

## The Individual in African History

# African Dynamics

VOLUME 17

The titles published in this series are listed at *brill.com/ad*

# The Individual in African History

*The Importance of Biography in  
African Historical Studies*

*Edited by*

Klaas van Walraven



BRILL

LEIDEN | BOSTON

The Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available online at  
<http://catalog.loc.gov>

Typeface for the Latin, Greek, and Cyrillic scripts: 'Brill'. See and download: [brill.com/brill-typeface](http://brill.com/brill-typeface).

ISSN 1568-1777

ISBN 978-90-04-40781-7 (hardback)

ISBN 978-90-04-40782-4 (e-book)

Copyright 2020 by Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden, The Netherlands.

Koninklijke Brill NV incorporates the imprints Brill, Brill Hes & De Graaf, Brill Nijhoff, Brill Rodopi, Brill Sense, Hotei Publishing, mentis Verlag, Verlag Ferdinand Schöningh and Wilhelm Fink Verlag.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, translated, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without prior written permission from the publisher.

Authorization to photocopy items for internal or personal use is granted by Koninklijke Brill NV provided that the appropriate fees are paid directly to The Copyright Clearance Center, 222 Rosewood Drive, Suite 910, Danvers, MA 01923, USA. Fees are subject to change.

This book is printed on acid-free paper and produced in a sustainable manner.

# Contents

Acknowledgements	VII
List of Illustrations	VIII
Notes on Contributors	X

Prologue: Reflections on Historiography and Biography and the Study of Africa's Past	1
<i>Klaas van Walraven</i>	

## PART 1

### *Methodological Insights*

- 1 Human Symbols  
*The Biographical Pursuit and the Language of Symbolism in Contemporary South Africa* 53  
*Lindie Koorts*
- 2 'Your Surroundings Don't Make You; You Must Rise above all that'  
*The Home in Life Histories as Site of Resistance to Racial Violence, Cape Town, South Africa* 70  
*Elena Moore*
- 3 From Life Histories to Social History  
*Narrating Social Change through Multiple Biographies* 91  
*Iva Peša*

## PART 2

### *Persons in Transitions*

- 4 The Effervescence of Individual Life: Cornelius Badu, Born 1847 in Elmina, Gold Coast 117  
*Paul Glen Grant*
- 5 The Leopard that Came to Laikom: Michael Timneng in Colonial Cameroon 148  
*Jacqueline de Vries*

- 6 Underground Struggles: The Early Life of Jack Hodgson 170  
*Duncan Money*

**PART 3**

***Discursive Worlds***

- 7 Binding Words: Student Biographical Narratives and Religious  
 Conversion 197  
*Morgan Robinson*
- 8 A Muslim Boy in Sunday School  
*Abdullah Abdurahman's Early Childhood and Education in Cape Town  
 at the End of the Nineteenth Century* 219  
*Eve Wong*
- 9 Barthélémy Boganda between Charisma and Cosmology  
*Interpretive Perspectives on Biography in Equatorial African  
 History* 246  
*Klaas van Walraven*
- 10 A Road not Taken? The Biography of Laurent Kabila (1939-2001) 275  
*Erik Kennes*
- Index 299

## Acknowledgements

This volume is the outcome of a 2-day workshop organised at the African Studies Centre, University of Leiden, in September 2016 for the specific purpose of investigating the relation between biographical research and historiography in the context of African studies. The case studies in this volume all discuss the importance of the subjective or biographical turn in historical research on Africa. They show the different ways in which an analytical focus on the individual, or persona, can enhance and complicate our view and understanding of Africa's history.

I would like to thank the authors for their willingness to participate in the 2016 workshop and discuss and revise the various drafts of their contributions to the volume. I am grateful to Jan-Bart Gewald and Meike de Goede for discussing the numerous issues involved in the study of biography and life histories. Finally, I would like to thank Harry Wels for his editorial support, Anna Yeadell for her careful language editing and Nel de Vink for the production of the maps.

# Illustrations

## Maps

- 2.1 Cape Town. Based on S. Field, *Oral History, Community and Displacement: Imagining Memories in post-Apartheid South Africa* [New York, 2012]. 77
- 6.1 Western Transvaal 176
- 6.2 Copperbelt, 1930s 179
- 7.1 Mission stations, East Africa 199

## Figures

- 4.1 David Badoe index card, Pilgermission St. Chrischona. Bibliothek, Theologisches Seminar St. Chrischona, Basel. 125
- 4.2 David Cornelius Badu's signature. Basel Mission Archives D-1.27 (1875), item 217 (Akropong). 144
- 5.1 A page from Michael Timneng's autobiography. J. de Vries. 150
- 7.1 Deed of freedom of Mabrook Nyasa, 23 May 1884 201
- 7.2 Deed of freedom of Nusora Mubwara, 10 February 1892. Courtesy of the Zanzibar National Archives, sole copyright holder. 202

## Photos

- 3.1 Returned labour migrants, 1950s. Betty Dening personal collection. 104
- 3.2 Women from Mwinilunga. Mwinilunga District Notebooks, National Archives of Zambia. 106
- 4.1 1889 class photo, Pilgermission St. Chrischona. Bibliothek, Theologisches Seminar St. Chrischona, Basel. 128
- 5.1 Laikom, ca. 1930. Mill Hill Mission Archive, Liverpool, courtesy Father Hermanus Bots. 160
- 6.1 Jack Hodgson as a young man 171
- 6.2 Jack Hodgson addressing strikers at Mufulira 184
- 6.3 Hodgson's desert rat patch 187
- 8.1 Khadijah & 'Hadji' Abdurahman (1897) 226
- 8.2 Hanafi mosque in Long Street, Cape Town (1881) 238
- 8.3 Hanafi mosque now 238



- 8.4 South African College School (1886). 239
- 9.1 Boganda in missionary care ca. 1923. Archives Générales Spiritaines, Chevilly-Larue. 249
- 9.2 Boganda and wife confronting a colonial official, Mbaiki, January 1951. Archives Générales Spiritaines, Chevilly-Larue. 265
- 9.3 Boganda as agitator. Archives Générales Spiritaines, Chevilly-Larue. 267
- 10.1 Laurent Kabila at the Kigoma base. Courtesy Albert Kisonga. 282
- 10.2 Laurent Kabila speaking (1982). Courtesy Heimo Claassen/Revobild. 287

## Notes on Contributors

### *Paul Glen Grant*

received his PhD in history at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 2017, and is currently lecturer in world history at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville. His research focuses on the cross-cultural process in World Christianity, and especially the ways African Christians have historically imposed indigenous agendas on what was often a foreign religion. His monograph *Healing and Power: Christianity in Late Precolonial Ghana* is forthcoming from Baylor University Press. His first (non-academic) book was *Blessed Are the Uncool: Authentic Living in a World of Show* (InterVarsity Press, 2007).

### *Erik Kennes*

(PhD Université de Laval, Québec/Univ. Paris 1 Sorbonne), worked successively at the University of Antwerp (1992–1999) and the section for contemporary history of the Africa Museum, Tervuren, Belgium (1999–2008), before joining Monusco's Political Affairs Department in 2009. From 2017–2019 he managed the Carter Center's Extractive Industries Governance Programme in Lubumbashi. He published extensively on the politics and history of the Democratic Republic of Congo. His latest book, *The Katangese Gendarmes and War in Central Africa*, Indiana University Press, 2016, was co-authored with Miles Larmer.

### *Lindie Koorts*

is a South African biographer and historian. She obtained her DPhil in History at the University of Stellenbosch, and is currently affiliated to the International Studies Group, University of the Free State. She holds a Newton Advanced Fellowship from the British Academy for her ongoing biographical research. Her biography of D.F. Malan, the man who instituted the policy of apartheid, was the first comprehensive biography of an apartheid leader to have been published after the country's turn to democracy in 1994. The book was shortlisted for South Africa's foremost non-fiction awards, including the Sunday Times Alan Paton shortlist, and the KykNET-Rapport shortlist for non-fiction.

### *Duncan Money*

is a historian of central and southern Africa with a particular interest in the history of the mining industry. Much of his research has looked at the history of the Zambian Copperbelt and, more broadly, he is interested in labour,

migration and global history. Duncan holds a DPhil in history from the University of Oxford and is currently a Postdoctoral Fellow at the International Studies Group, University of the Free State.

*Elena Moore*

is an Associate Professor of Sociology and Director of the Families and Societies Research Unit at the Centre for Social Science Research at the University of Cape Town. She is the author of *Divorce, Families and Emotion Work* (Palgrave, 2017) and (with Chuma Himonga) *Reform of Customary Marriage, Divorce and Succession in South Africa* (Juta & Co. 2015). Her work has appeared in the *Journal of Family Issues*; *Gender & Society*; *Critical Social Policy*; *Families, Relationships and Societies*; and the *Journal of Southern African Studies*.

*Iva Peša*

is Assistant Professor in contemporary history at the University of Groningen. In 2014 she completed her PhD thesis at Leiden University on the social history of Mwinilunga District, published as *Roads through Mwinilunga: A History of Social Change in Northwest Zambia* (Brill, 2019). Her research focuses on the social and environmental history of Central Africa. From 2017–2019 she was a Research Associate in environmental history at the University of Oxford, where she worked on the environmental history of the Zambian and Congolese Copperbelt. She co-edited, amongst other books, *The Objects of Life in Central Africa* (with Robert Ross and Marja Hinfelaar, Brill 2013).

