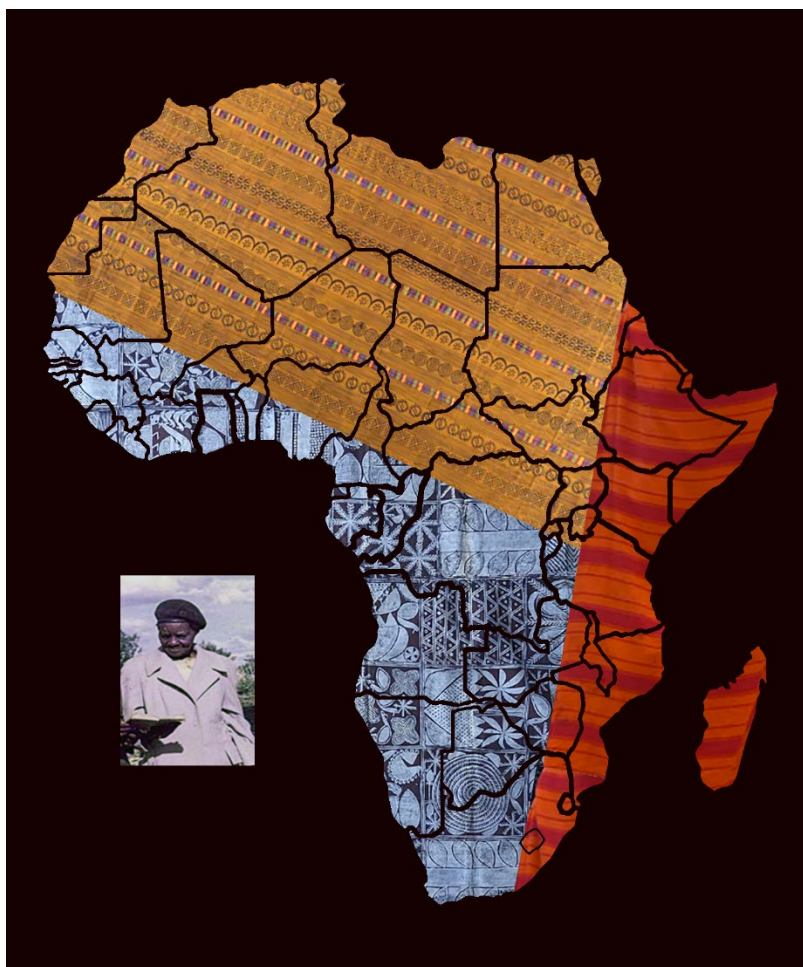


# JOURNAL OF AFRICAN CHRISTIAN BIOGRAPHY

Vol. 8, No. 3 (July 2023)

**Focus: Catechists and Evangelists**

J. E. Sarbah (Ghana), Sembera Mackay  
(Uganda), Jerusha Kanyua (Kenya)



A publication of the *Dictionary of African Christian Biography*

# JOURNAL OF AFRICAN CHRISTIAN BIOGRAPHY

Vol. 8, No. 3 (July 2023)

A quarterly publication of the *Dictionary of African Christian Biography* ([www.DACB.org](http://www.DACB.org))



©2023 *Dictionary of African Christian Biography*  
The DACB is a digital project of the Boston University Center for  
Global Christianity and Mission



CONOVER-PORTER  
AWARD



NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE  
humanities



BRITANNICA BEST SITES  
AWARD 2009

## JOURNAL OF AFRICAN CHRISTIAN BIOGRAPHY

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

CONTENT includes:

- Original biographies and African Christian histories
- Biographies highlighted from the DACB website
- Obituaries and tributes about recently deceased figures
- Excerpts of recently published scholarship
- Interviews with select African church leaders and scholars (still living)
- Resources for teaching with biography
- Reviews of scholarship on African Christian biography and history

SUBMISSIONS: Please direct all inquiries regarding submissions and advertising to the editor at [dacb@bu.edu](mailto:dacb@bu.edu). Refer to the *Instructional Manual for Writers* for guidelines and formatting: [https://dacb.org/resources/final\\_instr\\_manual.pdf](https://dacb.org/resources/final_instr_manual.pdf).

FREE SUBSCRIPTIONS: Sign up at [www.dacb.org/journal/](http://www.dacb.org/journal/)

ADDRESS: The office of the *Journal of African Christian Biography* is located at the Center for Global Christianity and Mission  
Boston University School of Theology  
745 Commonwealth Avenue,  
Boston, MA 02215, U.S.A.

ISSN 2572-0651



DONATE



## JOURNAL OF AFRICAN CHRISTIAN BIOGRAPHY

Established in 2016

Quarterly publication of the *Dictionary of African Christian Biography*

### Editor

Michèle Sigg  
*Boston University*

Kyama Mugambi

*Yale Divinity School*

### Associate Editors

Jesse Mugambi  
*University of Nairobi*  
Dana Robert  
*Boston University*  
Nimi Wariboko  
*Boston University*

### Contributing Editors

James N. Amanze  
*University of Botswana*  
Deji Isaac Ayegboyin  
*University of Ibadan*  
Philomena Njeri Mwaura  
*Kenyatta University*  
Paul Nchoji Nkwi  
*Catholic University of Cameroon*  
Olusegun Obasanjo  
*National Open University of Nigeria*  
Thomas Oduro  
*Good News Theological College and Seminary*

### Book Notes Editor

Frances (Beth) Restrick  
*Boston University*

### Consulting Editor

Jonathan Bonk  
*Boston University*

### Editorial Board

Esther Acolatse  
*Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary*  
Tekletsadik Belachew  
*Concordia Seminary*  
Jean-Luc Enyegue  
*Jesuit Historical Institute in Africa*  
Casely Essamuah  
*Global Christian Forum*  
Anicka Fast  
*Mennonite Mission Network*  
Mary Getui  
*Catholic University of Eastern Africa*  
Stan Chu Ilo  
*De Paul University*  
Fohle Lygunda  
*Africa Center for Interdisciplinary Studies*  
Kehinde Olabimtan  
*St. Stephen's College, University of Alberta*

## Table of Contents

“Time to Tell the Stories of the Greatest Missionaries in African Christian History” by Michèle Sigg .....	1
Sarbah, John Etannyiedur by Cosmas Ebo Sarbah .....	3
Mackay, Sembera K. by Kimeze Teketwe .....	14
Kanyua, Jerusha by Dickson Nkonge Kagemu .....	21
Featured Interview “Courage in Our Conviction: A Conversation with Pastor Abtidoon” By Aweis A. Ali.....	28
Book Review by Nebeyou Alemu Terefe.....	35
Tekletsadik Belachew. <i>Stories from the Fireplace: Theological Meditations on Haile Gerima’s Cinema</i> .....	35
Book Highlight: Belachew. <i>Stories from the Fireplace</i> .....	38
Resources for Education .....	44
“Shaping a truly global network through Christian e-publishing? Assessing strategies for access and dissemination within the <i>Dictionary of African Christian Biography</i> ” by Michèle Sigg and Anicka Fast.....	44
Recent Print and Digital Resources Related to Christianity in Africa Compiled by Beth Restricker, Head, BU African Studies Library .....	58

-----

Adinkra and Indigo cloth images from Ghana; Maasai cloth from East Africa.  
Thank you to <https://www.adireafricantextiles.com/> for the use of their textile images.

Photo: Jerusha Kanyua

*Please join our work by becoming a*

## *Friend of DACB*

The Friends of DACB is a community of individuals invested in the work of mission, global networks, scholarship, theological education, and shalom in the church in Africa. The Friends of DACB support the work of the *Dictionary of African Christian Biography* Project by assisting with:

- Promotion: Publicizing the mission of the DACB, and recruiting writers, instructors, and institutions to contribute content.
- Financial sustainability: Providing a core amount of money to sustain the project and help it to grow into the future.
- Networking: Helping to find collaborators in academia, web development, publishing houses, church leadership, mission agencies, educational institutions.
- Prayer for all those involved in this work

We invite you to become part of the mission of the DACB and the *Journal of African Christian Biography*. We need a global community of friends to build a sustainable and innovative future for this work.



For more information or to get involved, contact:

Mrs. Judy Stebbins, Chair

Email: [jcistebbins@gmail.com](mailto:jcistebbins@gmail.com) OR

Dr. Michele Sigg

Email : [dacb@bu.edu](mailto:dacb@bu.edu)

DONATE

## Time to Tell the Stories of the Greatest Missionaries in African Christian History

Throughout African Christian history, catechists and evangelists have carried out the lions' share of the work of mission. Catechists were generally served in Roman Catholic and Anglican churches as lay (non ordained) ministers and indigenous teachers. Their role was to instruct inquirers or new believers in the Christian faith. In Protestant churches, evangelists played an important role in outreach, often preaching in public places to draw people to the church. Their goal was to inspire their listeners to convert to Christianity.<sup>1</sup> Many churches had male and female evangelists although the women were often not recognized and remunerated for their service, as the men were. Both catechists and evangelists traveled frequently, moving from village to village as the needs arose.

Although these lay ministers—catechists and evangelists—played primary roles in the spread of Christianity and the decisive growth of the African church, historically, they were not referred to as “missionaries” as were the Europeans and North Americans. Although the purpose of Africans and expatriates alike was to evangelize and teach people about the Christian faith, in the practices of the time, the title of “missionary” was reserved exclusively for white foreign agents. And yet, from the earliest contact with the message of the gospel, Africans have been the most zealous and successful missionaries in Christian history. It is thanks to the work of African *missionaries* throughout history, whether they were performing their ministry as a catechist or an evangelist or in another role, that the Christian population in Africa has grown to be the largest in the global church (2023).<sup>2</sup>

This issue showcases the biographies of three exceptional African missionaries. Fr. Cosmas Sarbah, PhD, writes the story of his grandfather, John E. Sarbah, a catechist in the Roman Catholic Church of Ghana, who performed almost all the work of a parish priest for countless parishes throughout his region filling in where there was a shortage of priests and of European missionaries. Kimeze Teketwe presents the exciting story of Sembera K. Mackay, the first Anglican convert and the first to request baptism in nineteenth century Uganda. Sembera had such an impact through his lifelong ministry as a catechist that the author theorizes that his name might have been chosen to express the Luganda concept of Christian eucharist (communion) – *Oku-sembera*. Professor Dickson Nkonge Kagema gives us the story of Jerusha Kanyua, an extraordinary

---

<sup>1</sup> According to the *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (2022), a catechist is described as “In modern usage occasionally a person appointed to give instruction in Christianity” or “In the mission field a native teacher.” And the word “evangelist” describes “certain laymen [sic] in Protestant Churches who undertake popular preaching with a view to facilitating spiritual conversion.”

<sup>2</sup> According to the *World Christian Database*, in 2020, the number of Christians per continent was: 655 million in Africa, 603 million in Latin America, 572 million in Europe, 378 million in Asia, 369 million in North America, and 29 million in Oceania. Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds. *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed July 2023).

woman who ministered as an evangelist, a teacher, a midwife, a prayer warrior, and a prophetess, leaving a lasting legacy in her home region in Kenya.

In the second half of the journal, Dr. Aweis A. Ali leads an interview with a courageous pastor and missionary, Rev. Abtidoon (not his real name) who, in spite of living in one of the most dangerous regions on earth for a Christian, is one of the oldest known Somali Christians in the world (p.29). Next, a recently published volume on Ethiopian filmmaker Haile Gerima, *Stories from the Fireplace: Theological Meditations on Haile Gerima's Cinema* by Tekletsadik Belachew, a member of the DACB International Editorial Board, is the focus of a book review by Dr. Nebeyou Alemu Terefe. In the resources for education section, my recent presentation and that of Dr. Anicka Fast at the American Society of Missiology (2023) offer some insights into a possible model for teaching and publishing for theological education in Africa.

**Michèle Sigg**  
**Editor**



# Sarbah, John Etannyiedur

Approx. 1910s – 1989

Roman Catholic

Ghana

A Catholic catechist for his time

## Introduction

Although the first attempt to introduce the Roman Catholic Church was undertaken in the coastal villages of the Gold Coast (Ghana) in 1482 by Catholic Portuguese merchants and explorers, it was not until 1880 that a more serious attempt was made to found the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>3</sup> This new attempt started ten years after the Propaganda Fide (Congregation for the Propagation of Faith) had been established on the Gold Coast as a Prefecture Apostolic, entrusting it to the Society of African Missions in furtherance of its mandate to ensure the continuous growth of missions.<sup>4</sup> As a result, Fathers August Moreau and Eugene Murat were the first missionaries sent by the society to the Gold Coast to propagate the Catholic faith.<sup>5</sup> Soon upon their arrival at Elmina in 1880, the missionaries of the Society of African Missions embarked on an aggressive mission to evangelize the Gold Coast, beginning with attempts at planting churches in and around Elmina and Cape Coast. The missionaries administered sacraments and oversaw the founding of schools and hospitals with the help of the lay faithful.

Even though the efforts of the missionaries of the Society for African Missions were immensely critical in the evangelization of the people of Ghana, one cannot discount the contribution of the indigenous people. Often, the documentation of the history of Christianity has tended to focus on the contribution of the sacrifices of European missionaries to such an extent that very little is mentioned about the equally significant local contributors. In this paper, I will examine the contribution of African agents of evangelisation by highlighting the unique contribution of the John Etannyiedur Sarbah. John Sarbah's service to the Catholic Church was not only in his ministry as a catechist but also in the general development of the church.<sup>6</sup>

My interest in studying the life and missionary work of John Etannyiedur Sarbah

---

<sup>3</sup> Hans W. Debrunner, *A History of Christianity in Ghana* (Accra: Waterville Publishing House, 1967), 17.

<sup>4</sup> Debrunner, 17.

<sup>5</sup> The Propaganda Fide (now Congregation for the Evangelisation of Peoples) was set up by Pope Gregory XV in 1622 to ensure smooth management of all religious bodies (with the regulation of Catholic ecclesiastical affairs in non-Catholic countries) involved with mission of preaching and teaching of the Catholic faith across the world. Joseph A. Griffin, "The Sacred Congregation de Propaganda Fide: Its Foundation and Historical Antecedents," in *Christianity and Missions, 1450-1800* (Brookfield, Vermont: Ashgate Publishing, 1997), 68-76.

<sup>6</sup> E. Isichie, *A History of Christianity in Africa: From Antiquity to the Present* (William B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 1995), 24.

started in 1998, when I was posted to teach at St. Theresa's Vocational School at Dunkwa-on-Offin as part of the mandatory national service instituted by the Government of Ghana for all graduates of tertiary institutions.<sup>7</sup> Rev. Fr. Samuel Asante, the associate priest of St Stephen's Parish, assigned me to do weekend pastoral work at Denkyira Asikuma. At that time the church was still an outstation of St. Stephen's Parish, Dunkwa-on-Offin. I obtained most of the information on the catechetical work of John Etanniedur Sarbah at Asikuma from the interviews of ten elders. These were selected because they were members of the church who also lived and interacted with John Sarbah and his family during their stay in the pastoral area. Information on John Sarbah's work at Pedu and its environs was derived from interviews of selected individuals, including his children, relatives, as well as former catechists and church members. Some relevant information was also obtained from the archives of the Catholic Archdiocese of Cape Coast, Ghana, and St. John the Baptist Catholic Church, Pedu.

### **Personal life and Conversion**

The information on his baptismal card indicates that John Etanniedur Sarbah was born at Pedu (Cape Coast) to Opanyin Ekow Tsaba and Maame Ekuia Mansa, both of blessed memory. The card did not have any information on his date of birth. Although no one is certain of the exact day of his birth, the fact remains that John Sarbah was a man in his mid-forties when Ghana attained independence in March 6, 1957. He was born into the Twidan royal family of Pedu. His son, Kwesi Gyan, stated that: "John Sarbah's father relocated from a nearby village, Kwaprow, to engage in the flourishing watermelon and peanut plantations"<sup>8</sup> at Pedu and trade in Oguua (literal meaning "market"), the original name for Cape Coast.

It was at Pedu that Opanyin Kow Tsaba met and married a beautiful young woman, Maame Ekuia Mansa of the Twidan family of Pedu. Their marriage was blessed with four children, two males and five females. John Sarbah Etanniedur Sarbah, the only surviving son of Kow Tsaba, grew up and took up farming along with his sister Baduwa as their main occupation, following in the footsteps of their parents. Later on, at the age of 20, John Sarbah met and married a young woman, Atta Kakra, from the nearby village of Abura. Atta Kakra was baptised and given the name, Anastasia. Young Anastasia moved to Pedu to live with her husband. Their union was blessed with eight children (five males and three females).

John Sarbah took advantage of the Adult Education Policy put out by colonial government in 1948 and continued by the Kwame Nkrumah and later the Acheampong regimes.<sup>9</sup> The policy offered educational opportunities to John Sarbah and his colleagues who could not avail themselves of regular formal education classes because

---

<sup>7</sup> I was also interested in John E. Sarbah because he is my grandfather.

<sup>8</sup> Mr Kwesi Gyan, interviewed on May 7, 2021

<sup>9</sup> Maurice Garnier & Mark Schafer, "Educational Model and Expansion of Enrolments in Sub-Saharan Africa" *Sociology of Education* 79, no. 2 (2006), 153-75.

they were too old.<sup>10</sup> By the end of the first stage of the program on literary skills, John Sarbah could read and write in the native dialect (Fante) and English.<sup>11</sup>

The second and third stages of the adult education intensive scheme went further to deepen John Sarbah's understanding of the ongoing development of the country and to improve his knowledge of the Gold Coast through workshops, seminars, community forums, and development work. By the time he had completed the third stage of the three-year intensive program, John Sarbah had already oriented or reshaped his mindset and developed a liking for the Western lifestyle.

The missionaries of the Society of African Missions who settled in Cape Coast adopted home visitation as their major tool for evangelisation.<sup>12</sup> Home visitation involved one-on-one visits and sharing of the Gospel message of love wherever they went. It included developing an inter-personal exchange which was to help their interlocutors start out on a journey of a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. John Sarbah encountered two missionaries on one of their visitations at the Kotokoraba market at Cape Coast.<sup>13</sup> He had accompanied his mother to sell *kenkey* (a popular Ghanaian Food) at the market. The two missionaries were in conversation with Christian converts and non-Christians alike at the marketplace. He instantly joined the crowd and listened to the word of God out of curiosity, leaving his mother alone to sell. A year later, some of the missionaries came to Pedu, John Sarbah's home town, and he went to them. Eventually, John Sarbah was baptised in 1932 at Pedu in the presence of his non-Christian parents.<sup>14</sup> He was confirmed a year after and became a lay reader.

### **St. John the Baptist Church and St. Peter's Seminary at Pedu**

When some of missionaries came to his hometown of Pedu (a suburb of Cape Coast) in early 1930, John Sarbah was delighted to see them again. He approached them and this time introduced himself to them. He even accompanied them around the village on home visitation, introducing the inhabitants to the missionaries and the missionaries to them. The sizable numbers they gathered after subsequent visits by the missionaries in 1932 indicated that the time was ripe to plant the Catholic church. Information from the Archdiocesan archives on Pedu Church indicates three main facts about the church.

---

<sup>10</sup> R. Woodberry, "Democratization in Post-Colonial Societies: The Long-Term Influences of Religion and Colonial Governments," *Manuscript*, Harvard: Center for International Affairs, Harvard University, September, 2002.

<sup>11</sup> Prosser Gifford and Timothy C. Weiskel, "African Education in a Colonial Context: French and British Styles" *France and Britain in Africa: Imperial Rivalry and Colonial Rule*, edited by Prosser Gifford and William Roger Louis (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971), 663-711.

<sup>12</sup> F. K. Buah, *A History of Ghana*, Revised and Updated (Malaysia: Macmillan, 1998), 100.

<sup>13</sup> This interactive approach to missionary work was deemed so effective that it eventually became a diocesan policy for the clergy and the church at large. They were referred to as the silent proclaimers.

<sup>14</sup> Baptismal Records, St. John the Baptist Catholic Church, Pedu.

