

APPROACHES TO AFRICAN
CHRISTIAN HISTORY
PCH 710

SOME TEXTS

- F. J.Verstraelen. *History of Christianity in Africa in the Context of African History: A Comparative Assessment of Four Recent Historiographical Contributions*. Mambo Press, 2002.
- Kizerbo, JKI (ed.) *General History of Africa: Methodology and Pre-history* Nairobi: EAEP 2002
- Michael Andindilile. 'You have no past, no history' : Philosophy, literature and the re-invention of Africa University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania
- Bethwell A. Ogot *AFRICAN HISTORIOGRAPHY: From colonial historiography to UNESCO's general history of Africa*

AFRICAN HISTORY WHOSE STORY



**“until the lions have
their own historians, the
history of hunting will
always glorify the hunter “**

AFRICAN HISTORY WHOSE STORY

Approaches to African story of the church would include

1. Eurocentric Approaches that are colonial and would not have the assumption that Africa had no history.
2. Nationalistic approaches where Africans refute the colonial and European racist tendencies and define their own story
3. Feminist approaches that would critique the patriarchal notion of writing history ignoring the voices of women in the historical writings.

MYTHS ABOUT THE AFRICAN STORY

- Hegel's Statement "Africa has no history"?
- African Church History does not exist, What we have is the story of Missionaries in Africa.

EUROCENTRIC APPROACHES

- Writing in 1965 about history in Africa Hugh Trevor said
- “perhaps in the future there will be some African history to teach. At Present there is none, or very little there is only the history of Europeans in Africa.
- Writing in 1999 on World History Geoffrey Parker said
- Most of the hundreds of atlases published before 1978 suffered from Euro centrality, that is to say from a tendency to concentrate on the history of Europe particularly (western Europe) and to refer to other regions or countries only when and where Europe impinged on them

EUROCENTRIC APPROACHES

- On General History of Christianity, Williston Walker in his book a History of the Christian church, 1918,1959,1970,1986
- The concepts and the content of the book are almost exclusively very linked to the North Atlantic, western Christianity. The book ignores a greater part of Christianity's past elsewhere by treating it as a small appendix when the west catches its sight of it.
- Colonial minded historiography had strong racial arrogance which embodied an assumption that only worthwhile topics for consideration were the interventions of more advanced external cultures

EUROCENTRIC APPROACHES

- Ajayi and Ayandele in 1969 observed that “ Even after writing explicitly on the history of Christianity in Africa , it does not guarantee writing Christianity history.
- The majority of writers on Christianity and missionary activities in Africa have remained a part of the foreign missionary presence instead of seeking “to explore what Africans have made of Christianity” They should therefore swallow a bitter pill that they have not been writing African church history

NATIONALISTIC HISTORIOGRAPHY

- Approach to writing African history changed
- A) political movements towards independence 1950,1960s
- B) a renewed consciousness of people to take the making of history in their hands.
- C) social change- minority colonial to majority Africans,
- D) Structural changes from dependence to independence.
- D) a new look to both secular and religious histories
- E)