*Morgan Robinson*

is an Assistant Professor of History at Mississippi State University where she teaches African history. Her work has appeared in the *Journal of Eastern African Studies* and the *Journal of the History of Ideas*. She is currently work on a book manuscript entitled *Standard Swahili: Expressions of Belonging and Exclusion in Eastern Africa*.

*Jacqueline de Vries*

is a historian specialized in West Africa under British and German rule. In a recent article for *War & Society*, she discussed the internment of Cameroonian soldiers under German command on Spanish Fernando Po during World War 1. She is also the author of *Catholic Mission, Colonial Government and Indigenous Response in Kom (Cameroon)* (African Studies Centre: Leiden, 1998). Currently she is completing her PhD research at the University of Leiden, on the impact of colonial rule on gender relations in Kom, in British Cameroon.

*Klaas van Walraven*

is a historian and political scientist at the African Studies Centre, University of Leiden. He has worked on various issues of Africa's international relations and was general co-editor of the *Africa Yearbook: Politics, Economy and Society South of the Sahara*. He has written extensively on the Sawaba movement in Niger (*The Yearning for Relief: A History of the Sawaba Movement in Niger*, Brill, 2013; French translation: *Le Désir de calme: L'histoire du mouvement Sawaba au Niger*, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2017) and is currently working on a biography of Barthélémy Boganda.

*Eve Wong*

is completing her PhD at the University of Cape Town investigating Khoisan revivalism and the changes and continuities of coloured identity. She is interested in questions of boundaries and border-crossings, the imaginations of the past and future in the present, and the politics of heritage and belonging in the postcolony. She holds an MA in Anthropology from Boston University and an MA in Historical Studies from the University of Cape Town with undergraduate degrees in History, Classical Studies, and Anthropology. She is working with a co-author on a biography of Abdullah Abdurahman (forthcoming).

# Prologue: Reflections on Historiography and Biography and the Study of Africa's Past

*Klaas van Walraven*

## Historiography and Biography

Since time immemorial historians have written biographies.\* However, especially since the 1980s and 1990s biography (in the form of biographical studies or 'life-history' research, less often full-blown biographies) has expanded to such an extent that scholars now speak of a 'biographical turn' – both in the humanities and in the social sciences. It reflects, according to one scholar, a renewed interest in individual lives as a route to understanding societies and the process of social and historical change.<sup>1</sup>

This development, which encompasses both Africanist scholarship and the study of the wider world, has emerged as a result of a steady move away from structuralist approaches in the social sciences, a move whose inception lies somewhere in the late 1960s and 1970s. Growing scepticism about quantitative methods in social history and sociology, the decline of (neo-)Marxist analysis and the rise of post-modernist thought, followed by the fall of the Soviet bloc, all led away from large-scale theories constructed on the supposed pre-eminence of broad social divisions,<sup>2</sup> such as class or – in Africa – ethnicity. In a way, the evolution of these structuralist approaches, which had slowly become a vogue since the early twentieth century, had turned full circle, built as they were on metanarratives (not only in sociology, but also in social history) that often resulted in one-dimensional, even unsophisticated, explanations of historical or social change.<sup>3</sup>

Ironically, this was precisely what had been seen as the failings of political or national(ist) historiography as it had evolved in the nineteenth century. Structuralist historiography such as that of the French *Annales* School, so called after its journal founded in 1929, had developed in response to this, pleading not the history of high politics but one of wider issues, especially in the social sphere, but including aspects of geography, the environment and natural

---

\* I would like to thank Jan-Bart Gewald and Meike de Goede for their valuable comments on an earlier draft of this text.

1 B. Caine, *Biography and History* (London, 2019), 1.

2 *Ibid.*, 2.

3 S.G. Magnusson, 'The Singularization of History: Social History and Microhistory within the Postmodern State of Knowledge', *Journal of Social History*, 36 (2003), 704–705.

conditions, as well as trade and infrastructure and, at a later stage, that of collective mentalities.<sup>4</sup> Privileging the long-term of the historical flow (*longue durée*), it looked at persistent (and constraining) structures as explanatory forces of the human condition,<sup>5</sup> rather than ‘mere’ (often political) events (*histoire événementielle*). If nineteenth-century sociologists such as Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer (besides Marx) had also shown interest in structures, *Annales* historians such as Marc Bloch, Fernand Braudel, and, later, Le Roy Ladurie demonstrated convincingly that it was possible to write socioeconomic and cultural histories that met the rigorous standards of source criticism as propounded by Leopold von Ranke for the earlier political historiography. ‘Rankean’ history, considered the first form of scientific history-writing due to its empirical, source-based approach (called positivism or historicism), had given rise to narrow, top-down views of history – often national in scope – as a result of the systematic use of archives necessary for its construction (itself a novelty as compared with pre-nineteenth-century historiography).<sup>6</sup>

If the writings of *Annales* historians became influential, they were not well-received everywhere (they were largely ignored or rejected in Britain, Germany, and the United States). It was pointed out, amongst other things, that their analysis of structure was rather static, and thus ahistorical: until the 1970s, many economic and social historians were attracted to deterministic models of historical explanation, whether or not by way of quantitative approaches that received a new boost and expanded to other fields of history with the rise of ‘Cliometrics’ (*histoire sérielle*) in the 1960s–1970s. The implied determinism was critiqued as reductionist of the human condition.<sup>7</sup>

True, structural historiography had helped in the evolution towards what in the 1970s became known as ‘new history’ (*histoire nouvelle*), i.e. the history of any human activity, in whatever sphere, but generally affected by the premise of cultural relativism: reality was seen as socially and culturally constituted, and this premise thus took issue with what must be deemed as central and what as peripheral in history.<sup>8</sup> Besides fragmenting historiography, this opened, or widened, the gate to history writing on numerous subjects and social categories, including ‘ordinary’ people or groups with little power: women’s

4 See e.g. F. Braudel, *La Méditerranée et le Monde Méditerranéen à l’époque de Philippe II* (Paris, 1949) and E. Le Roy Ladurie, *Montaillou: Village occitan de 1294 à 1324* (Paris, 1975).

5 ‘Structure’ could be defined as the arrangement of, and relations and fundamental interaction patterns between, actors.

6 P. Burke, ‘Overture: The New History, its Past and its Future’, in P. Burke (ed.), *New Perspectives on Historical Writing* (Cambridge, 1991), 1–23.

7 P. Burke, ‘History of Events and the Revival of Narrative’, in *ibid.*, *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, 233–246.

8 Burke, ‘The New History, its Past and its Future’.

history and African-American history came into their own<sup>9</sup> (quite apart from the field of African history, whose driving forces had much to do with the demise of colonialism), and more generally histories ‘from below’ (*histoire d'en bas*) – which exposed the biases of (state) archives – and the history of daily life, as studied under the notion of *la quotidienne* in France and, later, as *Alltagsgeschichte* in Germany, or through the related perspective of microhistory (on which more below).<sup>10</sup>

This would, in due course, aid the resurgence of interest in the study of individual lives that we see today. But this would not occur before the structuralism in the social sciences and social history had, earlier in the twentieth century, driven an unprecedented wedge between history and biography – as forms of writing that both deal with the past, the two genres had been intimately linked since Antiquity.<sup>11</sup> One could argue that both biography and its conventional format – narrative – were amongst structuralism's earliest casualties, both because of the conception of history as it obtained in the nineteenth century and the (not unrelated) character of biographies as published in the Western world until, roughly, the 1920s. If structural history looked down on events, it could not privilege individual persons as the unit of analysis, let alone if it concerned ‘great men’: since the rise of Romanticism ‘great men’ (but seldom women) had been viewed as ‘heroes’, whose lives, Thomas Carlyle argued, provided the key to understanding society. To him, great men were the driving force of history and therefore inseparable from, and could be summarised as coming down to, their biography. ‘Heroes’ had the right to rule and should be revered. They stood at the centre of society, conforming to the Romantic idea of the hero as protagonist.<sup>12</sup>

Of course, this concept of history (very much part of Europe's nineteenth century) would come to grief in Eric Hobsbawm's ‘age of extremes’,<sup>13</sup> rightfully making room for structural approaches that privileged anything but the high political. In the genre of biography there was a like-minded correction with the publication of Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* (1918), which debunked biographical subjects and ended their treatment as heroes (itself signifying the absence of a

9 Caine, *Biography and History*, 2.

10 Burke, ‘The New History, its Past and its Future’ and Magnusson, ‘The Singularization of History’, 708.

11 O. Handlin, *Truth in History* (Cambridge, MA, 1979), 266.

12 J. Lepore, ‘Historians Who Love Too Much: Reflections on Microhistory and Biography’, *The Journal of American History*, 88 (2001), 131; Handlin, *Truth in History*, 267; T. Carlyle, *On Heroes and Hero Worship and the Heroic in History* (London, 1841); Wikipedia lemmas on biography and Thomas Carlyle, accessed 2 April and 10 May 2019.

