church as an institution. Furthermore, institutional history has tended to promote denominationalism, as African Christians have been forced to see themselves not as African Christians but as "products of warring confessional groups" from the West.²² In contrast, Kalu has well proposed that "church history is about the understanding of God's activity among the poor and their responses to the presence of the kingdom in their midst. It is a people's history of their perception of God's saving grace in the midst of their struggles for survival."²³

In writing African Christian history, the *DACB* is an attempt to counter the impulse to give institutions priority. The approach followed by the *DACB* is more in line with the New Testament tradition in which everyone—but especially the poor and the weak—is invited into God's kingdom and to belong fully to the family of God as God's own people. Further, everyone is also invited to play a part in telling the stories of the great works of God in history. In regard to the formation of the New Testament writings, Werner Kelber observes that the early Christian communities were of such character that oral transmission of

²⁰. Ogbu U. Kalu, "Introduction: The Shape and Flow of African Church Historiography," in *African Christianity: An African Story*, ed. Ogbu U. Kalu (Trenton, NJ: African World, 2007), 11.

²¹. Kalu, "Introduction," 12.

²². Kalu, "Introduction," 13.

²³. Kalu, "Introduction," 14.

the traditions flourished beyond textuality. The early Christians lived a rootless life, they embraced the ethical radicalism of poverty and homelessness, they were often persecuted, they lived on the margins of society, and they lived a migratory existence and possessed a social identification that was different from that of the mainstream. The early church embraced the message of Jesus not because it was written down, but because what Jesus said and did resonated profoundly with their daily lives. For them, oral proclamation was retained not in text, but through the life of the community.²⁴ Is this not what we see today in African Christianity where, despite the challenging social conditions of many African Christians, people are witnessing to the faith in heroic ways and telling the stories of God's great deeds in their everyday reality?

African scholarship has emphasized the importance in Africa of orality and storytelling as media of communication, especially in the development of African literature and oratory. In arguing for the significance of African literature in the writing of African history, Abiola Irele asserts "the dominance of orality in the cultural environment of African expression." He goes on to address

the relevance of orality not only to a general understanding of the processes involved in human communication but also, and in particular, to [formulation of] an all-encompassing idea of imaginative expression, one that would point toward a universal concept of literature.²⁵

Irele's sweeping perspective reinforces the contention of Kalu and Brown that in Africa, oral tradition cannot be dismissed. Rather, oral tradition continues to flourish there because of the high cultural context of Africa, which furnishes what Irele calls "a more flexible principle of textuality" and an impermanence of text due to "a built-in principle of instability." Texts, he states, are embedded in memory as multiple forms of "imaginative expression" that are

²⁴. Werner H. Kelber, *The Oral and the Written Gospel: The Hermeneutics of Speaking and Writing in the Synoptic Tradition, Mark, Paul, and Q* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 24–25.

²⁵. Abiola Irele, "Orality, Literacy, and African Literature," in *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory*, ed. Tejumola Olaniyan and Ato Quayson (Malden, MD: Blackwell, 2013), 75.

experienced “as the outline of a verbal structure and as reference points for the development of ideas and images, as suggestive signposts in the narrative or prosodic movement of discourse that is still in the future.”²⁶ Despite the emergence of textual documentation, oral communication remains the commonest means of communication in Africa and is still the most important channel for the transmission of history. Irele adduces the following reasons why this is so: first, “the oral text is almost never fully determined beforehand, given once and for all as is the case in written literature”; second, “an oral text is actualized in oral performance and is thus open and mobile” and can be given new meaning, just as “the verbal content of a written work is perpetually recreated, modified as the occasion demands, and given a new accent” by different hearers and performers.²⁷

Text, Context, and Pre-text

Some of Paul Ricoeur’s reflections, when placed in juxtaposition with elements of the African literary tradition as explicated by Irele, are helpful for exploring further what happens when an individual’s biography either is put into textual language or is celebrated in the collective memory of the group. My special concern in what follows is with the African ancestors, individuals who have died, and the importance of narrative as a cultural tool for writing African Christian history.

The narrative of an individual biography, I contend, involves three related components: *text* (the story—either written or communicated orally, but of someone, for example, of an African Christian ancestor); *context* (the community—whether a community of faith or non-faith, it is the place of interaction with the other and with the cosmos, nature, and the spiritual or non-spiritual world); and *pre-text* (the lived experience of the community that precedes the life of the individual whose biography is being written). An individual biography then becomes a text that can only be understood through the context

²⁶. Irele, “Orality, Literacy, and African Literature,” 75.

²⁷. Irele, “Orality, Literacy, and African Literature,” 80.

and the pre-text of the community in which the individual's text or story is embedded.²⁸

In "The Narrative Function," Paul Ricoeur draws attention to three important claims, ones that he develops further in many of his other writings. I have appropriated his theses as a way of elaborating the dynamic role of narration, for they illumine the importance of the tripartite dimensions of biographical writing—text, context, and pre-text. The first is *the importance of the interplay between narration and the environment of the narration*. Being able to write the biography of an African ancestor begins with developing the right tools for reading (explaining and interpreting) some events in the past and making connections between those past events and the ways they continue into the present. These steps require the writer to enter into the history of the individual and the context in which the individual grew. The success of such immersion, Ricoeur proposes, depends on "*our ability to follow a story*."²⁹ But *following a story* is not simply a function of chronology, in which one would recount the developments of a person's life from birth to death following the sequence in which they occurred. Narration, according to Ricoeur, contains another dimension as well, for,

the activity of narrating does not consist simply in adding episodes to one another; it also constructs meaningful totalities out of scattered events. This aspect of the art of narrating is reflected, on the side of *following a story*, in the attempt to "grasp together" successive events. The art of narrating, as well as the corresponding art of *following a story*, therefore require that we are able *to extract a configuration from a succession*.³⁰

²⁸. See Stan Chu Ilo and Gunda Werner, "Identity within Identities: Communicative Theology through Biography," in *Anders gemeinsam—gemeinsam anders? In Ambivalenzen lebendig kommunizieren*, ed. Maria Juen (Hergestell, Germany: Matthias Grunewald, 2015), 152–53.

²⁹. Paul Ricoeur, "The Narrative Function," in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action, and Interpretation*, trans. and ed. John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1981), 278.

³⁰. Ricoeur, "Narrative Function," 278.

Following a story entails a succession of activities and an immersion into the world, including the ecclesial and social contexts, of the person whose life is being documented. In this light, to write a biography is to bring together different layers of meaning; the biographer must reflect on multiple events with, as Ricoeur proposes, the aim of “encompassing them in successive totalities.”³¹ *DACB* writers, for example, are to be encouraged to see the art of the documentation of their biographies as a configuration of multiple layers of events, words, and deeds. Borrowing a phrase from Walter Benjamin, “a lot of digging beyond the surface” is required. The process may involve going through multiple sources—community (context) as well as worldview and social facts (pre-text)—and then returning to the same matter

to scatter it as one scatters earth, to turn it over as one turns over soil. For the “the matter itself” is no more than the strata which yield their long-sought secrets only to the most meticulous investigation.³²

The second point is that *the story of a person’s life is not completed simply through textual documentation*. What is documented belongs to the community as much as to the person whose biography is written. What is documented is also an open book that continues to grow, because it is part of the communicative process that makes and upholds the community in its historicity. The individual biography that is written grows out of the context of communal history, for, as Ricoeur notes, “we belong to history before telling stories or writing history. The game of telling is included in the reality told.”³³ As Ricoeur argues, the writing of an individual’s story gathers together many streams and fragments of untold stories, random events that all come together in presenting an intelligible portrait of the person or “hero.” Acknowledging this fact takes into account the temporal distance that separates the documentarist from the event or the life of the person.³⁴

³¹. Ricoeur, “Narrative Function,” 279.

³². Benjamin, “Excavation and Memory,” 576.

³³. Ricoeur, “Narrative Function,” 294.

³⁴. Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative III*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: Chicago Univ. Press, 1990), 167, 181. See also Henry Isaac Venema,

The third point is that *a text that has been produced—and through which an African Christian ancestor comes alive in a new way—grows beyond the text*. A text acquires an independent life that reaches out and encompasses more than the piece of writing that was produced in its creation. But what is a text? For Ricoeur, “a text is any discourse fixed by writing. . . . Fixation by writing is constitutive of the text itself.”³⁵ He makes clear that the text takes the place of speech; it takes the place of the oral communicator in dialogue with his or her audience. At the same time, the text opens a different type of dialogue among the text’s subsequent readers. Orality precedes literacy, but fixation in writing is not a new event of meaning. Nor does it surpass or nullify the value of speech; rather it “guarantees the persistence of speech.”³⁶

For Ricoeur, writing takes the place of speech and liberates discourse from the oral situation, but this preservation in textual form also sets off multiple levels of “veritable upheaval in the relations between language and the world, as well as in the relation between language and the various subjectivities concerned (that of the author and that of the reader).”³⁷ Therefore, the relation between text and oral tradition is dynamic. Ricoeur alludes to this dynamism when he holds that “the intention-to-say” is prior to writing, for it is this “intention-to-say” that is loaded in the dynamic collective memory of people.³⁸ Ricoeur’s claim that “writing preserves discourse and makes it an archive available for individual and collective memory” does not mean that writing exhausts the range of possibilities for documenting history or that it sets in stone the intelligibilities present in the history that precedes the text.³⁹ We must give due valence to other forms of historical storage such as, among others, works of arts, symbols, myths, drama, and fiction. Though writing may accomplish the “emancipation of the text from the oral situation,” as Ricoeur argues, there is no absolute text—rather, the text

Identifying Selfhood: Imagination, Narrative, and Hermeneutics in the Thought of Paul Ricoeur (Albany: State Univ. of New York Press, 2000), 56.

³⁵. Paul Ricoeur, “What Is a Text? Explanation and Understanding,” in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, 145.

³⁶. Ricoeur, “What Is a Text?,” 146.

³⁷. Ricoeur, “What Is a Text?,” 147.

³⁸. Ricoeur, “What Is a Text?,” 109.

³⁹. Ricoeur, “What Is a Text?,” 149.

must constantly return to the oral situation. In some instances the oral situation is the only collective archive available to people other than textual fixation.⁴⁰

Every narrative—whether it is written, spoken, or stored in collective memory—speaks of a reality. This reality is a history. This history is to be found “around” “the surroundings and the circumstantial milieu of discourse,” or what I prefer to call the “pre-text.” Every narrative text must return to the reality that gave birth to the discourse, the person, or the plot. In this “return,” the text, even though a fixed discourse, constantly “pours back into the universe” and becomes reconnected to the world, that is, the world mediated by meaning which encompasses both the context and pre-text of the life-story (text) that has been documented.⁴¹ In recent scholarship Dale Martin has pursued a similar line of argument concerning the life of the text by proposing that in reading the biblical text the Christian community are not to be simply passive receptors of the text. He debunks the myth of textual agency by arguing that the text is both a product of the community and a gift for the community that is to be received and interpreted. Martin’s conclusions apply also to the documentation or the reading of someone’s life.⁴²

We come back then to what I consider to be fundamental in Ricoeur and to be very useful for explicating my point about history’s lack of finality in textual documentation: that is, the importance of storytelling understood as communal participatory action and the need for ongoing renewal of the text (that is, the biography that is written). Communal participation and ongoing renewal are evident in (a) how the story emerges from participatory actions of the members of the community and flows back into the community, (b) how it renews the community through its referential and reconfigurational impact, (c) how it stimulates further conversation and conversion within the community through its referential function of explanation and interpretation, and (d) how it bridges the spatial distance between the past and present history. In Ricoeur’s words:

⁴⁰. Ricoeur, “What Is a Text?,” 147.