First, “[t]he first Mass was celebrated in the family house with five households,”<sup>15</sup> many of whom were among John Sarbah’s kinfolk. Pedu had no local ruler at the time. The governance of the village was in the hands of the elders of the six families of the village headed by the *ebusua panyin* (head) of the royal family. Second, “[t]he royal family donated a piece of land for church building.”<sup>16</sup> The fact that the piece of land given for the Pedu church building was close to the family house demonstrates that the royal family was very welcoming and ready to convert to Christianity. Later, the growing number of members necessitated the construction of the church building, which was started through communal labor by church members and even non-Christians, with donations from church members in cash and building materials. Third, “the building was completed in 1944 to the glory of God.”<sup>17</sup> This first church building, though it still stands today, is no longer used for church services. The Pedu church was eventually named St. John the Baptist Catholic Church. The eventual evangelisation and conversion of all the people of Pedu was gradual. It was so effective that to this day no other Christian denomination has been able to establish a church in Pedu.

The idea of training indigenous priests and church leaders for the Catholic Church in Ghana was always on the mind of the first Archbishop of Cape Coast, Most Rev. William T. Porter. As it was the policy of the Propaganda Fide, the missionaries of the Society of African Missions (SMA) trained the indigenous people to take over from European missionaries. Archbishop Porter found that the Pedu area was an ideal place for the major seminary not only because of its proximity to Cape Coast (three miles away) but also because he saw Pedu as the future of Cape Coast. In addition, St. John the Baptist Church at Pedu was doing well under John Sarbah and was helping with the evangelisation of the surrounding villages.

After an intensive visibility study conducted by the seminary committee headed by the auxiliary bishop, Most Rev. John K. Amissah, John Sarbah was contacted as a prominent Catholic and member of the royal family responsible for Pedu lands. Motivated by the good news and the honor that the training of indigenous catholic priests would bring Pedu, John Sarbah did everything he could to convince his cousin Egya Kweku Akyer and uncle Opayin Bentum (head of Twidan family/lineage of Pedu) to ensure the quick release of fifteen acres of land at a prime location for the seminary. After a long and difficult discussion among the family members—many of whom at the time were non-Christians—the decision was made to give “a portion of the land close to the forest and the lake which was the abode of the Pedu goddess, *Yerekyirmu*.”<sup>18</sup> This was the evil forest. The fact that they thought of the evil forest in the first place indicates a certain unwillingness, or misgivings, towards the whole idea of Christian religious training for priests at Pedu. Eventually however, the land was leased for 100 years to the Metropolitan Archbishop of Cape Coast on behalf of the local ordinaries (bishops)

---

<sup>15</sup> Records of St. John the Baptist Church (Pedu), Archdiocesan Archives, Catholic Secriatariat, Cape Coast.

<sup>16</sup> Records of St. John the Baptist Church (Pedu).

<sup>17</sup> Records of St. John the Baptist Church (Pedu).

<sup>18</sup> Egya Kweku Atta, John Sarbah’s cousin, interviewed on May, 5, 2021.

of the four dioceses, Most Rev. Joseph Oliver Bowers, SVD of Accra, Most Rev. Anthony Konings, SMA, of Keta, and Most Rev. Andrew Van Den Bronk, SMA, of Kumasi.

## **Called to be a Catechist of the Church**

After considerable deliberation and personal prayer, John Sarbah embraced full-time ministry as a catechist. The standard seven certificate he had then received after completing middle school at St. Francis Catholic School at Cape Coast turned out to be valuable. In addition, the fact that he belonged to the royal family of Pedu was also an advantage for missions in those days. It was the mission strategy of the church, wherever it went, to seek to convert the royals first and then the local people. The conversion of the royal family facilitated the conversion not only of their subjects but also of members of other royal families elsewhere.<sup>19</sup>

Moreover, as a catechist, John Sarbah felt he was going to fulfil his long-time dream of taking up the vocation to the priesthood. Thus, John Sarbah saw the role of the catechist as an opportunity to serve God and minister in His vineyard. His decision to take up this vocation was met with opposition not only from local folks but also from his family. His son Kwesi Gyan observed that: “[m]any were those who interpreted his decision as a desperate attempt by a lazy man”<sup>20</sup> who, despising the family business of farming, wanted to use the ministry as an escape. Many tried to convince him to rescind his decision, to no avail. At this time in the history of the church in Ghana and throughout the continent catechists were very much needed and played a crucial role in the expansion of the church.

On June 15, 1942, John Sarbah was commissioned as a catechist in a short ceremony at St. Francis Cathedral together with four others. As a catechist, John Sarbah was instrumental in planting and spreading the Catholic faith in the surrounding villages of Pedu. Kofi Occran, who often accompanied John Sarbah on pastoral visits noted that “we often went ahead of the priest to the villages around”<sup>21</sup> such as Abora, Kwaprow, Kakomodo, Esuekyir, Nkanfowa, Nkanfoa, Apewosika, Ammama, Akotokyir, and Ankaful, to prepare catechumens for the sacraments of baptism, first communion, and confirmation. John Sarbah taught them catechism and songs and also endured the difficulty of teaching Latin for the celebration of the Mass to Catholics who, for the most part, lacked formal education. He took a particular interest in the training and grooming of leaders at the churches he visited.<sup>22</sup> He served as a personal interpreter to many priests who were posted to the area. Thus, he helped pass on the faith of the church by introducing individuals to the person of Jesus Christ.

John Sarbah was one of the early catechists commissioned for the Archdiocese of

---

<sup>19</sup> C. P. Groves, *The Planting of Christianity in Africa* (4 vols), (London: Lutterworth Press, 1948), 45.

<sup>20</sup> Kwesi Gyan, interviewed on May 7, 2021.

<sup>21</sup> Kofi Occran, interviewed on August 11, 2020.

<sup>22</sup> Kofi Occran, interviewed on August 11, 2020.

Cape Coast.<sup>23</sup> He was an ordinary village man, from a simple background, called to be a catechist. Although he was not an expert teacher or a brilliant theologian, he generously volunteered his time to share his simple Catholic faith, values, and traditions with his generation of Christians. Through prayer, personal study, and direct participation in the life of the communities where he worked, John Sarbah grew in the integrity and responsibility that is required of a catechist.<sup>24</sup> He became a positive role model who helped God's people grow in faith, spirituality, and their relationship with God. His gifts of time and talent were of tremendous value to Catholics and non-Catholics alike. Through his words, actions, and love for his people, the message of Jesus Christ continued to spread throughout the Archdiocese of Cape Coast.

### **Denkyira Asikuma Pastoral Areas**

Approximately seven years after his commissioning, catechist John Sarbah was sent to take care of the pastoral area of Denkyira Asikuma, which was then an outstation of St. Stephen's Parish, Dunkwa-on Offin, in the Archdiocese of Cape Coast. He went with his wife and children, not wanting to leave anything behind that would draw him back. He dedicated his whole life to the service of the church as a catechist and interpreter in a unique way that amazed many wherever he went to minister.

John Sarbah arrived at Asikuma, a village in the Denkyira District, as a catechist responsible for six other villages in the area. Denkyira Asikuma and the surrounding villages were steeped in indigenous religions at that time. In 1949, with the help of his Dutch parish priest, Fr. James Ansaah, and his associate, Fr. Paul Bortsia, he immediately established St. Paul's Primary School in his house. Opanyin Mensa-Sekyere, one of the six pupils who started school there summed up the role it played: "This school was not only meant for the children in whom lay the future of the Catholic Church. It was also an avenue for the eventual training of local people to provide leadership in the new Christian communities (stations) to be founded in the area."<sup>25</sup> Thus, school turned out to be a critical extension of the catechism class. John Sarbah oversaw the church, teaching catechism and also leading the liturgy of the Word when the priest in charge was absent. He was also the homily interpreter for the priests whenever they came on visitation.

Although John Sarbah lived in Asikuma he was also pioneered the establishment of churches in the surrounding areas. He helped plant churches in Nsueam, Achiase, Meretwiso, Esaase, Atobiase, and Fawomanyo. His regular visits to these stations encouraged and deepened the faith of the converts. Asked why a school was not founded at Atobiase and even Esaase, Obaapanyin Afia Kobu observed that "my village was just walking distance from Asikuma. We could trek to and from school at Asikuma.

---

<sup>23</sup> Records in Archdiocesan Archives, Catholic Secretariat, Archdiocese of Cape Coast

<sup>24</sup> Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization, *Directory for Catechesis*, 113.

<sup>25</sup> Cosmas Ebo Sarbah, "Religious Rights in the State Regulated Mission Schools in Ghana", in *Religion and Sustainable Development: Ghanaian Perspectives*, George Ossom-Batsa, Nicolletta Gatti, Rabiatsu Deinyo Ammah (eds) (Vatican City: Urbaniana University Press, 2018), 49.

Pupils from Meretwiso also walked.”<sup>26</sup> From my discussion with some of the village folks, I concluded that as an interpreter, a teacher, and a catechist, John Sarbah was responsible for the interpretation of Catholic Christianity and its propagation. He taught the new converts Christian prayers and hymns, prepared the way for the priest and ensured catechetical instruction. The priest would normally come in from time to time and did little more than perform the sacraments. The priest travelled from village to village, baptizing hundreds of people each day, while the real mission work of the stations remained firmly in the hands of the catechist John Sarbah. Thus, John Sarbah’s work continued whether or not the priest was present.

Some members of the church at Nsueam and Achiase also noted that he regularly visited and interacted with all people in their homes. He settled disputes between Christians and non-Christians as well. His open interaction won the hearts of all people, including even the non-Christians such as traditional religionists, some of whom eventually converted to the Catholic faith. At one point, he became the teacher of the Asikuma township. Kwame Appiah, the catechist at the time of the interview, remembers that “he was more or less the teacher for the whole village.”<sup>27</sup> As the only one who could read and write, he also served as the chief’s linguist, who helped not only to write and record the history of the royal courts and families but also ensured their conversion to Christianity. The immediate conversion of the royal family was a critical feat which contributed to the swift acceptance of the church by the locals. This is because the rulers were not only political leaders but also religious ones. Therefore, it was almost impossible to ignore the chiefs in the quest to plant Christianity in the area.

In spite of the sacrifices he had to endure, John Sarbah encountered challenges from the royal family and the priests of the local shrine who felt their role and culture were being undermined by his continual presence in the area. It is difficult to underestimate the persistence and the effectiveness of passive resistance of many other native groups to the early missionaries and also to catechists such as John Sarbah.<sup>28</sup> During the period of John Sarbah’s stay, no more than 400 baptisms were administered. The number of adult conversions were strikingly unimpressive. Baptism was confined mainly to children who joined the church through the Catholic Youth Organisation (CYO) through their cultural display activities which included drumming, dancing, and drama performances. Kwame Appiah observed that “[h]e was also not liked by everybody in the stations he worked. His children were hated and treated very badly because of some people’s hatred for their father. Often he was treated as a foreigner and felt lonely.”<sup>29</sup> Eventually he was accused of destroying customs and traditions, and for not allowing the faithful to get involved in the indigenous festivals which missionaries considered in those days to be heathen

---

<sup>26</sup> Obaapanyin Afia Kobu, interviewed on December 3, 2020.

<sup>27</sup> Kwame Appiah, interviewed on July 9, 2020.

<sup>28</sup> Alan Strathern, “Catholic Missions and local Rulers in Sub-Saharan Africa” in *A Companion to Early Modern Catholic Global Missions* (Boston: Brill, 2018), 152-154.

<sup>29</sup> Kwame Appiah, interviewed on April 19, 2020.

celebrations.<sup>30</sup> He constantly preached to Christians who engaged in pouring of libations to ancestors and indigenous rituals for the cultivation of food stuffs and cocoa.

### **The Call Back Home to Pedu**

After about ten years as a missionary to the Asikuma pastoral area, John Sarbah returned to Cape Coast in 1963 and specifically to his village of Pedu. Two reasons were given in the interviews to explain his return to Pedu. Madame Ekua Yaba, a daughter, said “John Sarbah came back to Pedu because the extended family felt he had been away for too long.”<sup>31</sup> Mr. Ekow Awotwe, a former church president of Pedu, noted that “[h]e was recalled because the nascent church he helped plant at Pedu was in need of a competent and experienced catechist to run the affair.”<sup>32</sup> Because of the proximity of St. John the Baptist’s Church to St. Peter’s Seminary, the seminary had direct responsibility for the church. The rector selected one of the priest-formators to be in charge of the station. The heavy duty of forming young men to the priesthood made it difficult for Rev. Fr. Michael Blume (SVD), priest-formator in charge of the Pedu church at the time, to go beyond essential clerical duties. A catechist was needed to fill the vacuum in the absence of the priest: to teach catechism, organize the choir and actively engage in home visitation. Upon his return to his village and his people, John Sarbah was appointed the primary catechist.

After his arrival, John Sarbah also realised that the nascent school he helped establish had been taken over by the state as part of the implementation of the Education Act of 1961, which ordered all schools, including mission schools, to be run and administered by the Ministry of Education and the state agency, the Ghana Education Service.<sup>33</sup> Like most mission schools in Ghana, although the school is still located on a piece of land procured by the church, it is now a state school with the name Pedu District Assembly School.<sup>34</sup>

In Pedu, John Sarbah duty was basically teaching catechism and preparing candidates for the sacraments. To ensure that the singing at Mass improved John Sarbah founded the St. John the Baptist singing band. The singing band had its regular rehearsals at John Sarbah’s house. His daughter, Maame Ekua Mansa, indicated that “the membership of the band comprised largely of his children, nephews and nieces.”<sup>35</sup> He also brought in many young men and women to join the band. He was the dedicated choirmaster who taught the group songs. He remained the catechist and the choirmaster until his retirement in 1985. In so doing, he helped deepen the faith of the members.<sup>36</sup>

---

<sup>30</sup> Strathern, “Catholic Missions and local Rulers in Sub-Saharan Africa,” 156.

<sup>31</sup> Maame Ekua Yaba, interviewed on November 2, 2021

<sup>32</sup> Uncle Ekow Awotwe, interviewed on November 4, 2021

<sup>33</sup> Philip Foster, *Education and Social Change in Ghana* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1965), 81.

<sup>34</sup> Sarbah, “Religious Rights in the State Regulated Mission Schools in Ghana,” 34 & 35.

<sup>35</sup> Maame Ekua Mansa, interviewed on AuguSt. 10, 2021

<sup>36</sup> Daniel Justice Eshun “Speaking For Ourselves: The Ghanaian Encounter with European



John Sarbah's dedication to duty and his love for the church did not go unnoticed. He was one of the only two catechists who were awarded the medal of extraordinary missionary work by Pope John Paul II who came to visit Ghana in May of 1980 as a special guest of honor for the centenary celebrations of the Catholic Church in Ghana.<sup>37</sup> He received the *Pro Ecclesia et Pontifice* Papal Award instituted by Leo XIII on July 17, 1888, which happens to be the highest award given by the Supreme Pontiff of the Catholic Church to laypeople and the clergy. This papal recognition demonstrates John Sarbah's outstanding service and dedication to the Catholic Church in Ghana.

## The Ebusuapayin Challenges

Back home, John Sarbah was immediately elevated to the position of *ebusuapayin* as head of his extended family.<sup>38</sup> As *ebusuapayin*, John Sarbah became the living representative of the putative ancestor of the lineage/family. His main role as the *ebusuapayin* was to ensure the continuous survival of the family by helping to resolve and settle all internal rivalry, misunderstanding, and animosity.<sup>39</sup> Because he loved the family and their traditions, he ensured that members of the family upheld the customary obligation of lending support, both material and emotional, to one another, as a family, irrespective of religious backgrounds.<sup>40</sup>

The Catholic leadership of the Archdiocese of Cape Coast were not too pleased with John Sarbah taking up the role of *ebusuapayin*. The Catholic leadership felt the position of family head would compromise John Sarbah's role as a catechist. At the time, the church's mission was the conversion of souls to Christianity, which was at odds with any friendly encounters with non-Christians. The religious background of the membership of the lineage was diverse, consisting of Christians, traditional religionists, and Muslims.<sup>41</sup> The multi-religious nature of the family meant that John Sarbah was going to welcome every member irrespective of religious backgrounds and offer the assistance they needed.<sup>42</sup> The current *ebusuapayin* of the Twidan family, Opayin Muhammad Musa, observed that "[a]s *ebusuapayin* of the lineage, John Sarbah,

---

Missionaries, 16<sup>th</sup>–21<sup>st</sup>. Centuries", *Mission Studies* 38:3 (Dec 2021).

<sup>37</sup>[https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1981/november/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_spe\\_19811112\\_vescovi-ghana.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1981/november/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19811112_vescovi-ghana.html)

<sup>38</sup> The lineage (*ebusua*) is a basic social group whose members are believed to have descended through one line from a common ancestor or ancestress. All members of lineages are "...the matrilineal descendants of a single remote ancestor/ancestress" who owns property (usually land). All lineage members are *mogyakoro* or related by blood to the extent that even marriage is not permitted between people of the same lineage (M. Manoukian, *Western Africa Part 1: Akan and Ga-Adangme*, 1964), 17

<sup>39</sup> Desmond Ayim-Aboagye "Akan Language and its Relationship to Ancient Biblical Writings," 2022.

<sup>40</sup> Kwame Nkrumah, *Consciencism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1964), 24.

<sup>41</sup> Douglas Pratt, *The Challenge of Islam: Encounters in Interfaith Dialogue* (Hampshire, England: Ashgate, 2005), 61.

<sup>42</sup> Nathan Samwini, *The Muslim Resurgence in Ghana since 1950: Its Effects upon Muslims and Muslim-Christian Relations* (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2006), 76.

worked to instill discipline and keep the membership united under his leadership”<sup>43</sup> by faithfully following the traditions and customs associated with his position. He developed a cordial and friendly relationship with non-Christian family members and offered them the cooperation they deserved as blood relatives.

Another challenge John Sarbah faced was his role as the native priest of the ancestral stool which was part of his duties as *ebusuapayin*. As the family head, John Sarbah was essentially the priest of the ancestral shrine who also had to lead rituals associated with the ancestral stool. The church considered this practice “heathen.”<sup>44</sup> During festivals, libations were poured and animal sacrifices offered on the stool on behalf of the members of the lineage and as a memorial to the ancestors.<sup>45</sup> Even though on such occasions John Sarbah delegated his responsibilities to others, “the fact that the delegates performed the duties on his behalf was worrying enough.”<sup>46</sup> Many Christians, Muslims, and traditionalist family members still held strong views about the ancestral stool. Therefore they expected John Sarbah to play his role as head of the family to the fullest. This was a challenge to his role as a catechist. The church felt his double roles as catechist and *ebusuapayin* were in conflict. After five years, John Sarbah realised that combining the two roles was an impossibility and relinquished his role as head of the family. In 1986, John Sarbah retired from his work as a catechist as a fulfilled man.<sup>47</sup>

## Conclusion

In 1989, at the ripe age of about 95, John Sarbah passed away due to old age. He had been a catechist par excellence who performed his duties with deep faith in God and as a service to humanity. The interactive model of evangelisation that he championed was highly effective wherever he went. His knowledge of the language, and of the religious-political worldview and culture of the people was immensely beneficial. Local catechists were in high demand because the European missionaries of the Society of African Missions from Netherland were in short supply.<sup>48</sup> There was a high death rate among the European missionaries because of the harsh, humid tropical environment and its attendant diseases. They also suffered a number of assassinations as a result of the mistrust that the general population continued to have towards them, even years after the abolition of the slave trade.<sup>49</sup> Although Christian converts were enthusiastic

---

<sup>43</sup> Opayin Muhammad Musa, interviewed on October 2, 2021.

<sup>44</sup> John Mensah Sarbah, *Fanti Customary Laws*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (London: Frank Cass, 1968), 54; G. F. Arthur, *Cloth as Metaphor: Re-reading the Adinkra Cloth Symbols of the Akan of Ghana* (Ligon (Ghana): CEFIKS, Inc., 2001), 83.

<sup>45</sup> Christian A. Ackah, *Akan Ethics: A Study of the Moral Ideas and the Moral Behaviour of the Akan Tribes of Ghana* (Accra: Ghana Universities Press, 1988), 34.

<sup>46</sup> Sarbah, *Fanti Customary Laws*, 54; G. F. Arthur, *Cloth as Metaphor*, 83.

<sup>47</sup> Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-western Religion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University press, 1995), 67.

<sup>48</sup> David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991), 65.

<sup>49</sup> Of the six Portuguese members of the Augustinian Order who worked tirelessly to spread the

and welcoming of the missionaries, the white man even as a missionary, was seen by many local people as a slave trader who was there to capture Africans and sell them.

