

2019-01

Modern African church history and the streetlight effect: biography as a lost key

<https://hdl.handle.net/2144/50890>

"Downloaded from OpenBU. Boston University's institutional repository."

Modern African Church History and the Streetlight Effect: Biography as a Lost Key

By Jonathan J. Bonk, Project Director

For [post-Columbus] cartographers, maps became ephemera, repeatedly redrawn to new information. The sea monsters and ornamental flourishes disappeared to make way for new landmasses of increasingly accurate shape.

—David S. Landes, *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations*

A drunk stumbled into a dark back alley after a night of heavy drinking at the local bar. Pulling out his keys, he fumbled and dropped them. Despite searching, he was unable to locate the keys in the pitch black darkness. Noticing a light on the street at the end of the alley, he shuffled over to the lamp pole, where, a short time later a policeman asked him why he was crawling around on his hands and knees, peering at the sidewalk.

“I’m looking for my lost keys,” he replied.

“Are you sure this is where you lost them,” the policeman asked?

“No, I lost them on the other side of the street,” the man responded.

“Then why are you looking for them here?” queried the puzzled officer.

“Because,” the man responded edgily, “anyone can see that the light is better here. My eyes can see under the streetlight.”

What academia has dubbed *the streetlight effect* has its analogue in the study of African church history. Research on the continent of Africa—where Christianity is growing most rapidly today and where theologies are proliferating as the Christian Scriptures are brought to bear on questions and perspectives unanticipated by either their authors or their emissaries—can be tedious, time consuming, expensive, and frustrating, so scholars search beneath the reassuring glow of academic streetlights: university and mission libraries, archives and materials collections in Western lands. Not surprisingly, such studies yield more or less predictable Christendom and neo-Christendom histories and theologies. There is nothing wrong with such histories, of course, except that they no longer tell the story of African Christianity as it really is. That story can only be found elsewhere, beyond the reassuring rays of the streetlights.

The challenge of documenting the lives of persons who, rarely literate,

leave scarcely any paper trail is considerable.⁵ Failure to rise to the challenge compounds the troubling tendency of standard reference works to perpetuate the illusion that the Christian world ever revolves on a Western axis. Given the realities of world Christianity in AD 2016, such scholarly tools and the myths they perpetuate constitute disappointing proof that

Africa and Asia and Latin America and the Pacific and the Caribbean—now major centers of Christianity—are [still] underrepresented in works that are meant to cover the entire field of Christian knowledge.⁶

Africa as Terra Incognita—Christian Maps and the Invisible Continent

The fourteenth-century Hereford Mappamundi, a commonly referenced medieval map, is a striking example of historical and theological projection onto an image of the physical world.⁷ The map is congested with familiar European and Mediterranean towns and cities, from Edinburgh and Oxford to Rome and Antioch. Onto this familiar terrain the most significant historical and theological events are projected—the fall of humanity, the crucifixion, and the apocalypse. The rest of the world is vague and largely speculative. Most of Africa and Asia blur into margins featuring elaborately grotesque illustrations of prevailing myths and savage demonic forces.⁸ Evelyn Edson comments,

The . . . southern edge of the map contains a lineup of the monstrous races, from the “Genus sine auribus” (people without ears) at the top to the four-eyed people of Ethiopia and the Gangines “with whom there is no friendship. . . .” A number of other monsters are shown in Africa, including a mandrake, . . . a unicorn,

⁵ Even William Wadé Harris, hailed in 1926 as “Africa’s most successful evangelist” in consequence of his astounding impact upon the establishing of the Christian faith among the peoples of the Ivory Coast, “left no writings except a half-dozen short dictated messages.” See David A. Shank, “The Legacy of William Wadé Harris,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 10, no. 4 (October 1986): 170.

⁶ Andrew F. Walls, “Structural Problems in Mission Studies,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 15, no. 4 (October 1991): 151.

⁷ Evelyn Edson, *The World Map, 1300–1492: The Persistence of Tradition and Transformation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2007).