⁴¹. See Ricoeur, “What Is a Text?,” 148; the words Ricoeur quotes are from Gustave Guillaume.

⁴². Dale B. Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior: Gender and Sexuality in Biblical Interpretation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 1–16.

If reading is possible, it is indeed because the text is not closed in on itself but opens out onto other things. To read is, on any hypothesis, to conjoin a new discourse to the discourse of the text. This conjunction of discourses reveals, in the very constitution of the text, an original capacity for renewal which is its open character.⁴³

Recent scholarship in the social sciences has called attention to a shift of the epistemological center for the methodological canons regnant in the social sciences and religious studies, *with greater attention now being given to people's everyday practices*. Recent scholarship is showing that the text of an individual's life can be understood only within the larger context and pre-text in which that person is set. Thus writing the biography of an individual in Africa, for instance, will be a communal, cultural-historical, genetic project, for it brings together a network of meanings, traces of history, and residues of the past that is tied to particular communities and gives them freshness and new light. When received through oral tradition, as is often the case, biography uncovers and illumines regions of meaning embedded in forgotten history.

Therefore, to write African Christian history requires immersion in African Christian communities and familiarity with indigenous languages mediated through oral narratives. It also demands familiarity with the hidden cultural grammar that defines the intentionality of particular cultural texts, contexts, and pre-texts. Going further, those who would write African Christian history must attempt to make multiple connections: to the network of meanings that link individual witnesses in different contexts of faith in Africa, to the values of African religions and the African moral and spiritual universe, and to the ways those values are retained and expanded in the received patterns and emerging shape of African Christianity. The history of African Christianity will also be found to be a communal and participatory celebration of what is moving forward in history.

At this juncture lies a crucial difference between what the missionary historians accomplished in documenting African history and the kind of history being documented through the community contribution and African participatory practices in sharing and retelling the stories in the *DACB*. Emmanuel Obiechina has rightly pointed out that beginning from the late

⁴³. Ricoeur, "What Is a Text?," 158.

nineteenth century, missionaries were the main agents collecting African oral traditions—folktales, fables, myths, proverbs, riddles, and songs as well as historical fragments and their permanent recording in writing.⁴⁴ What was lacking, however, in the effort the missionaries expended and in the documentation they amassed was recognition of the participation of Africans themselves or acknowledgment of their contribution toward adapting African languages to Western scripts and what they contributed to the translation of the Bible and religious education books into African vernaculars.⁴⁵

Most missionary historiography did not record African community experience, nor did it aim to write African Christian history that focused on the contributions of African missionaries to their fellow Africans. As Ogbu Kalu argues, the history that came out of missionary historiography was limited and biased.

Missionary ideology tended to share the scientific racism of the nineteenth century. Thus, missionary historiography is often hagiographic, triumphalist, and disdainful of indigenous non-European cultures. As Peter Foster put it, a premium was put upon distortion and degradation of receiving cultures.⁴⁶

An additional sad aspect is the absence of the voices of women; as Obiechina has written, in the telling of stories, “women and children sit still and say nothing.”⁴⁷ Obiechina may be speaking from a specific African tribal context, for Mary E. Modupe Kolawole has provided historical evidence that in Central Sudan the role of grandmothers in storytelling is so dominant that grandmothers, *habboba*, are an institution. Therefore, if in some settings oral tradition demonized women through the use of proverbs, folktales, and legends, it is important in endeavors such as the *DACB* to show that in other settings women

⁴⁴. Emmanuel N. Obiechina, *Language and Theme: Essays on African Literature* (Washington, DC: Howard Univ. Press, 1990), 9.

⁴⁵. Obiechina, *Language and Theme*, 9.

⁴⁶. Kalu, “Introduction,” 14.

⁴⁷. Obiechina, *Language and Theme*, 14.

had a voice and to highlight their contribution through oral tradition and in history as a source of virtue.⁴⁸

Memory and the Narrative of African Christian Biographies

Many African historians argue strongly that understanding how oral traditions work in Africa is essential if one is to understand African history at all. Understanding oral tradition requires sympathetic and in-depth understanding of African discourse, especially the art of African storytelling. Ethnic groups in Africa, as Obiechina proposes, are narratophilic (storytelling) societies rather than logocentric (word-centered) societies. In a narratophilic or storytelling world, a portrait of life is built up by means of multiple stories that interconnect the moral and spiritual universe with the everyday practices of people. This portrait brings to the fore connections forged by shared participation and mutual interaction between, among others, spirit and nature, humans and nonhumans, God and humanity, the living and the dead, and humans and animals.⁴⁹ For example, with reference to the Igbo of Eastern Nigeria, Obiechina writes,

The Igbo have always remembered that they have a tree and their storytellers have always reminded them of the need to tend it. For them, stories are important because they are anchored in memory. For them, the story is eternal, it belongs in time but it has a timeless quality; its power to instruct, to remind, to renew, and to direct is not circumscribed by time. So that in their travels and through all vicissitudes of flux and change, they carry with them a memory instructed by their stories.⁵⁰

The persistence of stories in African culture is anchored in memory. So how does the community remember in Africa? It does so through the enactment

⁴⁸. Mary E. Modupe Kolawole, "Women's Oral Genres," in Olaniyan and Quayson, *African Literature*, 95.

⁴⁹. See Emmanuel Obiechina, *Nchetaka: The Story, Memory, and Continuity of Igbo Culture* (Owerri, Imo State, Nigeria: Culture Division, Ministry of Information, Culture, Youth, and Sports, 1994), 26.

⁵⁰. Obiechina, *Nchetaka*, 47.

of communal life broadly conceived; in turn, memory gives identity and form to the community. In African traditional society, memory is the storehouse of the worldview of the people; it is the repository for the great stories and great deeds from throughout the people's cultural and religious history. The stories reflect the people's beliefs and practices, spirituality and ethics. Memory furnishes the interpretive keys for understanding time and space. It is the key to understanding the future as well as the past and the present. Whether it is a question of cyclical time, temporal time, or what we might speak of as genealogical time, in African ontology and African Christian narrative the stream of consciousness that we find embedded in history can be understood only by entering into this memory bank. As also for members of the community at large, this memory bank permeates and is mediated through the lives of members of the community of faith.

The importance of oral tradition or the so-called "memorial culture" as a source of valid history has been challenged by the "hard school of history" which argues that "proper history must be reconstructed from written documentary sources of sufficient vintage and, therefore, sufficient distance from the events it is concerned with."⁵¹ The challenge of reconstructing valid history, however, can be met only by entering into the story of the past with humility and reverence—and with a willingness to utilize multiple conveyor belts of memory. We must deploy every tool possible to show that Africa's past—religious, political, economic, social, and spiritual—is not, in Achebe's words, "one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered [it]."⁵²

Christian Biography as Spiritual Pilgrimage

How then does the writing of a Christian biography become a pilgrimage—entry into a community's held-in-common spiritual memory and a sacred walk in a hallowed archive, one that offers a portrait of the mission of God active in one or another particular African Christian community?

⁵¹. G. N. Uzoigwe, "A Half Century of Historical Writing in Africa, 1950–2000," in *Emergent Themes and Methods in African Studies: Essays in Honor of Adiele E. Afigbo*, ed. Toyin Falola and Adam Paddock (Trenton, NJ: African World, 2009), 112.

⁵². Chinua Achebe, *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays* (New York: Anchor Books, 1990), 45.

Communicating God's Word in Africa requires paying close attention to ways that God continues to reveal the seed of God's Word in the lives of individuals who, in the economy of grace, in their own ways fully live the Gospel in the concrete history of Africa. This effort of close attention is taking place in many black communities throughout the world as people try to reclaim their own history. Henry Louis Gates argues strongly that it is only by telling their own stories and the stories of their heroes and heroines that communities—especially those on the margins—can reclaim a sense of dignity, healing, and restoration. For history to be restored, the stories from history must be recounted. The same steps are necessary if communities are to create new epistemic grounds for retrieving even fuller accounts of their history. It is in this sense that Gates proposes a narrative ethic: "I write myself, therefore I am."⁵³

One can argue that in writing theology, I am both writing myself and writing my community. Theology is both a biography of an individual and a prosopography of the community. In similar fashion, in writing a Christian biography I am—in addition to writing the life of the subject of the biography—also writing myself. The life of the person whose biography I write has family traits in common with my own life; we share our common vocation and our participation through faith, word, and deeds in the mission of God in history. This personal or subjective condition for believing and for communicating God's love in history is what the writer of 1 John meant when he wrote:

What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the Word of Life—and the life was manifested, and we have seen and testify and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was manifested to us—what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ. These things we write, so that our joy may be made complete. (1 John 1:1–4 NASB)

⁵³. See John Ernest, *Liberation Historiography: African American Writers and the Challenge of History, 1794–1861* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2004), 182.

So the biography of any Christian witness is a portrait of the faith and life of the community that shaped that person (though it in turn was shaped by antecedent Christian witness to the mission of God). In writing a biography, one is writing the history not only of an individual but also of a community and in this manner giving an account of the mission of God in history.

But the attempt to write African Christian history through biographies requires us to acknowledge the challenge we face. What, for instance, is the canon for inclusion or exclusion when we write the history of the Christian faith in Africa? Is a piece of literature “theological” or “Christian” because it grounds itself in the writings of the church fathers, in the teaching of the magisterium, or in proof-texting from the Bible—or because it appeals to important voices from the Western church? Who determines how particular histories of faith participate in the mission of God?

The response of the *DACB* to these questions is notably *counterhegemonic*. In the first place, in its account of God’s mission in Africa, the *DACB* gives voice to stories from the margins—local leaders, women, ordinary African Christians, and those whose heroic lives may have had no place within the small constellation of ecclesial stars. Church histories tend to be based on “official faith” and official accounts found in church records. Approval for inclusion in such histories is based on how faithfully the few Africans who do receive mention lived, as judged according to the standards of fidelity embraced by particular churches. Africans who have tried to live an African expression of the Christian faith have been omitted from missionary historiography, because Africanization of Christianity was not acceptable in the old map of church history. On this point the *DACB* offers a unique approach that goes beyond official faith and official church records to present accounts that are embedded in the actual faith of the people and that pay attention to an ecumenical vision of what God is doing in African Christian history.