Under the direction of priests, John Sarbah continued with frankness to announce the Good News to his brothers and sisters of other religions, preparing them for entry into the ecclesial community through baptism. Through religious instruction, preparation for the sacraments, animation of prayer, and other works of charity, he helped the baptised to grow in the fervor of the Christian life. Where there was a shortage of priests, he was, as a catechist, entrusted with the pastoral guidance of the little community separated from the main parish.<sup>50</sup> Often, he was called to witness to his faith by harsh trials and painful privations.

The story of John Sarbah is also that of many other catechists in Ghana and Africa who were called to assist the European missionaries in the evangelising mission of the church. Why did they embrace and preach a religion they knew very little about, completely discarding their time-tested religion, customs, and traditions? The only explanation is that it was a leap of faith.

### **Cosmas Ebo Sarbah**

This article was written by Dr. Cosmas Ebo Sarbah who is a Senior Lecturer of Comparative Religion and Interreligious Dialogue in the Department for the Study of Religions at the University of Ghana and at St. Peter's Regional Seminary (Pedu). He is also a diocesan priest ordained in the Catholic Church of Ghana.

---

faith from 1503 to 1534 in Elmina, Komenda, Efutu and Abura area, five were murdered.

<sup>50</sup> E. Isichie, *A History of Christianity in Africa (from antiquity to the present)*, (William B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 1995), 67.

## **Mackay, Sembera K.**

1865 - 1892

**Church of Uganda**

**Uganda**

Sembera K. Mackay was Uganda's first Protestant and the first Ugandan to request baptism. [1]

On October 8, 1881, Sembera delivered a note he had composed with "a pointed piece of spear grass" as the pen and "ink manufactured from banana juice and dirt" to Alexander Murdoch Mackay requesting baptism. Mackay, a Church Missionary Society (CMS) missionary, had been Sembera's friend and teacher since arriving in Buganda's capital in November 1878. The note, which soon became a justification that Ugandans were ready for baptism, read as follows: "Bwana Mackay, Sembera has come with compliments and to give good news. Will you baptize him because he believes the words of Jesus Christ?" [2]

### **Early years**

The exact place of Sembera's birth is unknown, but he was born in Busoga. He was a Musoga who had come to Buganda as an enslaved person. It was not uncommon to see enslaved people from other ethnic groups in Buganda as the kingdom often raided neighboring territories. The captives then either worked for the king and the chiefs or were sold to Zanzibari Arab traders. Catholic martyrs Mathias Mulumba Kalembe and Adolphus Mukasa Ludigo, both contemporaries of Sembera, were slaves in Buganda after being captured in Busoga and Bunyoro, respectively. Similarly, in a letter to the *Times* in 1889, Mackay stated that Buganda sold as many as 2,000 enslaved people to the Zanzibari Arabs every year.[3a] When Sembera first began attending the Protestant mission station, he was enslaved to Mayanja, a Muganda chief (Munakulya), who later became Isaya [Isaiah] after his conversion.

From a conversation Sembera had with CMS missionary Rev. E. Cyril Gordon, we know that he arrived in present-day Nabulagala, Buganda, during the reign of Muteesa I, the thirtieth *kabaka* of Buganda. The Zanzibari Arabs persuaded Muteesa to decree that all Baganda learn basic Islamic prayers from them. The Arabs had first come to Buganda during the reign of *Ssekabaka* Ssuuna II, his father, and immediate predecessor.[3b] Sembera studied the Arabic prayers taught to him and became familiar with Islam but was never convinced. As the Zanzibari Arabs used Swahili, Sembera learned it, further expanding his linguistic repertoire, which included Lusoga and Luganda.

Things suddenly changed when Henry Morton Stanley came to Buganda in 1875 and met Muteesa. On behalf of Muteesa, Stanley wrote an open letter to Queen Victoria published in the *Daily Telegraph* of November 15, 1875, requesting that English teachers be sent to Buganda to fill an urgent need for learning. He also left behind a young man named Muftaha, who acted as Muteesa's secretary and ran his

classes in Muteesa's court in the afternoon. As Sembera was interested in learning he took Muftaha's lessons as well. Though the Queen did not respond, the CMS sent a team of eight missionaries. Two of them reached Rubaga, Buganda, on July 8, 1877, followed by the Catholic White Fathers, who arrived from France, via Algiers (Algeria), on February 17, 1879.

Sembera was one of Rev. C. T. Wilson's students. When Wilson returned to England, Sembera connected with Mackay, with whom he became affectionately close. The two men had known each other for almost three years when Sembera decided to take his faith a notch higher by filing the infamous baptism notice (mentioned above). The note he gave to his teacher requesting baptism was the unique moment the CMS was waiting for to organize the first baptism, especially as Sembera was an exceptional student. That same year, Mackay had described him as a diligent pupil who had read everything he was given and who was exemplary, as far as he knew. As Rev. Philip O'Flaherty and Mackay were planning and preparing for the baptism following Sembera's request, a young man named Ddamulira, who had believed in witchcraft all his life, requested baptism before his death. [4] When Ddamulira died unbaptized, the CMS took this news as extra motivation to organize the baptism.

### **First Baptisms in Uganda**

The CMS had not baptized a single person in the five years of its existence in Uganda, making Sembera's request more exceptional. The Catholic mission, set up a year later, had performed several baptisms, starting on March 27, 1880, when four young men were baptized after only four months of instruction. There were two more planned for 1882. Reflecting on the delay, Robert Ashe said they wanted to baptize only when they felt Ugandans were ready and the CMS could not compromise on some important doctrinal issues. One such issue was polygamy. Polygamous men had to give up all their wives but one to be baptized, which ruled out many people, including the king and chiefs. But the inability of the CMS missionaries to stay in Uganda for a reasonable period might also have been an issue. Only Mackay, who was not ordained, appeared focused on the Ugandan mission until O'Flaherty joined him.

On March 18, 1882, Sembera was baptized by O'Flaherty, assisted by Mackay. He thus became the first (of five) Ugandans to join what has since become the Church of Uganda. The other four Ugandans baptized with him were Mukasa Edward, Mukasa Philip, Buuza-Abali-Awo Henry Wright, and Takirambudde Yakobo. One of the Mukasas took up O'Flaherty's name as his Christian name, as Sembera adopted that of his teacher and friend. The significance of this baptism cannot be overemphasized, as it opened the door to more baptisms and revived a struggling CMS mission. The enthusiasm of the first eight missionaries who had left Southampton, England, for Uganda on April 27, 1876, was hardly visible anymore.

But during the same year, Henry Wright Kitakule, a leading local Bible translator, was baptized on Easter in Zanzibar by the Universities Mission. The following year, Mika Sematimba and Zakaliya Kizito Kisingiri also joined the church. Sematimba was the first Protestant convert to travel to England to request more

missionaries for Uganda. Kisingiri was a trailblazer in the church and rose to the positions of deputy Katikiro (Prime Minister) of Buganda and regent of the young Ssekabaka Daudi Cwa II. In 1884, Nikodemo Sebwato, a prominent chief, let go all his wives but one so that he could be baptized. He then pursued great accomplishments for the church, including leading the construction of the first iteration of the monumental Saint Paul's Cathedral Namirembe, Uganda. By the end of 1884, eighty-eight Ugandans had been baptized. Such was the magnitude of the events Sembera had set in motion that, in 1904, a historical high of 6,135 Ugandans received baptism.

## Translation Work

Following baptism, Sembera continued learning and working with the CMS mission in different areas like interpretation and translation, thus endearing himself to the mission. In a letter dated August 5, 1890, published in the *CMS Intelligencer* of January 1891, Gordon wrote: "Now, with the help of Sembera and Kitakule, I have nearly completed the gospel [St. Mark and St. Luke]." In his book, *Eighteen Years in Uganda & East Africa*, Alfred R. Tucker, the first Protestant bishop to reach Uganda after two others before him failed, also wrote about how precious Sembera was to the team: "Sembera Mackay was peculiarly dear to both Walker and Gordon." In the *CMS Gleaner* of July 1893, Gordon again stated: "There was not one among the elders of the church in Buganda who had gained the respect and won the love of the whole of the church, including the missionaries, as [much as] Sembera had done."

In October 1883, Sembera participated in the first-ever holy communion with twenty others. The communion was again led by O'Flaherty, Mackay, and Ashe, who had since joined them in the spring of 1883. Intriguingly, the Luganda word for taking communion *Oku-sembere* is derived from the word Sembera, meaning "to approach," as defined by O'Flaherty in his *Luganda Grammar and Vocabulary*, published posthumously in 1890 by the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (SPCK). Christian missionaries and their local counterparts often had to invent new words or improvise where they needed a local word for a foreign word or activity that did not previously exist in a local language. Communion was one such word, and it is possible that Sembera's name played a role in how communion came to be known in Luganda: *Oku-sembere*.

## Persecution under Mwanga

On October 10, 1884, Muteesa died and was succeeded by his son Mwanga II, whose reign was characterized by Christian persecution for the first four years. Interestingly, the young Mwanga had been Mackay's student for a while, although he was never baptized early on. When he was chosen as king out of Muteesa's children, both English and French missionaries might have thought he was going to treat them favorably. It was never the case because he sought to stamp out Christianity from his kingdom from day one. On January 31, 1885, barely three months after enthronement, he sent shock waves throughout the kingdom when he ordered the "slow-burning to death" of three

young Christians, Serwanga, Kakumba, and Lugalama, whose bodies were dismembered and displayed in strategic locations in the kingdom as a warning to whoever aspired to emulate them.

That same month, Sembera was elected one of twelve members of the very first church council, thereby becoming one of the original elders of the Church of Uganda. The council was born out of concern and fear on the part of Mackay that Mwanga might expel all Europeans from Buganda because Christianity continued to spread despite the persecution. For it to be possible for the Baganda to continue the church's work, the English missionaries came up with the idea of the church council as the first step towards the indigenization of Uganda's Protestant church. To be elected a council member or even vote, one had to be Christian and Ugandan. It quickly became a leadership platform that placed trust and responsibility in several local Christians, elevating them to national and regional status. Due to their role as elders, Kitakule, Sematimba, Nikodemo, and Zakaliya were among the twelve original members who also became prominent leaders of their generation.

Mwanga did not immediately expel anyone, but persecution only intensified. On October 29, James Hannington, the first bishop of Equatorial Africa, did not reach Buganda because he was killed in Busoga by Luba, a local chief, purportedly on the orders of Mwanga. On November 1885, Joseph Balikuddembe, the head of Mwanga's pages, was ordered to be burned alive, but the Katikiro killed him before throwing him into the fire. Worn out by the stressful environment that Mwanga's reign had ushered in, O'Flaherty decided to leave the country of his own volition in December 1885, followed by Ashe the following year. In July 1887, Mackay was also expelled, on the advice of the Zanzibari Arabs who retreated to Usambiro (present-day Tanzania). Gordon came in to replace Mackay as the only CMS missionary left in Uganda, but the circumstances under which this happened are beyond our scope.

Sembera and his fellow elders could not do much to change Mwanga's resolve. However, when Mwanga turned against the Muslims, they toppled him, forcing him to flee on October 12, 1888. In the ensuing confrontation between Muslims and Christians, Christians lost and were driven from Buganda to Ankole. The *CMS Awake* of October 1892 reported that an estimated 2,500 Christians fled to Ankole, including Sembera. Even in exile, he used his voice to promote peace, stressing that Uganda could accommodate all religious groups, Protestants, Catholics, or Muslims. Not long after that, Mackay, still in Usambiro, requested that Sembera join him so they could continue translation work. When Christians returned to Buganda a year later after Mwanga seized the throne on October 11, 1889, Sembera was in Usambiro. He only came back after Mackay's death on February 8, 1890.

Sembera declined the offer of a chieftaincy from Mwanga who had sought to reward him for his contribution towards his reinstallation as *kabaka*. Many others, including Zakaliya, Nikodemo, and Sematimba, accepted positions in Mwanga's administration. It is worth noting that the CMS's perception of itself in Uganda had evolved to the point that they believed political and cultural influence contributed to their overall cause. Sematimba was promoted to chief in time for a trip to England under the auspices of the CMS since they believed that would make him a more credible

guest. This belief was based on their memory of Muteesa's first envoys to England that O'Flaherty had led back to Buganda on March 18, 1881. In rejecting the position initially—something many others could not do—Sembera had demonstrated that God's work deserved undivided commitment.

## **Sembera's Leadership and Global Influence**

In a Christmas letter he wrote to Christians in England, published in the *CMS Gleaner* of November 1890, Sembera called for more missionaries to Uganda, writing thus:

We have returned to our country by the strength of our Master Jesus Christ. We now reside in Buganda with our fellow countrymen of the Catholic party. Mr. Mackay has gone to his rest, and only two remain, Messrs. Gordon and Walker. I am your friend and, therefore, tell you these words that you may help us in the cause of our Master Jesus Christ and that you may send our Christian brothers having sympathy with the religion of our master to teach the Word of God in Uganda.

Interestingly, another story about him in the *CMS Gleaner* of July 1893 claims that Sembera constantly communicated with Christians in England—some even unknown to the CMS missionaries. Yet the above letter was monumental in many ways, aside from being possibly the first letter written by a Ugandan Christian and being reported in another country. This made Sembera even more exceptional than most believers of his day. Following the letter, the annual number of missionaries sent to Uganda began to steadily increase: no fewer than three came in per year. Ten came in 1895, of whom five were the first female missionaries in the eighteen years of existence of the CMS mission in Uganda. [5]

On January 20, 1891, Sembera was one of the first six catechists passed by Bishop Tucker on his first trip to Uganda. The other five were Kitakule, Sematimba, Kisingiri, Paulo Bakunga, and Yohana Muyira. Without an education system in Uganda, graduating as a catechist meant having the highest level of education. With Uganda edging closer to becoming part of the British Empire and as the Imperial British East African Company (IBEACo.) was already in Uganda, translation and interpretation work increased as colonial officials and CMS missionaries needed language experts. The prolific linguist and translator G. L. Pilkington is described as always needing the aid of Sembera, Kitakule, Samwili Mukasa, and Nuwa Nakiwafu.[6] Even Frederick Lugard, the colonial administrator who led IBEACo into Uganda, confided in Gordon that he considered the judgment of Sembera “most sound and his opinion most worth hearing.” The *CMS Gleaner* of June 1891 refers to a committee for translation set up by Gordon that Sembera was appointed to.

When Bishop Tucker asked Gordon to go to Busoga to explore the possibility of expanding the CMS mission, Sembera was naturally chosen as part of the team because, among other factors, his roots were in Busoga. In Gordon's words, he was their “Musoga elder.” During the trip, Sembera often led morning and evening worship and would reach out to many people who needed a word of encouragement as they traversed Busoga. This laid the foundation for the first mission station in Busoga which



was established in January 1891. In this regard, Sembera had inadvertently used his Christian development to promote his community of origin.

## **Mission Rivalry and Sembera's Death**

As all of this happened, Mwanga grew dissatisfied with his condition again. Both English and French missions tried to get their countries to occupy Buganda but, in the end, British missionaries won the contest and the IBEACo flag flew high in Buganda's capital. The Catholics drew Mwanga to their side and tension began building between both mission stations. On January 24, 1892, Sembera was shot dead purportedly by a Catholic convert, which resulted in instant violence. Mwanga had to flee a second time. This time, he ended up in Budu where the Catholics had been driven.

Catholics maintained their innocence, stating they only fired at Sembera because he would have killed one of them instead, as he had drawn his gun out. Sembera's colleagues said he was a messenger of peace and had only become involved in the scuffle that claimed his life as a mediator. His death, however, had not only immediate but also long-term implications. The civil war that erupted on the day he died became a contextualized example of why politics and religion should be pursued separately. It is the basis of article seven of the 1995 Constitution, which states that Uganda shall not adopt a state religion. Interestingly however, per the 2014 national census, eighty-four percent of Ugandans identify as Christians.

Sembera's death was mourned by many—both Protestants and Catholics—in Uganda and England. Here is how Gordon, who had, in many ways, replaced Mackay as Sembera's foremost friend and teacher, described him to Christians in England after his death in a letter published in the *CMS Gleaner* of July 1893:

In Buganda, he was my faithful friend and constant helper. He often had to act as a go-between in the frequent word strifes that arose between the Roman Catholics and Protestants. He received the thanks of Mwanga [Kabaka] and was spoken well of by the French priests and Roman Catholic chiefs for healing sore disputes and preventing serious fighting more than once.

At the time of his death, Sembera was married to a wife we only know as Zatusaanga, with whom he had two children, one of whom was unborn. Sembera, who had come to Buganda as an enslaved person, was the first to be freed in Christ in Uganda and he died a free man.

## **Kimeze Teketwe**

### **Sources:**

Ashe, Robert Pickering, *Chronicles of Uganda*. New York: A. D. F. Randolph & co., 1895.

*Church Missionary Society Periodicals*. Marlborough, Wiltshire, UK: Adam Matthew

Digital.

- Harrison, Alexina Mackay. *The Story of the Life of Mackay of Uganda Told for Boys by His Sister*. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1891.
- Mullins, J. D. *The Wonderful Story of Uganda: To Which Is Added the Story of Ham Mukasa, Told by Himself*. London: Church Missionary Society, 1904.
- Stock, Eugene. *The History of the Church Missionary Society, Its Environment, Its Men, and Its Work*. Vols. 1-3. London: Church Missionary Society, 1899.
- Tucker, A. R. *Eighteen Years in Uganda and East Africa*. Vols. I-II. London: Edward Arnold, 1908.

## Notes:

1. There are at least two variations on Sembera's middle name - Kumunbo and Kamumbe. The first one is how Mackay used to write it and it appears as excerpts from Mackay's journal in book *The Story of the Life of Mackay of Uganda Told for Boys by His Sister*, published by his sister (1891). The second one is what survives in public life in Natete, Uganda, where Mackay and Sembera met and worked. This is why I have abbreviated it.
2. J. D. Mullins, *The Wonderful Story of Uganda: To Which Is Added the Story of Ham Mukasa, Told by Himself* (Church Missionary Society, 1904), 27. The Luganda word Bwana (still in use today) means colleague.
- 3a. Mullins, 19.
- 3b. *Ssekabaka* means a dead king, while *kabaka* means a living king.
4. Mullins, 27.
5. Mullins, 82.
6. Mullins, 222.

This biography, submitted in March 2023, was researched and written by Kimeze Teketwe, a lecturer at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where he graduated from the International Educational Development (IED), M.S.Ed. program in December 2022. He holds a graduate degree in missiology (MAGL) from Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, California. He was born and grew up in Uganda, East Africa.

## Kanyua, Jerusha

1872-1974

Presbyterian Church of East Africa  
Kenya

### Early Life, Family and Conversion to Christianity

Jerusha Kanyua was born in early 1872 at at Karaa village, in Mwimbi Division, in the current Maara Sub-County, Tharaka Nithi County, Kenya. She was brought up in the traditional family set up, where she attained no formal education, but went through the Ameru rites of passage.<sup>51</sup> In 1894, she married Paul Njeru, who was nicknamed Paulo. They relocated from Mwimbi and settled at Chuka, near Chuka General Hospital.<sup>52</sup> Even though their marriage was blessed with several children, unfortunately all of them died during childhood from what was suspected to be pneumonia, measles, or malaria.<sup>53</sup> This prompted her husband to remarry so as to have children. The new wife, Martha Umoto, gave birth to a number of children. For unknown reasons, Njeru started to mistreat Jerusha.<sup>54</sup> This made Jerusha relocate to Ndagani, on the outskirts of Chuka town, and settle there.<sup>55</sup> Since she had no children of her own she adopted her younger sister's children, Alfred Mburia and Caroline, who are, to the present day, regarded as her children.<sup>56</sup>

In 1921, the Church of Scotland Mission (CSM), a Presbyterian mission that had been operating in Kenya since 1891, made arrangements to post the first European missionary to evangelize the Chuka-Mwimbi area.<sup>57</sup> On October 9, 1922, Dr. Clives Irvine arrived at Chogoria to build up the station and begin systematic medical work.<sup>58</sup> Earlier in 1915, the CSM had set up a mission station at Chuka with the recommendations of Rev. Dr. J. W. Arthur (nicknamed "Happy worrier"). The station was under two Africans, Daudi Makumi and Samsoni Maingi, who were among the first Presbyterian African converts in Kikuyu land.<sup>59</sup>

The first Presbyterian convert from Chuka was Mr. Ayub Mugo Njuki who lived at Ndagani village. He was the one who persuaded Jerusha Kanyua, her husband Paul Njeru, Justo Kanampiu, and Bertha Kangai (Ayub's wife) to accept the new Christian faith. Many people were cautious about this faith because they viewed it as direct

---

<sup>51</sup> Interview with C. Riungu on 2/4/2019.