⁸ Peter Whitfield, *Image of the World: Twenty Centuries of World Maps* (London: British Library, 2010), 20–21.

and a centaur.⁹

While considerable cartographic clarity has since been achieved by geographers and ethnographers, ecclesiastical “maps” continue to badly misrepresent, underrepresent, or simply ignore the actual state of affairs in much of the world, perhaps especially in Africa. We are prone to silly generalizations about Africa, forgetting that it is geographically huge, culturally complex, and linguistically diverse. The sheer immensity of the continent is belied by projections of it onto our consciousness by maps such as the Gall Projection, where Africa assumes modest proportions, seemingly smaller than North America, its surface intersected with neatly drawn borders demarking fifty-three discrete nation states, six of these islands.¹⁰ These national boundary lines trace their origin to a Berlin Conference in 1884 when—with nary an African present—European powers neatly carved up the entire continent among themselves.¹¹ The simplicity of the European scheme obscured then, and acerbates now, more complex cultural, linguistic, and topographic realities on the ground. Since cartographic studies are as much the *cause* as the *result* of history, continued reliance on such scholarly “authorities” ensures the ongoing confusion of Christian guides attempting to locate themselves and their protégés ecclesiastically.

This most polyglot of all continents—home to as many as 3,000 “mother tongues”—is notorious for its “vampire” states, savage civil wars, overwhelming pandemics, predatory politicians, rickety infrastructures, and intractable poverty. What is seldom noted in the depressingly predictable reports and images from which we construct our impressions of the continent is the presence of its burgeoning Christian and Muslim countercultures.

To the surprise of those who predicted its disappearance with the end of colonialism, Christianity in Africa continues to flourish. As Lamin Sanneh reminded us some time ago,

In 1962 when Africa had largely slipped out of colonial control, there were about 60 million Christians, with Muslims at about 145

⁹ Edson, *The World Map, 1300–1492*, 19.

¹⁰ For a graphic illustration of Africa’s actual size, see Kai Krause, “The True Size of Africa,” <http://kai.sub.blue/en/africa.html>.

¹¹ See St. Clair County Community College, Port Huron, Michigan, “Subsaharan Africa: Berlin Conference of 1884,” *World Regional Geography, Unit C: Subsaharan Africa*, www.sc4geography.net/hunckler/internetclass/SubsaharanAfrica/berlin.html.

million. Of the Christians, 23 million were Protestants and 27 million were Catholics. The remaining 10 million were Coptic and Ethiopian Orthodox.¹²

Today the number of Christians in Africa has multiplied nine times to nearly 555 million, making it the religion of a majority of Africans south of the Sahara.¹³

A survey by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, made public on August 15, 2010, showed Africa to be the most religious continent in the world. In a summary of the survey, Chika Odoua of the *Huffington Post* reported that religion was “‘very important’ to more than three-quarters of the population in 17 of 19 sub-Saharan nations.”¹⁴ The share of Africans who described religion as “very important” in their lives ranged from 98 percent in Senegal to 69 percent in Botswana. Those numbers compared with 57 percent of Americans, 25 percent of Germans, and 8 percent of Swedes. The survey also found that “the number of Christians in sub-Saharan Africa grew faster than the number of Muslims, from 7 million in 1900 to 470 million” in 2010. Today, approximately one out of four Christians resides in sub-Saharan Africa. The conclusion drawn by Luis Lugo, who conducted the research and issued the report, was that “on a continent-wide basis, sub-Saharan Africa comes out as the most religious place on Earth.”¹⁵

¹² Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion Is Christianity? The Gospel Beyond the West* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 16.

¹³ Todd M. Johnson, Gina A. Zurlo, Albert W. Hickman, and Peter F. Crossing, “Christianity 2016: Latin America and Projecting Religions to 2050,” *International Bulletin of Mission Research* 40, no. 1 (January 2016): 26. See, also, “Profiles of the 270 Largest of the 10,000 Distinct Religions Worldwide,” in *World Christian Encyclopedia: A Comparative Survey of Churches and Religions in the Modern World*, 2nd ed., ed. David B. Barrett, George T. Kurian, and Todd M. Johnson (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2001), 2:3–12.

¹⁴ Chika Odoua, “Survey Finds Africa Is Most Religious Part of World,” *Huffington Post*, June 15, 2010, updated May 25, 2011, www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/04/15/survey-finds-africa-is-most-religious-part-of-world_n_539704.html.

¹⁵ Odoua, “Survey Finds Africa Is Most Religious Part of World.” Odoua reports, “According to the survey, 98 percent of respondents in Senegal say religion is very important, followed by 93 percent in Mali. The lowest percentage was reported in Botswana, 69 percent, which is still a healthy majority. . . . The study was part of the Pew-Templeton Global Religious Futures Project. More than 25,000 sub-Saharan Africans responded in face-to-face interviews in more than 60 languages.”