The second striking point is the *openness* of the approach followed by the *DACB* that gives valence to the dynamic movement of Christian history in Africa. The approach followed by the *DACB* is breaking down walls, for it does not fit the previous categories, theological methods, or frameworks for writing Christian history found in any denomination in Africa. Third, the *DACB* recognizes that African Christian history is a *continuing acts of the apostles* with many surprises of the Holy Spirit. What African Christians consider important in the life of a Christian—what they celebrate as spiritual light and the irruption

of God's power in a person's life—may seem bizarre to non-Africans. In the documentation found in the *DACB*, however, the writers respect these new ways of witnessing. They give them place as valid expressions of a Christian faith whose peregrination in Africa requires humility on the part of all who seek to find the footprints of God in its history.

We could look also at ways that the creation of biblical theology and the formation of the biblical canon—for example, the way in which oral tradition precedes, accompanies, and validates the written tradition found in the New Testament—provide a guide and model, available to writers for the *DACB*, for the art of harvesting the stories of our African Christian ancestors. We could look also at the import orality, aurality, and performance have for the status of the written text, for fixation in textual form does not exhaust the meaning of the oral tradition. Exploration of these large topics, however, must await another occasion.

Conclusion

In this paper I have argued for the importance of both memory and narration in writing African Christian history by means of documenting the biographies of African Christian ancestors. I have proposed that in following the stories of these ancestors, *DACB* documentarists should pay attention to the larger communal context and pre-text of their lives. I also argued that these life texts or biographies are open books emerging from their communities even as they still belong to them.

In the religions and morality of most African ethnic groups, ancestral veneration and ancestral reading of history is at the heart of the plausibility-structure. The importance of this ancestral tradition has been preeminent in Christological reflections in Africa. The image of the ancestor in African Christian inculturation is widely interpreted as revealing the continuing presence of Christ in history and links the past to the present and the future in a concrete way. The biographies found in the *DACB* highlight the ancestral tradition as a hermeneutical key for understanding the movement of the Spirit in African Christian history.

I wish to conclude by stating that African theology is a narrative hermeneutics of African Christian history because it is consciously giving an

account of what is moving forward in history and is making a judgment as to how that forward movement relates to the realization of God's reign in Africa. In doing this, African theologies are giving account of God's continuing revelation in Christ under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit in the words and deeds of our ancestors. In order to harvest African Christian history through biographies, one must attend to the faith stories of actual African Christians. African ancestral interpretation of history retains, recapitulates, and presses forward by transforming the intimate connection between the past and the present as well as the future. In this way of thinking, history is neither cyclical nor linear; it is genetic.⁵⁴

My research on ancestral reading of history shows that four stages can be identified in the process of harvesting and documenting the words and deeds of African Christian witnesses into biographies. The first step deals with hermeneutical phenomenology by classifying and comparing the structures of religio-cultural traditions, rituals, beliefs, practices, and symbols—collected through the biographies of Christians. The second step is morphological phenomenology, which seeks to understand the essences, values, and meanings of religious symbols through interpretation, understanding, and evaluation of the data. It extends as well to the process of adding or removing data from stories of faith collected in the field related to the ancestor. These steps are concerned with the meaning of what is going on in history.⁵⁵ They concentrate on the religio-cultural elements as well as on the environment of faith. They give attention to participative communal involvement in the collection and narration of the stories. At the same time, they search for how the social context, streams of consciousness, internal logic, hidden rationality, and intentionality serve as symbols that offer explanatory accounts for social change, social tension, and limit situations—as well as aiding in exploration of the moral universe. In a sense, the steps found in this approach are an attempt at worldview analysis. Gathering

⁵⁴. The processes I have described are not unique to African Christian religion. As Dana L. Robert argues, Christianity is a multicultural religion, and understanding mission is about understanding cross-cultural mission as a central historical process in the formation of Christianity as a world religion. See Robert, *Christian Mission: How Christianity Became a World Religion* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 2–3.

⁵⁵. Walter L. Brennenman, Jr., *The Seeing Eye: Hermeneutical Phenomenology in the Study of Religion* (University Park: Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 1982), 15.

information for a biographical account is, thus, a starting point for following the multiple stories present in a community; the process helps to paint a portrait of faith's encounter with people's history.

The other two steps deal, first, with the way that Christian biographies act as a portrait of Christian history and of the Christian message as reflected in the movement of the Spirit in history and, second, with the narration of the mission of God in Africa. When we write the story of an African Christian ancestor, we are interpreting the place of faith in the history of Africa; at the same time, we are also narrating the history of the mission of God in Africa. The *DACB* shows that the story of a particular expression of the faith as made evident in the life of an individual reflects the intention of God to root God's great deeds in history and to do so through the multiple witnesses of people as lived out in the context of community.

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Preface:
The Life of Edward Francis Small of The Gambia

By Gabriel Leonard Allen

The following biography narrates the life and work of Edward Francis Small, O.B.E. (1891-1958), a local preacher of the Methodist Mission in The Gambia. Disturbed by the abject poverty and powerlessness of the vulnerable peoples at his mission station, Small felt compelled to preach, teach, and propagate a message of Christian liberation founded upon Wesleyan democratic traditions. Small's legitimate use of trade unionism, journalism, and politics provided invaluable tools for his evangelizing *praxis*.

Notable biographical accounts of Small's life exist, including David Perfect's thesis "Labor, Capital and ... and Politics in The Gambia, 1920-1984" (1987), Nana Grey-Johnson's *Edward Francis Small: Watchdog of The Gambia* (3rd Ed. 2013), and Jeggan C. Senghore's recent *The Very Reverend J. C. Faye: His Life and Times - A Biography* (2014). In this JACB edition, I have selected excerpts from chapters 3 to 7 of Grey-Johnson's work.⁵⁶ Grey-Johnson has indicated that this book represents one part of a related comprehensive historical work, *The Story of the Newspaper in The Gambia* (2004).

In the heat of World War I [1914-1918], African and European merchants of the Bathurst Trading Company (BTC) were conducting lucrative business in the British Protectorate of The Gambia. Profits arose principally through the ruthless exploitation of illiterate farmers in the groundnut trade and that of other agricultural commodities. In his evangelical work for the Methodist Mission in Ballangharr, Small emphasized the gospel *praxis* of both the Prophet Isaiah and Jesus Christ as his preferred agenda of mission:

⁵⁶ The author Nana Grey-Johnson is a prolific writer. Besides the two notable historical works mentioned in this Preface, the writer has attracted public acclaim for his light-hearted poetry (1975), plays (1989 & 2001), and novels (1987, 1995, 1998 & 1999). In 2013, Grey-Johnson served as the minister of Information and Communication Infrastructure of The Gambia. He is currently the Dean of the School of Journalism and Digital Media of the University of The Gambia (UTG).

The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. [Luke 4:18-19; cf. Isaiah 61:1, 2]

Small felt called and anointed to proclaim a Liberation Theology.⁵⁷ Being a passive conformer to the *status quo* was unacceptable. He chose, instead, to become a transformer, a living sacrifice in order to improve the lot of his people, spiritually and physically [cf. Romans 12:1-2]. When Small's trade union agenda disrupted the BTC traders' exploitation of local farmers, they were incensed. They conspired with the establishment to protect their profit margins. The "Ballangharr Incident" eventually led to Small's removal as a missionary.⁵⁸ Like many critical observers, Grey-Johnson disagrees with the reasons tendered by both state and church for his removal. He is convinced that Small was "fired for standing for the truth" (Chapter 5).

Thus began Small's second phase of mission—in trade unionism. His evangelical agenda of mission remained unchanged. He sought "to open eyes, unbind ears, heal diseases, and raise the sick." Beginning at Ballangharr in 1918, Small mobilized the powerless and founded the country's first trade union, the Gambia Farmers' Cooperative & Marketing Association (GFCMA).⁵⁹

In 1920, Small attended the inaugural National Congress of British West Africa (NCBWA) in Accra. Although he was an ordinary delegate representing the trade unions in The Gambia, he assumed the role of *de facto*

⁵⁷ [Http://www.gotquestions.org/liberation-theology.html](http://www.gotquestions.org/liberation-theology.html). (accessed August 15, 2017). "What is Liberation Theology? Simply put. Liberation theology is a movement that attempts to interpret Scripture through the plight of the poor. True followers of Jesus, according to liberation theology, must work toward a just society, bring about social and political change, and align themselves with the working class. Jesus who was poor Himself focused on the poor and downtrodden, and any legitimate church will give preference to those who have historically been marginalized or deprived of their rights. All church doctrine should grow out of the perspective of the poor. Defending the rights of the poor is seen as the central aspect of the gospel."

⁵⁸ Nana Grey-Johnson, *Edward Francis Small: Watchdog of The Gambia* (Banjul: Media & Development Specialists Publishing Co. Ltd., 2013), 16, 18.

⁵⁹ Nana Grey-Johnson, 107.

organizing secretary.⁶⁰ This budding international organization had a vast agenda that included education, trade unionism, politics, anti-racism, and anti-colonialism (Chapter 7). Under the leadership of NCBWA-Bathurst Chapter, Small initiated and formed numerous unions, associations, and pressure groups in the 1920s and the 1930s.⁶¹

The Methodist Church remains silent about Small. Nevertheless, the indisputable facts remain. From 1917 to the late 1940s, Methodist preacher Edward Francis Small led an extensive, vibrant, and sustained liberation movement in both the rural and urban Gambia of West Africa. Globally, it was a precursor to the Roman Catholic base ecclesial structures of the 1950s to 1980s in Latin America that were initiated by Peruvian priest Gustavo Gutierrez, Brazilian Leonardo Boff, and many other radical catholic priests.

The Methodist and Roman Catholic liberation theologians had a common agenda. Each challenged the Church, “the sacrament of God,” to become more conscious about its environment; to be mindful of social responsibility, justice, and human rights. For Small, in particular, his evangelism articulated a selfless *orthopraxis* that relentlessly incarnated legitimate trade unionism, journalism, and politics to the poor, the defenseless, the marginalized, and the downtrodden.

Grey-Johnson’s *JACB* biography below will provide a window into Small’s amazing life and mission.

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⁶⁰ Nana Grey-Johnson, 23.

⁶¹ Jeggan C. Senghore, *The Very Reverend J. C. Faye: His Life and Times- A Biography* (Bloomington: AuthorHouse, 2014), 61. Jeggan Colley Senghore, a renowned Senegambian historian, lists some of these groupings founded by Small: “There were the (Gambia Native Defence Union in Kaur) (1919), the Gambia Planters’ Syndicate (1929), the Carpenters’ and Shipwrights’ Society (1929), the Bathurst Trade Union (1929), The Gambia Farmers Cooperative Association (1929), the Bathurst Rate Payers’ Association (1932) the Committee of Citizens, the Gambia Representative Committee (1926), the Bathurst Urban District Council, the Gambia Labour Union (1935) and the Amalgamated Trade Union....”