<sup>52</sup> Interview with Ezekiel Mbogo (Kanyua's grandson) on 5/5/2019.

<sup>53</sup> The death of children was usually interpreted as a curse from the ancestors or God. A family whose children died was viewed to be with no divine blessings. The solution was remarriage.

<sup>54</sup> Interview with Catherine Ciambaka on 4/4/2019.

<sup>55</sup> At Ndagani there is a PCEA Church named after her. She was among its founders.

<sup>56</sup> Interview with Ezekiel Mbogo (Kanyua's grandson) on 5/5/2019.

<sup>57</sup> Macpherson, R. (1970). *The Presbyterian Church of East Africa*. Nairobi: PCEA, p.77.

<sup>58</sup> Macpherson, R. (1970). *The Presbyterian Church of East Africa*. Nairobi: PCEA, p.77.

<sup>59</sup> Kagema, D. N. (2016). "A short History of the Anglican Church in Meru (1969-2009)." *Research in Humanities and Social Sciences*, Vol.6, No.2, p.173.

intrusion into their culture. Ayub had been converted to Christianity by Dr. Arthur.<sup>60</sup> Thus by the time Dr. Irvine arrived in 1922, Christianity had began to gain roots in what is today known as Tharaka Nithi County. It needs to be noted that the Consolata Fathers (Catholics) had already come to Mwimbi and had established a mission station at Kariakomo, a few kilometers east of Chogoria in 1911.<sup>61</sup> Dr. Irvine settled at Chogoria in 1922 and started a CSM mission station there.<sup>62</sup> He then started a mission hospital at Chogoria which is today one of the biggest mission hospitals in Kenya.<sup>63</sup>

As Jerusha Kanyua was contemplating the miseries of life after having lost all her children and marriage, the word of God came to her through Dr. Irvine and Ayub Mugo.<sup>64</sup> She accepted Christianity, which was a great source of consolation at that time.<sup>65</sup> In 1923, she was baptized by Dr. Irvine, and was then offered a job at Chogoria hospital as a casual worker.<sup>66</sup> While working in the hospital, she began formal learning but due to her advanced age, she did not make much progress. However, she acquired many skills in caring for the sick and due to her interest in medical issues, she acquired basic skills in midwifery. Thus whenever she was at home in Ndagani, especially during weekends she assisted women when they gave birth. She also preached to the people, urging them to accept the Gospel of Christ.<sup>67</sup> She is regarded as one of the first missionaries in Ndagani village. Due to her efforts, a church and a school were started at Ndagani in 1937.<sup>68</sup>

### **A Teacher, a Doctor, and a Prophetess**

Jerusha remained a committed Christian and faithful follower of the Presbyterian Church. She tirelessly evangelized Ndagani village and its environs. For example, she walked long distances to Kibugua, Weru, Kiereni, Kangutu, and other villages within Chuka spreading Christianity.<sup>69</sup> Being illiterate, at first her preaching and teaching ministry mainly relied on her memory for Biblical quotations. However, with time, she learned to read the Bible effectively, especially after her formal education at Chogoria hospital.<sup>70</sup> Alongside her ministry, Jerusha devoted most of her time to teaching children about the Bible. She carried out this ministry both in church and in the children's homes. She carried out this ministry with such great passion that many

---

<sup>60</sup> Interview with Ezekiel Mbogo (grandson to Jerusha Kanyua) on 5/5/2019.

<sup>61</sup> Kagema, D.N (2016). "A short History of the Anglican Church in Meru (1969-2009)." *Research in Humanities and Social Sciences*, Vol.6, No.2, p.173.

<sup>62</sup> Kagema, D.N (2016). "A short History of the Anglican Church in Meru (1969-2009)." *Research in Humanities and Social Sciences*, Vol.6, No.2, p.174.

<sup>63</sup> Interview with Ezekiel Mbogo (grandson to Jerusha Kanyua) on 5/5/2019.

<sup>64</sup> Interview with Ezekiel Mbogo (grandson to Jerusha Kanyua) on 5/5/2019.

<sup>65</sup> Interview with Mercy Kaari (Kanyua's granddaughter) on 6/5/2019.

<sup>66</sup> Interview with Ezekiel Mbogo (grandson to Jerusha Kanyua) on 5/5/2019.

<sup>67</sup> Interview with Mercy Kaari (Kanyua's granddaughter) on 6/5/2019.

<sup>68</sup> Interview with Ezekiel Mbogo (grandson to Jerusha Kanyua) on 5/5/2019.

<sup>69</sup> Interview with Mercy Kaari (Kanyua's granddaughter) on 6/5/2019.

<sup>70</sup> Interview with Ezekiel Mbogo (grandson to Jerusha Kanyua) on 5/5/2019.

young people regarded to her as “Mwalimu” (a teacher).<sup>71</sup> On top of this, she was also leader of the Woman’s Guild, where she trained women in matters of midwifery, cookery, crafts, and farming, among other things. Those who listened to her, both men and women, acknowledge that Jerusha was a good teacher, leader, and counselor. She taught them much about family life, counseled both the married and unmarried, and prepared many women for marriage.<sup>72</sup> Tiras Nthiga (an elder who knew and interacted with her) says that Jerusha was a “fortress and beacon of hope” in matters of family life, Bible, and socio-economic life.<sup>73</sup>

Due to her commitment, the Church of Scotland Mission (CSM) at Chogoria sent her to Tumutumu Mission Hospital College in Nyeri to be trained for midwifery in 1944. This was the training that would make her very popular because it allowed her to offer assistance to women in rural areas especially in areas around Chuka, Embu, and Meru.<sup>74</sup> She had to walk very long distances from Ndagani to Nyeri to acquire this training. Because of the way people loved her, some young men volunteered to escort her through the thick and fearsome Mount Kenya forest to Tumutumu Hospital, a distance of about 94 kilometers.<sup>75</sup> She trained in midwifery and was awarded a certificate in midwifery in 1946.

Upon completion of her training, she returned home where she traveled from village to village, helping expectant women to deliver their babies safely, especially those who lived far from Chogoria Hospital. She did this alongside preaching the Gospel. She thus converted many people to Christianity.<sup>76</sup> Jerusha is an example of an African woman evangelist or missionary who dedicated her time and energy to converting her fellow Africans to Christianity. Due to her commitment and professional expertise, she became very famous. People travelled from far and wide to seek her selfless attention.

She was also a great mobilizer. If a woman developed complications that she could not handle, she mobilized people to make a stretcher that she used to ferry the patient to Chogoria Hospital. Since there was no transportation, they traveled on foot and she accompanied the patient to get specialized care from the missionary doctors. She did this job without any pay.<sup>77</sup> She was the first renowned midwife and caregiver who served people without reservation—a trait that made her a celebrity throughout the larger upper Eastern region (Embu, Mbeere, Chuka, Chogoria and Meru).<sup>78</sup> She earned deep admiration even from the missionary doctors, especially Dr. Irvine who was her mentor. Due to her service saving the lives of women, many people referred to her as “Dagitari” (Doctor).<sup>79</sup> In 1948, Dr. Irvine conferred on her a Diploma in

---

<sup>71</sup> Interview with Mercy Kaari (Kanyua’s granddaughter) on 6/5/2019.

<sup>72</sup> Interview with Tiras Nthiga on 6/5/2019.

<sup>73</sup> Interview with Tiras Nthiga on 6/5/2019.

<sup>74</sup> Interview with Ezekiel Mbogo (grandson to Jerusha Kanyua) on 5/5/2019.

<sup>75</sup> Interview with Mercy Kaari (Kanyua’s granddaughter) on 6/5/2019.

<sup>76</sup> Interview with Tiras Nthiga on 6/5/2019.

<sup>77</sup> Interview with Mercy Kaari (Kanyua’s granddaughter) on 6/5/2019.

<sup>78</sup> Interview with Ezekiel Mbogo (grandson to Jerusha Kanyua) on 5/5/2019.

<sup>79</sup> Interview with Tiras Nthiga on 6/5/2019.

Midwifery due to her exemplary performance.<sup>80</sup>

In 1950s, Jerusha started to prophesy. In 1951, she made several prophecies that were fulfilled later in 1960s.<sup>81</sup> Among her prophecies was the one she made on Sunday, June 3, 1951 while at PCEA Ndagani Church. This prophecy continues to have an enormous influence on the lives of local people. She prophesied,

A huge mountain will spring in the village (Ndagani), big trees will sprout and grow very big, and form a wide shade. Then birds from all over the world will come and land on these trees. People from all parts of the world will also come and cool themselves under the shade of these trees.<sup>82</sup>

In 1953, the colonial government built a concentration camp at Ndagani. People from all over Chuka and beyond were put in this camp. Many people thought that the prophecy of Jerusha had been fulfilled. However she denied this, and told them that time had not come for her prophecy to be fulfilled. She explained that her prophecy was that of success, good life, and happiness and not a prophecy of doom and oppression like that of the colonial government who dragged people from their homes and put them in a concentration camp.<sup>83</sup> She told them to believe and be hopeful that one day her prophesy would be fulfilled.<sup>84</sup>

What people did not understand was that Jerusha was prophesying about education which was something she very much cherished. Throughout her ministry, Jerusha encouraged young men and women as well as children to go to school. To her, education was the only key to success that gave the power to alleviate the challenges that people faced—challenges such as illiteracy, poverty, disease, and ignorance.<sup>85</sup> In this regard, she composed a song which was commonly sung to emphasize the importance of education. The song went like this,

<i>Karamu ni Itumo</i>	A pen is a spear
<i>Na mbuku ni Rong'o</i>	And the book is a shield
<i>Ita ya riu iramukagwa Cukuru</i>	Today's war is won by waking up and going to school. <sup>86</sup>

With this song she advised young people to take up a pen like a spear and a book like a shield.<sup>87</sup> Through her efforts, several institutions were established at Ndagani including a secondary school, a primary school, a village polytechnic, a cattle dip, an air strip, and a sports field.<sup>88</sup> When these institutions were first built, residents started saying that the mountains of Jerusha had started forming—or rather that her prophesy about

---

<sup>80</sup> Interview with Mercy Kaari (Kanyua's granddaughter) on 6/5/2019.

<sup>81</sup> Interview with Henry Migwi (elder) on 6/5/2019.

<sup>82</sup> Interview with Ezekiel Mbogo (grandson to Jerusha Kanyua) on 5/5/2019.

<sup>83</sup> Interview with Henry Migwi (elder) on 6/5/2019.

<sup>84</sup> Interview with Mercy Kaari (Kanyua's granddaughter) on 6/5/2019.

<sup>85</sup> Interview with Tiras Nthiga on 6/5/2019.

<sup>86</sup> Interview with Ezekiel Mbogo (grandson to Jerusha Kanyua) on 5/5/2019.

<sup>87</sup> See Chuka University Students' Information Handbook(2014).

<sup>88</sup> Interview with Henry Migwi (elder) on 6/5/2019.

the huge mountain and the birds had been fulfilled.<sup>89</sup>

However, it is actually the coming of Chuka University at Ndagani that people associate with the fulfillment of Jerusha's prophecy.<sup>90</sup> Chuka, Ndagani was the place people least expected a university to begin.<sup>91</sup> In 2004, Egerton University Senate elected Professor Erastus Njoka (the former Vice Chancellor of Chuka University) to chair a technical committee that, among other things, was to explore the possibility of establishing a campus in the eastern part of Kenya.

After several consultative meetings with education stakeholders in Eastern Province, the committee recommended to the University Senate to open a campus at Chuka due to its central location. This decision was ratified by the Egerton University Council on September 17, 2004. Egerton University Eastern Campus was established at Ndagani, Chuka on September 27, 2004, and officially opened on August 1, 2005. On August 23, 2007, the campus was elevated to a Constituent College of Egerton University and renamed Chuka University College. On January 8, 2013, the College was elevated to a full-fledged University, becoming the ninth public university in Kenya.<sup>92</sup> It is one of the fastest growing public universities in Kenya with a population of more than 18,000 students.<sup>93</sup>

With the birth of Chuka University at Ndagani and its students and staff from all over the country and beyond, people believe that Jerusha Kanyua's prophecy of birds from all over the world coming to land on trees around Ndagani has been fulfilled. They regard Chuka University as a prophetic university.<sup>94</sup> At the university, Jerusha is highly respected and seen by the university's fraternity as their matriarch.<sup>95</sup>

## Transforming Peoples' Lives

Jerusha transformed the lives of many people in the current Tharaka Nithi, Meru, and Embu counties.<sup>96</sup> Although she assumed no leadership position in the PCEA in spite of her instrumental role in its beginnings at Ndagani and was not well educated, she put a strong emphasis on the holistic gospel. This changed peoples' lives spiritually, socially, politically, and economically.<sup>97</sup> She thus urged all her new converts, especially among the youth and children to go to school.<sup>98</sup> In addition to preaching, she trained women in matters of midwifery, cookery, craft and farming among others.<sup>99</sup> In many

---

<sup>89</sup> Interview with Tiras Nthiga on 6/5/2019.

<sup>90</sup> Interview with Henry Migwi (elder) on 6/5/2019.

<sup>91</sup> Interview with Mercy Kaari (Kanyua's granddaughter) on 6/5/2019.

<sup>92</sup> See Chuka University Students' Information Handbook(2014).

<sup>93</sup> Chuka University Newsletter (2018).

<sup>94</sup> Prof. Erastus Njoka, Message from the Vice Chancellor, Chuka University Newsletter, Graduation News Edition (2018), p. 8.

<sup>95</sup> Most of the publications of Chuka University always refer to Jerusha Kanyua.

<sup>96</sup> Interview with Henry Migwi (elder) on 6/5/2019.

<sup>97</sup> Interview with Tiras Nthiga on 6/5/2019.

<sup>98</sup> Interview with Tiras Nthiga on 6/5/2019.

<sup>99</sup> Interview with Mercy Kaari (Kanyua's granddaughter) on 6/5/2019.

instances, she taught people practical skills. For example, she became the first local resident to own a grade cow (Guernsey), an exotic breed introduced by the missionaries. Traditionally, if a woman owned property like cows she would be regarded as a “*Kithetha*” meaning she was mocking men in her community. But Jerusha ignored all this and became a livestock farmer. She also had pigs, goats, and chicken. She embraced the new farming methods introduced by the missionaries. As a result, she accumulated a lot of wealth, which is one of the reasons she was highly respected in the community. While many women depended on men for survival, Jerusha worked very hard to acquire wealth of her own and became economically independent. She introduced new fruits such as mangos that she planted on her farm and in the church compound. People would come from afar to learn the new farming methods at her farm.<sup>100</sup>

Her love for people and her service to the community saved her from the wrath of the Mau Mau who eliminated anybody suspected to be a sympathizer with the colonial government. For example, in 1953, the Mau Mau made a decree that all schools would be burned down including the people found in the houses. The unit that was sent to burn Ndagani School and Church found Jerusha in the mud and reed hut where she resided with the missionaries. When they realized that it was Jerusha inside the hut, a debate arose among them. Finally, through the intervention of the Mau Mau leader, General Moge (also known as Wakemonto or “Simba”), they decided that it would be unfair to kill her because of the good work she was doing in the community, especially her intercessory role and her midwifery duties. They feared that if they killed her there would be nobody to intercede for them and that their wives would die in childbirth because Jerusha was the chief midwife in the region.<sup>101</sup> Interestingly, Jerusha was the only African Christian allowed to openly move about preaching, attending to the sick, the wounded, and the expectant mothers without any confrontation from the Mau Mau fighters.<sup>102</sup>

## A Woman of Faith

Jerusha was a woman of faith who trusted God in whatever she did. She always urged people to believe in God no matter the circumstance, because God cannot be defeated.<sup>103</sup> For example, in 1964, there was a severe drought which affected many parts of the country. For about three years since 1961, it had not rained in Ndagani and many parts of Kenya. People and livestock were suffering terribly from the effects of this drought. One Sunday, Jerusha called upon all Christians to assemble in the church and pray for rain. When the day for prayers came, Jerusha came with a rain coat, mud boots, hat, and an umbrella. Jerusha wondered why these people had not carried their umbrellas yet they were coming to pray for rain. Many people were astonished to see

---

<sup>100</sup> Interview with Ezekiel Mbogo (grandson to Jerusha Kanyua) on 5/5/2019.

<sup>101</sup> Interview with Henry Migwi (elder) on 6/5/2019.

<sup>102</sup> Interview with Tiras Nthiga on 6/5/2019.

<sup>103</sup> Interview with Titas Nthiga on 14/7/2023.



this kind of faith from a woman. She asked all the people to kneel down while she led the prayers. By the time she finished praying it was raining heavily. Everybody was amazed but Jerusha kept on telling them to be men and women of faith.<sup>104</sup>

### **Jerusha Kanyua's Death**

Jerusha became ill in the late 1960s and died in 1974 at the age of about 102 years. In 1997, the PCEA proclaimed her a saint. The church building at Ndgani was dedicated to her and named Jerusha Kanyua Memorial Church.<sup>105</sup> She died as a faithful servant of Christ who had left a remarkable mark on the life of the Church of Christ, especially in Embu, Meru, and Tharaka Nithi counties.

### **Dickson Nkonge Kagemu**

This article, received in 2019 and revised in 2023, was written by Prof. Dickson Nkonge Kagemu, an Associate Professor in Religious Studies and Theology at Chuka University in Kenya and the Coordinator of Chuka University, Embu Campus. He is a Canon in the Anglican Church of Kenya. His email is [dicknkonge@gmail.com](mailto:dicknkonge@gmail.com) / [dnkonge@chuka.ac.ke](mailto:dnkonge@chuka.ac.ke).

---

<sup>104</sup> Interview with Tiras Nthiga on 14/7/2023.

<sup>105</sup> Interview with Henry Migwi.

## Featured Interview

### “Courage in Our Conviction: A Conversation with Pastor Abtidoon”<sup>106</sup>

By Aweis A. Ali

The Somali people in the Horn of Africa have been exposed to the Gospel for over a century by different intrepid missionaries of various denominational persuasions. The most significant Big Three are the Roman Catholics, the Sudan Interior Mission (SIM),<sup>107</sup> and the Mennonite Mission. The Swedish Overseas Lutheran Church (SOLC) is also one of the earliest pioneers in Somalia. The SOLC set up a mission base in Kismayo, southern Somalia, in 1896 and eventually expanded its mission work to Jilib, Mugaambo and Jamaame, all in southern Somalia. While evangelism was the primary focus, the SOLC’s ministry was holistic, opening schools and clinics for the local people.<sup>108</sup>

The Roman Catholic Church (RCC) opened a mission station in Somalia in 1881 and started ministering to the Somali people.<sup>109</sup> The Cathedral in Mogadishu, built in 1928, was the biggest in Africa up until the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>110</sup> According to Venanzio Francesco Filippini, the RCC Bishop of Mogadishu, there were 40,000 Somali Catholics in southern Somalia by 1940.<sup>111</sup> The entire Somali population in Somalia proper was estimated in 1940 to be about 1,150,000 according to the Italian colonial authority and 1,200,000 in 1950.<sup>112</sup> This makes the Somali Christians in 1940 to be about 3.5% of the population. This is a significant growth in a Muslim country where local Christians have not been statistically crucial in the last several decades. However, other competent voices like Bishop Giorgio Bertin, the RCC Bishop of Djibouti and the Apostolic Administrator of Somalia, doubt the high figure

---

<sup>106</sup> This article is reproduced with permission from Ali, Aweis A. “Courage in Our Conviction” in *SBS Journal*, vol. 1, no. 1, version 2. Dec. 2020: 57-63.

<sup>107</sup> This mission organization changed its name a few times over the years but always kept is the acronym, SIM. It is known today as Serving In Mission.