The Christian scene in Africa is bewildering for most observers.¹⁶ Although a majority of Africans today self-identify as “Christian,” standard definitions of the term are hard pressed to accommodate on-the-ground realities. Frequently, comfortably established old Christendom formulations and practices have been displaced by much that is unfamiliar and even shocking. Scholarly observers such as Harold Turner, David Barrett, Bengt Sundkler, Kwame Bediako, and Marthinus Daneel have been pioneer chroniclers of the phenomenon variously referred to as African Independent Churches, African Initiated Churches, or African Instituted Churches. Acronymically known as AICs, these unique expressions of Christian faith and life can be disconcertingly pre-Enlightenment in their worldviews and pre-Christendom in their theologies. While churches elsewhere tend to stress Christology and individual salvation, the emphasis in AICs tends to be on the Holy Spirit and community. And the Holy Spirit is not simply a vague, ethereal sanctifier, but the healing, delivering, and persuading power of God.

AIC names only hint at a religious epistemology and ontology more reminiscent of fourth-century Edessa than of twenty-first-century Rome or Geneva. Thousands of denominations not found in the United States—their membership often numbering millions—include such ecclesiastical entities as Prophesying and Evangelizing Daughters of God, Celestial Church of Christ, Redeemed Christian Church of God, Church of the Lord Aladura, Sweet Heart Church of the Clouds, Musama Disco Christo Church, Spiritual Healing Church, Church of Christ on Earth by the Prophet Simon Kimbangu, Church of the Cherubim and Seraphim, Ethiopian Christian Church in Zion, Holy Five Mission, Patmos Church, Star Gospel Church, and so on.¹⁷

In his groundbreaking book *Schism and Renewal in Africa: An Analysis of Six Thousand Contemporary Religious Movements*, published in 1968, David Barrett first drew attention to the explosive emergence and profusion of AICs.¹⁸ Matthew Ajuoga—an Anglican clergyman excommunicated by a missionary bishop in 1957 because of his affiliation with what the established church dismissed as “a bunch of disgruntled nut cases”—became chairman of the

¹⁶ Much of the material in the following three paragraphs first appeared in Jonathan J. Bonk, “Africa Unbound,” *Christianity Today*, November 2007, 47–51.

¹⁷ The bewildering profusion of new denominations in Africa is typified in the partial listing of churches in Lesotho given by Craig W. Hincks, in his massive *Quest for Peace: An Ecumenical History of the Church in Lesotho* (Morija, Lesotho: Heads of the Churches in Lesotho and Christian Council of Lesotho, 2009), 944–49.

¹⁸ David B. Barrett, *Schism and Renewal in Africa: An Analysis of Six Thousand Contemporary Religious Movements* (Nairobi: Oxford Univ. Press, 1968).

Organization of African Instituted Churches (OAIC), an Africa-wide confession linking ninety-two national councils of independent churches, by conservative estimates now some 60 million strong.¹⁹

While most attempts by church historians over the past ten years to locate themselves in the terra firma of contemporary world Christianity have taken scarcely any note of Africa, the academy is at last beginning to reflect the reality that Christianity is no longer a so-called Western religion. Most of its adherents now reside outside of the West. This new reality was most emphatically evident in the groundbreaking *Atlas of Global Christianity*, published in 2009.²⁰ Similarly, the *Cambridge Dictionary of Christianity*, published a year later, contains substantial non-Western content.²¹ But these tools are in some ways still anomalous, since the imbalance in standard reference tools remains, and antiquated maps continue to dominate. The fact is, scarcely anything is known about the *persons* chiefly responsible for the astonishing explosion of Christianity across the African continent: the catechists and evangelists.²²

There is, however, an even more disturbing dimension to the problem. In his 1991 essay mentioned earlier, “Structural Problems in Mission Studies,” Andrew Walls observed that despite the global transformation of Christianity, not only do Western syllabuses fail to adequately register this phenomenon, but they

have often been taken over in the Southern continents, as though they had some sort of universal status. Now they are out-of-date even for Western Christians. As a result, a large number of conventionally trained ministers have neither the intellectual materials nor even the outline knowledge for understanding the

¹⁹ See Organization of African Instituted Churches (OAIC), www.oaic.org. The OAIC figures compare favorably with those of the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC) (in French: Conférence des Églises de Toute l’Afrique [CETA]), the ecumenical fellowship with headquarters in Nairobi that represents more than 120 million African Christians in 133 member churches and 32 associate councils of churches in 39 African countries. See World Council of Churches, “All Africa Conference of Churches,” www.oikoumene.org/en/member-churches/africa/aacc.

²⁰ Todd M. Johnson and Kenneth R. Ross, eds., *Atlas of Global Christianity, 1910–2010* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 2009).

²¹ Daniel Patte, ed., *The Cambridge Dictionary of Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2010).