Small, Edward Francis

1891 to 1958

Methodist Church

The Gambia

Edward Francis Small, O.B.E. [1] was an evangelist, a trade unionist, a journalist, and a politician. Small was one of the earliest 20th century practicing liberation theologians of colonial West Africa.

Birth of a Fighter

Edward was the son of Annie Eliza Thomas, an immigrant mistress from Sierra Leone, and a Bathurst tailor, John William Small. The boy grew up stocky and sturdy; his eyes were bright and the old people interpreted the boy's stubborn looks and his pronounced forehead as showing a spirit of promise and determination [2].

Growing up, Edward was surrounded by learning. He was tutored at home at very early age by his older half-sister, Hannah Small. Her brilliance in arithmetic and language later helped her to become the first woman to rise to the rank of a secretary at the Colonial Secretary's Office. Furthermore, she had the added honor of becoming Lady Hannah Mahoney, wife of the first Speaker of the Gambia House of Representatives, Sir John Andrew Mahoney.

Edward's parents knew immediately that only education could make their son rise above their own social status. Edward's mother hailed from Freetown where she knew education was making a big difference in the lives of people there. The opportunity to go to school was helping younger men make more demands on the governments of the Europeans more than their illiterate fathers had done. Annie Eliza Thomas saved her income from petty trading and decided with John that Edward was going to take advantage of the opportunity for a sound education.

Edward loved reading and whenever he had the chance, he would steal away somewhere to read books. He read everything he could lay his hands on. He studied hard and soon won a two-year scholarship to the Wesleyan High School in Bathurst. In 1906, the eager fifteen year old left for Freetown, Sierra Leone, to complete a well-rounded education through the study of language, rhetoric, logic, and the classics in addition to standard reading, writing, and

arithmetic. In addition, he received training that set him on his way to becoming a brilliant musician in the classical tradition.

He was a bright student. By 1910, he had finished school and had begun a government job as a stamp seller at the Freetown Post Office. Edward read all the newspapers that people brought in upon arriving from England. When he returned home to Bathurst in 1912, the young man's appetite for news from the greater world had increased so much that he wrote away to newspapers in Europe and paid to have editions sent to him. This allowed him to follow major developments in the work of contemporary African scholars while he worked as a daily paid government cost clerk at the Public Works Department. He felt increasingly attracted to the ideas of many of the African intellectuals whose articles were appearing in European journals and in papers in the more advanced capitals in West Africa, especially Accra and Lagos.

Crucible of Resistance

Young Edward was intensely interested in the First World War in Europe (1914-1918), and the political and social events that led up to it. In everything he read or heard about the European war, he tried to analyze the implications for Africa and its peoples. Behind all the global unrest and rapid changes, Small was keenly aware that close at home, in Africa, and in the distant West Indies and the United States of America, Africans and peoples of African descent were speaking out and writing more boldly about their conditions of life, and were prescribing the means to improve their political and economic welfare.

Among his reading material, he was most fascinated by the works coming out of meetings between Black Americans and West Indians who wrote about bringing all Black people together again in order to reclaim the respect and dignity that they had lost through slavery. Their desire was to recover the grand ideals of the African spirit and to recreate one country out of Africa out of the fragmented territories that had been taken over by European colonial overlords.

At that time, the idea of Africa being divided into countries was only three decades old (1884-1914). Yet it was already evident to many nationalists that while the relationship worked profitably for the Europeans who occupied the land and extracted African minerals, grains, oilseeds, and farm produce for their own benefit, the sickening conditions of life for the African inhabitants

hardly changed. Part of the ideal of Pan-Africanism was to change that. Edward found it a thrilling idea and wanted to know more.

Now, a grown man, Small's only difference with any young man of his day was the sharp, critical mind that he applied to what was happening around him and the burning in his heart to make a difference in his country. He resented the system of governance and the European dominance over Africans. He initiated a campaign to make Europeans aware of the fact that Africans also had a claim to dignity and self-respect. He resented the degrading and servile conditions under which Europeans ruled Africans in every sphere of life. In his heart, he longed to join a movement that would put into practice the ideas to free The Gambia and all African colonies from colonial rule.

His government job lasted only nine months. During that time, he had already been denied a promotion he thought he deserved. He took up a good well-paid job with the trading firm, Maurel & Prom, but at this time Small felt a call to church ministry. When the call grew stronger, he left Maurel & Prom and took a lower salary as a teacher at his *alma mater*, the Wesleyan High School, as part of his training. Edward dedicated himself to the work of the church, teaching and bringing enlightenment to students and colleagues alike. In 1917, the Wesleyan Church was satisfied enough with his preparation to send him on to do further training in the field as a church missionary in the village of Ballangharr [3].

At that important trading post in MacCarthy Island Province, Small came face to face with the stark realities of racism and exploitation. He immediately set himself the task of playing the organ in the church and pursuing his evangelistic mission, but he also sought to address the plight of the poor, illiterate peasants who were constantly at the mercy of the Europeans and the African traders who cheated the farmers of their well-deserved wages for their hard labor in the fields.

The young missionary was incensed by the cheating and the bad attitudes of the Europeans and by their master-slave relationship with the common people. He turned his anger against the officials and the senior members of the Church whom he claimed encouraged and perpetuated the unfair practices of the white people over Africans. While he struggled to advocate for fair prices for the farmers, his disillusionment with the church administration deepened.

To pass his spare time in Ballangharr, he read literature and other educational and political tracts and interpreted them to small casual audiences of village folk on the veranda of his house. This was his way of enlightening a small corner of the “Dark Continent.” Small realized that the only way to stop the exploitation of the farmers was to form them into cooperatives that would engage in collective bargaining on the prices of the produce. While this progressive thinking helped the farmers immensely, it incensed the traders who soon saw Small as a threat to their lucrative business [4].

Therefore, at the instigation of the white traders in Bathurst, J. Macullum, the travelling commissioner, regularly made disparaging reports to the government regarding Small’s activities among the peasants and the farmers. In February 1918, he sent a report to Governor Cameron in which he said:

Finally, I do not consider that Small is a fit person to be at an out station such as Ballangharr ... he lacks judgment, courtesy and self-control, and I should be obliged if you would inform the Wesleyan Church at Bathurst that his removal from here is absolutely essential.... [5].

What the commissioner was not telling the governor was that the real conflict centered on Small’s role as the only voice against the unfair and exploitative control of the white traders of the Bathurst Trading Company (BTC) in Ballangharr wharf town.

The bad blood between Small and the Europeans came to a physical showdown in what became known as “the Ballangharr Incident.” Mr. James Walker, a white trader in the BTC, trespassed on church property, slapped Small’s houseboy for obeying his master’s orders not to let him in. When he found Small, he violently complained that the ringing of the church bell during the Watch Night service disturbed his peace. Small explained that it was the tradition to ring the bells at midnight to welcome the New Year 1918 [6]. Walker did not accept any of that so when Small insisted he was trespassing on church property and should leave, Walker resisted and the two men came to blows. Small was young and sturdy and Walker must have gotten the worst of it.

The “Ballangharr Incident” was just one of the many pretexts to have Small removed. The truth was that Ballangharr was the center of the oilseeds trade and the agents of the BTC hated Small for organizing the farmers into

cooperatives. Armed with the power of information, lowly people now had the courage to better negotiate their livelihood. The new knowledge Small was imparting to the farmers on pricing and trading practices angered the traders.

Small officially pursued the implications of the incident with Mr. Walker in its relevance to the question of racial discrimination (also called the color bar). On January 1, 1918, in the morning following the affair, he quickly sent a letter to the government in Bathurst to ascertain whether in the absence of the district commissioner, any white person in the Protectorate was allowed to exercise administrative authority without official commission or announcement. Why? Small asked, did it appear that any white man, no matter how low his knowledge, status or condition, enjoyed an unquestioned lordship over Africans no matter how educated or endowed the Africans were? As far as he was concerned, white traders who assumed authority over the community whenever government officials were absent had to be stopped.

While Mr. Walker had given orders objecting to late night bell ringing for an official church celebration, he had actually trespassed on church property and, furthermore, had physically assaulted an innocent African houseboy. The Methodist Church was unable to see that their missionary representative had courageously protected the sanctity of the church grounds. Instead, the Church insisted that the African was wrong to challenge a white trader who had lost sleep to a *bona fide* church ritual of bell ringing. Even in the fairest of the Christian minds of church and government, they could find no room to properly examine the circumstances and evidence to justly determine which of the two men, Walker or Small, really lacked judgment, courtesy, and self-control.

For standing up against the terror of the white colonialists, Small clashed regularly with the establishment. He quickly flourished as a household name among the farm folk in all of MacCarthy Island Province and beyond [7].

Fired for Standing by the Truth

It was inevitable that the travelling commissioner and the governor would soon influence Methodist Church leaders to remove the thorn in their flesh. In July 1918, when the green leaves of the groundnut plants were breaking the surface in the fields of MacCarthy Island Province, a letter arrived in Ballangharr from the desk of Acting Superintendent Rev. G. J. Lane of the Wesleyan Mission at Dobson Street, Bathurst. The letter announced the termination of Small's

services for “impropriety of conduct.” The young and somewhat overzealous Englishman who had arrived only a few months before was desperate to prove that he was fit and able to head his Mission at Bathurst. As a result, he had fully endorsed the opinion from Government House that “Small’s mission work among the natives was a pretext for political propaganda.”

While Reverend Lane’s actions may have gained him friends and shown his authority in making decisions, it soon became clear in later church correspondence that Lane anxiously needed friends, recognition, and reassurances. Dismissing Small was thus one important way to cement a friendship with the establishment and with some of the very important African merchants in the congregation [8]. His prompt acquiescence to dismiss was also tainted by other documents in Small’s file that bitterly protested the mistreatment of another Gambian candidate. The latter had mishandled his ministry and this had left the novice’s life in social disarray. Small’s disillusionment with the church deepened over this affair and left him feeling that he should give up on ever becoming a minister.

The termination of his position precipitated a deep rift between Small and the Methodist Church. For the young activist, the fact that the Church sided with the government and the self-interested African merchants was a delay in the movement to break the grip of colonialism and only served to push farther down the road progress towards the dignity, equality, and self-respect of the people.

His removal left farmers without any defense against the whims and excesses of government officials who colluded with trading agents. They ruled their empire uncontested at Ballangharr that had become the largest provincial base of the Krio and Syrian merchant aristocrats and Small had very few friends among them. Obviously, his presence there was not good for their business.

An Agenda for Liberation

Small’s sympathy for agricultural concerns grew out of the fact that he lived in the heart of the farming community. Thankfully, he dismissal from Ballangharr did not remove him completely from his chosen environment. Only a few months later, in 1919, his old employer, Maurel & Prom, re-engaged his services and sent him back up country in Kaur. Small was already in touch with the International Trade Union Committee of the Negro Workers (ITUC-NW) and the League Against Imperialism and for National Independence (LAI-NI). He

had seized the opportunity of his posting in Ballangharr in 1917 to sow the seeds of union culture among the people. He had formed the Gambia Farmers' Cooperative Marketing Association (GFCMA) in 1917, the Gambia National Defense Union (GNDU) [9] in 1919, and the Bathurst Trade Union (BTU) in 1929. These were forerunners, respectively, of the later editions of the Gambia Cooperative Union and the Gambia Labor Union [10].