<sup>108</sup> Abdurahman M. Abdullahi (Baadiyow), *The Islamic Movement in Somalia: A Study of the Islah Movement, 1950-2000*, (Adonis & Abbey Publ. Ltd. 2015), 122. The name has been changed and the text modified for security reasons.

<sup>109</sup> Erwin Fahlbusch and Geoffrey William Bromiley, *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, volume 1 (Brill Academic Publisher, 1991) 120.

<sup>110</sup> “A Surprising History of Christianity in Somalia,” Alex of Esther Project (2017). <http://theestherproject.com/surprising-history-christianity-somalia/> (accessed 30 September 2017).

<sup>111</sup> Paolo Tripodi, *The Colonial Legacy in Somalia, Rome and Mogadishu: From Colonial Administration to Operation Restore Hope*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 1999), 66.

<sup>112</sup> “Catholic Hierarchy,” Diocese of Mogadiscio, (nd). <http://www.catholic-hierarchy.org/diocese/dmgds.html> (accessed 26 April 2018).

of 3.5%.<sup>113</sup>

French fathers from the RCC started a high-profile ministry in the northern Somali village of Daymoole, near the port town of Berbera, in 1891 by opening an orphanage and a school.<sup>114</sup> The RCC schools were expanded to southern Somalia with the financial support of the Italian colonial government in 1939.<sup>115</sup>

The Mennonite Mission (MM) entered Somalia in 1953 and the SIM in 1954.<sup>116</sup> Unlike the low-profile mission work of the RCC, both the SIM and the MM demonstrated the proverbial missionary zeal.<sup>117</sup> Both mission' organizations won numerous Somalis to the Lord within a short time. A Somali Muslim fanatic killed an MM missionary in Mogadishu in 1962. Merlin Grove was "only 33 years old when he was stabbed to death in Mogadishu, Somalia."<sup>118</sup> The RCC was not spared martyrdom. Bishop Pietro Salvatore Colombo, 66, is the highest profile martyr this church has produced in Somalia. He was shot and killed in the Mogadishu Cathedral in 1989.<sup>119</sup>

The 2017 World Watch List places the Somali Church as the second most persecuted in the world.<sup>120</sup> This church often makes the infamous top two slots of the World Watch List.<sup>121</sup> It has been on this list since 1992.<sup>122</sup> According to Open Doors,<sup>123</sup> "The mere suspicion of one's having renounced Islam leads to a rushed public execution."<sup>124</sup> The most prominent Somali martyr is arguably pastor Liibaan

---

<sup>113</sup> The Bishop made this claim in an e-mail communication with the researcher on April 17, 2019.

<sup>114</sup> Abdurahman Moallim Abdullahi, "The Islamic Movement in Somalia: A Historical Evolution with a Case Study of the Islah Movement (1950-2000)." (PhD. Thesis, McGill University, Institute of Islamic Studies, 2011), 121.

<sup>115</sup> Saadia Touval, *Somali Nationalism: International Politics and the Drive for Unity in the Horn of Africa*, (Harvard University Press, 1st edition, 1963), 77.

<sup>116</sup> Abdullahi "The Islamic Movement in Somalia," 21.

<sup>117</sup> Abdullahi, "The Islamic Movement in Somalia," 111.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid, 129. See also: Ruth Myers. *When the Lights Go Out: Memoir of a Missionary to Somalia*, chapter 18: Murder in Mogadishu (Acorn Press, 2016)

<sup>119</sup> "Taking the Catholic Pulse: Somalia one of world's great danger zones for Christians," Crux. (2016).

<https://cruxnow.com/global-church/2016/10/25/somalia-one-worlds-great-danger-zones-christians/>

<sup>120</sup> "World Watch List," *Open Doors USA*, (nd).

<https://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/world-watch-list/> (accessed 20 Feb 2017).

<sup>121</sup> "World Watch List," *Christianity Today*, (2017)

<http://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2017/january/top-50-countries-christian-persecution-world-watch-list.html> (accessed 3 July 2017).

<sup>122</sup> "About Somalia," *Open Doors USA*, (nd).

<https://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/world-watch-list/somalia/> (accessed 30 September 2017).

<sup>123</sup> "About Somalia," *Open Doors USA*, (nd).

<sup>124</sup> J. Gordon Melton. *Faiths across Time: 5,000 Years of Religious History [4 volumes]: 5,000 Years of Religious History*. ABC-CLIO, 2014. 1897. Kindle Version.

Ibraahim Hassan who was martyred in Mogadishu, Somalia, in 1994.<sup>125</sup> One of the most prominent Somali Christians is the late Michael Mariano Ali who served his country as an elected member of parliament, cabinet member and an ambassador.<sup>126</sup> While the Somali constitution was tolerant of the tiny Christian population in the 1960s, the 2009 constitution was amended to make it Sharia Law compliant, thus adding insult to injury in the eyes of the already besieged Somali Christians.<sup>127</sup>

Pastor Abtidoon is one of the oldest known Somali Christians in the world. Following is the interview I had with this eminent Somali pastor. The interview has been edited for space and clarity.

## Interview

*AAA: Tell me about your childhood.*

*Pastor:* I was born in the Somali inhabited region of what is now North-East Kenya in 1932. My father died when I was about five years old. My mom raised me. I grew up herding cattle and camels in the Horn of Africa. No one could steal my camels. I was a fearsome warrior who would lay down his life for his cattle and camels. When I was about 19, a lion grabbed my favourite heifer in broad daylight in the North-East county of Wajer, Kenya. I seized the lion by the ear and then stabbed it in the neck with my double-edged dagger. The lion jumped off the heifer and groaned in pain. It disappeared into the forest.

*AAA. How did your father die?*

*Pastor:* My father was inside a shallow makeshift borehole collecting water for his cattle in the Afmadow district in southern Somalia. Two oxen fought at the mouth of the water well, and one of them fell into the borehole smashing my father to death.

*AAA: When did the Lord find you and what challenges did you face as a new disciple?*

*Pastor:* The Lord found me in 1969 after an American tourist had witnessed to me. Somali Muslims started persecuting me; relatives, neighbours, and even total strangers targeted me. My fellow Somalis could not comprehend the idea of a Somali Muslim leaving Islam, and following Jesus. To them, I committed religious treason, an apostasy. My Ogaden clan is known for their violence and religious fanaticism. I feared for my life, yet I was determined to stay with the Lord.

---

<sup>125</sup> Somalia - Trusteeship and Protectorate: The Road to Independence. Country Studies. Nd. <https://country-studies.com/somalia/trusteeship-and-protectorate:-the-road-to-independence.html> (accessed 31 March 2019).

<sup>126</sup> "Somalia," *Voice of Martyrs Canada*, (nd). Somalia. <https://www.vomcanada.com/somalia.htm> (accessed 30 September 2017). See also: "Somalia," US Department of State, (2011).

<sup>127</sup> "Ali burnt some people and this news reached Ibn 'Abbas, who said, "Had I been in his place I would not have burnt them, as the Prophet said, 'Don't punish (anybody) with Allah's Punishment.' No doubt, I would have killed them, for the Prophet said, 'If somebody (a Muslim) discards his religion, kill him.'"

*AAA: How are you still alive if so many people wanted to kill you for your Christian faith?*

*Pastor:* I had kept a very low profile until 1971 when I started to share my new faith with my close family members openly. Like apostle Paul, the Lord has revealed himself to me and encouraged me not to waver in my walk with Jesus. My own Damascus Road encounter gave me extraordinary courage in my conviction. I was never the same.

*AAA: Tell me about your birth family.*

*Pastor:* My family are nomadic pastoralists. While they own cattle, sheep, and goats, they are best known for their camel herding prowess. My entire clan is also known for their pride; they believe they are the best people ever created by God! I belong to a warrior clan that is feared by many. While my clan could choose to kill me anytime, no one from another clan would have the guts to lay a finger on me because my Muslim clan will strike back with a vengeance. While my Ogaden clan protects me to this day, my sub-clan, Mohamed Subeyr, protects me the most.

*AAA: Why would your Muslim clan protect a Christian convert whose punishment should be death according to the teachings of Islam?<sup>22</sup>*

*Pastor:* In popular Islam, the clan is more important than Islam! If a man from a different clan kills me, my clan would see that as humiliation because they could not protect one of their own from a rival clan. My clan is not protecting me as an individual, they are also protecting their honor.<sup>128</sup> My Ogaden clan is the most numerous clan of all Somali clans. We reside in Somalia, the Ogaden region of Ethiopia and North-East Kenya.

*AAA: Should Somalis continue being an integral part of their clan after the Lord finds them?*

*Pastor:* Absolutely. This Somali proverb best illustrates my point, “both your shoes and your clan protect you.”<sup>129</sup> The Somali clan system is a mixed bag, but I like to focus on the positives. The clan system offers protection, social security, and a safety net for its members.

*AAA: Were any of the Somalis whom the Lord found in your ministry martyred for their faith?*

*Pastor:* I am aware of eight who were martyred in North-East Kenya.

*AAA: I heard from multiple sources that you are the first known Somali to follow Jesus in*

---

<sup>128</sup> *Sahih al-Bukhari*, translated by M. Muhsin Khan 4:52:260, (Kazi Pubns Inc1995). <http://cmje.usc.edu/religious-texts/hadith/bukhari/052-sbt.php#004.052.260> (accessed 01 April 2019). See also: *Sahih al-Bukhari*, 9:89:27. <http://cmje.usc.edu/religious-texts/hadith/bukhari/089-sbt.php#009.089.271> (accessed 09 May 2018). Arab Law Quarterly, vol. 13. No. 3, Brill, 1998. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/i276475> (accessed 04 February 2019). Nomadic background Somali Christians martyred for their walk with the Lord in Somalia since 1991 were killed in regions where their clan is not the dominant one.

<sup>129</sup> *Tolkaaga iyo kobtaada dhexdaa looga jiraa.*

*Kenya. Tell me about this.*

**Pastor:** That is correct. There were no known Somali Christians in the Somali inhabited counties of North-East Kenya and the entire country of Kenya before the Lord found me. For decades, I was the only visible Somali Christian in Kenya.

*AAA: What do expatriate missionaries ministering to the Somalis do well and what could they do better to be a better witness to the Somalis?*

**Pastor:** Bringing the Gospel to my Somali people is a huge blessing. I am thankful for the sacrifices of expatriate missionaries to make Christ known to my people; they do this well. Expatriate missionaries often struggle to understand the Somalis. We are proud people and sometimes arrogant even when our stomachs are empty. Missionaries assume Somalis to be docile and humble because we are poor with limited formal education. They are shocked when they learn we are hawkish, proud, and sometimes egotistical. Many missionaries then get discouraged; they should not be disheartened because their sacrifices are bearing fruits.

*AAA: How do the Somali Christians and missionaries see your ministry?*

**Pastor:** Many of them think my strategy is too reckless because I share my faith very openly. I do not blame them! I preach with no fear. Many Somali Christians and missionaries believe that keeping a low profile in sharing the Gospel is the most effective way in this hostile environment. I must admit they have a point. Despite our different strategies, we serve the same Lord, and we pray for one another. I believe that what is inspired is the Gospel, not the strategy we employ to communicate it.

*AAA: What has helped you the most to become mature and prominent minister of the Gospel?*

**Pastor:** I joined a local church shortly after I was saved; this community of faith and the larger spiritual family in the denomination helped my faith to deepen. Many Somali Christians do not understand the value of a denominational family; mission workers with parachurch organizations often encourage new believers to attend Bible study groups and fellowships that often meet in the living rooms of these missionaries.<sup>130</sup>

*AAA: Why do you think missionaries with parachurch organizations do not often encourage new Somali believers to attend a local church in addition to the Bible studies and fellowships?*

**Pastor:** Missionaries with parachurch organizations are often territorial; they do not want to lose their hard-earned fruits to a local church with its own denominational distinctive. So, these missionaries who do not share a theological persuasion or doctrinal unity isolate the new believers. This makes the new believers weak and confused. The mature Somali Christians I know belong to established local churches with denominational links. The weakest ones I know only attend intermittent Bible study and fellowship meetings held in the living rooms of missionaries with

---

<sup>130</sup> Ahmed Ali Haile and D. W. Shenk, *Teatime in Mogadishu: My Journey as a Peace Ambassador in the World of Islam*. (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2011), 111.

parachurch organizations.

*AAA: Could you name one or two missionaries who had the most positive impact on your life and ministry?*

*Pastor:* Yes. They are Larry and Debbie Kitchel of Christian Mission Aid.

*AAA: How are the Kitchels different from most of parachurch organization missionaries?*

*Pastor:* The Kitchels always knew their ministry was to strengthen the church, not to replace it or compete with it. The many African church leaders the Kitchels trained and equipped will agree with me.

*AAA: Tell me one unforgettable favor the Kitchels did for you.*

*Pastor:* The late Larry Kitchel once visited me when I worked in Nairobi; he asked me how he could best help my ministry. I requested from him about 200 Bibles to smuggle into Somalia for believers; he gave me 220 Bibles next time we met. I donated 20 of the Bibles to Somali believers in North-East Kenya. I put the remaining 200 Bibles on the back of a he-camel and started walking seventeen days from North-East Kenya all the way to the southern Somali port town of Kismayo. I donated some of the Bibles to believers in Kismayo and walked with my camel to Jamaame, Jilib, Wanlawein, Baidawa—all in southern Somalia—and finally Mogadishu. I blessed all the Somali believers I met with Bibles, and I prayed with them. I then walked back from Mogadishu to North-East Kenya. It was an epic journey; I cannot do that anymore. I am an old man.

*AAA: What most excites you about the people of God?*

*Pastor:* I sometimes see tourists, visitors, and other foreigners with no ministry assignment but they still share their faith with wisdom and courage. These Great Commission-minded believers excite me the most. I love them.

*AAA: How could the community of faith pray for you?*

*Pastor:* I need plenty of prayers for God's protection from the evil one. When Satan fails to undermine our relationship with the Lord, he targets our loved ones.

## Epilogue

The Somali church is the product of a partnership between various innovative expatriate mission organizations, churches, and valiant Somali believers; it is this divine effort that gave birth to what is often described as the second most persecuted church in the world after North Korea. Expatriate mission workers do not only bring the Good News to the Somalis but also education, healthcare, impeccable work ethics and a host of other benefits. This is the holistic ministry that appeals to many Somali Muslims, some of whom become disciples of Christ. Many of the Somali Muslims who do not follow Jesus pick up some Christian values and develop a friendly attitude towards the Christian minorities.

While parachurch organizations like the SIM are overrepresented in the Somali ministry, church-based mission organizations like the MM most benefit the Somali ministry eventually because they can deliver their evangelistic message with consistent and coherent doctrines shared by all the mission workers. New Somali believers also learn the importance of belonging to a local church and to a larger denominational family. While parachurch organizations like the SIM lack this distinction of doctrinal unity, they still have a lot to offer to a people group that is Muslim majority. After all, Warren and Dorothy Modricker pioneered the modern mission work among Somalis in 1933. The Modrickers later joined the SIM and expanded the Somali ministry to the entire Somali peninsula. The Modrickers are considered as the First Family of the Somali Church. One would be hard-pressed to find a Somali Christian whose faith journey is not directly or indirectly traceable to the Modrickers.

## Bibliography:

- Abdullahi, Abdurahman M. *The Islamic Movement in Somalia: A Study of the Islah Movement, 1950-2000*. Adonis & Abbey Publishers Ltd., 2015.
- Abdullahi, Abdurahman Moallim, "The Islamic Movement in Somalia: A Historical Evolution with a Case Study of the Islah Movement (1950-2000)." Ph.D. Thesis, McGill University, Institute of Islamic Studies, 2011.
- Fahlbusch, Erwin and Geoffrey William Bromiley. *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*. Volume 1, Brill Academic Publisher, 1991.
- Haile, Ahmed Ali, and David W. Shenk. *Teatime in Mogadishu: My Journey as a Peace Ambassador in the World of Islam*. Herald Press, 2011.
- Myors, Ruth. *When the Lights Go Out: Memoir of a Missionary to Somalia*. Acorn Press, 2016.
- Melton, J. Gordon. *Faiths across Time: 5,000 Years of Religious History: 5,000 Years of Religious History*. ABC-CLIO, 2014.
- Touval, Saadia. *Somali Nationalism: International Politics and the Drive for Unity in the Horn of Africa*. Harvard University Press, 1st edition, 1963.
- Tripodi, Paolo. *The Colonial Legacy in Somalia: Rome and Mogadishu: From Colonial Administration to Operation Restore Hope*. Palgrave Macmillan, 1999.

**About the author:** Aweis A. Ali (BTh., MDiv., PhD) is a missiologist and an author. Rev. Aweis is a former house-church pastor, worship leader and evangelist; he has been in ministry since 1993. The author can be reached at [amazingwisdom@gmail.com](mailto:amazingwisdom@gmail.com)



## Book Review

**Tekletsadik Belachew.** *Stories from the Fireplace: Theological Meditations on Haile Gerima's Cinema.* Bamenda: Langaa RPCIG, 2020.

This multi-disciplinary study examines the works of Ethiopian scholar and filmmaker Haile Gerima from a theological perspective. The author was inspired to write this book because of “the persisting, provoking and lingering representation of Africa as ‘the radical other’ through intellectual and artistic media” (xxi). Historians, anthropologists, and missionaries create and recreate Africa’s otherness in film and other texts. The “Afro-pessimistic” history of (mis)representations can be traced in travelogues, cartography (mapmaking), anthropozoology (human zoos), and the Hollywood types of conventional cinema (zoo-keepers) (57). By engaging with African cinematic discourses, Belachew tries to demonstrate the kind of positive role African Christian theology can play in the pursuit of human dignity and flourishing. He creates a counter narrative against Afro-pessimist films, which frequently perpetuate inferior images of the African other (4).

There are six chapters in this book. Chapter One provides a general introduction to the book. In this section, the main thesis of the book is stated: “A robust theology of icons helps to foster conversation with Haile Gerima’s African cinematic storytelling that elicits and then subverts Afro-pessimistic images and imaginations, thereby fostering alternative representation, counternarratives, counter-images, and counterstories such that the agency of the self resists a radical otherness and promotes human dignity and flourishing” (6-7). Belachew defines key terms such as African cinema and African Christian theology. He indicates that the orthodox theology of icons (iconology) is used as a methodology since it bridges theology and other disciplines like cinema and identity (14).

The second chapter outlines Gerima’s intellectual biography. Gerima was born in Gondar, northwestern Ethiopia, in 1964. He grew up in a literate and storytelling family. Gerima narrates his upbringing and early inspirations from storytelling (22). Gerima moved to Chicago at the age of 22 to pursue theatrical art at the Goodman School of Drama. Later he went to UCLA where he acquired a fascination for cinema and recognized the relevance of Ethiopian stories and values from the fireplace as raw material for his creative endeavor (34).

Gerima has a legacy as an independent filmmaker and film professor at Howard University in Washington, D.C. that extends over five decades. He produced dozens of films in Amharic and English. In his cinema, Gerima counterbalances the “Afro-pessimistic view” on Africa’s culture, art, and values by providing counterstories through his cinema and storytelling. This chapter argues that Gerima’s “cinematic works are a testimony to the pan-Africanist resistance of radical otherness that also offers alternative stories, counternarratives, and counterimages” (57). He uses cinema as a “weapon” to resist exotic otherness.

Chapter three discusses the theology of icons (with an emphasis on the Orthodox theology of icons) and iconic cinema with the aim of connecting theology and cinema.

This chapter makes a link between theology and African cinema through icons (60). The theology of icons is employed as methodology because of Haile Gerima's "cultural and religious background" (60).

In the past (and perhaps even the present in some circles), African art and artifacts have been viewed stereotypically by missionaries as the work of "the Devil," which consequently "led to acts of destruction of African arts by missionaries" (70)—a clear manifestation of Afro-pessimism and iconoclasm. Belachew indicates that Christ is the icon par excellence, and God is the first iconographer par excellence. Humans are icons and icon makers. Humanity is created in the image of God. As excellently argued by the author, such an understanding of iconoclasm "allow[s] us to engage with Afro-pessimism trends of image-making and image-exhibiting" (19).