²² Elizabeth Allo Isichei, *A History of Christianity in Africa: From Antiquity to the Present* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, and Lawrenceville, NJ: Africa World, 1995), 98–99. It is only recently that standard reference works have begun to include African subjects.

church as she is.²³

Walls then reminded readers that discoveries in other fields—one thinks of such pathfinders as Copernicus or Louis Pasteur, for example—were resisted by those whose personal or institutional vested interests were threatened. The implications of new discoveries made their acceptance difficult. Similarly, Western Christendom’s dawning awareness that her old strength is gone and that her vitality is ebbing inexorably away is

intellectually threatening, requiring the abandonment of too many certainties, the acquisition of too many new ideas and skills, the modification of too many maxims, the sudden irrelevance of too many accepted authorities. It was [and is] easier to ignore them and carry on with the old intellectual maps (and often the old geographical ones too), even while accepting the fact of the discovery and profiting from the economic effects.²⁴

But this troubling deficiency might also be due to an absence of basic, easily accessible reference tools—and the absence of such tools might be the result of the observational bias identified at the beginning of this essay as the “streetlight effect,” sometimes known as the “drunkard’s search.”

To return to the map analogy, since new maps have not been created, the old maps must serve. And on the old maps, the story of the church in Africa is a mere desideratum, a footnote to the story of European tribal ascendancy. It is seen as the religious expression of the West’s 500-year rise to world military, economic, and social hegemony: the complex phenomenon now neatly compressed into a single term—globalization. On most ecclesiastical maps, Africa remains terra incognita, a blur on the margins of world Christianity’s self-understanding.

The Dictionary of African Christian Biography

The *Dictionary of African Christian Biography* (DACB) was born in 1995.²⁵ Funded by a modest grant from Pew’s Research Enablement Program, a small

²³ Walls, “Structural Problems in Mission Studies,” 147.

²⁴ Walls, “Structural Problems in Mission Studies,” 149–50.

²⁵ The story of the *Dictionary of African Christian Biography* (DACB) has appeared in numerous scholarly publications over the years. The most up-to-date account can be found on the DACB website at www.dacb.org.

group of scholars met that year at the Overseas Ministries Study Center in New Haven, Connecticut, to consider how these peculiar lacunae in African church history—an almost exclusive reliance on foreign sources and perspectives and the relative absence of African subjects or voices—might be redressed.²⁶ The *DACB* was the direct outcome of that meeting. Having intimated the reasons for the *DACB*'s existence, the final task of this essay is to tell the *DACB* story by answering three more, simple questions: (1) What is it? (2) How does it work? and (3) What is its future?

What is it? The *DACB* is an online, nonproprietary *memory base* committed to documenting, collecting, preserving, and making freely accessible biographical accounts and church histories, from oral and written sources, in order to advance a scholarly understanding of African Christianity. The database now contains more than 2,200 discrete biographies—a majority of these in English. At the time of this writing, an additional 160 English and 235 French language biographies are being processed for future incorporation into the *DACB*. A number of subjects also warrant alternative biographies, representing the distinctive orientations of their contributors.

From the very beginning, the *DACB* has maintained that publishing rights should be freely granted to churches, denominations, and national or international publishers wishing to produce a printed version of the entire electronic database or of any portion of the database deemed useful to them. Were the *DACB* to be conceived of as a proprietary, profit-making venture, it is doubtful whether it could gain significant Africa-wide circulation. Purchasing such a database would be out of the question for most Africans, making their stories unavailable to Africans themselves. The cost of producing and distributing the *DACB* in its annually updated, nonproprietary CD-ROM form is borne by the project management office at Boston University.

In August 2015 the *DACB* celebrated its twentieth anniversary. It is now a well-established, widely emulated, go-to source of information on those African figures chiefly responsible for the uniquely dynamic character and growth of Christianity on that continent. Awareness of the *DACB* continues to grow as

²⁶ Members of this group included Jonathan J. Bonk (convener), Gerald H. Anderson, Joseph G. Donders, Charles W. Forman, Rosalind I. J. Hackett, Stephen Peterson, Lamin Sanneh, Francisco J. Silota, and Andrew F. Walls. The official announcement issued by participants at the conclusion of consultation (August 31–September 2, 1995) summarized the *raison d'être* and *modus operandi* of the envisaged *DACB*.

instructors increasingly require their students to develop the habit of using the database for their African church history assignments. Virtually the only central source of information on African Christian biography, the *DACB* website received more than 1.5 million unique visitors from January 2014 through July 2016.