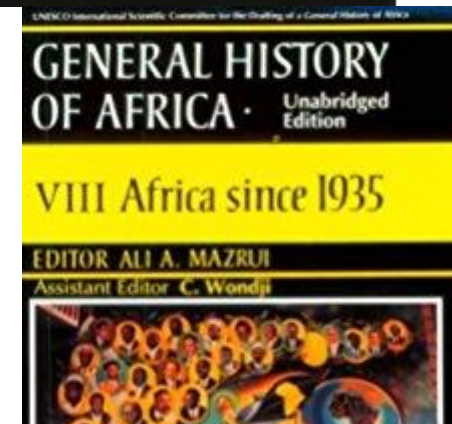
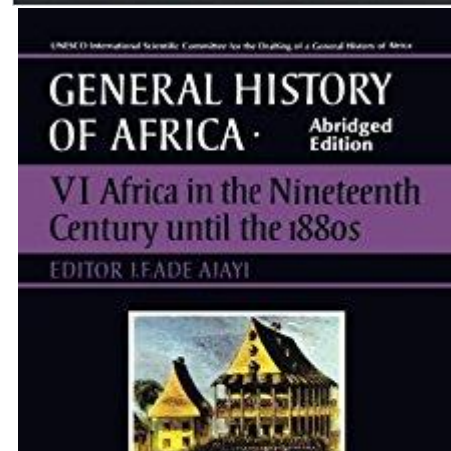
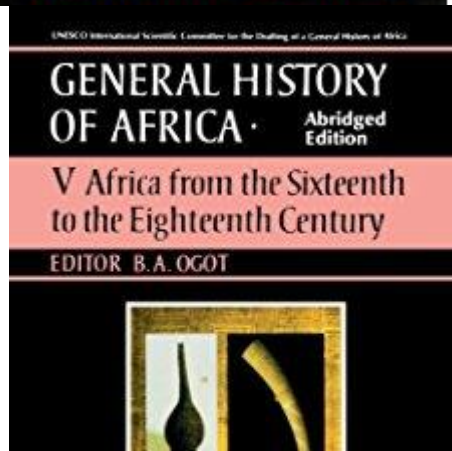
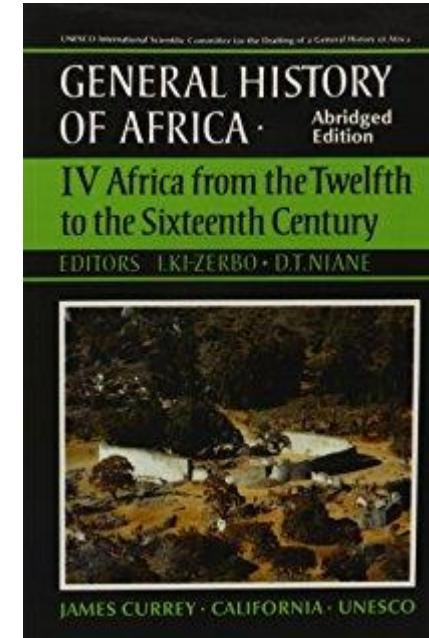
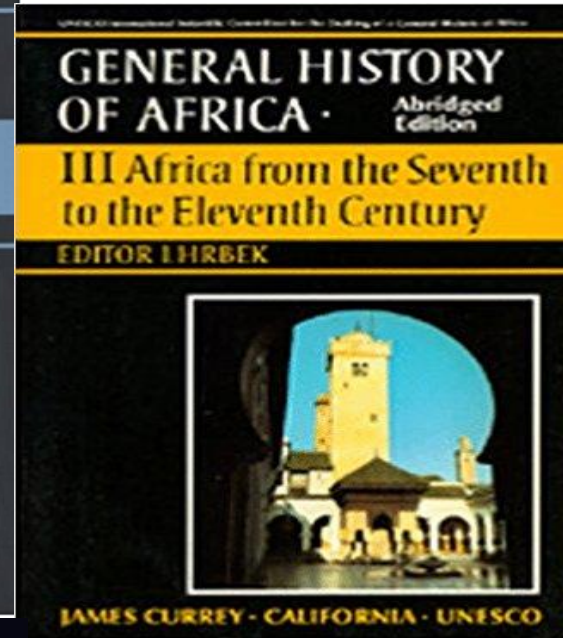
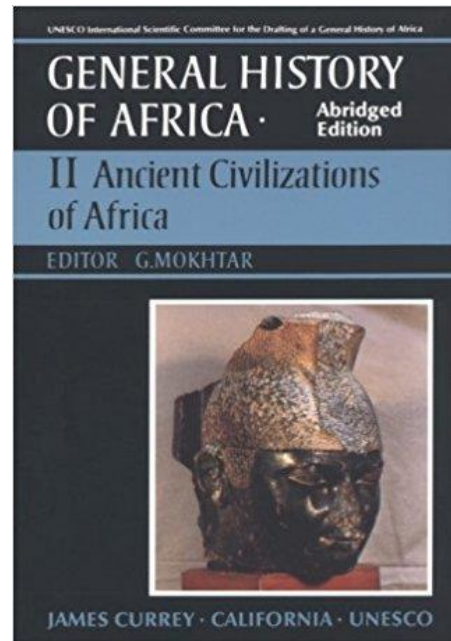
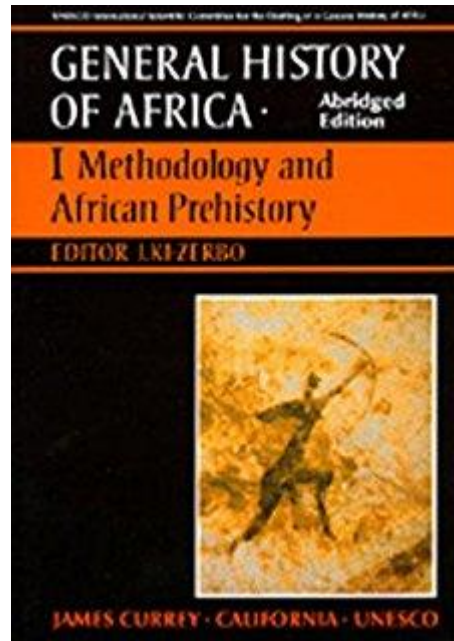
NATIONALISTIC HISTORIOGRAPHY