13 E. Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914–1991* (London, 1994).

consistent theory of biography).<sup>14</sup> But this could not prevent many twentieth-century historians sustainably rejecting biography outright. Many even argued that it was not a form of history as such because of what was seen as flawed periodisation; that it was marked diachronically by the birth and death of the subject irrespective of society's larger transformations. If this view was also the long-term consequence of the more scientific approach ingrained in positivist source criticism, then the influence of structuralist history made itself felt here. Historians also questioned whether individuals (heroic or not) could serve as a vehicle for understanding deeper social trends.<sup>15</sup> Doubting its capacity to provide analytically sophisticated interpretations of the past, biography was now seen as the 'stepchild' of the historical profession.<sup>16</sup>

Along with this there was a decline of narrative, brought about not only by the *Annales* School, but also by British historians such as Lewis Namier and R.H. Tawney, as well as by developments in modern literature. Writers such as James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Aldous Huxley, and Marcel Proust experimented with decomposition of narrative structure, something that would later give rise to the so-called new novel (*nouveau roman*), which eschewed narrative or sequence (along with other classical features of the novel such as plot, coherence, and a stable personage) in favour of experiment and obsession with objects, detail, and language. American historian Hayden White pleaded that colleagues heed these literary insights, privileging the human sense of discontinuities.<sup>17</sup> Some took up the challenge, composing texts in reverse chronological order, which had the merit of exposing the weight that the past exerts on human beings.<sup>18</sup>

As noted above, a reverse trend would set in later in the twentieth century (even if biography and narrative were never completely abandoned, either in Western or African history), facilitated by the decline of structuralism and the rise of post-modernism – although the latter would, as shown later, also *complicate* the biographical genre. Thus, in 1979, Lawrence Stone announced a comeback for narrative, something that one could even see in the work of

14 L. Strachey, *Eminent Victorians* (New York, 1918); Lepore, 'Historians Who Love Too Much'; Handlin, *Truth in History*, 269.

15 N. Salvatore, 'Biography and Social History: An Intimate Relationship', *Labour History*, 87 (2004), 187–192.

16 D. Nasaw, 'Historians and Biography', *The American Historical Review*, 114 (2009), 573–578.

17 Burke, 'History of Events and the Revival of Narrative' and P. Brunel, *Histoire de la littérature française* (Paris, 1977), vol. 2, 714–715.

18 Burke, 'History of Events and the Revival of Narrative'; B.H. Sumner, *Survey of Russian History* (London, 1944); N. Davies, *Heart of Europe: A Short History of Poland* (Oxford, 1984).



some *Annales* historians, such as Le Roy Ladurie's *Le Carnaval de Romans*.<sup>19</sup> As shown below, broadly similar trends would mark the development of biographical studies in African historiography.

### Biographical Study: Vicissitudes, Notions, Issues

Modern historical biography, in both the Western world and Africa, has had a long gestation period. At the time of European Antiquity, Plutarch wrote his *Parallel Lives* of Greeks and Romans (*Βίοι Παράλληλοι*), followed by Suetonius' work on Roman emperors (*De Vita Caesarum*). With the inception of the Christian era and, later, the emergence of Islam, biographical works began to appear that discussed the lives and deeds of the church fathers, the prophet Muhammad, knights and kings and, during the Renaissance, of artists. Most of these works were character types that served as exemplars – often they were outright hagiographies.<sup>20</sup> Their subjects were celebrities.<sup>21</sup>

This paralleled traditions in pre-colonial Africa of praise-singing, a widespread discursive tradition of public speaking that can be seen as a form of oral biography.<sup>22</sup> For centuries, griots had eulogised the deeds of ancestor-rulers as an important element in the formation and consolidation of pre-colonial polities, and in the nineteenth century Westernised elites in Yorubaland and the Gold Coast began to transliterate this genre as well as write about contemporary public figures. This development was also fed by (and partly merged with) the new tradition of written biographies of great black men in the United States and must be set in the context of racial-colonial emancipatory struggle. In addition, it was inspired by a long-standing Christian-missionary tradition of producing biographical sketches of converts, which allowed for the modelling of good conduct, morality, and self-sacrifice. In due course, this would also serve as an engine for autobiographical writing set within particular discursive regimes, notably in colonial East Africa (on which more in the next section).<sup>23</sup>

19 L. Stone, 'The Revival of Narrative: Reflections on a New Old History', *Past & Present*, 85 (1979), 3–24; E. Le Roy Ladurie, *Le Carnaval de Romans: De la chandeleur au mercredi des Cendres, 1579–1580* (Paris, 1979).

20 Caine, *Biography and History*, 5.

21 Wikipedia lemma on biography.

22 D.D. Cordell (ed.), *The Human Tradition in Modern Africa* (Lanham, MD, 2012); L.A. Lindsay, 'Biography in African History', *History in Africa*, 44 (2017), 12.

23 Lindsay, 'Biography in African History', 12; M.R. Doortmont, *The Pen-Pictures of Modern Africans and African Celebrities by Charles Francis Hutchison. A Collective Biography of Elite Society in the Gold Coast Colony* (Leiden and Boston, 2005), 34–40; D.R. Peterson,

The evolution towards biography as an independent genre began in the seventeenth-eighteenth century. The term 'biography' – literally, the writing or drawing of life – first came into use in England and reflects questions about how lives should be described and, therefore, what an individual person was *exactly like* (this prefigured Von Ranke's historical approach) – thereby breaking with the earlier tradition of exemplary character types. James Boswell's book about Samuel Johnson (1791) is seen by many as the first modern biography, methodologically marked by extensive archival research, eye-witness accounts, and interviews with its persona (the two men were roughly contemporaries), as well as an honest portrayal of Johnson's personality. In addition, the Enlightenment in France boosted (auto-)biography as an independent genre, as writers such as Denis Diderot began to experiment in novels with the construction of complex, contradictory personas whose characters, behavioural traits and attitudes were in the process of continual evolution. This, in turn, helped encourage awareness of the distinction between the social persona and the perception of the self, which in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions* would lead to doubts about the possibility to engage in autobiography. In any case, during the nineteenth century biography in the Western world largely stagnated or harked back to the preceding tradition of hagiography, probably as a result of the heroic conception of history then in vogue.<sup>24</sup>

World War I put an end to this, and, though subsequently set in a structuralist age, biography in the first half of the twentieth century received a modest boost with the development of psychology as a scientific discipline and Freud's psychoanalytical method. If most (historical) biographers chose to ignore these approaches, some now provided discreet interpretations of aspects of their subjects' behaviour. While psychology (especially in the deterministic variety of behaviourism), as well as the influence of sociology, led biographers to downplay the individuality of their subjects and emphasise the role of the environment, it was hoped that psychoanalysis could provide a more penetrating insight into the persona. It encouraged some, for example, to pay attention to the subject's childhood and adolescence, stimulated by a new culture

---

*Ethnic Patriotism and the East African Revival: A History of Dissent, c. 1935–1972* (Cambridge, 2012), 195 and 200.

24 Cordell, *The Human Tradition in Modern Africa*, 8; Caine, *Biography and History*, 5; Wikipedia lemma on biography; J. Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D., Comprehending an Account of His Studies and Numerous Works* etc. (London, 1791), Eighteenth Century Collections Online, accessed 14 May 2019; G. Levi, 'Les usages de la biographie', *Annales: Economies, sociétés, civilisations*, 44 (1989), 1326–1328; A. Eckert and A. Jones, 'Historical Writing about Everyday Life', *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 15 (2002), 9.

of autobiographical writing that developed as a form of therapy.<sup>25</sup> This carried with it the added benefit of including children (or the phase of childhood) as subject of biographical analysis. As argued in the chapter by Eve Wong in this volume, childhood is usually minimised in conventional biography, perhaps especially in Africa.<sup>26</sup> This is due not least to methodological reasons. As all marginalised categories, children leave few (archival) records (Van Walraven's chapter also pays attention to the phase of childhood in the interpretation of its persona).

The psychological approach in biography was really put on the map in the 1950s with the publication of Erikson's *Young Man Luther*, a study that sought an explanation for the actions of the leader of the Reformation in his childhood and adolescence, notably Luther's difficulties with his father and related identity crisis.<sup>27</sup> Such an undisguised psychological perspective was elaborated later by Gusdorf, who tried to show how autobiographers seek to create order, coherence, and direction in a life's narrative where none may have existed, thus interpreting autobiography as a form of self-conscious individualism that puts subjectivity centre-stage. Bjorklund would later argue that autobiographies were therefore a good source for investigating ideas about the 'self', to find out about people's mental constitution.<sup>28</sup>

If the early debunking of 'heroes' in Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* shared an interest with psychological biographers in the uncommon personality traits of the subject,<sup>29</sup> the approach easily lent itself to abuse, with some Africanists, for example, treating autobiographical texts as representative of entire cultural blocs.<sup>30</sup> Erikson, moreover, had pleaded that biographers separate themselves altogether from the rationalisations of the historical process:<sup>31</sup> as the sub-title of his book suggests, he wrote as a psychoanalyst, not an historian, for whom theory has to make way for hard evidence. Historians who give excessive attention to the persona's character, battle with fiction and psychiatry at a disadvantage (the

25 Lemma on biography, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, (online version, accessed 2 April 2019); Wikipedia lemma on biography.

26 An exception here is N. Parsons, W. Henderson and Th. Tlou, *Seretse Khama 1921–80* (Gaborone and Braamfontein, 1997).

27 E.H. Erikson, *Young Man Luther: A Study in Psychoanalysis and History* (New York, 1958).

28 G. Gusdorf, 'Conditions and Limits of Autobiography', in J. Olney (ed.), *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical* (Princeton, 1980), 28–48 and D. Bjorklund, *Interpreting the Self: Two Hundred Years of American Autobiography* (Chicago, IL, 1998).