For the first seven months of 2016, StatCounter tallies reported 385,190 page views (an average of 2,176 per day), 280,926 unique visits (an average of 1,587 per day), 241,379 first time visits (an average of 1,363 per day), and 39,547 returning visits (an average of 223 per day).²⁷ During the two months of June and July 2016, usage could be traced to 194 different countries, with the top five being Nigeria (22.57 percent), South Africa (14.19 percent), United States (13.77 percent), Kenya (7.07 percent), and Ghana (5.75 percent). During the same period of time, 1,536 pictures or PDF files were downloaded from the *DACB* website.

Also gratifying is the fact that the *DACB* has served as a modest stimulus for similar data gathering initiatives in other parts of the world. These initiatives include ones carried out by the Centre for the Study of Christianity in Asia (Trinity Theological College, Singapore), the Don Bosco Centre for Indigenous Cultures (Shillong, India), and Trinity Methodist Church (Selangor Dural Ehsan, Malaysia); each requested, and was granted, permission to adopt the *DACB* format. In September 2003, the *DACB* office was notified that an editorial team composed of members of the Contextual Theology Department of Union Biblical Seminary, Pune, India, and coordinated by Dr. Jacob Thomas, supported by an all-India Council of Advisors, had likewise embarked on a biographical project modeled after the *DACB*, but focusing on the Indian subcontinent. According to the public announcement,

The inspiration for this project comes from . . . the *Dictionary of African Christian Biography*. . . . The *DICB* project is grateful for the partnership by which there is mutual encouragement and sharing of relevant ideas.

I have not kept abreast of these initiatives, and I do not know how they have fared.

Similarly, ten years ago the *DACB* sparked the *Biographical Dictionary of Chinese Christianity (BDCC)*, playing a key consulting role for the consortia of

²⁷ Statistics tabulated by StatCounter (<https://statcounter.com>) for www.dacb.org at 2:00 p.m., July 26, 2016.

church leaders and historians that served on its board and serving as project incubator while the managing director, Dr. Yading Li, spent two years getting the online memory base up and running. This English-language database is now flourishing.²⁸

More recently (September 10–14, 2015), I was invited to demonstrate the *DACB* to a forum of indigenous leaders from across Latin America. We met in Lima, Peru, at the Centro Evangélico de Misiología Andino-Amazónica (CEMAA), where we discussed the all-too-common challenges faced by aboriginal peoples everywhere, “¿*Quién la historia? Espiritualidad e identidad indígena de la misión*” (Whose story? Spirituality and indigenous identity of the mission).²⁹ These indigenous leaders were acutely aware that while scores of autobiographical and biographical stories have been published in English by North American missionaries, detailing their work among aboriginal peoples, and that while the accounts of anthropologists and sociologists sometimes mention the impact of missionary work among Latin America’s indigenous peoples, “there has been little to no documentation of the histories of [any kind] from indigenous perspectives.”³⁰ Thirty-one individuals—representing thirteen different indigenous groups from seven Latin American countries—took part in the forum. At the end of the meeting, the group nominated a committee responsible for creating, administering, and promoting an online database to serve multiple functions consonant with rescuing and preserving the memory, and thus cultural integrity, of indigenous Christianity throughout the continent.³¹ At their request, the *DACB* serves in a modest advisory capacity as, and when, needed.

How does it work? The story often attributed to Francis Bacon, Roger Bacon, or, less frequently, Aristotle—“How many teeth are there in the mouth of a horse?”—may be familiar. The methodology it implicitly endorses encapsulates the essence of the *DACB*’s approach.

In the year of our Lord 1432, there arose a grievous quarrel among

²⁸ “Introducing the *Biographical Dictionary of Chinese Christianity*,” *DACB News Link*, no. 5 (Fall 2006), 4, www.dacb.org/email%20newsletter%20fall%202006.pdf. The *BDCC* can be found at www.bdconline.net/en.

²⁹ See www.cemaa.org/quienessomos.htm.

³⁰ Drew Jennings-Grisham, email to Joel Carpenter, Monday, March 17, 2014.

³¹ Further information about this significant endeavor can be found at www.memoriaindigena.org.

the brethren over the number of teeth in the mouth of a horse. For thirteen days the disputation raged without ceasing. All the ancient books and chronicles were fetched out, and wonderful and ponderous erudition, such as was never before heard of in this region, was made manifest.

At the beginning of the fourteenth day, a youthful friar of goodly bearing asked his learned superiors for permission to add a word, and straightway, to the wonderment of the disputants, whose deep wisdom he sore vexed, he beseeched them to unbend in a manner coarse and unheard of, and to look in the open mouth of a horse and find answer to their questionings.