These organizations were to be the framework for the more challenging transformation into a political arena of a strong, committed, and unified African voice. From the beginning of his mission, being in close touch with the farmers was an advantage in strengthening his aspirations. It fermented ideals of people's power that had ensured the fall of the tsars and the accession of the Bolsheviks in Moscow only two years before, in 1917. However, internal petty bickering and government resistance aimed at hindering the registration of unions continually dogged political organization. This led to strife within the ranks of the Africans in every public sphere. With too much disaffection in the government, Small had to look farther afield to his associates in international circles for support in his demand for the same rights for workers and peasants in the Colony. He argued against the Colonial Government's intolerance for unions while similar unions thrived in England and other European countries as a vital part of the political systems that recognized them.

The young missionary did not see his presence among the people in MacCarthy Island Province as just limited to evangelization. He believed that Christ's teaching ordained active religion by teaching the people how to free themselves from both physical and spiritual ignorance and bondage. Seven decades before the theme arrived on the world political scene in the 1980s, Small was already preaching what the modern era called Liberation Theology [11].

Small was concerned that, as an interest group, the self-seeking merchants obviously benefitted from the crumbs that fell from the colonial table and naturally would turn a blind eye. For them, therefore, the burning issues of the dignity, equality, and self-respect for the masses of deprived Africans were not urgent. Their only worry was how Small's wake up call to the masses would affect their profits.

However, while many of Small's obstacles seemed to come from the Church, there was a similarity between his struggles and Arab colonialism that took the subtle form of religious instruction. This created a vast culture that also

slowed the struggle to design a true African personality, untainted by foreign colonial experience.

Small had fully assessed the implications of the *modus operandi* of the two colonizing forces, Western and Arab, even though they seemed to be diametrically opposed. The British local government structure was an administration centralized in a capital town and supported by the provincial municipalities. Anglo-Saxon Christianity was the leitmotif of the administrative tradition. This worked hand in hand with the centuries old unstructured and decentralized inculcation of Arabic culture through the village *daira* (Koranic schools).

While the first was overtly political with a program of forced cultural change that provided opportunities for class mobility to its adherents, the second had virtually no central administrative overhead and made very few demands separate from the status and common conditions of its believers. The former was slow, aristocratic, and costly. It needed bureaucratic oversight while the latter spread quickly and easily through simple independent ministries to the farmers. Subtlety with profound implications consequently developed in local mentalities. While it sounded starkly colonial and foreign to be called Abraham, Ishmael or Joseph, the same was not so obvious with Ebrima, Ismaila or Yusupha, even though neither was less colonial or foreign than the other. It was difficult for the local African mind to see immediately that Essa and Momodou were, indeed, foreign names of perfectly Arabic derivation, just like Jesus and Mohammed. This way, perhaps subliminally, two foreign cultures worked their way among the people. This led to a difficult bridgehead as to which served the central cause better in the search for an independent African identity that was neither Western Judeo-Christian nor Arabo-Islamic, but one that had to be honorably Negro-African. Small faced the brunt of this clash of foreign cultures when he began to organize the Gambian people against colonial domination and to set the agenda toward self-determination and independence.

Like all true revolutionary pan-Africanists, he found himself laboring between forces aligned with Western Christian concepts and upbringing, and those with Muslim and anti-Western inclinations. While by themselves these influences were already relegated to the central debate on African independence and liberation, they were further handicapped by devastating tribal sentiment at the roots. From 1919 to 1950, while he strove relentlessly to unify religious and ethnic-based associations of tradesmen and artisans under an altruistic and

national common cause, political cohesion continued to crack along the religious divide that first raised its ugly head in the mid-40s among the youth. The phenomenon almost derailed his life's mission when a consolidated party, the Gambia Muslim Congress emerged in 1952 to appeal to the parochial specificities that the name suggested. The fact that the party had been founded by a former apprentice and protégé [12] afflicted Small with a deep sense of defeat. This was the blow that triggered the psychological decline of the fighter.

West Africa: A Common Struggle

World War I had left the world in a difficult place and the impoverished colonies were struggling with even worse conditions. Everyone needed to survive. The war had heightened many issues and the re-unification of Africa was high on that agenda. In March 1920, Small was selected to attend the inaugural meeting of the National Congress of British West Africa (NCBWA). At last, the opportunity arrived to connect to a common struggle with pioneering thinkers, activists, and politicians in other parts of West Africa.

The NCBWA emerged after the First World War with the significance that the West Africans were moving forward from simply belonging to local indigenous societies (such as the Fante Confederation founded in 1867, or the Aborigines' Rights Protection Society in 1897, both on the Gold Coast, or the Gambia Native Defense Union founded in 1919) to membership in larger movements that unified the struggle in the four British dominions: The Gambia, Sierra Leone, Gold Coast and Nigeria. [13]

Without a moment's hesitation, Small resigned from the Maurel & Prom and set off to Accra in the Gold Coast for the meeting. On arrival, he discovered that the conveners were completely unprepared for the meeting. Small immediately took over the arrangements and soon afterward the other representatives from Nigeria and Sierra Leone began arriving. The first president of the Congress paid tribute to Small at the inaugural meeting, stating that had it not been for his presence and organizing ability he doubted whether the meeting would have been successful.

Great minds assembled to discuss themes that shaped the anti-colonial struggle. The founders, J. Casely-Hayford, T. Hutton Mills, Sam R. Wood, and other intellectuals and political figureheads among the twelve delegates, listed the objectives of the founding Congress:

1. To agitate for full racial representation of the African peoples in the Government of the Colonies.
2. To promote unity of purpose and action among West Africans on matters of common interest.
3. To defend the land rights of the Natives against exploitation in any shape or form and to pursue legislative, municipal, judicial and land reforms, economic development, self-determination and the formation of a West African press union.
4. To establish a university, colleges, and academies for racial education and the diffusion of African history and culture among the masses [14].

Small was away for three months and planned his return home very carefully. He immediately transformed the GNDU into the Gambia Branch of the NCBWA. Although initially the membership of the local NCBWA was mainly of low paid clerks and office workers, in time, the branch became a major pressure group that began vocalizing the resolutions and calling for development, especially towards self-determination. All the common people who wished to challenge the government channeled their frustration through the NCBWA.

Homeowners expressed their opposition to the heavy hut tax and came out in mass rallies to make the government aware of their grievances. Many were opposed to the high government taxes. Small, himself, was particularly concerned with the absence of Africans in the committees that decided the disbursement of the funds from those taxes.

Small petitioned the British and international communities using the slogan, “No Taxation without Representation” which became a source of inspiration in his later campaign for the Africanization of the senior civil service [15]. He insisted that if Africans were expected to pay such huge taxes, they must be nominated or, even better, elected into the committees responsible for the disbursement and appropriation of that national purse.

Small was *avant-garde* in his political thinking for an environment like The Gambia. He knew that numbers counted in western political formulae. Since

the liberal government of Prime Minister William Ewart Gladstone had introduced the secret ballot in Britain in 1872, the trend had strengthened people's faith in the "one-man-one-vote" principle with its added blessing of privacy in such a crucial political expression.

The NCBWA had become very active in unionizing the workers in the Colony [16]. Its nucleus, the GNDU had been formed in Kaur in 1919 in a bid to protect the vulnerable lower echelons of the civil service that were prone to arbitrary dismissals and loss of benefits. The unionization of the civil servants drew the unpardonable wrath of Governor Cecil Armitage [1921-1927] who was openly hostile to unions and especially to Small who led them. Perhaps for the first time in the country's social history the contradictions between the working class and the trader-owners became overt enough for interests to clash violently.

The taxes were too heavy and the pay packets too light. Labor negotiations had all along been tense with government and trading firms yielding little or nothing to the workers' demands. The establishment of the local branch of the NCBWA with Small as secretary gave him that first semblance of a political organization. Politics was now center stage for Small and he networked directly with those educated and intellectual names he had read so much about from reports of the meeting of Commonwealth West Africa in London in 1900 and in Paris in 1919. His views in social circles in town, his association and correspondence with anti-colonial elements were gradually becoming well known and feared. The government quickly intimidated members of the NCBWA and the GNDU and hounded Small at every opportunity.

SeneGambia & Pan-Africanist Newspaper

The governor's resolve against Small meant his liberty was seriously threatened. Bathurst soon became too small for one powerful governor and the powerless civil liberties campaigner. Small was wise to decide to escape from the heat by going into exile across the border into Senegal. From the safer haven at Rufisque, outside Dakar, he kept in close touch with the people's organization at home and sent regular letters to the prime minister's office in London telling the British government about the poor performances of European officials in the colony. The colonial police became quite suspicious of his international contacts and activities and branded him a "link subversive," meaning a "communist sympathizer." The British Office in Dakar chased him wherever he went and

soon the safe haven became quite unsafe. In 1923, cornered and alone, Small sought the distance of London to get away from the clutches of Governor Armitage.

Armitage and Small were two men possessed by their convictions. They were ready to fight each other to uphold their ideals. One was a powerful English governor trifling with the ideals of British Imperial glory and European domination worldwide... The other was a simple African peasant armed with his pen on a burning mission to enlighten and free his people. During the 1921 to 1927 era, Small and Armitage were diametrically opposed to each other. A poor but popular evangelical trade unionist against a powerful and avowed imperialist.

Small's active trade unionism precipitated a third phase of his life mission—journalism. It was obvious that his entry to the press media was destined to have a rough reception from the establishment. While in exile in Dakar in 1922, Small launched his newspaper *The Gambia Outlook and Senegambia Reporter* in order to keep in touch with his following at home and to accommodate a wider scope within Senegambia as a stronger, more potent anti-colonial unit. He carefully chose his fights and addressed popular subjects that were relevant to the national and workers' interests. The newspaper rose immediately to live up to its claim to work for the public good.

It was a struggle to keep the paper alive while in exile. It was welcome relief when, in 1927, the new Governor Sir J. Middleton [1927 to 1928] offered him an olive branch. Small returned to a triumphal welcome and began printing for the first time in Bathurst. This advent signaled evangelical—journalism *cum* trade unionism as never before, making Small the most trusted voice of the press. The paper became his virtual pulpit in which he preached doctrines of “fair price” for produce, “No Taxation without Representation,” anti-racism, and Pan-Africanism. Small left a discernible legacy that reportedly “created a tradition of critical and independent political journalism.”

If one could define politics as “the art and science of government,” then Small had already acquired respectable proficiency in this domain. At the onset of his rule, Governor Sir Hilary Blood (1942-1947) appointed Small an “unofficial” representative to the legislative chamber in 1942. Small distinguished himself in this position and left an indelible mark on at least three bills that were ratified: the repeal of the “Registration and False Publication Bills” (1943-1944); the establishment of the first Gambian municipality of the Bathurst Town Council (BTC) (1947); and universal suffrage for Bathurst citizens (1947).