- The story of African Christianity is rooted in the movement towards political and psychological independence.
- The connectedness of politics and psychology in interpreting and re-writing the total story of Africa as of
- Pre colonial, colonial, nationalistic, independence (post colonial)

RELEVANT INITIATIVES IN THE FIELD OF AFRICAN HISTORIOGRAPHY

- 1963 School of Oriental studies established a chair in African History
- 1965 congress of African Historians held in Dar asserting the centrality of African scholarship in the development of African history
- This marked a watershed in African historiography.
- 1970 UNESCO entrusted the drafting of a general history of Africa to a committee which chose to cover the story of Africa over three million years in 8 volumes.

UNESCO BOOKS



UNESCO

- The history is viewed from inside or from an African perspective
- Writing was by Africans as long as they had the right qualifications.
- The first volume dealt with the methodology and Africa pre history
- In methodology JD Fage discusses the development of African historiography
- PD. Curtin, Recent trends in African Historiography and their contribution to history in general
- J Vansina, oral traditions and its methodology Hampté Ba, the living tradition.
- “The editor of volume 1 stresses that the history of Africa can only be the history of the people of the continent as a whole including the mediterenian sector, in a unity consecrated by age long and sometimes bloody links which make the two parts of Africa either side of the Sahara the two leaves of one door, the two sides of one coin” .

UNESCO

- Kir-Zerbo in writing the methodology observes that “ the history of Africa is necessary for the understanding of world history, many passages of which will remain impenetrable enigmas as long as the historical horizon of the continent of Africa has not been lit up.

FIELD OF CHRISTIAN HISTORY

African Christian story not missionary Christian story in Africa

In 1962 a society of Christian history was established in free town Sierra Leone. It was aimed at

- i. Promoting the study of Christian in African
- II. Encouraging the discovery, preservation and use of materials for historical studies of the African church

By this time there were a good number of African historians C.G. Baeta, Dr. K. Onwukua dike, Dr. DMS M. Tinkulu as vice president, JF Ade Ajayi and JS Mbiti, executive members

The society established a bulletin and 7 issues were published.

FIELD OF CHRISTIAN HISTORY

- Conferences about African Christian Historiography
- 1965 conference in Ghana
- 1974 conference in Jos Nigeria

The Conferences developed new themes and a new look at Christianity in Africa

- 1980 other initiatives which re assessed Christian story in the colonial and post colonial eras.
- Establishment of the **Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians** (EATWOT)
- The association disregarded the Europe –based denominational particularities, which was wrote with and from a colonial mentality.