At this, their dignity being grievously hurt, they waxed exceedingly wroth; and joining in a mighty uproar, they flew upon him and smote him hip and thigh, and cast him out forthwith. For, said they, surely Satan hath tempted this bold neophyte to declare unholy and unheard-of ways of finding truth contrary to all the teachings of the fathers.

After many days of grievous strife the dove of peace sat on the assembly, and they as one man, declaring the problem to be an everlasting mystery because of a grievous dearth of historical and theological evidence thereof, so ordered the same writ down.³²

In like manner to the youthful friar and despite however useful may be information about African Christianity that might be garnered from standard archival, library, and mission resources in the West, the *DACB* is committed to uncovering, documenting, preserving, and disseminating on-the-ground accounts of the lives of those remarkable men and women without whom there would be only the most threadbare understanding of how the religion called “Christianity” came to be what it is across the continent.

The *DACB* approaches its task by means of two functionally distinct but complementary entities: (1) the operational center of the *DACB* at Boston University and (2) African collaborating institutions (research centers, academic

³² C. E. Kenneth Mees, “Scientific Thought and Social Reconstruction,” *Sigma Xi Quarterly* 22, no. 1 (March 1934): 17; reprinted from *Electrical Engineering* 53 (1934), 381–87. Mees—at the time Director in Charge of Research and Development for Eastman Kodak Company—attributes the parable to Francis Bacon (1561–1626). It has occasionally been attributed to Roger Bacon (1214–1292), and more rarely to Aristotle.

departments, graduate schools, seminaries) committed to biographical and historical research integral to understanding local, regional, national, or denominational expressions of Christianity, and to the dissemination of this research through the online *DACB*. Boston University assures the institutional and technical integrity of the *DACB*'s website and database. The project manager, with a small staff of one or two graduate assistants, monitors and maintains the editorial standard of entries as they are prepared for inclusion in the *DACB* database.

DACB affiliates in Africa serve as sources, researching, writing, and verifying biographical and church histories. *DACB* affiliates also regularly host and facilitate practical training forums in oral history. Scholars and students at these centers are encouraged to research, write, and contribute stories of both individuals and churches to the *DACB* database for preservation and dissemination. Stories that comply with *DACB* content, documentation, and writing guidelines are published, with full attribution, in the database, but may thereafter also be freely published as monographs, articles, or chapters in books.³³

The project's data collection network is thus not *hierarchical*, but *lateral*—a kind of “spider's web,” with the *DACB* office at Boston University as the nexus for as many data collection centers as emerge. The web already extends to numerous points across Africa, as indicated earlier. The registry of “Participating Institutions” is kept current on the website.³⁴ Affiliated academic institutions agree to incorporate biographical research and writing assignments into the syllabi of certain departments and courses, utilizing *DACB* standards and guidelines that are available in print or downloadable as PDF documents.³⁵

An effort is made to ensure both the merit of the biographical subject and the accuracy of the resulting story by associating the names of the participating institution, the liaison coordinator, and the author with each biographical entry. On request, participating institutions can receive an updated CD-ROM or flash drive version of the database for use in the preparation of syllabi, supplementary readings, or booklets. No restriction other than simple attribution is placed on use of the material.

Biographical subjects are identified on the basis of their perceived local, regional, national, continental, or denominational significance. No subject is excluded if, in the opinion of local communities, his or her contribution is

³³ See, for an example, George S. Mukuka, *History from the Underside: The Untold Stories of Black Catholic Clergy in South Africa (1898 to 2008)* (Baltimore: PublishAmerica, 2011).

³⁴ *DACB*, www.dacb.org/particip_instit.html.

³⁵ *DACB*, www.dacb.org/resources.html.

deemed to be somehow singular. In addition, printed materials of all kinds—church and mission archives, church histories, mission histories, denominational histories, doctoral and masters’ theses, in-house denominational and mission society magazines, as well as existing reference tools and biographical dictionaries—are routinely culled with a view to discovering the identities and stories of Africans whose contributions to the shape and dynamism of local, regional, or national expressions of Christianity on the continent is in some way remarkable.