Chapter four emphasizes the subject of memory. Colonialism distorted or destroyed the African past. Belachew argues that storytellers are custodians of culture, and Gerima is an epic storyteller: "Haile Gerima plays an important role as a symbol of resistance and a shield of culture and memory in all films" — like *Sankofa*, *Adwa*, and *Teza* (Morning Dew) (152). According to Belachew, African cinema provides a parallel to Christian theology because both face similar challenges, such as the erasing of memory (140). Hence, from oral tradition to iconography and classic works, there are various ways to reclaim theologically the African past, especially its Christian contribution (140).

The fifth chapter delves into two themes of African folkloric orality. 1) the stereotypical representation of African orality, as well as 2) the ingenious usage of African folklore orality by African filmmakers, particularly Gerima (155). It also offers a theological perspective on oral tradition.

Africa's orality has been wrongly viewed as lacking textuality and hence considered inferior and primitive in the area of art and culture. "Orature", the oral equivalence of literature, includes folkloric stories, songs, riddles, proverbs, prayers, and so on. Africans need to be agents of their own stories with their memories. Hence, it is mandatory to utilize local oral resources. For Haile, cinema is a weapon used to tell a story that is "either exploitative or liberating" (176). African and majority-world filmmakers (Gerima refers to it as "Third Cinema") and theologians highlight the harm of a single story and emphasize the plurality or "multivocality" of stories (178). Local materials (such as oral traditions) were employed in Gerima's films. Theologians can also engage with folklore and oral tradition (186).

Chapter 6 shows how Afro-pessimistic and stereotypical ideas about Africa that come from the outside affect African life. This chapter discusses radical otherness and non-being, the problem of invisibility, and the mode of resistance. The author engages with orthodox theologians like John Zizioulas (to explore the authority of personhood) and Miroslav Volf, as well as African theologians like Laurenti Magesa and J. N. K. Mugambi, and is enriched by *Ubuntu* philosophy. Zizioulas's trinitarian theology of personhood coupled with the African concept of humanity from a Christological and anthropological perspective is highlighted as a response to the radical otherness of Africans. The concept of personhood in the work of the seventeenth century Ethiopian philosopher Zara Ya'eqob and his disciple Walda Heywet is briefly discussed.

The book includes an interview with Gerima (Appendix I) and a gallery of twenty-one still pictures, including from Gerima's films and family archives (Appendix II). Tite Tiénou wrote the book's foreword, and Fr. Daniel Assefa wrote an afterword. A couple of poems are also included as postscripts. The book contains indexes (key topics and authors) and many bibliographic materials, including an annotated bibliography on and by Haile Gerima for those who are interested in cinema, iconography, and African theology.

His cinema deals with issues of misrepresentation, misrecognition, falsification, disfiguration, denigration, and dehumanization of the other. Theologians should be encouraged to tackle related issues using local resources since these issues surface in theological and religious discourses as well. The agency of the self is important both for artistic and theological innovation. Belachew brilliantly argues that "African theologians can no longer afford to abandon the riches of iconographic and folkloric traditions that facilitate the telling of counter-stories and depict counter-image to regain truth that has been denied and memory that has been erased" (222). African theology benefits from local resources like local proverbs, local pedagogy.

The book is packed with original information. It is an interdisciplinary project that provides new perspectives that appeal to academic and general readers alike. I wholeheartedly recommend this intriguing and stimulating book to anyone with an interest in or a desire for knowledge at the intersection of theology with disciplines like cinema, history, culture, and philosophy within an Ethiopian and the larger Pan-African contexts—including the diaspora. Those who are interested in the oral and folkloric traditions will benefit tremendously from this book. It is well researched and well written, with a wealth of details that help readers see the intricate relationship between iconography and theology. Issues for further research are recommended at the end of the book. These are: 1) how to engage African cinema to decolonize education, curriculum, and epistemology; 2) film literacy; and 3) how to question the ethics of gazing at the other. Belachew invites us, readers, to *Sankofa*, that is, back to our roots, to discover our past in order to enrich the present and the future.

Nebeyou Alemu Terefe, PhD

*Wycliffe Ethiopia and The University of the Free State*

## Book Highlight

**Excerpt from Tekletsadik Belachew, *Stories from the Fireplace: Theological Meditations on Haile Gerima's Cinema*. Langaa RPCIG (Cameroon), 2021. p. 143 – 152.**

*Sankofa – Evokes Memory of the Living Stones*

Sankofa – Reclaiming ancient African ancestors evokes the memory of the spiritual and intellectual ancestors moving forward. One of the most acclaimed films, *Sankofa* by Haile Gerima, begins with a bronze representation of the Sankofa-bird, rolling to signify the root metaphor of memory. The elderly griot representing Sankofa is playing the drum and shouting repeatedly “Sankofa! Sankofa! Sankofa!” While holding his staff bearing the symbol of *Sankofa* carved into it, the griot begins walking and encounters a young model of African descent. The griot confronts the girl for denying her identity, calling her to return to her roots—to the seedbed of her true self—and reclaim her memory and identity.

*Sankofa* means, “returning to your roots, recapturing what you’ve lost and moving forward.” The concept of *Sankofa* is relevant to the contemporary problem of disremembering the ancient African Christian legacy. By going back to the past, you can move toward the future in a way that also positively affects your present reality. *Sankofa* evokes memory! Memory is an important aspect of being human, and truthful remembrance is not mere attempt to dwell in the past. For Africans, the audacity to remember the past stands against the tides of historical amnesia or repeated erasures of memory. The biblical story of the Exodus, the Passover, underscores the significance of memory. In the book of Joshua, Joshua ordered the representatives of Israel to gather stones to construct a memorial. He later commanded the Israelites to tell their children when they asked about the meaning of the stones, how God had dried up the Jordan so the Israelites could cross it (Joshua 4:21-22). In the New Testament, the sacrament of the Eucharist or the Lord’s Supper also carries a powerful dimension of remembrance and reenactment of life. Both icons and oral folklores evokes memory.<sup>131</sup>

Now more than ever, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, you [people of African descent] are entrusted with learning and telling the stories of the “living stones” of early African Christians, the intellectual and spiritual legacy of which is archived in written texts, church paintings and oral storytelling traditions, and the ruins of archeological remains. Their stories are worth remembering.<sup>132</sup> Their stories are worth telling your children and grandchildren. Their memories await your unearthing. Through their legacy, the Spirit kindles the renewal of your mind and the transformation of your bodies in Christ

---

<sup>131</sup> Jean-Marc Éla, *My Faith as an African*, translated from the French by Robert R. Barr (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1986), “Before the written word destroys our ability to listen and remember, we need to hear the voices of these older Africans who carry the message of a millennium-old Africa to new generations,” 11.

<sup>132</sup> John P. Kealy and David W. Shenk, *The Early Church and Africa: A School Certificate Course Based on East African Syllabus for Christian Religious Education* (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1975).

to “be a living and holy sacrifice!” (Romans 12:1; see also John 14:26).

The myth of “Africa without history” fails to acknowledge the early Christian intellectual movement from South to North, from Africa to elsewhere (including Europe). The negative view towards Africa also results from the presumed divorce between textual and oral discourses. Oral traditions are mistakenly perceived as inferior—an error with powerful implications since Africa is regarded as the oral continent. This false dichotomy neglects the fact that the gospel progressed from oral forms to a textual medium. It also undermines the textual contributions of Africa, particularly those of early African Christianity. Even the most enlightened pan-Africanists and African nationalists, who dare to dig deep in every well in their quest to reclaim the stories of Africa and restore her dignity, often neglect the textual and other intellectual contributions of pre-colonial early Africa.

Contrary to contemporary disbelief or denial, historically the intellectual movement trajectory travels from South to North, from Africa to Europe. This movement of the ancient faith has much to offer, including a wealth of spiritual resources, to present-day Christians living in Africa and the African Diaspora.<sup>133</sup> The religiosity, engagement with African cultures and traditional religions, and intellectual vitality of these “living stones”—be they laypeople, clergy, teachers, theologians, martyrs, or Desert Fathers and Mothers—offer a vast gold mine awaiting your own *Sankofa*. That is, they beckon a return to your roots, a reclaiming of your ancestors and the telling of their stories. Your excavation of their memories may both root you in history and empower your vision.

*Africa in the Bible:* Africa has a close affinity with the Bible itself. Biblical references to Africa and Africans are numerous. Africa has always had a place in God’s salvation narrative. Egypt, Libya, Cush, and Ethiopia are names of either a specific country or region of the continent embraced as God’s people (Isaiah 19:24-25; Psalm 68:31). African Christian history is not an experience of yesteryear, but, rather, is closely tied to the time of Jesus Christ and anchored in the ancient faith of the apostles.

In the New Testament, the flight of the holy family to Egypt (A.D. 1-3) speaks of African hospitality, as the nation hosted the incarnate Christ as its guest. Matthew says that their African sojourn was in fulfillment of the prophecy of Hosea: “I called my son out of Egypt.” (Hosea 11:1; Matthew 2:13-15). Another link between Africa and the Bible is manifest in the Ethiopian eunuch, the earliest African believer who returned to the continent after being baptized by Philip the Evangelist (Acts 8:26-40).

Mark, the Gospel writer and narrator, was an African born in Cyrene (Libya) who collaborated closely with Peter the apostle and travelled across three continents. He founded the church in Alexandria and ordained leaders for Cyrene before being martyred in Alexandria (on April 26, A.D. 68). To this day, the Coptic Church of Egypt and the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church venerate Mark the Evangelist as an African apostle and Illuminator of the Gospel. In addition, Alexandria is regarded as the See of St. Mark. However, the five hundred years of vibrant early Libyan

---

<sup>133</sup> Paisius Altschul, *An Unbroken Circle: Linking Ancient African Christianity to the African-American Experience* (St. Louis, MO: Brotherhood of St. Moses the Black, 1997).

Christianity have been almost forgotten.<sup>134</sup>

*The Bible in Africa:* You read the Bible as a historical document, and the history of biblical interpretations has been shaped by early African Christianity (which, in turn, shapes the history of the world). Early African teachers contributed to the translation and interpretation of Scripture. Outstanding exegetes—theologians of early African Christianity include Didymus the Blind, Cyril of Alexandria, and Augustine of Hippo. Origen the Egyptian (c. 186-255) deserves to be acknowledged as the “Father of Biblical Criticism” for the sole reason that he was one of the earliest Church Fathers to develop a theory of interpretation. A prolific writer, Origen produced a massive body of commentaries, as well as systematic and philosophical texts. A wealthy friend provided the facility and manpower to transcribe Origen’s thought as he dictated into texts in writing while Origen himself dictated them. Later, Origen transferred his library and taught at Caesarea. Other early African teachers were also sought-after scholars invited to teaching of the Bible outside Africa. Another contribution of early African Christianity is the teaching centers, particularly in Alexandria, upon which European universities were patterned.<sup>135</sup>

*Christian Thought in Africa:* Christianity in Africa is not a recent colonial and missionary experiment. Nor is it alien to African cultures and religions. Despite naïve beliefs to the contrary, early African Christianity contributed enormously to the formation of Christian doctrines and practices.

Among noteworthy early African theologians, teachers, philosophers, and exegetes are Clement of Alexandria (150-215), Cyprian of Carthage, Didymus the Blind, Fulgentius, Lactantius, Marius Victorinus, and Minucius Felix. No one doubts the great doctrinal contributions of these figures. But their identity as Africans has been contested or forgotten. One of the many reasons for negating their African identity centers on the fact that their original writings were in Latin or Greek. However, language is not an exclusive identity marker. Indeed, that the New Testament was written in Greek does not alter the Jewish identity of the authors, and it is not typically suggested that Paul and Peter were Greek rather than Jewish! A number of early African intellectual’s identity has been questioned for example that of Tertullian who wrote in Latin.

Tertullian from Carthage (160-215), one of the great African theologians, is known for coining the Latin term for the doctrine of the Trinity.<sup>136</sup> Athanasius of Alexandria “the Father of Orthodoxy is best known as a pragmatic theologian and church leader who refuted the heretical teaching of Arius. Athanasius also influenced the ecumenical decision of Nicene and the creed on the doctrine of Christ and the Trinity. These controversies were debated and settled in Africa before they reached ecumenical consensus elsewhere.

---

<sup>134</sup> Thomas C. Oden, *Early Libyan Christianity: Uncovering a North African Tradition* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2011).

<sup>135</sup> Thomas C. Oden, *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind: Rediscovering the African Seedbed of Western Christianity* (Downers Grove: IVP Press, 2007), 44.

<sup>136</sup> See also David E. Willite, *Tertullian the African: An Anthropological Reading of Tertullian’s Context and Identities* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2007).

*Ancient African Spiritual Practices:* The influence of early African Christianity also extends from Christian beliefs to practices such as monasticism, prayer, and ecumenism, which were significantly shaped in Africa.<sup>137</sup> Early African church thinkers (both clergy and laypeople), whose ascetic lifestyle was demonstrated through different Christian practices such as prayer and endurance in the face of severe persecution and even martyrdom, were also mostly known for their deep spirituality. Mark in Alexandria and Cyprian in the Maghreb gave their lives as a living offering. Vibia Perpetua also became a martyr in resisting the Roman cult, and died in Carthage's amphitheater. Many other early African Christians faced persecution and ultimately honored God.

We echo the writer of Hebrews, who declares that he has simply run out of time to recount the heroic faith of godly men and women (11:32). How much more can we say? "It would take too long to recount the stories." (Hebrews 11:32). It would also take us too long to retell the stories of African Christian saints such as Mark the Evangelist; Cyprian the Bishop; and Perpetua, the mother who fearlessly and resiliently faced martyrdom publicly. These saints celebrated the Lord of life without the fear of suffering and death. In the words of Tertullian, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church."

Let us also consider another feature of African Christianity. Monasticism also flourished under the leadership of monastics such as Anthony, Pachomius, and Macarius of Egypt. St. Athanasius's classic biography, *The Life of St. Anthony*, helped to propagate monastic movements outside of Africa. The Desert Fathers and Mothers provided counseling for those who were spiritually and emotionally distressed. Major figures of the Desert Fathers, including Evagrius Ponticus of Egypt, founded Christian psychology and counseling along with St. Augustine of Hippo (which is in present-day Algeria). Explorations of their wisdom still bring comfort and consolation to contemporary Africa.

The loud reading of Scripture, inner spirituality and contemplation, and intellectual acumen—each of which impacts the larger society—are never compartmentalized. Evagrius Ponticus wrote, "If you are a theologian, you truly pray. If you truly pray, you are a theologian." In the early church, the pursuit of spirituality—including prayer and other ascetic practices—were part and parcel of the intellectual's endeavor. Four early African theologians, namely, Tertullian, Cyprian, Origen, and Augustine, wrote *On the Lord's Prayer*.<sup>138</sup> These treatises emerged from their practices in the Christian family of North Africa and explicate the content and posture of prayer, thereby combining both mind and body as well as individual and communal.

#### *Learning from Early African Spiritual Ancestors*

The oldest living African churches today are the Coptic/Egypt and Ethiopic Orthodox

---

<sup>137</sup> J. Patout Burns, Jr. and Robin M. Jensen, *Christianity in Roman Africa: The Development of its Practices and Beliefs* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2014).

<sup>138</sup> Tertullian, Cyprian, and Origen, *On the Lord's Prayer. Popular Patristic Series*. Translated and Introduced by Alistair Stewart-Sykes (Crestwood, NY: SVSP, 2004).

Tawahedo Churches. Other churches of Africa and the African Diaspora are also entitled to share in early Christianity's heritage, but must give due respect to the ancient African churches who archived the living tradition through texts, liturgy, the commemoration of the saints, oral tradition, iconography, and so on.<sup>139</sup> Losing this sense of tradition by not exhibiting such respect prohibits churches from delving into the wealth of early African Christian resources. Contemporaries are standing on the shoulders of their African spiritual ancestors (martyrs, teachers, clergy, and intellectuals), who have already run the race of faith and are watching us as a "huge crowd of witnesses." (Hebrews 12:1). Africans should not neglect them—they are our roots—nor the rich treasures they offer.

Learning from early African scholars and spirituals matters for today.<sup>140</sup> The monumental legacy left by early African Christians is enriching the rest of the world, particularly the West. The vast contributions of early African Christianity are quenching the thirsty souls of the world, and this should be no less true for contemporary Africans. With the audacity of *Sankofa*, may all—the children of the Nile Valley and all of Africa and the African Diaspora—quench spiritual and intellectual thirst! The wisdom of the past is often not regarded as precious as gold. በእጅ ያለ ወርቅ እንደመዳብ ይቆጠራል። “Gold in one's hand (possession) is like copper.” This proverb implies that one does not really appreciate a treasure at hand. There is also another proverb that points to such problems. የዓባይን ልጅ ውሃ ጠማው። “The Child of Abbay (Blue Nile) is thirsty.”<sup>141</sup> This also tells us how one can be deprived in the midst of indigenous bounty such as Ancient African Christianity.<sup>142</sup>

Africans are heirs to a rich history of ancient Christianity. But the question put to people of African descent is: “Do you know this history?” Do you know the stories and contributions of early African Christianity? Such is the fading memory of ancient African Christianity and an evocative griot would probably challenge the legacy that needs to be reinvigorated by people of African descent. Telling early African Christian stories of faith, martyrdom, and intellectual vitality to children and the coming

---

<sup>139</sup> For the early church understanding of tradition, see Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies*, Book III. ed. Robert M. Grant. *Early Church Fathers* (London: Routledge, 1997), 123-42. From the Protestant reformers on the use of tradition see Martin Chemnitz (1522-86), “Concerning Traditions: From the First Decree of the Fourth Session of the Council of Trent.” in *Examination of the Council of Trent*, Part I, trans. Fred Kramer (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1971). Contemporary Evangelical theologian Kevin J. Vanhoozer also warns the misunderstood sola scriptura is not solo scriptura. See Vanhoozer. *The Drama of Doctrine*. 154.

<sup>140</sup> See Mark Ellingsen, *African Christian Mothers and Fathers: Why They Matter for the Church Today* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2015).

<sup>141</sup> Tekletsadik Belachew, “Wax and Gold: Wisdom, Spirituality and Moral Discourse in Ethiopian Proverbs.” in *Being and Becoming African as a Permanent Work in Progress: Inspiration from Chinua Achebe's Proverbs*, edited by Francis B. Nyamnjoh, Patrick Nwosu and Hassan Mbiydenyuy Yosimbom (Bamenda, Cameroon: Langaa RPCIG, 2021), 167-168.

<sup>142</sup> Daniel Assefa, “Treasures from the Ethiopian Orthodox Tawahedo Church,” in *The Church We Want: Foundations, Theology and Mission of the Church in Africa*, edited by Agbonkhanmeghe E. Orabator (Nairobi: Pauline Publications Africa, 2015), 310-21.



generations is a Sankofa move – a return to the past to move to the future.

As I wrote elsewhere, Africans in the continent and in the Diaspora, the dispersed community of Africans throughout the world, rightfully share the legacy of this rich history of Christianity on African soil. Unfortunately, however, many are oblivious to much of the wealth of Ethiopian Christianity, as the story has traditionally not been told in Western textbooks. And yet, if historians and scholars remain quiet about Ethiopian Christianity, even the stones will cry out!<sup>143</sup>

## Conclusion

(...)The power of naming, renaming, or reclaiming is the strongest point of Gerima's cinematic storytelling. He calls for reclaiming Africa's true image that has been deformed by exploitative cinema: "Let us fight for the multiplication of our images, our non-visually documented ancestors. Let us reclaim our own image, reconfigure our disfigured visual representation, and in so doing we will look and be normal."<sup>144</sup>

Stereotypical representation or the problem of invisibility has negatively influenced journalism, international relations, academic discourse, Christian missions, theologizing, and methodology. The ultimate problem of invisibility, terra incognita, is that which Africans have been facing in the wider human context, particularly its implications in cinematographic, theological, and ecclesiastical spheres.<sup>145</sup>

Gerima is a visionary filmmaker who values memory to convey hope for the future. Violent erasure of memory and culture can be encountered and counterbalanced only through counter-memory. African theologians can contribute their part by exploring rich sources of the living tradition, both from reading the Scripture in the community context and from their ancestors – a history of exegesis as lived religiosity. African folkloric storytelling and orality serve as a vehicle of memory and epistemology relevant both for African cinematography and African Christian theology.