29 Handlin, *Truth in History*, 269 ff.

30 See e.g. J. Olney, *Tell Me Africa: An Approach to African Literature* (Princeton, NJ, 1973). Discussion in Peterson, *Ethnic Patriotism and the East African Revival*, 197–198. Another example is W. Sachs, *Black Hamlet* (London, 1937).

31 Salvatore, 'Biography and Social History', 188.

patient is not there to answer questions). More fundamentally, the application of the psychoanalytical method takes place on the assumption of the universality and constancy of human nature, as well as its timelessness – i.e. that people in the past felt just like us – thus opening the way for psychological anachronism.<sup>32</sup>

Nevertheless, as shown by the contributions by Wong and Van Walraven in this volume, cautious discussion of character or personality traits can be warranted – even indispensable – if relevant to the overall historical significance of the persona and his/her context. (Historical) biographers can never know everything about their subject's life (notably with regard to their thoughts, motivations, etc.) and for this reason often advance speculations to fill in gaps in evidence.<sup>33</sup> If properly identified as such, these do not immediately detract from (in fact, may enhance) the analysis. In African studies, Brian Willan's biography of Sol Plaatje springs to mind.<sup>34</sup>

Thus, in the evolution towards modern biography the format disintegrated and assumed different forms (including literary, psychological, and historical). Some scholars would, however, still define biography (or, rather, comprehensive biographies) as a form of *literature* – albeit one, just like history, in search of truth, facts, and the persona's experience of them in past times – since it tries, it is argued, to create, through selection and design, the *illusion of a life* actually being lived (the notion of 'illusion' is discussed in the next section).<sup>35</sup>

There is no consensus on the typology of biography, however. Some single out 'scholarly biography' as the fundamental form of biographical research, and several contributions in this volume are illustrative of this as historical portrayals of (aspects of) individual lives. Other types of biography include intellectual biography (focusing on the evolution of the subject's beliefs and motives within the wider world of ideas); memoirs and different forms of autobiography; and literary biography, amongst others. Backscheider's views are notable especially for literary biography (whether or not the subject is writers of literature themselves).<sup>36</sup> To her, the writing of (full-blown) biography is a cerebral activity, with the biographer transforming into the subject's closest ally and bitterest foe, who is determined to get under the persona's skin. This requires selection, invasiveness, and passion. For this reason, she argues, academics are

32 Handlin, *Truth in History*, 272–274 and Burke, 'The New History, its Past and its Future'. Also see W. McKinley Runyan, *Life Histories and Psychobiography: Explorations in Theory and Method* (New York, 1982).

33 Cordell, *The Human Tradition in Modern Africa*, 8.

34 B.P. Willan, *Sol Plaatje: South African Nationalist, 1876–1932* (London, 1984).

35 Lemmas on biography, *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and Wikipedia.

36 P.R. Backscheider, *Reflections on Biography* (Oxford, 1999).

poorly prepared for biography writing, with many of their biographies either ‘mausoleums’ of archives, which nobody wants to read, or not genuine biographies at all but ‘biographical books’, i.e. on lives written up and used for other purposes. For Backscheider, however, real biography is a form of art, which conveys the feel of an individual’s life experience.<sup>37</sup>

Of course, scholarly biography, which in its different forms is the subject of this prologue, takes a different cue. Yet, Backscheider’s description of ‘biographical books’ is useful in pointing out that biographical research may include more than comprehensive biographies. As Lindsay argues for the current state of African studies, historians currently seldom aspire to a continuous narrative of one single life (which is also true for most of the chapters in this volume and the research from which they derive).<sup>38</sup>

Thus, biographical research may concern autobiography or the writing of memoirs, or it may come down to the pursuit of oral history or what is called ‘life-history’ research. As argued by Paul Grant in this volume, biography as such is closely related to historical research on individual life, but not the same thing. The latter’s objective may be taken to pertain to something *outside* the persona involved (as in histories of daily life or so-called microhistory, on which more below). But, as Grant argues, biography privileges individual idiosyncrasies for their own sake, if not making a case for the subject’s uniqueness – even when set in the broader historical context. The more broadly defined ‘biographical research’ has, as a method, the central aim to produce dense descriptions of persons or to conceptualise structural types of actions and understand the action logics involved and the linkages between persons and structures.<sup>39</sup>

The life-history approach mentioned above is an example of this. Though rarely distinguished bibliographically from biography or even autobiography, ‘life histories’ usually differ in form, purpose, and result from biography as such. The approach can be defined as a form of biographical method that is inspired by either the social sciences or traditions of oral history, narrative discourse and theoretical concepts from psychology or sociology. By then addressing the issue of generalisability a case study paradigm may emerge.<sup>40</sup> If

37 Lemmas on biography, *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and Wikipedia; <http://www.aera.net> (on biographical research), accessed 2 April 2019; Backscheider, *Reflections on Biography*, xv, xvi, xix and 232–234.

38 Lindsay, ‘Biography in African History’, 17.

39 J.O. Zinn, *Introduction to Biographical Research* (Working Paper 2004/4; University of Kent), accessed 15 May 2019.

40 <http://www.aera.net> (on biographical research).

the terms 'biography' and 'life history' are now often used interchangeably (also in this volume), life history is generally distinguishable from other oral sources as it involves an extensive recording of a person's life told to and recorded by a scholar, who may (but may also not) then edit and write the life in question as though it were an autobiographical account.<sup>41</sup> As will be shown further below, this method (very much part of anthropologists' original tool kit) was to play a considerable role in the resurrection of biographical study towards the end of the twentieth century, in the process also involving sociologists, psychologists, and (social) historians.<sup>42</sup>

The objectives of life history research show that biographical study does not stand on its own. In fact, the criticism of many twentieth-century historians that biography's periodisation is flawed for not taking in larger societal transformations is only truly valid in studies of individual lives that do not analyse 'context'. But in the academic world such biographies have long since ceased to be the standard. It is precisely 'context' that matters, with the drama of people's struggles in conditions that constrict them in limited life spans being at the very heart of all living history. For this reason, biography *is* a form of historical writing<sup>43</sup> and is seen as the archetypal contingent narrative, for the one best able to demonstrate the importance of place and circumstance, as well as multiple layers of change and a person's experience of this. Even modern political biographies argue the necessity of understanding socio-political context and investigate the complex way in which their subjects relate to the world they inhabit.<sup>44</sup>

Thus, by definition contextualised – 'critical' – biography involves the study of a persona in a particular historical context.<sup>45</sup> At the same time, this makes for potential pitfalls, such as how to strike the balance between context and individual, and in the relation between the latter's private sphere and public life, with someone's personal life sometimes being read too much into the individual's public actions or achievements (an issue notably discussed in literary biography).<sup>46</sup> However, good contextualised biography never begins with

41 S.N.G. Geiger, 'Women's Life Histories: Method and Content', *Signs*, 11 (1986), 336–337, citing L.L. Langness, *The Life History in Anthropological Science* (New York, 1965), 4–5. A related genre is the so-called authorised biography, a full-sized biography written with the help of (and approved by) the subject.

42 Geiger, 'Women's Life Histories', 337 and I. Goodson, 'The Story of Life History: Origins of the Life History Method in Sociology', *Identity*, 1 (2001), 137.

43 Salvatore, 'Biography and Social History', 190–191.

44 Caine, *Biography and History*, 2–3.

45 A classical description of such biographies often refers to the 'life and times' of the persona involved. Biography lemma, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

46 Wikipedia lemma on biography.

birth; nor does it end with the subject's death. It is rooted in ideas and events larger than the persona, with historians who write biographies not interested in the individual life as such but keen on examining it in its dialectical relationship with the multiple social, cultural, and political worlds, which the subject inhabits and helps to give meaning to.<sup>47</sup> The actual subject of contextualised biography is not the complete person, nor his or her society, but the point where the two meet: an interplay of personal and impersonal forces. This would also explain the difference between classical biographers and historians writing biography. Whereas the former would investigate the past in order to cast light on the individual (including his or her personality), the latter would privilege structure – or at least 'events' – and rarely put character first.<sup>48</sup>

As Salvatore argues, it is the traditional methodological imperatives of the historian's craft that provide the guidelines for how to strike the balance between persona and context.<sup>49</sup> And therefore, in the words of Nasaw, the work of the historian who writes biography must be judged by the same standards as applied to any other historical text. In any case, scholarly biography should only discuss aspects of private life if for some larger significance.<sup>50</sup> The ideal result sheds light beyond the persona, even if not in all corners of social life. The value of grasping a specific life in its larger environment is that it analyses historical change through the prism of an individual being, who struggles with the various private and public forces affecting his or her social existence. Here, the work of Hobsbawm is also relevant, particularly in its focus on the private spheres of people casting an unexpected glance on their public (or professional) roles.<sup>51</sup>

In that sense, the distinction between the public roles and private lives of personas is blurred. The required research strategy is therefore broad, recognising that the particular is the prism that may reveal personal and social meaning. Hence, not even the minutest detail is irrelevant: culture theorist Aby Warburg put it aptly when he argued that 'the dear Lord' hides in the detail, in reference to the search for the seemingly marginal aspect that may cast a perspective on the greater whole.<sup>52</sup> More on this will be said in relation to the concept of microhistory.