FIELD OF CHRISTIAN HISTORY

- EATWOT laid a foundation for historiographies of the Third world.
- Other organizations included the Conference of African Theological Institutions (CATI).was formed.
- In 1986 the (CATI) laid emphasis on African church Historiographies,

FIELD OF CHRISTIAN HISTORY

- What should a new church look like or emphasize?
 1. The new church story should not focus on the exploits of foreign missionaries
 2. The new church story should be an account of the creative reception and incarnation of the gospel in different religions and cultures
 3. The new church story should show how the past speak to the present and it should strengthen the self awareness and identity of Christian communities
 4. The new church story should reject the notion that objectivity hailed in western scholarship is as a result of neutral and dethatched approach should be rejected
- 5. The new church story should lay emphasis in historical truth that is tested and substantiated.

INSIGHTS AND APPROACHES OF AFRICAN CHRISTIAN HISTORIOGRAPHIES

African Christian historiography lays emphasis on the following

1. Importance of the African missionary messenger whose significance exceeds the western missionary contributions
2. Use of oral history (Personal memoirs) oral tradition (material handed down from generation to generation (**The death of the older generation is a death of a library- (Aloo Mojola)**)
2. Read the Missionary sources for chronology, factual data, mission policy but from an African perspective
- 3.** Combine methodologies and use of sources of both Oral and written and oral .

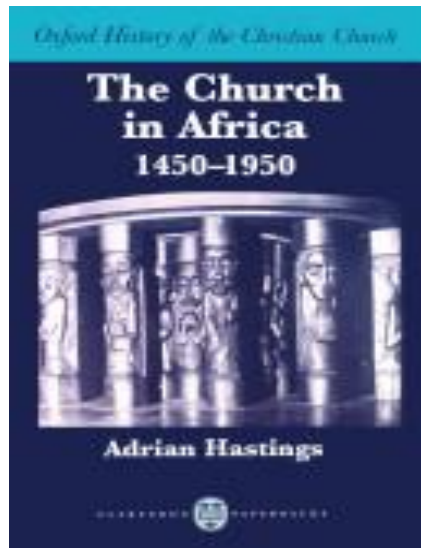
INSIGHTS AND APPROACHES OF AFRICAN CHRISTIAN HISTORIOGRAPHIES

- African Christian historiography should be beyond often Missionary Hagiography
- African Christian historiography moved beyond nationalist (excluding the foreign factors or judging them only in the negative way)
- African Christian moved to a holistic approach balanced approach focusing on all players with attention to the political, social economic, and religious aspects, and structures within which the Christian drama in African.

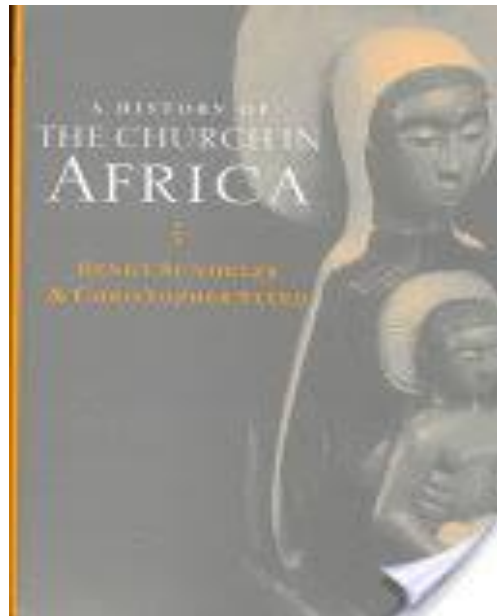
INSIGHTS AND APPROACHES OF AFRICAN CHRISTIAN HISTORIOGRAPHIES

- Lamin Sanneh's study on missionary impact on Culture in his book (Translating the Message) observes that
- "notwithstanding negative attitudes and activities of foreign missionaries, there were internal contradictions between 'mission work' and colonial rule' the former activated forces of indigenization, the latter consisted in essence in an alien and alienating suzerainty.
- He concludes that
- History of Christianity In Africa was and is a history carried out and sustained by Christian Africans in all periods.

