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Dana L. Robert’s volume offers an excellent introduction to the achievements and challenges in writing African Christians history over and against the various failings of the missionary archive. It is based on a 2015 conference celebrating twenty years of the *Dictionary of African Christian Biography* (DACB, [www.dacb.org](http://www.dacb.org)), which since its foundation by Jonathan Bonk has grown into an important nonproprietary and crowd-sourced archive of African Christian biographies. As Bonk himself tells us in this book, the free availability of the DACB (including publication rights) has guaranteed the wide circulation of its now over 2,200 biographies, with Nigeria and South Africa topping the list of online users (together almost forty percent of total access traffic). This is a truly impressive achievement, and I highly recommend this jubilee volume as an accompanying text to the DACB.

The book is divided into four parts. After Dana Roberts’ introduction, part one builds the case for the DACB, reflecting on the importance of collecting African Christian biographies for the study of World Christianity more widely. Next to Bonk’s already mentioned contribution, the current DACB manager Michèle Siggs shows how the genre of biography helps address a number of historiographical challenges in African Christian history. Furthermore, the Catholic theologian Stan Chu Ilo and the Anglican Archbishop Emmanuel Egbonnu deliver appraisals on the importance of biographical narrative in commemorating African Christian history as fully African, and fully Christian.

The second section compiles samples of African Christian biographies in chronological order. It begins with the female, 15th-century Ethiopian-Orthodox saint Kröostos Sämra (Wendy Belcher), and then proceeds via the Kingdom of the Kongo (John Thornton on Afonso I) and Angola (Linda Heywood on Queen Njinga), to Sechele in South Africa (Stephen Volz), African “independent” prophets in Mozambique, Malawi, and coastal West Africa (Mark Noll on Bernhard Mizeki, John Chilembwe, and William Wadé Harris), and finally the first black president of the Methodist Conference of South Africa, Seth Mokitimi (Deborah Gaitskell). Though the historical trajectory and geographical selection are somewhat conventional, I found the inclusion of two women’s biographies refreshing, as well as many of the insights and discussions in these six chapters.

The next section brings together three further female biographies, this time deliberately discussing the challenges in recovering the histories of African Christian women, at least twice marginalised (by race and gender). Here Heather Hughes introduces us to the first wife of ANC founder John Dube, Nokutela Dube, who was eclipsed not only by her husband’s political career and extramarital affairs, but also by his second wife after her divorce and death. Hughes’ chapter makes the important point that if one takes the trouble to dig, these forgotten female histories can indeed be reconstructed through their traces in very archives marginalising their legacies. This is followed by Barbara Mahamba’s chapter on Sikhwulaphi Kumalo, a girl ‘rescued’ by nuns in Zimbabwe. Tracing Kumalo’s career from missionary poster child to Christian motherhood, Mahamba provides insight into the benefits and limits of missionary education for African women. The third and final chapter in this section is an introduction to the life of Nellie Maduma Mlotshwa, wife of Brethren pastor Peter Mlotshwa. Detailing the many challenges she faced and overcame, particularly during
the Zimbabwean guerrilla war, Wendy Urban-Mead shows how Nellie would not only have been worthy of ordination in the Brethren church but would have made a “world-class bishop.”

The final section, composed of four chapters, looks more explicitly at the challenges in writing African Christian biography. I found this to be the most interesting part of the book, as all chapters address the politics of historical memory in one way or another. Maureen O. Iheanacho draws out the contrast between the “unsung heroes” of early African converts working with the Basel Mission on the Gold Coast and the disinterested forgetfulness toward their record in the Presbyterian Church of Ghana. Paul Glen Grant dwells on questions of morality in writing about lives ruptured by the colonial encounter which do not easily conform to the heroic tropes frequently employed in writing about African converts and missionaries. Roger S. Levine narrates how he was challenged in his own position as a historiographer, when a Xhosa audience accused him of illegitimately appropriating the Xhosa chief Dyani Tshatshu, a traveler between the worlds of missionaries, chiefs, and colonial authorities. Finally, Joanne Davis convincingly takes to task previous biographers of the Reverend Tiyo Soga in their elisions, omissions, and additions, which, as Davis argues, turned Soga into a “paper doll” to be dressed with attributes and characteristics as convenient for their respective stories about African Christianity.

Overall, the book is an excellent introduction into the achievements, but also the struggles of writing African Christian biography. Unlike the DACB, the geographic selection of chapters is heavily skewed toward Southern Africa, which should makes it especially interesting for the readers of this journal, while Africanists from other regions may feel a little short-changed. The book will also be of less interest to anthropologists, but historians of all stripes will certainly benefit from engaging with the material presented. On that note, however, I found that there was a curious lack of engagement with the theoretical angles of post-colonial historiography, which should lead authors to further problematise (and politicise) their notions of subjectivity and historiography. Perhaps the integrity of individual experience is particular blind spot of the biographical genre, but it is one that needs to be deconstructed. Historical writing is a function of the present and it tends to veil its ideological preferences through the construction of subjects in selective and instructional narratives. Therefore, it is not enough to simply flip the colonial script of missionary progress via the creation of African “unsung heroes” of Christianity. In the same vein, I also find the juxtaposition of “proper” biography with hagiography unhelpful – both tend toward idealised narratives about a person, with the latter at least being somewhat transparent about its ideology. What is needed instead is a deeper engagement with the latent ideology of historiography right in the middle of writing history: whose questions are being asked, how can we better account for colonial hybridity and ambiguity, how do politics influence the selective traditioning of oral histories and missionary archives alike, and how has foregoing historiography guided, but also clouded our perception? The last four chapters of this volume show that there is a lot of potential for these kinds of questions in African Christian biography, and for the sake of World Christianity as a truly global discipline, I hope that the material and biographies collected by the DACB will further enable us to move from a kaleidoscopic mode of knowledge collection to a critical analysis of knowledge production.