The issue of context in biography, however, is more complex than the balance between the personal-private and the public or social. As Lindie Koorts

---

47 Nasaw, 'Historians and Biography', 574.

48 Handlin, *Truth in History*, 266, 275–276.

49 Salvatore, 'Biography and Social History', 189.

50 Nasaw, 'Historians and Biography', 575.

51 E. Hobsbawm, *Uncommon People: Resistance, Rebellion, and Jazz* (New York, 1998).

52 W. Schäffner, S. Weigel and T. Macho, *Der Liebe Gott steckt im Detail: Microstrukturen des Wissens* (Paderborn, 2003).

points out in this volume, context is multi-layered, with, first, the persona's environment that needs to be recreated, and, second, the biographer's own context to be taken into account. Without commentary in terms of time and space, life stories remain uncoupled from the conditions of their social construction, a notion discussed in the next section.<sup>53</sup> But, as in other historical texts, the context of the biographer also impinges on biography. Literary theorists warn for what is termed the 'biographical fallacy',<sup>54</sup> i.e. the risk that the biographer becomes too involved with his or her subject and will read the life of the persona into the literary text (or other artwork) that the persona has produced (and which should therefore better stand by itself, apart from the persona-creator).<sup>55</sup> This literary 'new criticism' also holds that no biographer can fully disengage from the subject and thus portray the persona objectively (this will be taken up further in reference to the influence that post-modernism would exert on the genre of biography). Some argue that it is therefore necessary to keep the biographer completely out of the text, though in that case, of course, there is still a controlling metanarrator, albeit a silent one.<sup>56</sup> This seems more manipulative than the explicit presence of biographers in more conventional biographies. In some of these, by contrast, biographers go to the point of disclosing their own state of mind, their doubts and uncertainties vis-à-vis their subject, or their concern about the sense of betrayal that interviewed living personas or their relatives may feel once confronted with the finished text.<sup>57</sup> This brings us to the third layer of context, i.e. biographies' readers. As the contribution by Koorts makes painfully clear, the interpretation of a life cannot be controlled by the biographer – especially if it involves prominent, controversial personas who are objects of love or hatred. This has much to do with the assumption that biography, by its very nature, serves as a tribute to its subject. It may therefore provoke strong reactions from a non-academic reading public.<sup>58</sup>

From another angle, however, it can be argued that the issue of context-individual has long since been resolved by historians who have contributed

53 Goodson, 'The Story of Life History', 139.

54 C.J. Lambert, 'Postmodern Biography: Lively Hypotheses and Dead Certainties', *Biography*, 18 (1995), 313.

55 Salvatore, 'Biography and Social History', 188.

56 Lambert, 'Postmodern Biography', 324–325.

57 Such matters are relevant in academic biographies but seldom of interest to a wider reading public. Lepore, 'Historians Who Love Too Much', 135–139.

58 A possible exception to this may be biographies of more extreme examples of personas in world history, such as mass murderers. One could think here of the numerous biographies of Stalin, Hitler, Himmler, etc.



new insights into the problematic relation between structure and ‘events’ (in the latter of which individuals per force play roles). The opposition between events and structure that has been highlighted since the *Annales* School has by now been replaced by a focus on their interrelationship.<sup>59</sup> Contradicting Braudel, the American anthropologist Marshall Sahlins argued that events and structure have a dialectical relationship. Each time that categories are used to interpret the changing world these classifications become to some extent impaired: when events are incorporated in their interpretive cadres, the cultural order is rearranged slightly. Structuralist historians were thus asked to focus more on the power of events as such and their role in the process of ‘structuration’. This would expose the binary opposition between structure and events as false.<sup>60</sup> Moreover, this argument could also help redeem narrative (provided narrativists be prepared to examine the relationship between events and the culture in which they occur). Indeed, the move to concern oneself, once more, with individual lives would (as Lawrence Stone had predicted) lead to what came to be called the ‘narrative turn’ (and with it the biographical one). Scholarly concern with how people *experienced* historical realities represented an antipositivist correction to historiography,<sup>61</sup> an emic approach as compared with ‘Rankean’ (positivist) history. This, however, also required that narrators make themselves visible – not out of self-indulgence but as a warning that other interpretations remain possible.<sup>62</sup>

However, the waning of the supposed contradistinction between structure and events does not resolve the question whether, and to what extent, biographical actors influence their surroundings. For this reason, social scientists in recent decades focused increasingly on the concept of ‘agency’. In response to the structuralist paradigms of the twentieth century social scientists generally sought to privilege human resilience and creativity, while, in particular, anthropologists working on Africa aimed at exposing victimising perspectives on social developments on the continent. The ‘Afro-pessimism’ triggered by the socioeconomic crises of the late twentieth century made this all the more pressing and boosted the status of the concept (though sometimes to

---

59 Burke, ‘The New History, its Past and its Future’.

60 Burke, ‘History of Events and the Revival of Narrative’; M. Sahlins, *Historical Metaphors and Mythical Realities: Structure in the Early History of the Sandwich Islands Kingdom* (Ann Arbor, CT, 1981); book review by Alan Howard in *American Anthropologist*, 84 (1982), 413–414.

61 M. Bamberg, ‘Biographic-Narrative Research, Quo Vadis?: A Critical Review of “Big Stories” from the Perspective of “Small Stories”’, in K. Milnes *et al.* (eds), *Narrative, Memory and Knowledge: Representations, Aesthetics and Contexts* (Huddersfield, 2006), 64.

62 Burke, ‘History of Events and the Revival of Narrative’.

the degree of a buzz word).<sup>63</sup> In African studies, some of the groundwork for this paradigmatic shift was laid by the Manchester School when it turned to studying social structures that challenged or changed the institutional formations that structural functionalism had earlier deemed crucial (reflecting developments in associational life in the late colonial period). Subsequent Marxist interpretations of the African condition – dominant by the 1980s – led some to plead for more actor-oriented models, such as the concept of ‘interface’, through which local societies confronted Western encroachment; and with the decline of Marxism, social change came to be understood fully in terms of actors’ decision-making strategies, in the process laying stress on notions such as ‘mobility’ and the development of new social or religious movements.<sup>64</sup>

Sociologists helped to formulate ideas about the link between structure and agency, arguing, for example, that social transformations are situated in the dialectical linkage between actor and environment (the latter in Africa especially a source of uncertainty). However, this does not make clear what ‘agency’ exactly is or entails. As the capacity of people to act independently and make their own free choices,<sup>65</sup> it assumes the existence of an individual’s free will (discussed in the next section) and therefore holds, presumably, that people can, indeed, influence their surroundings. The extent to which the latter is accepted, however, remains a bone of contention. Agency, in any case, is seen as being produced simultaneously by both actor and the wider (social) structure and therefore involves not just (any form of) acting by the individual involved, but also a sense of thinking (‘reflexivity’) about the wider context: agency is not just a state of being but also of becoming. The aspect of reflexivity makes the cultural or ethnographic context and its influence on the thinking of the persona relevant. As noted in one volume on the concept of agency, if Africans are often constrained by their condition this does not preclude contemplation, with people continually charting new strategies, opportunities and solutions to the problems they face. In African studies, this reflexive dimension, while demonstrating people’s inventiveness,<sup>66</sup> may provide the biographical genre (in its various forms) added significance.

63 R. van Dijk, M. de Bruijn and J.B. Gewald, ‘Social and Historical Trajectories of Agency in Africa: An Introduction’, in M. De Bruijn, R. Van Dijk and J.B. Gewald (eds), *Strength Beyond Structure: Social and Historical Trajectories of Agency in Africa* (Leiden and Boston, MA, 2007), 1.

64 *Ibid.*, 1–4.

65 Wikipedia lemma on agency, accessed 21 May 2019.

66 Van Dijk, De Bruijn and Gewald, ‘Social and Historical Trajectories of Agency in Africa’, 6–9.

## Studying the Self

Before detailing the evolution of biographical study in the context of Africa, however, it is necessary to delve into biography's unit of analysis. This is especially necessary because of the so-called cultural-linguistic turn that post-structuralist scholarship took (partly) after the 1970s. Under the influence of post-modernist philosophers as Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, social scientists (though by no means all), as well as some historians, began to study human behaviour through the concept of discourse. This was premised on the idea that language, as a cultural-intellectual form, represents the means by which authority is communicated to people. This threatened to do away with social causes all together, while it potentially led to the collapse of explanatory paradigms: privileging language, scholars began to deconstruct concepts, in the process moving away from the search for objective explanations of social life by treating culture/language as an interpretive category in the course of the search for meaning.<sup>67</sup> In response to positivist social science scholars rejected the determinism of social structure, but also celebrated subjectivity in the sense that personal and social meaning allegedly form the basis for action. If this held potential for the study of individual lives, the problem of post-modernism was that it did not clarify the relationship between the personal and the social. It encouraged focus on reflexivity, the subjective construction by individuals of their 'self' and the fashioning of their identity.<sup>68</sup>

In its extreme form, this approach denied the existence of individual stable identity and a unitary self, arguing that any evidence for this was but a transient expression of an incoherent worldview.<sup>69</sup> Fed by the post-modernist incredulity vis-à-vis metanarratives,<sup>70</sup> the unified persona became suspect and with it, so-called definitive biographies. One advantage of this was that research could move away from the strictures of identity politics since from this perspective, identity changes with context.<sup>71</sup> But the new focus on subjectivity

67 Magnusson, 'The Singularization of History', 707–708. Besides historian Hayden White, mentioned above, anthropologist Clifford Geertz proved influential in this cultural turn. See his *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York, 1973).