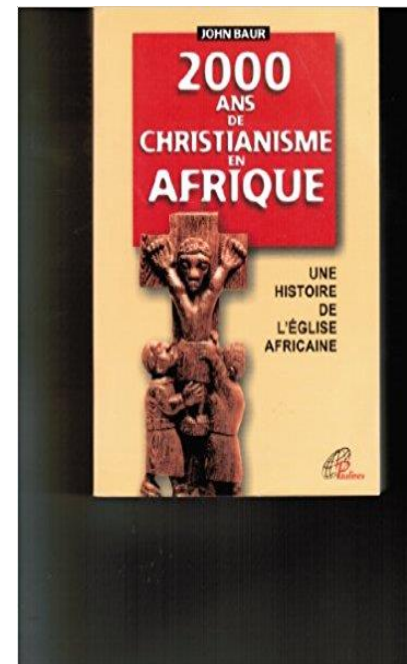
CONTRIBUTIONS TO HISTORIOGRAPHY OF CHRISTIANITY IN AFRICA



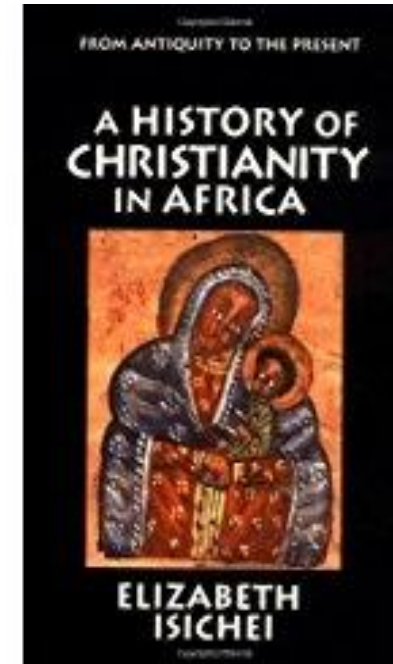
**ADRIAN
HASTINGS**



[Bengt Sundkler](#),
[Christopher](#)
[Stead](#)



JOHN BAUR



**Elizabeth
Isichei**

CAUCASIAN AUTHORS WRITING AFRICAN HISTORY

- Adrian Hastings *The church in Africa 1450-1950* (Oxford: Claredon Press 1997-xiv+706 pp
- Bengt Sundkler and Christopher Steed *Africa: A church History: (Cambridge: University press 2000 xix+1232pp*
- John Baur *Two thousand years of Christianity in Africa* (Nairobi Paulines publications- Africa 1994 560pp
- Elizabeth Isichei *A History of Christianity in Africa from Antiquity to the present* (Grand Rapids/Lawrenceville:Eerdmans world press 1995 xi+420 pp.

PERSPECTIVES IN WRITING HISTORY

- Issues to raise to the four authors on writing the story of Christianity in Africa include
 1. What were their sources
 2. What is their scope and limitation in writing the story (tease out the titles they are telling on the scope and limitation (**Baur and Isichei- Christianity in Africa; Hastings and Sundkler the church in Africa**)
 3. How do the authors choose the period of writing and why , what is the content of the book
 4. what is nature of their scholarship ie the quality of the work of each author
 5. how do the authors engage with the facts.

ENGAGEMENT WITH THE FACTS

- A common view held by some of western Historians for a while was that historiography was merely descriptive, without any normative or ideological considerations.
- Third world historians reject such neutrality and detached approach to history. They advocate re-writing history in view of strengthening the self awareness and identity of Christian communities without however abandoning historical criticism.
- The question one raises of the four western authors is whether some form of engagement , a kind of theological commitment that goes beyond solely describing historical events. Since all these authors have had a long standing experience of and involvement with African and Christian Africans, one might expect already a priority that their writing history has been affected by that experience and involvement.

THE AFRICAN HISTORIANS

- Who and where are the African historians.
 - The four authors discussed above have made a substantial contribution to the historiography of Christianity in Africa but where are the African church historians.
1. African historians contributed to the UNESCO volumes.
 2. African who have written on the history of Christianity in Africa even if they have limited themselves to either a geographical part or a denomination.
 3. perhaps there is need for a general History of Christianity in Africa like UNESCO project.

