

2019-10

African Christian Biography Serialized: stories my grannies never told me: memory and orality in the narrative of African Christian history

<https://hdl.handle.net/2144/51110>

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

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

By Stan Chu Ilo

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Importance of Narrative in Writing African Christian History

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

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

The *DACB*, while not hagiographic in its documentation of African saints, gives strong testimony to the depth and strength of African Christianity. The stories it contains give evidence of men and women who have borne witness to God, church, society, and their local communities in fidelity to the message of the Gospel. The *DACB* is an African Christian ancestral project. It locates the words and deeds of our ancestral African Christian witnesses, showing them to

be in continuity with the historical Christian witnesses, and is analogous to a continuing account of the Acts of the Apostles.

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

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

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

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

www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story.

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

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

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

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

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

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

In this vein, as Godfrey Brown has noted,

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

²¹. Kalu, "Introduction," 12.

²². Kalu, "Introduction," 13.

²³. Kalu, "Introduction," 14.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Text, Context, and Pre-text

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

³⁰. Ricoeur, "Narrative Function," 278.

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

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

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

³¹. Ricoeur, “Narrative Function,” 279.

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

³³. Ricoeur, “Narrative Function,” 294.

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

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

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

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

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

³⁶. Ricoeur, “What Is a Text?,” 146.

³⁷. Ricoeur, “What Is a Text?,” 147.

³⁸. Ricoeur, “What Is a Text?,” 109.

³⁹. Ricoeur, “What Is a Text?,” 149.

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

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

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

⁴⁰. Ricoeur, “What Is a Text?,” 147.

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

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

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

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

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

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

⁴³. Ricoeur, "What Is a Text?," 158.

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

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

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

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

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

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

⁴⁶. Kalu, “Introduction,” 14.

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

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

Memory and the Narrative of African Christian Biographies

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

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

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

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

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

⁵⁰. Obiechina, *Nchetaka*, 47.

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

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

Christian Biography as Spiritual Pilgrimage

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Conclusion

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Stan Chu Ilo is a Research Professor at the Center for World Catholicism and Intercultural Theology, DePaul University, Chicago, USA and visiting faculty at the Institute of Social Ministry and Mission, Tangaza University College, Nairobi, Kenya. He is the editor of African Christian Studies Series for Pickwick Publications, Wipf and Stock Publishers. He is the author of *The Church and Development in Africa: Aid and Development from the Perspective of Catholic Social Ethics* (Paulines, 2014) and editor of *Wealth, Health, and Hope in African Christian Religion: The Search for Abundant Life* (Lexington Books, 2017).