68 P. Chamberlayne, J. Bornat and T. Wengraf, 'Introduction: The Biographical Turn', in P. Chamberlayne, J. Bornat and T. Wengraf (eds), *The Turn to Biographical Methods in Social Science: Comparative Issues and Examples* (London and New York, 2000), 1–6.

69 *Ibid.*

70 Lambert, 'Postmodern Biography', 305; C. Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA, 1989); J.F. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis, 1985).

71 For a recent argument to this effect, see M. de Bruijn, 'Introduction: La radicalisation et les messages cachés du changement social', in M. de Bruijn (ed.), *Biographies de la*

had the paradoxical effect of complicating, even repudiating, the genre of biographical writing. Particularly influential here was an article by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, which argued that the notion of a 'life history' presupposes that someone's life has a distinct history that inseparably constitutes a coherent ensemble of events of an individual existence conceived as a story, a path along which a linear and unidirectional movement takes place marked by a beginning and an end.<sup>72</sup>

But, of course, our personal lives as we experience them have a confusing, if not chaotic, ring about them, which *Macbeth* (admittedly when faced with the consequences of his reckless ambition) already saw as undermining the very notion of 'history':

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage  
And then is heard no more: it is a tale  
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,  
Signifying nothing.

*MACBETH*, Act V, Scene V

In Bourdieu's perspective, this is seen to mean that individual lives are a form of 'non-history'. Lives have an illusory, constructed, and artificial coherence that can and must be understood as a unitary expression of an objective and subjective *intent*. The persona is the ideologue of his or her own life and to this purpose builds up a tidy chronology and a logical sequence. These ignore the many chronological twists and turns that any scholar doing interviews with biographical subjects will stumble upon but streamline in the interest of a coherent text. Especially autobiographies have, in that sense, a teleological bent that serves a purpose in the construction of one's identity – as the contribution of Jacqueline de Vries in this volume makes very clear; this will be discussed further below in the context of 'self-fashioning'. To Bourdieu, the biographer is complicit in this process, pleading instead for the abandonment of linear storytelling, the portrayal of reality as discontinuous and experiments at chronological ordering – as he did in his own autobiographical essay (which commenced with his university life followed by a discussion of his childhood). The influence of the *nouveau roman* is obvious here.<sup>73</sup>

---

*radicalisation: Des messages cachés du changement social* (Mankon, 2018), 4. Also M. de Goede, 'L'héritage de la résistance politique au Congo-Brazzaville', in *ibid.*, 267–284.

72 P. Bourdieu, 'L'illusion biographique', *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, vol. 62–63 (1986), 69–72.

73 P. Bourdieu, 'Esquisse pour une auto-analyse', *L'orientation scolaire et professionnelle*, 35/3 (2006), 477–479.

One could retort that chronology disciplines historians against excessive abstraction and generalisation<sup>74</sup> and that the proper demands of historical scholarship mitigate the 'illusory' aspects of biography. Moreover, effective biographers also play with sequence when interrupting the flow of time and grouping research data to reveal broader themes.<sup>75</sup> One may, however, also question whether (auto)biographical representations that reverse time sequences do not render lives unreal, not just because they are constructed after the fact but, while humans can *look* back in time, travelling back is, under the general theory of relativity and quantum mechanics, physically impossible.<sup>76</sup> Attempts at writing history backwards also present considerable difficulties (not least by the fact that within such texts distinct episodes must be written – and read – forwards).<sup>77</sup> One could, finally, query whether there is no fundamental distinction between fiction and non-fiction as far as the production of biography is concerned.

In any case, Bourdieu recognises social mechanisms that stimulate the experience of individual life as a oneness and a totality, in particular the provision of proper names, which provide durable identities to the biological individual across time and space.<sup>78</sup> But, in a radical continuation of the argument perhaps typical of post-modernist philosophy, Bourdieu then concludes that it is absurd to understand an individual life as a unique and sufficient series of successive events that have no link with each other but the constant of a proper name; one cannot understand such a trajectory without, first, constructing the successive stages of the context in which this life takes place.<sup>79</sup>

It is precisely here, however, that social scientists and historians (including those working on Africa) have in recent years advanced arguments that seem to resolve this conundrum. In writing life stories, scholars have realised how personas assume and discard multiple identities depending on context and necessity. This 'self-fashioning' is to a considerable extent (but not completely) a social process. In the post-modernist perspective, the subject of a biography is therefore no longer the coherent self but a self that is performed to create the impression of coherence, with different manifestations of the self reflecting the passage of time and the demand of context, as well as the way others represent the subject. As argued by Eckert and Jones, a biography is, thus, a social construct, which constitutes social reality as well as the persona's experience.

---

74 Handlin, *Truth in History*, 406.

75 Lemma on biography, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

76 This is called Stephen Hawking's chronology protection conjecture.

77 Burke, 'History of Events and the Revival of Narrative'.

78 S.A. Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (Oxford, 1980).

79 Bourdieu, 'L'illusion biographique'.

This social construct continually transforms itself within the dialectical relationship between biographical experiences and general social patterns.<sup>80</sup>

Thus, it is (also) the social function of biographies and the processes of their constitution that scholars should examine. In fact, for this reason it is especially biographical study that could put a stop to futile social science debates oscillating between individual and structure.<sup>81</sup> The idea of a singular, knowable, and essential self is part of the social production of individualism, linked to what Goodson calls 'agentic selves' that pursue their various objectives. As a result, linearity of time and storylines is challenged in favour of multiple and disrupted notions of subjectivity. But lives are narrated – and read –<sup>82</sup> with an aspiration to coherence and a unitary self, since people do not *see* themselves as disjointed individuals (leaving aside the complicating issue of schizophrenia or other psychiatric disorders). Biographical study should therefore be interested in how people actually narrate their lives, rather than the way they *should*. This could neutralise the risk that fundamentalist postmodernism poses to biography.<sup>83</sup> In the end, life stories are as 'suspect' as any other Taylorian source,<sup>84</sup> therefore requiring the careful interpretation that is part of the historian's craft.

Indeed, the qualities of post-modern biography still stand out. Francis Vanoye hails fragmentation, splintered narrative, contradictions, parodies, and incompleteness as its very qualities.<sup>85</sup> Epstein, in this regard, avoids the nihilistic understanding attributed to post-modernism, arguing that its type of biography need not be anti-humanistic (there is a parallel here with Edward Thompson's plea to save people from the 'enormous condescension of posterity').<sup>86</sup> The dismissal of biography as non-history impairs a more humanistic vision of history.<sup>87</sup> If traditional biography gives the subject an artificial unity, in reality the subject is an integral part of chaos, which post-modernist writing privileges to

80 Eckert and Jones, 'Historical Writing about Everyday Life', 9. See also Part 3 of L.A. Lindsay and J.W. Sweet (eds), *Biography and the Black Atlantic* (Philadelphia, PA, 2014).

81 Eckert and Jones, 'Historical Writing about Everyday Life', 9.

82 Narrative is the means by which people understand life. Hence, (non-academic) audiences hardly have an interest in scrambled time sequences or tousel narrative. Backscheider, *Reflections on Biography*, 230.

83 Goodson, 'The Story of Life History', 137–138.

84 A.J.P. Taylor, *The Struggle for Mastery in Europe 1848–1918* (Oxford, 1954), 569.

85 F. Vanoye, 'La biographie, quand même', in P. Lejeune (ed.), *Le désir biographique* (Paris, 1989), 197–205.

86 E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1980; 1st ed. 1963), 12.

87 W.H. Epstein (ed.), *Contesting the Subject: Essays in the Postmodern Theory and Practice of Biography and Biographical Criticism* (West Lafayette, IN, 1991); Salvatore, 'Biography and Social History', 188.

show the ambiguities of the persona and the uncertainties of the biographer. Yet, in the end, post-modern biographies also have a metanarrator who controls the source material. The difference is that, whereas 'traditional' biographies provide more 'facts' and an 'illusion' of a life, post-modern ones offer fewer details in order to reflect on fragmentation. Crucially, Lambert argues that the interaction between subject matter and biographer can be portrayed without detracting from historical narration.<sup>88</sup>

Finally, Bamberg notes that (auto)biographies (including recorded life histories) are not 'playbacks' of a life but require a perspective from where past events are made relevant for the here and now. That process is ambiguous as recollections operate on the basis of a created 'self'. But the construction of 'self' requires a lived life, a contradiction that can only be bridged by a theory of transformation of how the past evolved into the persona of today: there is, thus, always something built-in in (auto)biography. While the self is a product of the telling and not something to be dug up from the recesses of individual subjectivity, the story is nevertheless *prior to* (although not independent from) the discourse with the biographer/interviewer. Narrative meaning-making, then, becomes the foundation for self-making, obtaining quasi-ontological status.<sup>89</sup>

The self-fashioning that is, therefore, (auto)biography can be observed in the African historical context in particular. In his study of ethnic patriotism in East Africa, Derek Peterson detailed how Kikuyu youngsters took to autobiographical writing, not just because of the prompting by missionaries, but also as a way of self-positioning in the changing social landscape of colonial Kenya. Their conversion to Christianity was expressed through specific narratives constructing the past, in classroom essays, but also in autobiographies produced on missionary presses. Subsequently, it was participants in the Mau Mau rebellion and, later, Kenya's independence leaders, who took up such writing for their own purposes, in the process helping to develop autobiography into East Africa's dominant literary genre.<sup>90</sup>