AFRICAN HISTORIANS PERSPECTIVES

- Do African historians write from an African perspective different from the ones realized by western writers.
- There are several indications that African writers reflecting on how historiography of Christianity in Africa should look like , do indeed emphasize new points in African perspective.
- Some scholars tend to consider the history of African missions as merely a chapter of European church history, which is then followed by the post –missionary era when Africans have become the full subjects of their own history.

AFRICAN HISTORIANS PERSPECTIVES

- In writing the story by African Christianity historians full emphasis is given not only to the ancientness of African Christianity but also to the nearness of many of its forms to Biblical and early Christianity.
- Authors such as Kwame Bediako and Lamin Sanneh have offered interesting observations.
- Bediako sees the international conference on Christian missions held in Zoute Belgium February 1926 as the real watershed in the missionary consciousness because the missionary movement was now reflecting on the learning from its African experience.

AFRICAN HISTORIANS PERSPECTIVES

- A.A. Boahen editor of the general history of Africa Volume 3. Africa under colonial rule 1880-1935, observes that 1935 was a turning year because it was the year the fascist forces of Mussolini occupied Ethiopia.
- The crisis shocked and outraged Africans the world over. It also awakened them more dramatically to the inhuman, racist and oppressive nature of colonialism.
- EATWOT consultations also questions on how the protestant reformation and counter reformation which were European histories take a centre stage in Africa.
- They were domestic European events that lead to Portuguese- Spanish expansion leading to a DE cloistering of Europe and to transition from a provincial or regional Christianity to an empirically and objectively internationalized Christianity.

MULTIPLICITY OF CENTRES FOR CHRISTIANITY

- Walls observes that the “most important events in the whole of church history has occurred.... A complete change in the centre of gravity of Christianity, so that the heartlands of the church are no longer in Europe, decreasingly in North America, in certain parts of Asia and Africa. (Andrew Walls ‘Towards Understanding Africa’s place in Christian History’ in J.S. Pobee (ed) *Religion in a Pluralistic Society* (Leiden Brill, 1976) 180.)
- The southward shift of the church is seen not so much as a displacement from the centre to periphery but rather as the emergence of ‘new centres of Christianity’s universality.

MULTIPLICITY OF CENTRES FOR CHRISTIANITY

- The shift of the centre of gravity in Christianity is ` a pointer to the nature of faith and much less to the significance of the human agencies of its transmission([Bediako](#))
- [Lamin Sanneh](#) further observes that `perhaps the very success with which the religious insights of western church has been assimilated by non western societies has been overshadowed the less spectacular; though no less real, process of the quiet re education and re-orientation of the west.

MULTIPLICITY OF CENTRES FOR CHRISTIANITY

- Joseph Ndi Okalla notes that 'the former ethnological look at the white man' has been reversed by an indigenous look 'at civilized people or at the African survival strategies against the conqueror coloniser and missionary. Which took place more often and in a more effective way as internal resistance than a violent one.
- The reversed look of the locals reveals visions representations, the concepts that are very important to discover the reality of the church, mission and faith
- To write church history as mission history in Africa requires that dialogical structure between missionary and local people.
- Novels of African writers like Mongo Beti, Chinua Achebe and Ngugi Wa Thiongo often disclose, in an existential way, the indigenous look of the local Christians at the missionary enterprise.

AFRICAN HISTORIANS PERSPECTIVES

- African scholars and Christian Africans do indeed bring new and fresh insights to an 'African perspective. It is clear that they want to underline at least that first the uniqueness of the African Christian experience and second the to see that African Christian history not as an appendix at the periphery of but as a contributing partner within the universal Christian history.
- To use the analogy of Ngugi wa Thiongo- on *moving the centre*- there are many centres forming global Christianity .
- African historians bring to the fore perspectives visions and interpretations unknown or overlooked by western church historians.

AFRICAN HISTORIOGRAPHY

- African historiography is an area that is open to critical exchange of African perspectives with non African perspectives

Sources for the notes

- Frans J Verstraelen, *History of Christianity I Africa in the context of African History. A comparative assessment of four recent historiographical contributions* . Mambo Press Gweru 2002

SEMINARS USING TWO BOOKS