Riding upon the successful implementation of the latter two bills, Small was elected the first African member of the Gambia Legislative Council (GLC) during its maiden BTC Elections of 1947. Once elected, he was immediately appointed to the Executive Council. The sense of legitimacy completed Small. Finally, he was a representative of the people in government. He was the first Gambian citizen to have been duly endorsed into office at the ballot box.

Nonetheless, Small's experience in active politics was torrid and brief (1942-1951). He was deeply disillusioned with fractious partisan politics that was fueled by unscrupulous behavior and rebellion. He witnessed the deconstruction processes within painfully built-up unions and associations as a result of religious sectarianism and tribalism. At the loss of his re-election bid to the BTC in 1951, he exited politics. Abdou Wally Ndow, one of his trusted supporters, prompted him to ponder life with a valedictory "Parable of the Match Stick" [Chapter 27]. In addition, Small was given a silver chain and medallion, inscribed with "*Edward Francis Small: Watchdog of The Gambia.*" This represented a symbol of appreciation for the totality of his life and mission to the peoples of the Gambia. Again, in 1959, Melville Benoni Jones, editor of *The Vanguard* local newspaper, chose to honor Small with a death anniversary tribute bearing the accolade: "Father of Trade Unionism in The Gambia."

Small's legacy lived quite modestly until March 2013 when The Gambia's President Sheikh Prof Dr. Alh. Yahya A. J. J. Jammeh, an embodiment of the new Pan-Africanism in the modern era, honored the legacy of the patriot by changing the name of the country's main referral hospital, the Royal Victoria Teaching Hospital, to the "Edward Francis Small Teaching Hospital" (EFSTH). All facets of society have considered this a fitting tribute to a man who received his title "The Watchdog of The Gambia" from the people.

Nana Grey-Johnson

Notes:

1. This *JACB Biography* has been culled from four chapters (3-7) of a historical work by Nana Grey Johnson, *Edward Francis Small, Watchdog of The Gambia*, 3rd ed. (Banjul: Media & Development Specialists Publishing Co. Ltd., 2013), 12-25. It was first published in 1997 in Banjul by the Book

- Production and Materials Resources Unit (BPMRU). Another BPMRU 2nd edition came out in March 2002.
2. The Confidential Dispatch in MP no. 633/21 at the National Archives, Banjul mistakenly stated that 1890 was the year of Small's birth. However, in June 16, 1930, Small himself signed his passport endorsement application form in which he stated in his own handwriting that he was then 39 years old (CSO3/165MP1308), thus making 1891 the correct year of his birth.
 3. Ballangharr lies in Central River Region (CRR). It is located about 150 km east of Banjul on the northern bank of the River Gambia.
 4. Feeling the pinch of competition and market share, the African traders at Ballangharr formed a group to look after their interests against bigger and better-financed European companies such as the Bathurst Trading Company.
 5. Travelling Commissioner J. Macallum to Governor Sir. E. Cameron [1914-1921], report, February 1918.
 6. Secret Minute Paper 140 vol. 1. National Archives, Banjul, File 4/42A.
 7. See "The Ballangharr Incident," cited by David Perfect in Arnold Hughes, *The Gambia: Studies in Society and Politics*, Birmingham University African Studies Series 3 (Birmingham : Centre of West African Studies, University of Birmingham, 1991).
 8. See Barbara Prickett's *Island Base: A History of the Methodist Church in The Gambia 1821-1969* (Freetown: The Methodist Church Gambia, printed by the Bunumbu Press), 174-180.
 9. National Archives File CSO2/10. In 1922, the Colonial Secretary answering the enquiries of a Travelling Commissioner on the GNDU described it as having no known political aims: "It is a society of government clerks, both Gambians and Sierra Leoneans ... with the object of getting more pay when high prices made living an acute problem. Generally, its aims and objects are to look after the welfare of the native civil servants in the Colony."
 10. See David Perfect's essay. "The Political Career of Edward Francis Small" in Arnold Hughes's " *The Gambia: Studies in Society and Politics*," Birmingham University African Studies Series 3 (Birmingham : Centre of West African Studies, University of Birmingham, 1991), 75-76.
 11. On Liberation Theology, see Preface, p. 40, note 57.
 12. Ibrahim Mohammadou Garba Jahumpa, "and his backers formed the Muslim Congress (MC) party in January 1952, bringing together about 40

Muslim societies in one organization. For much of its life, the MC was sectarian and exclusive; only adherents to the Islamic faith were accepted as members. (...) Garba Jahumpa had for many years been an assistant to E. F. Small, a Christian, and was closely involved in the latter's radical politics and diverse trade union activities." Jeggan C. Senghore, *The Reverend J. C. Faye: His Life and Times- A Biography* (AuthorHouse, 2014), 91.

13. F. K. Buah, *West Africa and Europe* (London: Macmillan, 1967), 206-207.
14. See also Ref. 174728 vo, 371. Foreign and Commonwealth Office Library, London, (which) includes this fourth objective.
15. E. F. Small writing in *The African World*, London, April 23, 1921.
16. J. Ayodele Langley, *Ideologies of African Liberation 1856-1970* (London: Rex Collings, 1979), 745-746.

This article, received in 2017, is excerpted and adapted from Nana Grey-Johnson's *Edward Francis Small, Watchdog of The Gambia*, 3rd ed. (Banjul, The Gambia: Media & Development Specialists Publishing Co. Ltd., 2013). Grey-Johnson is a private media consultant and a senior lecturer at the University of The Gambia where he is the Dean of the School of Journalism and Digital Media.

Contribution en français: Notice biographique

Engelbert Mveng, SJ (1930-1995): Jésuite et Historien

Par Jean Luc Enyegue, SJ

Notes biographiques

Le Père Engelbert Mveng est né à Enam-Ngal au Sud du Cameroun, le 09 Mai 1930.⁶² Il est né de parents Presbytériens, mais sera baptisé dans la foi catholique romaine en 1935. Il fait ses études secondaires dans l'enseignement catholique, successivement à EfoK (1943-44) et au Petit Séminaire d'Akono (1944-49), dans le centre du Cameroun oriental, alors sous-mandat français. Attiré par une certaine radicalité évangélique, il quitte le grand séminaire et ne sera dissuadé de devenir Trappiste que sur l'insistance de son évêque, Mgr René Graffin, qui semble discerner que ce jeune intellectuellement très doué s'épanouirait davantage au sein de la Compagnie de Jésus, alors absente au Cameroun. C'est ainsi que le jeune Engelbert Mveng se rendra au Congo Zaïre en 1951 pour y commencer son noviciat, à Djuma, en pleine forêt équatoriale. Après deux ans passés au noviciat, Mveng, devenu jeune scolastique (i.e. Jésuite aux études) après ses vœux perpétuels et privés, est envoyé par ses supérieurs à Wépion en Belgique (1954-1958), pour des études de philosophie.

Au Cameroun, depuis 1955, l'UPC, premier parti politique jamais créé dans le pays en 1948 est interdit et contraint au maquis par l'administration coloniale. Deux ans plus tard, en 1957, le pays accède au statut d'autonomie interne, avec un premier gouvernement autochtone dirigé par le catholique et ancien séminariste André-Marie Mbida. En 1958, outre la dissolution du gouvernement Mbida et l'arrivée au pouvoir de Ahmadou Ahidjo (musulman) comme Premier Ministre chef du gouvernement, le leader de l'UPC, Ruben Um

⁶² Cf. « Engelbert Mveng: historiographie et humanisme ». Interview accordée à Iwele Gode publiée dans *Congo Afrique* (Kinshasa: 1999), 340: 603.

Nyobè est assassiné à Bumnyebel (Centre du Pays). La guerre civile bat son plein, principalement dans les régions du Mungo, du Littoral, de l'Ouest et du Centre. C'est donc dans ce même contexte tendu qu'Engelbert Mveng retourne au Cameroun comme stagiaire au Collège Libermann à Douala (1958-1960). Mveng est avide de redécouvrir le Cameroun profond. Il profite de ce retour au pays pour étudier à fond les cultures de l'Ouest, celles notamment des Bamiléké (l'un des plus grands et influents groupes du pays) et des Bamoun leurs voisins. C'est de cette période que naît également son intérêt pour l'art.

Au terme de son stage, il retourne à Lyon-Fourvière (France) pour ses études de théologie (1960), par ailleurs date de l'indépendance du Cameroun Oriental. Mveng y est ordonné prêtre le 07 septembre 1963. En 1964, il soutient une thèse de troisième cycle en France sous le titre : *Paganisme face au christianisme dans la correspondance de Saint Augustin*. Puis, en 1970, Mveng défend sa thèse d'Etat sur : *Les sources grecques de l'histoire négro-africaine depuis Homère jusqu'à Strabon*. Mais Mveng n'aura pas attendu ce temps pour faire son chemin dans l'intelligentsia camerounaise. En 1962, il publia un chemin de croix africain. En 1963, il publiait la première histoire du Cameroun jamais écrite par un camerounais. Trois ans plus tard, en 1966, il participa au Festival des Arts à Dakar. Mveng participe aussi dans plusieurs organisations d'intellectuels africains et est l'un des pères de l'œcuménisme au Cameroun.

Le 23 avril 1995, deux mois après qu'il a organisé un Congrès International à Yaoundé sur « Moïse l'Africain », le Père Engelbert Mveng est retrouvé mort à Nkol-Afeme (Yaoundé), dans sa chambre de la nouvelle congrégation religieuse qu'il avait contribué à fonder : *Les Béatitudes*. Tout près du cadavre se trouve une importante somme d'argent qui laissa penser que les assassins n'avaient rien à voir avec des chasseurs de primes, mais que les raisons de sa mort pouvaient bel et bien être préméditées.⁶³ Jusqu'à ce jour, les causes officielles de sa mort ne sont pas connues.⁶⁴ Mveng, premier Jésuite Camerounais est cependant rentré dans l'histoire comme l'un des plus grands intellectuels

⁶³ Voir: Camille Nodjita Manyenan : « Comprendre le meurtre de Nkol Afeme (Yaoundé). Une lecture de la vie et de l'œuvre du Père Mveng » in *Père Engelbert Mveng, SJ : Un pionnier*. Kimwenza : Loyola Edition, 2005 : 13.

⁶⁴ Jean Luc Enyegue, "Terre d'émergence de la pensée d'Engelbert Mveng. Et si le Cameroun était tout simplement infanticide ?" in *Engelbert Mveng, SJ : Un Pionnier* (Kimwenza: Loyola éd., 2005), 21.

africains du siècle dernier. Le combat intellectuel d'Engelbert Mveng sera marqué par un ardent désir de restituer à l'Afrique la place qui lui est due dans l'histoire universelle, en renvoyant dos au mur ceux qui lui niaient toute forme d'historicité.