The chapters in this volume by De Vries and Morgan Robinson show that self-fashioning by autobiographical writing already took off during early colonial rule (and also beyond East Africa). Perhaps one could argue that this is something specifically (or specially) African: the ubiquity of such self-fashioning, also by the humblest folk, can be set in the context of the mobility – in the widest sense of the term – that has marked much of the continent's historical

88 Lambert, 'Postmodern Biography', 324–325.

89 Bamberg, 'Biographic-Narrative Research, Quo Vadis?', 65–67.

90 Peterson, *Ethnic Patriotism and the East African Revival*, 195–208.

development. As observed by Lindsay, the flexible and relational identities that form a hallmark of African civilisation lend themselves well to this phenomenon, particularly if the persona's life barely evinces a stable identity.<sup>91</sup> In this context, narratologists point out that storytelling plays an important role in personal adjustment to life. 'Biographising' then becomes a normal human activity that contributes to the maintenance of identity and the presentation of the self.<sup>92</sup>

Self-fashioning depends, of course, also on the nature of memory, which is usually expressed in narrative form.<sup>93</sup> The question of memory will play less of a role in diaries (written immediately after the fact and whose content is usually not meant to be divulged) than in the interviewed production of life histories.<sup>94</sup> Generally, autobiographical accounts also rely on a culturally shared symbolic system – Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus' is pertinent here.<sup>95</sup> Thus, oral historians working on Western history in the 1980s adopted life history methods and pleaded the quality of the oral testimonies involved.<sup>96</sup> Critics, however, pointed out that the interpretation of such oral data neglected insights from psychology, notably with regard to the reliability of a person's memory.<sup>97</sup> Yet, in the context of Africa's ancient – more orally oriented – civilisations scholars have long argued against dismissing oral data out of hand. Jan Vansina's work on the methodological possibilities of oral traditions has been groundbreaking, demonstrating the usefulness of oral data in the reconstruction of history at least as far as the last few centuries are concerned, depending on region and various other factors. In the end, oral testimonies, just as oral history or oral traditions (concepts that overlap but are not exactly the same), are

91 Lindsay, 'Biography in African History', 20–22, discussing, amongst other texts, C.C. Crais and P. Scully, *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus: A Ghost Story and a Biography* (Princeton, NJ, 2009).

92 Chamberlayne, Bornat and Wengraf, 'Introduction: The Biographical Turn', 9.

93 J. Vansina, 'Memory and Oral Tradition', in J.C. Miller (ed.), *The African Past Speaks: Essays on Oral Tradition and History* (Folkestone, 1980), 262.

94 Cordell, *The Human Tradition in Modern Africa*, 8.

95 Bamberg, 'Biographic-Narrative Research, Quo Vadis?', 65.

96 Chamberlayne, Bornat and Wengraf, 'Introduction: The Biographical Turn', 4.

97 One study suggests that, in the organisation of autobiographical memory, temporal data function in a different manner than information about what, who, and where. While the number of irretrievable events can rise to about 20 per cent, some evidence suggests that none of these events are fully forgotten. See W.A. Wagenaar, 'My Memory: A Study of Autobiographical Memory Over Six Years', *Cognitive Psychology*, 18 (1986), 225–252. See also *ibid.*, *Identifying Ivan: A Case Study in Legal Psychology* (New York, 1988) (on the case of John [Ivan] Demjanjuk).



just another type of ‘suspect’ sources that require careful interpretation and comparison with others.<sup>98</sup>

But is the self (and, therefore someone else’s self) really knowable, as the more radical post-modernists doubt?<sup>99</sup> This is of relevance to the question of motivation, which the field of historical psychology links to individual and collective explanation.<sup>100</sup> If presumed conscious, motivation assumes the existence of free will on the part of the individual. This is disputed by behaviourist psychologists, however, who argue that all deportment is caused by preceding factors and thus predictable – factors that may lie either outside the individual (called environmental determinism) or inside the individual’s body (genetic or biological determinism); behaviourists thus dismiss free will as illusory. It seems clear, however, that biographical study – in its broadest conception – just as agency and self-fashioning, is implicitly built on the assumption of free will, i.e. the notion that individuals have some choice in how to act or think, meaning that individual personas are self-determined.<sup>101</sup> That biography, in its old-fashioned form, saw its subjects as ‘heroes’ is in this respect interesting, since in Homeric Greek *ἥρωες* does not only refer to (plural) heroes but also to ‘free men’. Without the assumption of (some) self-determination, biography or life history is deeply complicated (and risks tumbling into the conceptual-methodological complexities of psychological science).

Nevertheless, a discussion of free will does have relevance since it is tied to another notion, i.e. ‘autonomy’. The contribution by Grant in this volume observes that autonomy has a cultural-relativist aspect to it. Historically, Africans who fell victim to enslavement – meaning instant ‘death’ in social respects for losing all protective ties to the community – upon emancipation rather favoured building up new social links instead of achieving individual autonomy. Autonomy is thus not necessarily the same thing as fully realised personhood, but culturally rooted and historically contingent.<sup>102</sup> The contribution by Robinson therefore discusses how liberated slave children in Zanzibar defined conversion to Christianity as social rebirth in the mission collectivity.

98 See Vansina, ‘Memory and Oral Tradition’ and *ibid.*, *Oral Tradition as History* (London, 1985).

99 Lambert, ‘Postmodern Biography’, 305–306.

100 Histories of emotion are an example of this. Burke, ‘The New History, its Past and its Future’, 17.

101 S. McLeod, ‘Free Will and Determinism’, 2013, <https://www.simplypsychology.org/free-will-determinism.html>, accessed 2 April 2019.

102 S.E. Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* (Cambridge, 2007), 60; J.C. Miller, *The Problem of Slavery as History: A Global Approach* (New Haven, CT, 2012), 87; O. Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death* (Cambridge, 1982).

The mind aside, a person also possesses a physical body – and even this notion has its cultural(-religious) contingencies. Florence Bernault has pointed out how, in the western Bantu cultures of the Equatorial rainforest, the human body was (and is) not considered an integral, biological whole but a fragmented entity consisting of various parts and forms that may harbour non-physical powers or entities beyond the will of the individual concerned; Equatorial Africans also see the body as a ‘fetish’, i.e. as an instrument for accessing power by manipulating supernatural forces lodging there.<sup>103</sup>

In the context of African studies, the notion of biographical subject requires, then, careful consideration. Thus, one could perhaps argue that the concept of ‘individual’ (let alone the notion of ‘individualism’) should be approached with caution. While originally referring to that which is indivisible, in seventeenth-century Europe the notion of individual also began to signify separateness, being distinct from other people.<sup>104</sup> If ‘individual’ in Africa’s context might already require some nuance when seen in its biological meaning as an organism, in the social-cultural realm one could perhaps play safe by substituting it for the notion of person. Ideally, one should replace all these terms with the concepts extant in African languages themselves. Thus, in the past, much was made of the notion of *muntu* – an essentialist fiction of Eurocentric imagination about the supposed existence of a single ontology in the Bantu-speaking regions of the continent. If this has rightly lost its cogency (language and culture seldom overlap fully), some have pointed out how the linguistic term *muntu* (human being, person) holds connotations of ‘being with’ (i.e. the lives of others).<sup>105</sup> If this would hold true for much of sub-Saharan Africa, ‘person’ rather than ‘individual’ would be a more appropriate description of African biographical subjects.<sup>106</sup> However, as the concept of individual is deeply established in biographical studies (including in the African context) this volume does not eschew the term but will treat it as synonymous with ‘person’(hood).

---

103 F. Bernault, ‘Body, Power and Sacrifice in Equatorial Africa’, *Journal of African History*, 47 (2006), 210 and 213–214; J. Tonda, *Le souverain moderne: Le corps du pouvoir en Afrique centrale (Congo, Gabon)* (Paris, 2005).

104 Lemma on ‘individual’, Wikipedia, accessed 9 April 2019.

105 T. Ntumba, ‘La vision Ntu de l’homme: Essai de philosophie linguistique et anthropologique’, *Cahiers des Religions Africaines*, 7 (1973), no. 14, 175–197. Based on an analysis of Baluba.

106 T. Ruwa’ichi, *The Constitution of Muntu: An Inquiry into the Eastern Bantu’s Metaphysics of Person* (Bern [etc.], 1990), 164–168.

## The Birth of Modern African Biography

As noted in the second section, African biography in its broadest sense has a long ancestry. From the eighteenth century onwards, a written, more modern form began to appear that owed much to the effects of the encroaching presence of Europeans and North Americans. Memoirs or (auto)biographies by or about liberated slaves became something of a genre, first in West Africa. With the steady expansion of the missionary enterprise the production of such life stories spread to other regions. Subsequently, the African auxiliaries, informers, and interpreters on whom European explorers, traders, and scientists depended while on their expeditions in the African interior, became another source of biographical stories, often recorded, written, and published by these Europeans. Sometimes, Africans wrote up their own story or memoirs, with publication arranged by their European contacts. Many of these texts are valuable historical sources in their own right, whatever the challenges involved in their interpretation<sup>107</sup> (conversely, Grant's chapter in this volume discusses some German travelogues, which included subjective reminiscences about a West African auxiliary that nevertheless provide a fascinating insight into that persona's views of Europeans in the later nineteenth century).