***Reprinted with permission from the author and the publisher, Langaa RPCIG (Cameroon).***

---

<sup>143</sup> Tekletsadik Belachew, "From Abba Salama to King Lalibela: Christian traditions in Ethiopia are among the oldest in the world" in *Journal of African Christian Biography* (Special Issue in Honor of Director Jonathan Bonk on the Occasion of his retirement) 5, no. 4 (2020): 60–66. Available online <https://dacb.org/journal/>

<sup>144</sup> Haile Gerima, "What is the Link between Chosen Genres and Developed Ideologies in African Cinema?" in *Symbolic Narratives/African Cinema: Audience, Theory, and the Moving Image*, edited by June Givanni (London: BFI Publishing, 2000), 132.

<sup>145</sup> Ousmane Sembène, "Cinema as Evening School." *Black Camera: An International Film Journal* 12, no. 2 (Spring 2021), 460. See also Jonathan J. Bonk, "Ecclesiastical Cartography and the Invisible Continent," in *Christianity in Africa and the African Diaspora: The Appropriation of a Shattered Heritage*, edited by Afe Adogame, Roswith Gerloff and Klaus Hock (London, UK: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2008): 20–32. See the references section in this book for the previously published version of this essay in journals such History in Africa and IBMR.

## Resources for Education

### **“Shaping a truly global network through Christian e-publishing? Assessing strategies for access and dissemination within the *Dictionary of African Christian Biography*”**

Presentation at the Yearly Meeting of the American Society of Missiology (June 2023)  
- Panel: Creating bridges and not dams: challenges in African Christian publishing

By Michèle Miller Sigg, Executive Director

In November 2021, the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC) held a consultation in Nairobi, Kenya, in collaboration with theological networks and institutions in Africa on “theological education for sustainable growth in churches and society” to articulate their commitments to Agenda 2063 of the African Union. In a published statement, they voiced concern over “imported” teaching that resulted in “irrelevant theological praxis not responsive to human life and felt needs on the continent” and recognized the gaps in their theological institutions. They called for an ecumenical effort of African churches to “rethink church mission philosophy from a ‘tomorrow’ notion to ‘now’” by fulfilling seven aspirations in their core curricula. Among these were— 1) promoting networking (conferences, connectivity); 2) creating “transformative curriculum that is relevant, integrative, and contextual;” and 3) developing academic publications to “articulate the vision (...) towards the Africa we want, a Continent of God’s desire.”<sup>146</sup>

The consultation statement was an echo—whether intentional or not—of Andrew Walls’ prophetic 2002 article entitled “Christian Scholarship in Africa in the Twenty-First Century” in which he called for the development of “Christian scholarship rooted in Christian mission.”<sup>147</sup> In it he criticized western universities for having lost their way and called for a “return to the ideal of scholarship for the glory of God, a return to the ideal of academic life as a liberating search for truth.”<sup>148</sup> It is imperative, said Walls, to counter “small scale” western theology, which is nothing more than Enlightenment theology, irrelevant to the African context, and useless to a continent that has not experienced the Enlightenment.<sup>149</sup> The only hope, mused Walls, was for the scholarly vocation to start anew in the non-western world. This, in fact, was the sentiment reflected in the statement of the AACC.

---

<sup>146</sup> All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC), “Statement from the Consultation on Theological Education for Sustainable Growth in Churches and Society in Relation to Agenda 2063 of the African Union in Nairobi, Kenya. (November 28, 2021), 2.

<sup>147</sup> Andrew F. Walls, “Christian Scholarship in Africa in the Twenty-First Century,” *Transformation* 9, no. 4 (October 2002): 221.

<sup>148</sup> Walls, “Christian Scholarship in Africa,” 222.

<sup>149</sup> Walls, “Christian Scholarship in Africa,” 223-224.

Walls drew a sharp distinction between the “African intellectual matrix” that focuses on a theology of relationship or of belonging, and the western individualistic, cartesian concept of the self.<sup>150</sup> He proposed several “ingredients” to Christian scholarship, drawn from the theology of relationships, including 1) a renewed Christian vocation to scholarship, rooted in Christian mission; 2) a cooperative model of teaching and research (the ashram model of sharing resources); and 3) ecumenical interaction and collaboration within world Christianity.<sup>151</sup>

In this presentation, I will explore how the *Dictionary of African Christian Biography* is enacting the “theology of relationship” that Walls describes and which is also reflected in the aspirations of the AACC consultation statement. In a first part, I will assess the DACB’s past and current strategies for creating a collegial model for research through our pursuit of accessibility and the creation of resources for theological education. The second section will draw from several recent initiatives in Africa to sketch out some principles of collaboration that provide a sense of hope and local agency while also avoiding the danger of dependency.<sup>152</sup>

## **A. Collegiality through access and resource development: An assessment**

The original announcement of the creation of the *Dictionary of African Christian Biography* in 1995 included a commitment to create an open access, non proprietary repository of materials that promised first, that it would be “simultaneously accessible to readers around the world” and secondly, that it could be “freely reproduced locally in printed form” (original announcement, 1995).

### **1. The first promise: a) Internet access: Delivery of content via computer and smart phone.**

To make the content widely available, the plan was to deliver this content via the Internet. At that time (Dec 1995), the Internet was still an emerging communications platform: less than half of the U.S. population was online and 99% of East Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa was offline. There were only 16 million Internet users worldwide—0.4% of the world’s population. However, the rapid expansion of the Internet soon gave hope that it might actually provide widescale accessibility. Ten years later, in 2005, 15.7% of the world was using the Internet. 20 years later in 2015, it was 46.4%. And in December of 2022, 69% of the world was online.<sup>153</sup>

Unfortunately, however, Internet use in Africa is the lowest of all global regions. In December 2022, only 43.2% of Africa’s population was using the Internet (contrasted with 93.4% in North America). Those who use the Internet the most in Africa are the more educated and the younger population. Africa also records the

---

<sup>150</sup> Walls, “Christian Scholarship in Africa,” 226.

<sup>151</sup> Walls, “Christian Scholarship in Africa,” 226-227.

<sup>152</sup> Walls, “Christian Scholarship in Africa,” 227-228.

<sup>153</sup> Internet World Statistics,

[https://www.internetworldstats.com/emarketing.htm#google\\_vignette](https://www.internetworldstats.com/emarketing.htm#google_vignette), accessed 6/15/2023.

lowest ownership of smart phones of all global regions. But here again, growth is aggressive. In 2014, 15% of sub-Saharan Africans owned a smart phone. This figure had more than doubled by 2018 to 33% (contrast with 77% in the U.S.) and is projected to double again by 2025.<sup>154</sup> In July 2022, the percentage of Africans with smartphones stood at 46%.<sup>155</sup> This figure is important because over 60% of the DACB's web traffic comes from mobile phones.

The question stands therefore: Has the Internet been the most effective way to reach maximum accessibility for our target audience in Africa? By itself, it is not, of course, given the realities of African daily life. Therefore, we continue to pursue ways to widen the circle of access in multiple ways, even on the Internet.

#### **b) The DACB website is designed to be as accessible as possible online.**

We practice a **policy of open access** and a philosophy of minimal computing in our choice of digital technology. This means that the site was designed as an HTML based site, using very little bandwidth, to accommodate nonwestern network vulnerabilities—specifically pay-as-you-go mobile phone data plans in African countries.<sup>156</sup> It can operate independently of server-based technology even for our site search engine. The site is designed with adaptive technology for mobile phones as well so that mobile users can easily access our content.

#### **c) It is REALLY open access:**

In contrast with institutional proprietary databases and gated digital resources, we seek to “de-territorialize” the field of academic and church educational resources by providing our resources freely on the website. This means that there are no subscription fees, no institutional memberships (eg university enrollment), and no access portal requiring institutional registration. We do not collect names and contact information in exchange for the use of the site. Only if viewers wish to receive a free quarterly e-subscription to the *Journal of African Christian Biography* do they submit their name and email address.

#### **d) The site provides wider linguistic access for global Internet users:**

---

<sup>154</sup> Laura Silver and Courtney Johnson, “Internet Connectivity Seen as Having Positive Impact on Life in Sub-Saharan Africa,” (Pew Research Center, 2019), 5. This study is based on data collected from six countries (South Africa, Ghana, Nigeria, Senegal, Kenya, and Tanzania) in 2018.

<sup>155</sup> “African Countries with the highest number of mobile phones,” *FurtherAfrica* (July 19, 2022), accessed 6/15/2023. The countries with the most mobile (all phones—not just smartphones) phones are: Nigeria, South Africa, Egypt, Kenya, Ethiopia, Tanzania, Morocco, Algeria, Ghana, DRC, Ghana.

<sup>156</sup> Currently in its 3.0 iteration, the DACB website is hosted via Github, an **open source software platform**, and utilizes Jekyll, Ruby, and JSON to create a dynamic, text searchable website that remains **light on bandwidth** by placing most of the workload of the site on the browser.

A TRANSLATE button in the top menu makes it possible for users to translate the entire site into any language offered by Google translate.

#### **e) Access beyond the Internet:**

But what about African users who have little or no Internet access? For institutions and individuals with computers but little or no Internet access on a regular basis, they can download a full copy of the DACB website and copy it to a local computer at home or in their institution's library. The USB site files include an offline search engine that makes the website searchable even without Internet access. An updated timestamped version will be available twice a year (April and October) on the DACB website at <https://dacb.org/resources/usb/indexes/> (the Introductory resources page).

### **2. What about beyond the Internet? The second promise seeks to provide access beyond the Internet and computers.**

All DACB content and Journal issues are non-proprietary, which means that users can freely download materials to print and distribute locally. The only requirement is that they cite the DACB website as their source.

*Critique:* This particular area of accessibility is still underdeveloped. What remains to be done is to develop a chain of local printers in Africa who could print content on demand, including hardcopies of the Journal to distribute them (for a fee to offset their costs) when they are published.

Even offline, we continue to look for ways to push the boundaries of accessibility to produce hard copies of our resources that are available to African Christians. But we need more entrepreneurial partners on the ground in Africa. Until we have a local printing and distribution network, DACB materials will not reach the majority of African Christians. Or until North American and European publishers make an intentional push into establishing printing and publishing hubs in Africa, the availability of printed resources will be severely limited for African Christians. Nonetheless, the preference for hard copies of DACB and Journal content has inspired some of our recent initiatives.

## **B. The DACB's Emerging Models for Collaboration in Publication and Teaching**

Recent initiatives have focused on collaborative projects driven by, directed by, and funded by local initiative. The goal is to empower and give responsibility for these African initiatives to local collaborators. The role of the North American DACB office is to offer editorial services and publication opportunities while African colleagues provide biographical content and organize on-the-ground conferences, consultations, and workshops. There are two recent examples of such initiatives:

### **1. Local Christian Biography Conferences**

*Nigeria.* In March 2023, the first Nigerian Consultation on African Christian

Biographies was hosted by His Excellency, President Olusegun Obasanjo (DACB elder) at the Olusegun Obasanjo Presidential Library, Abeokuta, Nigeria with the participation of Professor Deji Ayegboyin (DACB elder). Thirty-two scholars in Christian Religious Studies, mainly full professors from universities in Nigeria attended, including several local chiefs, UNESCO Associate Experts, former Ambassadors, and three serving or former Vice-Chancellors. The goal of this consultation is to produce biographical content for a publication in the form of a dedicated journal issue and a book.

**Kenya.** In January 2023, I received an email from Dr. Ferdinand Manjewa M'bwangi in which he asked how his newly established research institute might collaborate with the DACB. Several conversations and a zoom meeting later, Dr. M'bwangi and the council of the Diocese of Mombasa Research Institution (DOMRI), based at Pwani University, Mombasa, Kenya, decided to organize a Kenyan Christian Biography conference to take place in late 2023. The content produced will be featured in a dedicated Journal issue.

These initiatives are just at the beginning or in the middle of their process to plan or carry out an African Christian biography conference that produces publisher-ready biographies. Time will tell how successful this kind of cooperative initiative is.

## **2. Local Oral History and Biography Writing Workshop (DRC)**

In the DACB vision, the biographies of African Christians are primary sources for a renewed curriculum for theological education in Africa, particularly the teaching of African Christian history. To create such a curriculum, one scholar stresses the importance of attending to “contextualisation, worldviews, and hermeneutics” as part of the dual process of decolonisation and Africanisation of theological curricula.<sup>157</sup> A new curriculum must primarily take into account concrete African realities. The DACB’s use of biography as the vehicle for documenting the Christian story in Africa prioritizes daily realities and local concerns. Oral history methodology in Africa helps to strengthen Christian community by constructing “believer-centered church history that avoids an over-reliance on North-American or European institutional archives.”<sup>158</sup> In biographies written by Africans, the authors express not only their subjects’ worldviews and spiritual concerns but can also reflect on or question their own. In an educational context, the practice of sharing personal stories while also participating in a group effort to write biographies creates an atmosphere of *ubuntu* that inspires the research and writing process itself. It is the sense that each author can accomplish their own writing project because the others in the group hold them in solidarity. In this case, the biographical subject’s story is embedded in the author’s story, which is also rooted in the story of the whole group.

---

<sup>157</sup> Johannes Knoetze, “Decolonising or Africanisation of the Theological Curriculum: A Critical Reflection,” *Scriptura* 120, no. 1 (2021): 2.. <http://dx.doi.org/10.7833/120-1-1874>. Although this observation was made relative to the teaching of theology, it is still relevant in the case of Christian history.

<sup>158</sup> “Oral history and the strengthening of Christian community,” *Bearing Witness Stories Project* (Nov. 3, 2015), <https://martyrstories.org/> <https://martyrstories.org/oral-history/>.

In March 2023, I was invited my BU colleague and friend Anicka Fast, to co-teach a workshop on “Writing the History of the Church for Congolese Mennonites” at the Centre Universitaire de Missiologie in Kinshasa, DRC—which is an “ecumenical, independent, and mission-minded institution” in Kinshasa.<sup>159</sup> The workshop was designed to equip Congolese Mennonites to write biographies of the pioneers of their churches from three different Mennonite denominations in the Congo. There were sixteen students—five women and eleven men, ranging in age from their twenties to their seventies. The concrete outcome of the workshop is to produce a book of their biographies in French and English, published by Langham Press in their Global Perspectives Series, and disseminated among local churches and educational institutions.

Even though the project is still ongoing as the students are now doing oral history interviews and writing their biographies (due late July), several important lessons have emerged from the experience of the workshop itself. The positive experience of this case study seems to indicate that these factors will help to shape a better model of theological training in Africa by creating an atmosphere of group solidarity and a identification with the work of Christian mission. What were these factors? Please see the appendix for co-instructor Anicka Fast’s list of factors based on her assessment of the workshop. They complement and expand my list here:

***There was integrity in planning.*** From the beginning, the careful planning of the workshop with advice from local trusted friends, from the objective selection of the students based on merit, writing ability, and motivation to appropriate opening and closing ceremonies that honored denominational leaders, made the workshop a success. It was truly a collaboration and an exercise in listening to the wisdom of our Congolese colleagues. The careful nurture of relationships—between students, with local coordinators, with church leaders—took center stage from the beginning

***Prioritizing relationships bore fruit.*** The students were all in residence for the full week of the workshop. Between lectures and study sessions, we shared coffee, meals, and conversations together, students and instructors. It was a time to get to know each other and to draw closer. Those times helped narrow the cultural and experiential gap between us as people shared their life stories and struggles in a country beset with much sadness. By the end of the week, we had become friends. The times students met with us individually for advice on their biography project often turned into personal storytelling or spiritual reflection sessions. A sense of ease and freedom settled between us (instructors) and students. Students seemed fascinated that we were so available to them in a familial kind of way, as brothers and sisters in Christ, even though we were helpless to solve their very real struggles. I was reminded of Bishop Azariah’s cry “Give us friends!” at the international mission conference in Edinburgh in 1910, as Anicka and I knitted ties of friendship with our students by listening and sharing of ourselves, and sometimes praying with them.

***Building relationships created community / ubuntu.*** The nurture of relationships created a sense of community. At the end of the workshop, students

---

<sup>159</sup> Anicka Fast, report.

reported on what they had learned—facts about African Christian history and the role of women or of revival movements, friendships with missionaries—but also on how they felt strengthened by the friendships they had formed during the workshop and how the experience had reaffirmed their faith. After the workshop, these friendships have continued in Whatsapp group conversations as people share photos and stories of their research, ask questions and seek advice, rejoice or lament with one another. The “family” that has grown out of the experience is contributing to the work being done. Their individual biographies will all draw from the collective guidance and encouragement of the group.

***Students gained a sense of a larger global Christian community across space and time.*** The lessons in world Christian history and African history from antiquity to the present powerfully fueled the global imaginations of the students who suddenly realized they were part of a much larger family in time and space.

***Women were empowered.*** The five women students gained an enormous benefit from the workshop and the friendships they gained. To learn that there had been influential Christian women in Congolese history was eye-opening for them. But even more than that, the experience of two women instructors, in positions of authority, and their own treatment as equal partners in the collective project of producing a book with 50% women’s stories was transformative. They gained a sense of empowerment that, in some cases, had ripple effects after the workshop. One student, Charlie, created a Whatsapp group for all the Mennonite church women in the Congo—to work together for the betterment of women in the church. Charlie also served as our “village chief” or student rep during the week—another pioneering feature of this workshop.

***Learning became worship and writing became Christian mission.*** We designed our teaching to be not only an intellectual experience (acquisition of knowledge) but a sacramental exercise and an act of worship. Each day started with a student group presenting the biography of the day for a church setting—as a Sunday school lesson, a sermon, a hymn, or a skit. This exercise was meant to help students process the lessons learned as sources for church teaching, worship, and encouragement for the community. Unexpectedly, Charlie’s role as village chief contributed powerfully to the element of worship throughout the day as she led us in prayer, roused people from their fatigue by having them stand up and sing praise songs in Lingala, or rallied people for coffee breaks or meals.

What emerged in their final comments was the students’ deep sense of responsibility and calling to the work of biography writing. They each treasured having been chosen for the workshop and took seriously the work ahead of them. The women, especially, were emboldened by the week’s experience. The proverb “to educate a woman/mother is to educate a nation” was quoted several times in the feedback. And these women seemed ready to take up the challenge.

This is a pilot project that we hope will be replicated in different places and produce more printed materials to be used in the development of theological curricula for African Christian history. The goal is to produce a DACB series of similar books for different regions.



## Conclusion

The work of the DACB and the *Journal of African Christian Biography* enter into that category of “Christian scholarship as Christian mission” that Walls spoke of. Much work remains to be done but our footprint is expanding and we are gathering more African collaborators. Hopefully we can also rally western publishers to close the loop with African writers.

Since the beginning, the DACB mission has included three “movements”:

*Conversion of consciousness/ Shifting of perspectives:* Since the early years, the ongoing task has been to convert the consciousness of the global community to the new realities of Christianity in the Global South, in Africa in particular.

*Connection/ Forging new networks:* The DACB is working to strengthen old networks and create new ones. Already, the DACB connects language groups across Africa through its multi-lingual function. It fosters interaction with international networks of scholars and church agents. It builds bridges that connect people across national, regional, denominational, gender, socio-economic, political, and educational lines. It dismantles the “divide and conquer” legacy of colonialism and displaces the traditional gatekeepers of knowledge through its policy of open and equal access.

*Restoration/ Recreating community.* The ultimate goal of the DACB is one of restoration on an intellectual, theological, and relational level within the global church. With this model, the act of empowering African authors to write a truer and more complete history of the church in Africa will lead to a deeper understanding of God’s mission in the world for the global church. The result will be the restoration of relationships within the global church – across cultural and denominational boundaries.

## Appendix (by Anicka Fast)

**Excerpt from:** “Publishing as global church bridge-building: case study of a collaborative, biography-based approach in DR Congo” by Anicka Fast<sup>160</sup> (ASM “Creating Bridges, not Dams” Panel 2023):

Through this case study, I argue that collaborative efforts to connect local denominational channels of collaboration, interest, and funding with the broader vision and resources available within ecumenical and global organizations can contribute to more equitable knowledge production within the global church by generating high-quality and accessible publications with pedagogical value for churches, students, and

---

<sup>160</sup> Dr. Anicka Fast was primary organizer and co-instructor of the workshop. She is a specialist in church history and missiology for francophone Africa with Mennonite Mission Network, a Visiting Researcher at Boston University Center for Global Christianity and Mission and a Research Fellow at the Institute for the Study of Global Anabaptism at Goshen College. She also serves as Secretary of the Faith and Life Commission of Mennonite World Conference. She is a member of the DACB’s International Editorial Board (<https://dacb.org/about/editors-and-elders/>).

researchers, in both South and North.