Le projet historiographique d'Engelbert Mveng tel que rapporté par son œuvre

L'historiographie d'Engelbert Mveng réagit contre une approche négationniste, celle de Hegel pour qui « L'Afrique n'est pas intéressant du point de vue de sa propre histoire... [Et où] nous voyons l'homme dans un état de barbarie et de sauvagerie qui l'empêche encore de faire partie intégrante de la civilisation... »⁶⁵ Aussi Mveng vise-t-il avant tout à « réhabiliter le passé de l'Afrique. Mieux, réhabiliter le passé de l'humanité en tant que telle. Car une histoire tronquée est néfaste à l'humanité toute entière. »⁶⁶ Au Congrès International des Historiens de l'Afrique en 1965 à Dar-es-Salam, Mveng rapportait l'ultime but du faire histoire en Afrique : « L'étude de l'histoire africaine suppose que le peuple africain est maître de son histoire : il lui appartient de dire qui il était, qui il est et qui il veut devenir ! Le devoir de l'Afrique, face à son histoire, est d'affirmer son authenticité, non en vertu de l'image que les observateurs étrangers se sont façonnés de son visage, mais en vertu de la vérité de son devenir historique vécu, saisi et exprimé par elle-même. »⁶⁷

Engelbert Mveng essaya de balayer tout soupçon éventuel de l'historien patriote en reprenant à son compte le paradigme de la critique historique. Pour lui donc, les sources constituent la matière première avec laquelle on fait l'histoire. Elles doivent être recueillies et traitées scientifiquement. Cette recherche doit aussi être interdisciplinaire. Pour Mveng, « les sources constituent à la fois la condition de possibilité et le test de crédibilité du travail de l'historien. »⁶⁸ Seulement, il faudrait encore que les historiens s'accordent sur la

⁶⁵ Friedrich Hegel, *La raison dans l'histoire*. Trad. Papaioannou (Paris: UGE, 1965), 247-250.

⁶⁶ Cf. Interview accordée à Iwele Gode publiée dans *Congo Afrique* (Kinshasa: 1999), 340: 603-609.

⁶⁷ Cf. *Rapport du Congrès International des Historiens de l'Afrique* (Dar-es-Salam: Prés. Afr., 1971), 604.

⁶⁸ Interview à Iwele Gode, 604.

nature de ces sources et sur l'idée de scientificité. Jusqu'à une époque récente en effet, l'histoire se définissait comme « la connaissance du passé basée sur les écrits ». Un continent à qui le don d'écrire a été nié à dessein ne trouve donc pas son compte dans le concert de l'histoire. L'écriture n'est-elle pas alors le critère de légitimité de toute science historique ? Mveng ne précise nullement dans le texte sus-cité de quelles sources il s'agit dans le faire histoire, mais déjà, il éclate les sources en ouvrant l'histoire à d'autres disciplines au rang desquelles l'art s'imposera comme un domaine majeur de son historiographie.

Les sources de Mveng

Mveng n'aime pas la facilité. Il ne voudrait donc pas contourner le paradigme de l'écriture de peur de ne pas être écouté. Voilà pourquoi sa thèse porte avant tout sur les sources écrites. Il s'agit des *Sources grecques de l'histoire négro-africaine depuis Homère jusqu'à Strabon*. Cette thèse, défendue à l'Université de Lyon et publiée en 1972, traverse haut la main tous les préjugés des écoles historiques dominantes. Mveng s'inspire des Grecs (preuve qu'il peut les lire dans leur langue), renvoyant les négationnistes à leur ignorance de leur propre trésor culturel. Il propose ainsi une histoire négro-africaine à partir des sources de ceux qui l'ont niée. Par cette démarche, il ne marche plus fidèlement sur les pas de son prédécesseur Cheikh Anta Diop ; il marche désormais à ses côtés. Pour Ntima Nkanza, l'un de ses commentateurs, « alors que Cheikh Anta Diop, Théophile Obenga et d'autres s'efforcent de démontrer l'origine négro-africaine de la pensée occidentale, Mveng, lui, prend le chemin contraire. Il ne démontre pas l'origine, il rappelle à l'Occident que ses propres sources et sa propre histoire contiennent des vérités non encore prises au sérieux ». ⁶⁹

Dans sa recherche interdisciplinaire, Mveng s'appuie d'abord sur l'anthropologie, convaincu qu'une approche épistémologique africaine authentique et originale doit avoir pour point de départ l'anthropologie, c'est-à-dire « l'homme comme sujet et objet de la pensée créatrice... [Car] les concepts de vie, de mort ou de paupérisation anthropologique rendent mieux compte de

⁶⁹ Ntima Nkanza, "Engelbert Mveng: La poésie comme antidote contre la domination de l'homme par la machine" in *Telema* (Kinshasa: ed. Telema, 2005), 120: 28.

nos réalités. »⁷⁰ Devenu chef du département d'histoire de l'université de Yaoundé, Mveng sera également l'un des pionniers de l'archéologie camerounaise, laquelle va, en plus de la tradition orale, fournir à l'histoire africaine ses plus beaux textes à savoir les œuvres artistiques. Pour Engelbert Mveng, « l'art traditionnel africain est un véritable livre qui raconte les aspects de la vie africaine. Sa place doit être prépondérante dans la recherche historique en Afrique »⁷¹. Il aborde la question de l'interdisciplinarité pour recentrer la critique historique sur l'érudition que cette discipline attend de ses acteurs. En effet, l'érudition est indispensable à la synthèse et à la créativité historique, sans quoi, « les sources demeurent muettes et inaccessibles ». ⁷² Il semble indispensable à Engelbert Mveng de former les jeunes historiens à la paléontologie, à l'archéologie et à la préhistoire, et l'étudiant en première année d'histoire à l'université de Yaoundé continue de jouir de l'initiation aux deux dernières disciplines. On découvre peu à peu l'historien qui décroche d'une critique historique positiviste vers une plus grande considération des structures et mentalités locales traduites dans l'art traditionnel et l'oralité, seuls capables de rendre compte, au mieux, des réalités africaines. D'après Mveng, la recherche historique en Afrique n'aboutira que lorsque l'Africain sera capable d'amorcer une réponse personnelle à la question (kantienne) du « Qui suis-je ? », laquelle réponse sera pour lui source de libération. Libération des chaînes de la paupérisation anthropologique que cultivent des régimes politiques immoraux, libération aussi, et surtout, du joug d'une histoire douloureuse résultant des tentatives répétées d'annihiler l'homme africain aussi bien par la traite que par la colonisation. Cette histoire douloureuse et paralysante, le prophétisme historiographique des idéalistes l'écrase frontalement ; et les structures sans vie, les élans positivistes et machinistes ne parviennent pas à l'apaiser et à la fertiliser. Cette histoire qui se contente de relater les faits, d'énumérer des dates ou d'aligner des statistiques, sans rapprocher les deux bords, les forces de la vie et les forces du mal, ni refaire le tissu social déchiré par l'annihilation et la paupérisation anthropologiques, Mveng ne s'en satisfait pas ; son génie poétique va assouvir cette soif.

⁷⁰ Engelbert Mveng; B. L. Lipawing, *Libération et cultures africaines. Dialogue sur l'anthropologie négro-africaine* (Yaoundé: Prés. Africaine/Clé, 1996), 90-91.

⁷¹ *Rapport du Congrès de Dar-es-Salam*, 18.

⁷² Interview à Iwele Gode, 604.

Méditation sur la portée épistémologique de *Balafon* dans l'historiographie de Mveng

L'approche de Mveng semble reconnaître que la rationalité mathématique n'est pas l'unique. Il peut parfois faire ombre au sentir fondamental, cela même qui permet à l'homme d'entrer en relation avec autrui et d'approcher le réel d'une certaine manière. Nous avons vu les limites du positivisme historique en ce sens qu'il occulte l'affect dont est pourtant marqué tout homme, acteur et victime de l'histoire. Ainsi, la poétisation de l'histoire par Engelbert Mveng dans son œuvre *Balafon* semble répondre à une double préoccupation : le traitement historien des événements limites comme les traumatismes collectifs (traite, colonisation, génocides...) et le sens de l'histoire en tant que tel.

Le traitement des événements-limites. La neutralité dans le cas des événements limites est difficile et complique le faire histoire. On est en effet victime ou bourreau et donc plus susceptible d'une lecture partisane, ou alors on est un observateur extérieur, et le traitement des sources, dans son *objectivité*, risque d'ignorer la profondeur des lésions humaines et sociales, et se livrer à un structuralisme sec et infertile. Mveng de la forêt, habitué au son des balafons, des tam-tams et aux veillées autour du feu ou lors des funérailles sait combien ces histoires réelles des familles que les femmes chantent, des clans que les vieillards racontent, mises en musique, touchent et éduquent. Il emprunte donc à la *poétique* d'Aristote le double objectif esthétique et éthique qu'il assigne à la poésie, plaire en touchant (les cœurs) et éduquer (l'esprit). La découverte des sources grecques pour sa thèse en histoire favorise ce climat et s'il écrit les deux œuvres en même temps, c'est certainement parce que l'exigence académique de l'école française ne lui permet pas de faire le pas de la mise en intrigue de l'histoire dans sa thèse, cette mise en intrigue, associant esthétique (plaire et toucher) et éthique (éduquer) qui rapprocherait l'histoire enseignée et l'histoire vécue et donnerait une meilleure portée à la formation des consciences. La poésie garde donc tous ses attributs formels. Mais le fond, en donnant une grande part à l'histoire des relations nord-sud pour une fraternité universelle, n'a pour seul dessein que d'exorciser l'aigreur d'une histoire humiliante, une histoire lourde à porter et qui ronge notre quotidien en vue de lui donner un autre sens. Car l'histoire n'est-elle pas cette connaissance du passé qui nous permet de mieux appréhender le présent pour préparer le futur ? Aristote le souligne à merveille dans sa *Poétique*, en accordant à la *Catharsis*, la purgation, une place de choix. Quant aux moyens

devant conduire à cette exorcisation, Mveng, tout en choisissant le dialogue (les lettres à ses amis) prône aussi la voie transcendantale en laquelle culmine le sens de l'histoire.