Chronologically, the *DACB* spans twenty centuries of Christian faith on the African continent, thus counteracting the notion that Christianity in Africa is little more than the religious accretion of nineteenth- and twentieth-century European influence. “Christianity in Africa,” as John Baur aptly reminded his readers, “is not a recent happening, nor is it a by-product of colonialism—its roots go back to the very time of the Apostles.”³⁶

Ecclesiastically, likewise, since Christian expression in Africa does not readily lend itself to standard Euro-American tests of orthodoxy, the *DACB* aims at inclusiveness rather than exclusiveness.³⁷ Self-definition as “Christian” is sufficient to qualify for the category. As is customarily the case with encyclopedic works of any kind, exclusion is the prerogative of the user. Thus, for example, key figures associated with what some might consider to be heterodox organizations such as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints or the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society, as well as those in sometimes highly-controversial African Initiated Churches, are included.³⁸

Individually, inclusion criteria are as broad and as flexible as possible. In general, those persons deemed at local, regional, national, or denominational levels to have made a significant contribution to African Christianity, and whose stories are indispensable to an understanding of the church as it is, are included. While main entries are generally restricted to subjects who are African either by birth or by immigration, non-African subjects such as foreign missionaries,

³⁶ John Baur, *2000 Years of Christianity in Africa: An African History, 62–1992* (Nairobi: Paulines, 1994), 17.

³⁷ As Professor J. F. Ade Ajayi, former vice-chancellor of the University of Lagos, observed (in a letter to the author, April 9, 1998), the issue of just who is and who is not a “Christian” is not always so clear-cut in Africa as it is in some parts of the world. He mentioned as an example a well-educated woman, a devout Christian, “who moved from the Christ Apostolic Church to Jehovah Witness without necessarily realizing that she had thereby lost her initial focus on Christ.”

³⁸ See Andrew F. Walls, “Conversion and Christian Continuity,” *Mission Focus* 18, no. 2 (1990): 17–21.

friendly pagans, or government officials, whose contributions to African church history are regarded by Africans themselves to have been significant, may be included.

Linguistically, most entries appear in English, with growing numbers of stories in French, Portuguese, and Swahili. The hope is for the database to be freely available in the four languages most broadly understood in those parts of Africa where the Christian presence is most notable. Since the material is nonproprietary, there is nothing to prevent research institutes, academic departments, or enterprising individuals from translating the stories into any language.

A data collection template has been designed to ensure a measure of uniformity in the cognitive fields around which the details of each subject's life are arranged.³⁹ Insofar as such data as birth dates are actually available, these are included. Otherwise, authors and editors attempt to link the birth of a subject to a particular period or an auspicious event. Wherever possible, they utilize published as well as oral sources of information. While documentation can pose a serious challenge, contributors utilize the standards commonly employed by those working in the field of oral history.

The database contains two levels of information. One, the *DACB* itself, is accessible online; the other, the *DACB*'s working database, is accessible only to the editors. The former contains information on figures who, if not deceased, are advanced in years; the latter stores, in addition, information on still active subjects who are likely to merit inclusion in the database eventually.

What is its future? Now more than twenty years old, the *DACB* has entered the

³⁹ These simple guidelines—initially adapted from the venerable but still useful British Association for the Advancement of Science, *Notes and Queries on Anthropology* (London: E. Stanford, 1874) and subsequent editions—have gradually evolved into the *Dictionary of African Christian Biography: Instructional Manual for Researchers and Writers and Procedural Manual for Participating Institutions* (New Haven, CT: *DACB*, 2004), which offers resources for persons researching and writing biographies for the *DACB*. Professor Kehinde Olabimtan, who was *DACB* liaison coordinator at the Akrofi-Christaller Institute of Theology, Mission, and Culture in Akropong-Akuapem, Ghana, expanded the original *DACB* guidelines to produce the 84-page booklet published in 2004. Michèle Miller Sigg—*DACB* project manager since 2000 and now at Boston University—edited the second, revised edition, a 41-page resource that elaborates the essential techniques of oral history as well as providing examples of a range of stories already appearing in the dictionary. PDF versions of the booklet are available in English, French, Portuguese, and Swahili at www.dacb.org/guidelines-writers.html.

final stretch of its “Bonk phase.” For the immediate future, the *DACB* has adopted six interrelated, measurable goals to be achieved by 2020: (1) the addition of five hundred stories to the database; (2) the inclusion of stories from every country in Africa; (3) the incorporation of brief overviews of five hundred African denominations, cross-referenced to biographical subjects; (4) publication of an anthology of biographies and church histories for use in university and seminary classrooms; (5) with the Africa Advisory Council, fostering use of the stories in primary and Sunday school curricula; and (6) the publication of an online *Journal of African Christian Biography (JACB)*.

DACB staff at Boston University have identified African countries for which we have fewer than twenty biographies. They have also produced a useful database of the continent’s major universities, seminaries, and church denominations, together with the names and contact information of key persons within those organizations. Efforts to conduct annual collaborative oral history workshops and biography conferences in various African countries are ongoing.

