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Jonathan Bonk and the DACB: a treasured contribution to African Christian history

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By Isaac Deji Ayegboyin and Michael A. Ogunewu

Introduction

> That Europeans suffered in Africa, made sacrifices, and showed dedication and heroism is a fact apart from all exaggerations of their own accounts and the hagiographies of their admirers. But so did the rarely named African collaborators who carried the missionaries on their backs and in hammocks and who interpreted for them. What comes through to the African who reads the missionary efforts of Europeans in Africa is the ethnocentricity of the account[7]

It is now well known that during the missionary era, white proselytizers did not work alone on the African mission field because they enjoyed the able assistance of their African counterparts. Although this sounds very much like it is repeating the obvious, it is interesting to recall that this *datum,* for a long time, was hardly accessible. Indeed, African Church History was presented as a solely western enterprise. The ostensible truth of the prejudiced historians' hypotheses is that Africans or native agents were apathetic to the promotion of Christianity on the continent. Consequently, while stories of western missionaries enjoyed continuous replication even in the work of African scholars, less attention was paid to the exploits of the many native agents who were often pioneers, scouting and preparing the advance, carrying the missionaries and their belongings, and serving as formidable links between the missionaries and the local potentates. Michael Ogunewu explains that one strong factor responsible for this anomaly is that while European and American missionaries regularly preserved diaries of events, wrote journals, and regularly sent letters to their relatives, mission boards, and financial supporters back home, African Christians rarely recorded their own stories or had their contributions documented.[8] For these deliberate omissions,

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[7] Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Hearing and Knowing: Theological Reflections on Christianity in Africa* (Accra: Sam Woode.1996), 33

[8]Michael Adeleke Ogunewu, "Writing African Christian History through Biographies: African Christian Biographical Project (DACB)," in Samson A. Fatokun, Jacob K Ayantayo, Solomon M. Mepaiyeda, Olusesan O. Familusi, and Samuel O. Okanlawon

Deji Ayegboyin indicted the ethnocentric writers for writing "bad" history because they allowed their prejudice, ignorance, and personal feelings to get the better side of them.[9]

Enter Jonathan Bonk

During his university studies, Jonathan James Bonk of the Overseas Ministries Study Center (OMSC) in the United States had noticed this discrepancy. He describes the situation thus:

> While these pioneers (missionaries) planted the seeds of Christianity on African soil, they had little impact on the growth of the church. And yet they are well known because reference books document the work of the Western missionaries in Africa. In contrast, many of these same reference works do not mention pioneer African church leaders and founders such as those whose ministries yielded astounding fruit in the birth and growth of the African church.[10]

As a result of this observation, Bonk decided to champion the cause of filling the lacuna in African Christian historiography. This, *inter alia,* gave birth to the *Dictionary of African Christian Biography* (DACB), in 1995 with Jonathan Bonk as its visionary and founding Director.

Bonk's love for Africa stemmed from the fact that he was raised in Ethiopia by missionary parents. Even after his retirement as executive director of OMSC in July 2012, he has continued to be actively involved in the furtherance of the cause of Christianity globally. He is an innovator in the field and has made a significant contribution to the progressive changes in the global understanding of Africa's role in world Christianity. Bonk is a seasoned, articulate academic

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(eds.) *African Christianity in Local and Global Contexts: A Festschrift in Honour of Rev. Prof. Isaac Deji Ayegboyin FNAL* (Ibadan: Dept. of Religious Studies, University of Ibadan, 2019), 96.

[9] Deji Ayegboyin, "Prejudice of Traditional Missions' History against the Third World: Reflections on Andrew Walls and Jeffrey Kloeber's Renunciation," *Nigerian Journal of Church History and Missiological Studies* (NJOCHAMS) 1-2

[10] Jonathan Bonk and Michele Sigg, *An Introduction to the Dictionary of African Christian Biography,* PowerPoint Presentation created by Michele Sigg, DACB, Project Manager, 7, 8.

conference speaker and writer. He has authored many books, chapters in books, articles in learned journals, and many edited works.

His Academic Legacy

Jonathan Bonk is a dedicated scholar, having served in academia in various capacities since 1972. Early on, he embarked on a diligent search and open-minded study of African history. Refusing to be an armchair philosopher, he has sought to better understand the African story. His academic work necessitated networking trips to universities, research centers and seminaries in China, Korea, Malaysia, Thailand, Egypt, Ghana, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Malawi, South Africa, Mozambique, Namibia, and various European and Eastern European countries.[11] Consequently, with the DACB project, he has confirmed the importance of the use of biography to tell the story of African Christianity. He has organized regional workshops on biography and oral history in Africa. All these accomplishments have earned Bonk a place of honor in the African academy.