Sens de l'histoire. Une place importante est déjà accordée au christianisme par l'idéalisme allemand comme ultime manifestation de l'esprit. Seulement, là où Kant ou Hegel ne voient que pur humanisme, Mveng voit l'œuvre divine d'un Dieu qui a pris corps avec l'humanité, non pas pour mettre fin à l'Histoire, mais pour la conduire à sa perfection en lui proposant un sens toujours nouveau fondé sur l'amour et la réconciliation entre tous les hommes. Dans sa poésie religieuse, notamment avec *Si quelqu'un...*⁷³ Mveng annonce les thèmes historiques de *Balafon*⁷⁴ en dénonçant la dimension douloureuse de notre histoire de sorte que, s'appuyant sur l'expérience de la croix du Christ, l'humanité renonce à la haine, à l'injustice et à la violence en vivant la véritable *catharsis* qui produit la paix au-delà des traités. *Balafon*, en rapport à cette première, devient donc une poésie apaisée d'une humanité qui, sans nier les blessures de l'histoire, est purgée de ses rancœurs et s'achemine vers plus de dialogue, de réconciliation, de fraternisation. Dans la *première station* de son chemin de Croix, Mveng évoque « les Juifs des fours crématoires, les nègres de l'Apartheid, et les pauvres chrétiens derrière tous les rideaux... ». Il reprend le cri des foules qui demandent en « rançon » la mort de Jésus, comme « une cargaison de pièces d'Indes pour racheter notre servitude ; sur les côtes sans fin de notre histoire humaine, comme aux comptoirs de Guinée, de Calabar et de Manicongo... ». Il demande alors que le sang du Seigneur retombe sur l'humanité comme un « océan de miséricorde » et l'irrigue d'un esprit nouveau. A la *quatrième station*, ce sont les larmes des mères d'Afrique qui pleurent, inconsolables, leurs enfants « qui s'en sont allés, sans Adieu... » et ces pleurs sur l'Afrique souffrante se poursuivent jusqu'à la *quatorzième station*. Dans cette poésie religieuse, *Si quelqu'un...* est une avance complémentaire de *Balafon* qui, dès 1961, inaugure la même œuvre, unique, de Mveng dont le souci n'était pas de faire de la poésie pour la poésie. En fait, La poésie de Mveng, loin d'être une élégie, est une tragédie dont le héros est le Christ qui se charge des souffrances de l'humanité une fois pour toutes. Il ne pratique

⁷³ Engelbert Mveng, *Si quelqu'un...* (Paris: Mame, 1961). Il s'agit en fait d'un Chemin de Croix chrétien.

⁷⁴ Engelbert Mveng, *Balafon* (Yaoundé: Clé, 1972).

http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Engelbert_Mveng

pas non plus de la religion pour la religion, de l'histoire pour de l'histoire ; ses écrits visent avant tout à libérer l'homme des chaînes de la servitude reconnue ici dans l'apartheid, la colonisation et toute forme de sous humanisation des individus, et de lui communiquer la loi d'amour et de pardon qui seule construit l'humanité et donne un sens heureux à l'histoire.

Le visiteur de la cathédrale de Mbalmayo, « Ville cruelle » d'après le romancier camerounais Eza Boto,⁷⁵ s'inclinera, à l'entrée de l'église, sur la tombe de Monseigneur Paul Etoga, premier évêque catholique de l'Afrique noire francophone et fondateur de ce diocèse. Tout près de l'autel, se trouve au centre de la chaire épiscopale de plus récent successeur d'Etoga, Monseigneur Joseph-Marie Ndi Okala, une fresque eucharistique de Mveng. Etoga, Mveng, Eza Boto (aussi connu sous le pseudonyme de Mongo Beti) représentent ensemble le projet d'africanisation du christianisme et de la politique camerounaise dans ses aspirations et son irréductible esprit de rébellion contre l'injustice et l'oppression. Mveng est certainement mort, assassiné par des mains toujours anonymes dans l'obscurité de sa chambre à Yaoundé. Mais son projet d'africanisation de l'église africaine se poursuit, luisant et glorieux à l'image de sa fresque de la résurrection à Hekima à Nairobi. Son humanisme aussi est plus que jamais apprécié par des africains et des camerounais en proie aux virus de la division et de la violence qui paupérisent.

C'est cette même violence, pauvre par sa gratuité et l'immédiateté de ses aspirations, qui arracha Mveng à la vie dans la nuit du 23 avril 1995, au moment même où ses collègues historiens étaient réunis à Aix-en-Provence en France pour un congrès sur l'enseignement de l'histoire en Afrique francophone.⁷⁶ D'après l'historien Jean-Paul Messina, Mveng n'y a pas été invité ; il aurait, de fait, été désinvité, l'on ne sait par qui.⁷⁷ Tout semble donc indiquer que les forces obscures de l'histoire auraient voulu réduire au silence, et à jamais, celui qui ne cessa jamais

⁷⁵ Eza Boto, *Ville Cruelle* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1954).

⁷⁶ *La recherche en histoire et l'enseignement de l'histoire en Afrique centrale francophone : actes du colloque international (Aix-en-Provence, 24-25 et 26 avril 1995)* (Aix-en-Provence: Publications de l'Université de Provence, 1997).

⁷⁷ Jean-Paul Messina, *Engelbert Mveng : La Plume et Le Pinceau : Un Message Pour l'Afrique Du III^{ème} Millénaire, 1930-1995* (Yaoundé: Presses de l'Université Catholique d'Afrique Centrale, 2003).

de parler. Et pourtant, Mveng et son esprit restent têtus. Au moment même où l'unité nationale de son pays est mise à mal, le monument de la Réunification dont Mveng fut l'un des concepteurs et artisans reste solidement planté sur la colline de Ngoa-Ékélé, par ailleurs le centre universitaire, politique et militaire de la capitale camerounaise. Les chrétiens qui se rendent à la messe tous les jours dans les cathédrale de Yaoundé et Mbalmayo, la chapelle du collège Libermann à Douala, celle de l'université jésuite Hekima College de Nairobi au Kenya, et bien d'autres lieux de culte continuent de prier au pied de l'art de Mveng, portés par celui-là qui lutta inlassablement pour donner à leurs églises et liturgies une image et identité africaine, et qui a su peindre sur les murs leur espérance et le cri, jamais interrompus, de leur souffrance. Les jeunes camerounais continuent d'apprendre l'histoire de leur pays et de s'initier aux lettres en lisant Mveng. Face au flou des enquêtes officielle sur son lâche assassinat, cette enquête est menée dans une fiction, un roman écrit de la main de l'un de ses plus célèbres contemporains, le même Mongo Beti de « ville cruelle », qui était, comme Mveng, excellent dans son art mais objet de contradiction dans son pays.⁷⁸ Mveng reste tétu, admiré et polémique, toujours contradictoirement en mouvement dans la reprise et réinterprétation de son œuvre. C'est cette contradiction, ce clair-obscur du personnage et de son œuvre qui l'établirent comme une figure de l'histoire du christianisme africain et font la richesse de son œuvre. L'historien jésuite belge Léon de Saint Moulin vit en Mveng le plus grand jésuite du 20^{ème} siècle.⁷⁹

Jean Luc Enyegue, SJ
Boston, Décembre 2018

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⁷⁸ Mongo Beti, *Trop de soleil tue l'amour* (Paris: Julliard, 1999).

⁷⁹ Léon de Saint Moulin, *Histoire Des Jésuites En Afrique: Du XVIe Siècle à Nos Jours* (Namur: Éd. Jésuites, 2016).

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Recent Print and Digital Resources Related to Christianity in Africa

Compiled by Beth Restrick, Head, BU African Studies Library

Akono, François-Xavier, *Explorer la théologie d'Engelbert Mveng: Inculturer la foi chrétienne et libérer la personne humaine en contexte africain*. (French Edition) Paris: Edilivre; EDILIVRE-APARIS edition, 2011.

\$17.00 [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B005333333) ISBN-10: 2812152443; ISBN-13: 978-2812152443

Description: *Explorer la théologie d'Engelbert Mveng* est né de la volonté de l'auteur de relire les grandes intuitions de ce « pionnier de la théologie » en Afrique, d'expliquer quels sont les enjeux de la théologie pour E. Mveng. La dialectique de cet ouvrage est organisée autour de deux grands thèmes théorisés par E. Mveng : d'abord, l'africanisation du christianisme, ensuite la christianisation de l'Afrique ; en somme, une insertion de la foi chrétienne dans la vie des peuples africains. Mais, la théologie ne doit pas se cantonner à la quête d'intelligibilité de la foi, car elle est « interrogation de la foi face aux situations concrètes des individus et des peuples »: elle doit penser la foi et donner une réponse aux interpellations de la révélation. ([Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B005333333))

Wealth, Health, and Hope in African Christian Religion: The Search for Abundant Life. Edited by Stan Chu Ilo. Publisher: Lexington Books, 2017.

\$90.15 [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com/dp/9781498561273) ISBN-10: 1498561276; ISBN-13: 978-1498561273

Description: *Wealth, Health, and Hope in African Christian Religion* offers a portrait of how contending narratives of modernity in both church and society play out in Africa today through the agency of African Christian religion. It explores the identity and features of African Christian religion and the cultural forces driving the momentum of Christian expansion in Africa, as well as how these factors are shaping a new African social imagination, especially in providing answers to the most challenging questions about poverty, wealth, health, human, and cosmic flourishing. It offers the academy a good road map for interpreting African Christian religious beliefs and practices today and into the future. ([amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com/dp/9781498561273))

Online Article (Full-text)

Hanl, Y. S. & J. BeyersII, **A critical evaluation of the understanding of God in J. S. Mbiti's theology.** *Acta Theologica*, vol. 37, no.2, 2017. Online version ISSN 2309-9089

Accessible at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.18820/23099089/actat.v37i2.2>

Abstract: “This article investigates how Mbiti articulates the theological reflections on the understanding of God from an African perspective. Mbiti systematizes data of the African concepts of God in a set of Western Christian doctrinal systems. He presupposes a continuity between the Christian and the African concepts of God, and overemphasizes the similarities. Mbiti regards African Traditional Religion(s) (ATR(s)) as monotheism and as a *praeparatio evangelica*, and maintains that the Christian God is the same as the God worshipped in ATR(s). In Mbiti's theology, negative attributes of the African God, which are irreconcilable with the God of the Bible, are not critically evaluated, and the concept of the Trinity is not articulated. In this article, the notions of African monotheism and of ATR(s) as a *praeparatio evangelica* are criticized. This article claims that what African theology needs is to clarify the Christian concept of God, and to articulate the understanding of God within a Trinitarian context.” (www.scielo.org.za)

Dissertations

Pickens, George Franklin. “**The “God Talk” of an African Christian Patriarch: The Formation and Presentation of Matthew Ajuoga’s “Johera Narrative.”**” Ph.D. thesis, Department of Theology, University of Birmingham (UK), 1997.

Abstract: In 1957 during the fervor of the East African Revival, Matthew Ajuoga led over 16,000 communicants out of the Anglican Church in Nyanza, Kenya to establish the Church of Christ in Africa-Johera. In 1993, after thirty-six years of silence, Matthew Ajuoga offered his “God Talk”—the story of his Christian experiences—within the “Johera Narrative,” the oral text which is the focus of this thesis.

The purpose of this study is to carry out the requisite tasks of the handler of oral materials: to describe and demonstrate an effective collection and presentation of Matthew Ajuoga’s “Johera Narrative.”

Part One discusses the sources and methodologies for forming the study and text, and Part Two focuses on matters of presentation. Three chapters offer interpretations of the text within its major contexts. An examination of the nature of the narrative follows, and it is also assessed as a theological text. An index of requisite postures and idioms for understanding Ajuoga's "God Talk" is then presented, and the study concludes with suggestions for future research.

This study makes two contributions to the study of African Instituted Churches: it presents a hitherto non-existent oral theological text; and, it provides a guide for the collector/handler of such source materials.