## **Seven values for a new kind of World Christianity book series**

### **1. Collaboration**

- In our workshop, it was significant that academic, ecclesial, and mission organizations in both North and South were collaborating to support the process of writing, researching, and publishing by global South authors.
- In our case, it seems that several kinds of collaboration were necessary. Most obviously, there was close collaboration, over more than a year, with Michèle Sigg and the DACB.
- I would say that it is also necessary for the success of a workshop for there to be a local person who shares the vision and with whom there is a relationship of trust and collaboration. In my case, the friendships and intercultural relationships that developed during my work with MCC in Congo 15 years ago have been critical to my ability to work in Congo at all. One close colleague, Maurice Matsitsa, chair of the board of a local interdenominational Christian university and a Mennonite himself, has over the years become a conversation partner about preserving sources and supporting the writing of history of Mennonites in Congo. He played a crucial role as co-organizer in giving legitimacy to the workshop idea, promoting it to the right leaders within the three Mennonite communities, and offering wisdom about participant selection.
- In addition to the long-term relationships and conversation partners, there was also broad buy-in, during the months preceding the workshop, from ecclesial, academic, and mission stakeholders both inside and outside Congo. I spent quite a lot of my time soliciting, facilitating, asking for involvement, and it was amazing to see how many people and institutions were ready to step up. In addition to preparing all the bedrooms for us to rent and facilitating our liaison with a good caterer, CUM offered us the free use of their classroom spaces, airport pickup, invitation letters, and gas for the generator during power outages. Personnel from the AIMM office in Kinshasa did the tiring job of making the money transfers to distant participants. In North America, the Schowalter Foundation offered funding to support the travel and lodging of workshop participants and some of the costs of proofreading and copyediting. Mennonite Mission Network covered my travel costs, while MCC covered travel and living costs for Michèle after her arrival in Burkina Faso. The DACB supported her travel to and from the United States. And of course, Langham was willing to publish the book.
- Making these connections takes a lot of time. It seems that it might be necessary for there to be a few long-term intercultural workers like myself who can work on fostering such relationships. Dana Robert has suggested that mission today in an era of global Christianity works best through

“overlapping human networks” that connect people around the globe<sup>161</sup> – and her observation is particularly relevant today at a time when structures for global missional and ecclesial collaboration are so much in flux.

## 2. Quality

- Our goal in the workshop was to offer quality academic mentoring and resourcing to participants. We wanted to equip them with writing and research skills that would give their contributions legitimacy within a global conversation from which they tend to be completely excluded.
- One way we worked at quality was to have a selection process. This was a critical factor in the success of the workshop, one that participants also identified. When we put out an invitation on social media, we requested a writing sample and the answers to a few questions about candidates’ interests in church history and previous experience with historical research and writing a historical narrative of any kind. We wanted to get the people who had already been working on these things on their own. We selected candidates based on the quality of their writing and on their answers to these questions. We did engage in some affirmative action – accepting some candidates whose writing wasn’t as strong – so that we would have participants from different parts of the country, from all three Mennonite churches, and as many women as possible.
- During the workshop, we worked hard to develop participants’ reading and writing skills. We were unapologetic about this, seeing it as an investment in equity. We insisted that everyone read two biographies every day, and write a summary of one of them. We checked over and evaluated the summaries each day. We offered individual mentoring for those who wanted to talk over their writing projects. We provided a very practical manual that included checklists of common errors to avoid, laid out expectations about footnoting and the formatting of references, and included all the documents that participants needed, since most of them could not easily access additional documents on the internet, or afford to buy books.
- Of course, this required a lot of work ahead of time, especially in preparing the manual. We think it would be valuable for this manual or curriculum to be standardized to facilitate the work of other teachers in the future.

## 3. Small scale

- In our workshop, we chose to pursue a broad global vision by making space for small contributions to lead to change over time.
- As a historian I have become convinced that this is how long-term cultural change happens, one story at a time, one life at a time, one friendship at a

---

<sup>161</sup> Dana Lee Robert, *Christian Mission: How Christianity Became a World Religion*, Blackwell Brief Histories of Religion 27 (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 176–77.

time. Each story shifts the ground a little bit. That's why this project takes a bottom-up approach. In the planning, I tried to go where the energy and relationships were that had developed locally over a long time and were now ready to coalesce into something collaborative and global. My strategy was to go after long-term connections – even if they were rusty or stale – and try to take them to the next level.

- For the book series, this means that each book in the series must grow organically from existing networks of relationship and collaboration. Instead of topics or books being commissioned from above, as was the case for the Global Mennonite History Series with one book per continent, collections of stories will grow from those who are available to write them, with some attention paid to gender, denominational, and regional representation. We need to follow the energy and collaborative networks as they develop, sometimes in unexpected places, precisely because, as I've already said, structures for global missional/ecclesial collaboration are in flux.
- (This again raises questions about the role long-term cultural bridge figures – there probably need to be some of those people...)

#### 4. Biography

- In this book series we embrace biography because of the value of this narrative form, because of its value in an African context, and because of its practical accessibility.
- Other colleagues, especially those associated with the DACB, have eloquently argued for the value of biography in particular in filling in the huge gaps of the history of the church in Africa. It is a narrative form that highlights marginalized voices including those of women, illuminates agency of individuals within oppressive structures, and brings out details of friendships, missionary encounters, and religious convictions that would be glossed over in institutional histories.<sup>162</sup>
- On a practical level, a 3,000-word biography is a manageable focus for a chapter for someone who has not published before. It is also a genre that is already valued and used in Africa. For example, several of the workshop participants had already written and sometimes self-published biographies.
- Another reason to prioritize biography is because of the way it shapes our identity as members of a global church. One thing that took on particular poignancy in the workshop was that the act of sharing and telling stories of African Christians felt like a way of participating in what Stan Chu Ilo calls an “African Christian ancestral project.” We were together discerning African Christians’ contribution to the local and global church, and so

---

<sup>162</sup> Michèle Miller Sigg, “Pointillist History and the Essential Role of Biography in the Dictionary of African Christian Biography,” in *African Christian Biography: Stories, Lives, and Challenges* (Pietermaritzberg: Cluster Publications, 2018), 27–34.

gathering them in as Christian ancestors, while also writing ourselves into the story as part of their lineage.<sup>163</sup> One participant, when talking about the biography he was going to write, emphasized that this biography would make a person who had died, alive again. He quoted the reference to Abel in Hebrews 11.4: “Even though he has died, he still speaks.” It was like saying that this person, when I tell their story, can join the cloud of witnesses who cheer us on. This discernment of deceased individuals as part of the story of the church is critical. I would go a little further and say that discerning and recognizing our kinship with African Christians is an ancestral project for all of us.

## 5. Women

- Women are at the center of the story of the church.
- Following this conviction meant that during the workshop, we featured biographies of women, ensured that women figured prominently in our narrative during the lectures, emphasizing their contributions as apostles, missionaries, revivalists, prophets, and laypeople, modeled leadership as women ourselves, and tried to be open about the struggles women – including us – can face when our leadership is not accepted.
- We found that the work of restoring women to the story of the church resonated deeply with both male and female participants. One of the participants, writing up her impressions after the workshop, said, “The women felt very valued in this workshop and cast off the inferiority complex that gnaws at us daily.”<sup>164</sup>
- We also insisted on parity between women’s and men’s stories in the upcoming publication, and future volumes will be expected to follow suit. It caused some mostly good-natured sparring about this requirement, but with some time together in church-based groups, participants were able to agree on a list of biographies in which women were as prominent as men. In one case, a male participant tried to surreptitiously change to a male biographical subject after the workshop, but after an open conversation, he’s now happily advancing on his story about a woman.

## 6. Accessibility

- In this project, we are pursuing accessibility with respect to language, print

---

<sup>163</sup> Stan Chu Ilo, “Stories My Grannies Never Told Me: Memory and Orality in the Narrative of African Christian History,” in *African Christian Biography: Stories, Lives, and Challenges* (Pietermaritzberg: Cluster Publications, 2018), 46. Ilo also notes, “in writing a Christian biography I am – in addition to writing the life of the subject of the biography – also writing myself.” Chu Ilo, 59.

<sup>164</sup> Charly Ntumba Malembe, “Church History Writing Workshop for Congolese Mennonites March 20-24, 2023 - Centre Universitaire de Missiologie, Kinshasa, DR Congo. A Personal Report.,” *Journal of African Christian Biography* 8, no. 2 (April 2023): 61.

and online options, reading level, and oral retransmission of the stories.

- The book will be published in separate English and French versions – Langham was very open to this as long as we provide the translation into English.
- Print/online access. The book will appear in print but individual chapters will all be accessible online in the DACB and on BINA. My experience is that there is a high demand for print resources in Africa. People in Congo do not have reliable access to the internet, or to a charged device. At the same time, having the biographies online will mean that it is possible to access individual stories for local printing as pamphlets or course readings while referencing Langham as the source publication.
- Accessible language. Each story will be written at an approximately sixth-grade reading level, accessible to undergraduate theology students but also to church members with limited education. Each biography will be followed by three or four discussion questions to facilitate group study and/or classroom discussion.
- At the same time, my experience and what my students have told me leads me to begin to accept that many Congolese Mennonites may always find this book inaccessible in its written form, and that it will service as an in-between, non-final, yet essential form of a story, with which many will engage deeply only as it is retransmitted in oral form.<sup>165</sup> I've been helped in my thinking along these lines by Stan Chu Ilo, who himself draws on Paul Ricoeur's work on text, narrative, and speech. I have started to see the historians trained in the workshops as bridge figures between written and oral forms of a story. For the biographies that they write to build up and encourage the church, they will need to be transmitted orally. In the workshop, we tried to work at practicing that final transmission by assigning small groups to lead a morning chapel based on a particular biography. For example, one small group presented the story of Kimpa Vita as a children's story in Sunday School. However, these efforts were very preliminary. I think there is room for much more work on understanding those movements from oral to written to oral modes of transmission and getting a clearer idea of the role played by the written text in connecting the living church today with its Christian ancestors.

## 7. Church-based, yet ecumenical

- This workshop was different from similar workshops that Michèle and I have taught before in interdenominational Bible school settings, because it gathered participants from one particular church tradition. Logistical and financial support for the workshop came mostly from Mennonite organizations in Congo and North America. Participants had the sense, as

---

<sup>165</sup> Chu Ilo, "Memory and Orality," 55.

they worked together, that retrieving sources and crafting narratives about Congolese Mennonites was something that they were doing as Congolese Mennonites. Church leaders who were present for opening and closing ceremonies emphasized to the participants that they were being entrusted with this work by the church. Sharing an identity as Mennonites meant that the group dynamic included existing relationships of accountability, potential future channels of collaboration, and deep shared concern about a particular story of Mennonites in Congo, even though we touched on many broader themes. The sense that we were doing the holy work of discerning the Body seemed easier to name and engage in precisely because we were a church-based group.

- And yet, this was possible in part because of the ecumenical awareness that was developing. Over the course of the week, the church began to look bigger to us, not smaller. This happened because Michèle was there representing the ecumenical and academic DACB, because participants read many biographies of non-Mennonites throughout the week and recognized these non-Mennonites as kin, and because Michèle and I presented the story of Christianity in Africa as an Africa-wide and even global story, which helped to place the Mennonite tradition into a much wider church family.
- In short, there is something at work here that Dana Robert has identified as one of the drivers in the history of World Christianity: a local-global tension,<sup>166</sup> which this book project seeks to welcome and harness creatively. There is a productive tension between the specificity of denominational funding structures and relational networks, and the broader, ecumenical vision of the global church that is ultimately being transmitted.

---

<sup>166</sup> Robert, *Christian Mission*, 176–77.

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

Compiled by Beth Restrick, Head, BU African Studies Library

Alava, Henni. *Christianity, Politics and the Afterlives of War in Uganda: There is Confusion (New Directions in the Anthropology of Christianity)*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2023 (*forthcoming*). \$39.95 (pbk). [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com). ISBN-10:1350301981; ISBN-13: 978-1350301986.

**Description:** This open access book sheds critical light on the complex and unstable relationship between Christianity and politics, and peace and war. Drawing on long-running ethnographic fieldwork in Uganda's largest religious communities, it maps the tensions and ironies found in the Catholic and Anglican Churches in the wake of war between the Lord's Resistance Army and the Government of Uganda. It shows how churches' responses to the war were enabled by their embeddedness in local communities. Yet churches' embeddedness in structures of historical violence made their attempts to nurture peace liable to compound conflict.

At the heart of the book is the Acholi concept of *anyobanyoba*, "confusion," which depicts an experienced sense of both ambivalence and uncertainty, a state of mixed-up affairs within community and an essential aspect of politics in a country characterized by the threat of state violence. Foregrounding vulnerability, the book advocates "confusion" as an epistemological and ethical device, and employs it to meditate on how religious believers, as well as researchers, can cultivate hope amid memories of suffering and on-going violence. ([www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com))

Younge, Paschal Yao. *Augustine Kwasi Young: The Great Musician, Composer, Educator, Scouter and Counselor: The Pioneer in Revitalization and Africanization of the Catholic Liturgy and Mass in Ghana*. Accra, Ghana: DAKpabli & Associates, 2022. \$35.28 (pbk) [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com) ISBN-10: 9988902476; ISBN-13: 978-9988902476.

**Description:** When the Catholic Church realized the itching urge to inject more African Culture in her Christian worship to revitalize the Liturgy and Mass in the 1960s, Mr. A. K. Younge, alias "Master Younge," in a solo effort revolutionized the Roman Catholic Church musical scene by initially replacing the "Old Latin Hymns" with traditional tunes accompanied by African musical instruments. As his determination persisted, he found himself in the greatest imbroglio as some church elders and musicians cast insinuations for what they believed to be anti-Christ (Catholic). With much encouragement from his dear wife Catherine Afiwor Younge and full support by the Papal See in Rome, Master Younge delved deeper. He came out with many compositions and innovations that provided the foundation that seemed to meet the aspirations and expectations of the awakened African Catholicism in Ghana and the Keta Diocese.

If traditional African drums, bells, and rattles are heard in Catholic churches



today in Ghana, we must, with all certainty and reverence, remember the efforts of Master Younge. He made it happen. His era's selected contemporaries also covered include Adalbert Kodjo Mensah Tibu, Philip Gbeho, Emmanuel Gakpo Gadzekpo, Togbe Afiatsoa II: Mr. George Kwame Akordor, and Cornelius Kofi Doe-Williams (alias CK). ([www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com))

Njoroge, Lawrence M. *Beyond Century of Endeavour: A History of the Catholic Church in Kenya*. Pauline Publications Africa, 2022. <https://shop.paulinesafrica.org> \$25.00.

**Description:** Over 20 years ago, Fr Lawrence Njoroge wrote *A Century of Catholic Endeavour*. The book narrated the story of the contribution of the Holy Ghost and Consolata Missions in the founding of the Catholic faith in Kenya. It was a publication that focused on the impact of the two religious organizations on education and human development in the country. This new publication *Beyond Century of Endeavour* has expanded the field of study and updated the story to cover the whole country. In order to hit the target, the author has received help from the Kenya Conference of Catholic Bishops (KCCB) that granted him access to their archives. At the same time, the book sourced information and data from the Association of the Sisterhoods of Kenya (AOSK) and the Religious Superiors' Conference of Kenya (RSCK).

A reviewer of the opus has called the work "a fairly comprehensive and definitive story of the Catholic Church in Kenya". ([shop.paulinesafrica.org](http://shop.paulinesafrica.org))

## Open Access Resources

Amanyire, Joseph. *The role of small Christian communities in evangelization of Yerya Parish in light of Ecclesia in Africa*. MA Dissertation, 2022. Makerere University, Uganda. <http://hdl.handle.net/10570/10963>

**Abstract:** Small Christian Communities are vital in the work of evangelization of Yerya Parish, and a more profound study has been carried out to bring to light their roles. These Small Christian Communities (SCC) are small units of families that come together to share the word of God weekly, sitting in a circular form, guided by the seven steps of Gospel-sharing and the Lectio Divina method. Small Christian Communities' work is to evangelise themselves; subsequently, they can bring the good news to others. The research outlines their roles and their understanding.

These Small Christian Communities give minimal value according to what they are to contribute to the evangelisation. Some are inactive, and some members are lazy. Some receive minimal formation, leading to their roles not being realised and yet they are seen as potential units of making the Church grow. Given that Christ Jesus gave a mandate in Matthew 28:19-20, "go to all the nations...", these Small Christian Communities play different roles in evangelization like teaching the word of God, helping people to practice bible study, and encouraging people to receive the seven sacraments. Members of SCCs support church activities. Members are taught to choose

a life that is worthy for them and the growth of the members spiritually. They are agents of making the word of God easily reach the people, help solve some challenges among Christians in light of the gospel and increase Christians' faith. Some challenges deter their roles in evangelization: conflicts among families, limited knowledge of these Small Christian Communities, ignorance of members, limited materials to use, pretence in sharing the word of God, languages barriers, monetary attachments, disunity among families, and limited support from the members. To mitigate these challenges, more leaders have been trained to facilitate these SCC with the help of priests, religious, catechists and the bishop at the head.

Recommendations have been suggested to see their roles realized and challenges solved. Seminars have been encouraged to begin in parishes, provision of the requirements, ongoing deep catechesis, visitation and dialogue with the members, making formal awareness to the people and more so, offer Mystagogical Catechesis. The Christians of Yerya Parish have been mostly considered. The researcher made an assurance to work hand in hand with the Parish authority to see to it that what has been dealt with in the research (as the research is the first to be written in the parish about these Small Christian Communities) is applied with the help of the diocesan authority, so that the roles of Small Christian Communities are realised. The church continues to grow to greater heights.

Gathogo, Julius Mutugi. *The Digo Mission of the Anglican Church of Kenya: essays in commemoration of 114 years of mission work in East Africa (1904-2018)*. Kentucky: First Fruits Press, 2020. Free download, Asbury Seminary. ISBN: 9781621719984. <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/academicbooks/34>

**Summary:** Contents include the following: Culture, identity and power in the Digo mission / Ferdinand Manjewa M'bwangi; First European missionaries in Digo land / Bryson K. Samboja; Pioneer Digo-Duruma Christian converts / Japheth Muthoka; Christianity in Viongwani / Robert Maneno; Entry of the first missionaries in Digo land / Peter Mwangi; Christian-Muslim relations in Digo land / Evans Mwangi; Unsung heroes and heroines in the Digo mission / Julius Mutugi Gathogo; Women's participation in the Digo mission / Lawrence Tsawe-Munga Chidongo; Protestants and Pentecostal churches / Joshua Itumo Kiilu; Challenges and prospects in the Digo mission / Julius Mutugi Gathogo; Global Team Mission. / Josephat J. Murutu.

Kitoola, J. V. *Evangelization and Planting of the Church in Buganda*. Universidad de Navarra. *Cuadernos Doctorales de la Facultad de Teología. Excerpta e Dissertationibus in Sacra Theologia*. 72, 2022, 367 – 433 <https://hdl.handle.net/10171/64505>

**Abstract:** This thesis intends to answer two questions: how the Catholic Church was planted in Uganda and how the first Christian community in Uganda lived its faith in the first nine years 1879 to 1887. The beginnings of the Catholic church in Uganda can be traced back in 1879 and counts on the initiative of two principal personalities: Mutesa the King of Buganda who made some considerable efforts to invite Christian

missionaries and Lavigerie, the founder of the Society of the Missionaries of Africa, who were the pioneer missionaries to Uganda. The course of history of this young church went through three successive periods; the first one being the arrival of the missionaries and the beginning of evangelization which mainly focused on the ruling class and the redeemed slaves; the second period covered the withdraw and absence of the missionaries and the emergency of a strong and vibrant lay apostolate; and the last period was the time of trial marked by persecution and martyrdom. The planting of the church in Uganda can be considered as having been successful and the first Christian community understood to have lived to the fullness a life proper to that of a fully-fledged Church summarized in the celebration of sacraments and active witnessing.