Prioritizing African History

One of the distinguishing hallmarks of this great scholar and mentor is his uncompromising commitment to the development of human capacities and potential for the overall betterment of humanity. Bonk founded the DACB database which has championed the documentation of the activities of African church leaders and some of the unsung heroes—across the entire African continent—whose contributions to Christianity would have otherwise remained unknown. Since the founding of the DACB, the study of African Christian history has become easier. It has afforded African scholars in the field, belonging to any Christian tradition, the privilege of researching the history of their own people and documenting it for posterity.

In the same vein, the OMSC trained and mentored African scholars in the art of biographical writing through the Project Luke Fellowship. From 1999 to 2012, this specially funded residential program allowed African scholars to spend a period of time at the OMSC where they could dedicate themselves to writing biographies of African church leaders. Many African scholars benefited immensely from this program. In this way, Bonk who, though not an African by

[11] CV. p. 4: https://bu.academia.edu/JonathanBonk/CurriculumVitae - accessed on 01-06-2020.

birth, ensured that African Christian History was brought into the limelight, through the DACB project. For this, African scholars in the field of Church History will forever be grateful. In this way, Bonk has succeeded in shielding generations from the perils of continental amnesia, by encouraging the writing of biographies of leading personalities of African churches since the beginning of Christian history.

The DACB is an award-winning project that was conceived in 1995 and first went online in 1998. Now, the DACB website is in its twenty-second year. Its mission continues to be "to collect, preserve, and make freely accessible biographical accounts and church histories – from oral and written sources – integral to a scholarly understanding of African Christianity."[12] One of the most distinguishing features of the DACB, in recent years is the inauguration of the bi-annual scholarly *Journal of African Christian Biography* which features some of the outstanding biographies that have appeared in the online database.

The DACB documents a crucial phase in African history referred to as Ethiopianism. The Ethiopian leaders opposed the domination of the church by the missionaries and were resentful of their unscriptural and racist policies as well as their intolerance of African culture and practices even when they did not contradict the teachings of the Bible. Using the promise in the Psalms that "Ethiopia shall raise its hands to God," Ethiopianism became a movement of cultural and religious protest.

Among radical leaders whose stories are highlighted in the DACB are Simon Kimbangu (1887-1951), the founder of Church of Jesus Christ on Earth through Prophet Kimbangu, who is reputed to have initiated one of the largest religious movement in modern Africa; William Wade Harris (1865-1929), whose movement spread across the three West African countries of Liberia, Ghana, and Côte d'Ivoire and attracted over 100,000 followers; Garrick Sokari Braide (1882-1918), whose movement is acclaimed as the first Pentecostal movement in Nigeria; and Joseph Ayodele Babalola (1904-1959), the arrowhead of the *Aladura* Revival of the 1930s, in southwest Nigeria, whose ministry snowballed into the Christ Apostolic Church, Nigeria.[13]

Concluding Remarks

Endowed with a patient and pleasant demeanor, Jon hardly ever complained during the course of our meetings over the years. At meetings, he appreciates all

[12] See DACB Database - accessed on 01-06-2020

[13] See DACB Database – accessed on 01-06-2020

contributions and he has a talent for delegating authority. Remarkably, age and the passage of time have not hampered his attributes of commitment, attractiveness, accessibility, dedication, humility, and open-mindedness. If anything at all, age seems to have deepened them. For, even at age 75, this exemplary leader has remained courteous, gentle, warm, cultured, respectful and always accommodating. The fact that he continues to be in great demand for speaking engagements at his age bears testimony to an exemplary life that deserves to be celebrated now, and always.

Jon, your great legacy is further revealed in the way you have passed on the baton to the indefatigable Michele. It has been a great blessing knowing and working with both of you. With all these attestations and even more that are not captured here, we join our voices to recognize Professor Jonathan Bonk who deserves to be celebrated for his accomplished life and his contribution to African History.

Rev. Deji Isaac Ayegboyin, PhD, *Professor and Head, Department of Religious Studies at the University of Ibadan (Nigeria). Formerly on the Advisory Council, he currently serves as member of the Senior Advisory Council of the* Dictionary of African Christian Biography *(DACB.org) and Contributing Editor of the* Journal of African Christian Biography *(JACB), projects based at the Center for Global Christianity and Mission, Boston University School of Theology.*

Michael Leke Ogunewu, PhD*, is former Senior Lecturer in Church History and Director of Museum and Archives at the Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary (NBTS) in Ogbomoso, Nigeria. He has authored or co-authored over thirty original biographies of West African Christian figures for the DACB. In addition, he has supervised the work of many students who have written biographies for the DACB especially from NBTS.*