The *Journal of African Christian Biography* was inaugurated in June of 2016. For now, it is appearing in monthly fascicles which are to be assembled in a cumulative issue at the end of each year. Its purpose is to showcase, interpret, and make more readily accessible biographical and historical resources in the field of African Christianity. These resources are intended for use in classrooms and churches to foster a deeper understanding of the history of African Christianity at the local, regional, national, and continental levels. The *JACB* will thus provide tools to undergird the development of contextual African theologies.⁴⁰

Conclusion

Maverick economist E. F. Schumacher once stood on a street corner in Leningrad, trying to get his bearings from a map provided for him by his Russian hosts. He was confused, because while there was some correspondence between what the map registered and what he could see with his own eyes (for example, the names of parks, intersecting streets, and similar entities), several enormous churches looming in front of him were nowhere indicated on the map. Coming to his assistance, his guide pointed out that while the map did indeed include some churches, that was because such churches were now museums. Those that were not museums were not shown. “It is only the ‘living churches’ we don’t

⁴⁰ The *Journal of African Christian Biography* is available online at www.dacb.org/journal-acb.html.

show,” he explained.⁴¹

Since the greatest surge in numbers in the history of Christianity has occurred in Africa over the past one hundred years—and appears set to continue its remarkable trajectory into the twenty-first century—it would be both disappointing and tragic if yet another generation of Christian leaders, scholars, and their protégés, relying upon existing, “up-to-date” reference sources, were to learn virtually nothing of this remarkable phenomenon, or of the men and women who served and who serve as the movement’s animators and catalysts. Africa will remain “the dark continent” so long as emerging scholars—including Africans themselves—confine their research to the well-lit streets of Western academic and missionary archives and to ignore the living churches all over the continent.

In *The Lost City of Z*, David Grann reminds readers that

one of the most incredible feats of humankind [has been the] mapping of the world. Perhaps no deed, not the building of the Brooklyn Bridge or the Panama Canal, rivals its scope or human toll. The endeavor, from the time the ancient Greeks laid out the main principles of sophisticated cartography, took hundreds of years, cost millions of dollars, and claimed thousands of lives, and, when it was all but over, the achievement was so overwhelming that few could recall what the world looked like before, or how the feat had been accomplished.⁴²

It is becoming increasingly possible to imagine a time when few will be able to recall what the ecclesiastical world looked like before African Christianity assumed its rightful position and scale on world ecclesiastical maps. The *DACB*—the fruit of international cooperation across Africa that also reaches beyond the expansive bounds of the continent and yet is in some ways a laughably limited enterprise at the levels both of conception and of implementation—is offered as a modest contribution toward bringing our ecclesiastical maps up to date.

About the author: Jonathan J. Bonk is research professor of mission studies at

⁴¹ E. F. Schumacher, *A Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 1.

⁴² David Grann, *The Lost City of Z: A Tale of Deadly Obsession in the Amazon* (New York: Vintage, 2014), 55–56.

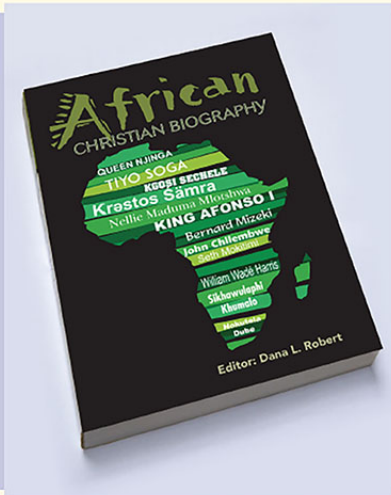
Boston University and director of the *Dictionary of African Christian Biography* (DACB). The author of numerous articles and reviews, he has published five books, the best known of which is *Missions and Money: Affluence as a Western Missionary Problem* (Orbis Books, 1991), now in its eleventh printing. An ordained Mennonite minister, he is editor of the *Encyclopedia of Missions and Missionaries*, published in 2007 as Volume 9 in Routledge's Religion and Society Series.

CLUSTER PUBLICATIONS

presents

African CHRISTIAN BIOGRAPHY

Editor: **Dana L. Robert**



CLUSTER PUBLICATIONS
Pietermaritzburg, South Africa

www.clusterpublications.com
Call: +27 (0)33 846 8602
Fax: +27 (0)86 546 8347
eMail: shop@clusterpublications.com

R150.00 / US\$15.00
Shipping costs additional

ISBN: 978-1920620 25-7