With the gradual development of African studies in the twentieth century, biographical production assumed more scholarly foundations. Margery Perham in 1936 edited *Ten Africans* in an effort to substitute colonial representations of 'the African' for life stories privileging the idiosyncrasies of individuals and their trajectory. The book's contributions, sometimes preceded by separate scholarly commentary, consisted of life histories told by the personas concerned to, and recorded by, different Western scholars who included the pioneering anthropologists Monica Hunter and Audrey Richards. Several of the contributions were written by the personas themselves (though undoubtedly edited afterwards). Importantly, most of the biographical subjects were so-called 'ordinary' people, and – even more revolutionary – they included two women.<sup>108</sup> Similarly, the linguist Dietrich Westermann followed in 1938 with a volume containing eleven life stories from Africans with different social status, backgrounds and professions (including one woman). It intended to portray how individual people experienced and interpreted their fate and environment, thus providing a personal window on the transitions of the colonial period. While some of these stories were transmitted orally or written up by the

107 For an overview, see S. Paul, 'Bausteine zu einer Geschichte der Biographie-Forschung in Afrika', *Paideuma*, 42 (1996), 185–193.

108 London, 1936 (here 2nd ed. London, 1963).

individuals themselves – in African languages, English and German – the volume's contributions were only mildly edited.<sup>109</sup>

In large part due to the anthropological discipline, the life-history approach thus gained a firm foothold in African studies – earlier than in the Western social sciences and humanities. And with the gradual appearance, after World War II, of more women scholars the female subject also began to occupy a niche in biographical studies. Of seminal importance here was Mary Smith's *Baba of Karo*, published in 1954, which contained a life history recorded over a six-week period and covering a good half century, starting with the colonial occupation as seen from the perspective of one woman's private life.<sup>110</sup> Whether or not this was representative of wider issues (the notion of 'representivity' is discussed later),<sup>111</sup> scholars now began to collect life histories in earnest, even if not always solidly theorised (a problem that has often bedevilled the build-up of biographical collections).<sup>112</sup>

One step further was taken in *Nisa* (published in 1981, though researched since 1969) – Marjorie Shostak's anthropological study of a San woman.<sup>113</sup> Narrated in the subject's words, but arranged temporally and thematically by the author, the (auto)biography remained separate from the scholar's commentary (which also included insight into the biographer's travails and feelings vis-à-vis the persona). With the subject providing meaning to her existence through a narrative, the biographer transmitted a voice disclosing personal (even very intimate) details of a San woman's life. The subject, who received a pseudonym, decided which parts would be published.<sup>114</sup>

Thus, in somewhat predating the feminist wave that was to come in biography, the book mirrored some other life histories of women, such as Ida Pruitt's early *A Daughter of Han* (outside the African context; 1945) and Marcia Wright's *Women in Peril* (1984).<sup>115</sup> As shown in the next section, it would feed (and help

109 D. Westermann, *Afrikaner erzählen ihr Leben: Elf Selbstdarstellungen afrikanischer Eingeborener aller Bildungsgrade und Berufe und aus aller Teiler Afrikas* (Berlin, 1938; here 2nd ed. Berlin, 1952), 7; Paul, 'Bausteine zu einer Geschichte der Biographie-Forschung in Afrika', 195.

110 M.F. Smith, *Baba of Karo: A Woman of the Muslim Hausa* (London, 1954); Paul, 'Bausteine zu einer Geschichte der Biographie-Forschung in Afrika', 197.

111 See the discussion about the book's introduction (written by Mary Smith's husband M.G. Smith) in Geiger, 'Women's Life Histories', 341–342.

112 Paul, 'Bausteine zu einer Geschichte der Biographie-Forschung in Afrika', 197.

113 M. Shostak, *Nisa: The Life and Words of a !Kung Woman* (Cambridge, MA, 1981).

114 Lindsay, 'Biography in African History', 14 and Paul, 'Bausteine zu einer Geschichte der Biographie-Forschung in Afrika', 197–198.

115 I. Pruitt, *A Daughter of Han: The Autobiography of a Chinese Working Woman* (New Haven, CT, 1945); M. Wright, *Women in Peril: Life Stories of Four Captives in Nineteenth Century East-Central Africa* (Lusaka, 1984); Geiger, 'Women's Life Histories', 338–339.

redefine) historical biography later, in the 1980s-1990s: one of its defining features would become scholarly interest in 'ordinary' people (or, rather, people with little power or of humble background).

In the meantime, and in marked contrast to this, Africanist *historians* had already busied themselves with producing more conventional biographies. Spurred on by the politics of decolonisation, they published numerous biographies of powerful figures – often leaders of the struggle for independence in the 1950s,<sup>116</sup> and sometimes of people who were deemed as (protonationalist) precursors of that era. An early example of the latter is *Independent African*, the biography of John Chilembwe by George Shepperson and Thomas Price (1958).<sup>117</sup> It would prove seminal not just for biography, but also for the genre of 'resistance studies', setting the stage for representations of African responses to colonial rule as falling somewhere within a spectrum of resistance-collaboration.<sup>118</sup> Other examples of biographies of significant personalities in the colonial period included, beside Willan's *Sol Plaatje*, the early study of James ('Holy') Johnson of Sierra Leone (1970) and numerous works on activists in the Pan-African movement.<sup>119</sup> However, as Africa's regained independence led to a blossoming of studies on the pre-colonial past,<sup>120</sup> biographical subjects also came to include Africans from before the colonial occupation, ranging from the founder of the Sokoto Caliphate to the rulers of Ethiopia, Buluzi, and Lesotho.<sup>121</sup> All these biographical studies were more classical in both form

116 See for a list Lindsay, 'Biography in African History', 12–13.

117 G. Shepperson and Th. Price, *Independent African: John Chilembwe and the Origins, Setting and Significance of the Nyasaland Native Rising of 1915* (Edinburgh, 1958).

118 K. van Walraven and J. Abbink, 'Rethinking Resistance in African History: An Introduction', in J. Abbink, M. de Bruijn and K. van Walraven (eds), *Rethinking Resistance: Revolt and Violence in African History* (Leiden and Boston, MA, 2003), 1.

119 E.A. Ayandele, *Holy Johnson: Pioneer of African Nationalism, 1836–1917* (London, 1970). Seminal Pan-African biographies were C. Fyfe, *Africanus Horton, 1835–1883: West African Scientist and Patriot* (London and New York, 1972) and H.R. Lynch, *Edward Wilmot Blyden: Pan-Negro Patriot* (London, 1967). Pan-African biographies are too numerous to be cited exhaustively. See f.e. J.R. Hooker, *Henry Sylvester Williams: Imperial Pan-Africanist* (London, 1975); A.M. Cromwell, *An African Victorian Feminist: The Life and Times of Adelaide Smith Casely Hayford 1868–1960* (Washington, DC, 1992); E.D. Cronon, *Black Moses: The Story of Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association* (Madison, WI, 1955); J.R. Hooker, *Black Revolutionary: George Padmore's Path from Communism to Pan-Africanism* (London, 1967); P. Geismar, *Fanon* (New York, 1971); D. Delas, *Léopold Sédar Senghor: Le maître de langue: Biographie* (Croissy-Beaubourg, 2007).

120 R. Reid, 'Past and Presentism: The "Precolonial" and the Foreshortening of African History', *Journal of African History*, 52 (2011), 136.

121 S. Rubenson, *King of Kings: Tewodros of Ethiopia* (Addis Ababa, 1966); G. Clay, *Your Friend, Lewanika: The Life and Times of Lubosi Lewanika Litunga of Barotseland 1842 to 1916* (London, 1968); M. Hiskett, *The Sword of Truth: The Life and Times of the Shehu Usman Dan Fodio* (New York, 1973); L. Thompson, *Survival in Two Worlds: Moshoeshe of*

and content: they were sustained biographies (rather than life histories or books with biographical snapshots serving other analytical purposes), while their subjects represented, without exception, the icons of old-fashioned biography – ‘great men’.

Although the later biography by Jean Boyd on Nana Asma’u (the sister of Sokoto’s ruler Muhammad Bello), constituted a rare exception to this,<sup>122</sup> it nevertheless fell within the perspective that saw history as steered by powerful people; this may have had more to do with the earlier African historiography – which felt stimulated by the independence project to investigate the glory of pre-colonial empire –<sup>123</sup> or with a more feminist approach to African history, rather than a conscious theory of biography. As Koorts argues in this volume, the nationalist metanarrative was infused with heroes – ‘free people’, after all! Even if biographies complicated them by exposing their frailties and, therefore, showed that they were not mythological demigods, their weaknesses humanised them and thus distinguished their accomplishments. This merely reinforced the hero narrative (the same being true for the opposite: humanising the villain subject, such as the architect or criminal of apartheid, rarely leads to more understanding of – let alone compassion for – the persona involved; this has much to do with the fact that biographical subjects are also symbols for wider issues; this is discussed further under the issue of representivity). Finally, while the seminal Chilembwe study involved another category of subjects – those defying hegemonies – if executed poorly, such biographies could descend into cliché representations of ‘crafty rebels’ that did not fundamentally contradict the ‘heroic’ biographical genre; much of that had to do with a romantic conception of history and the consequent neglect of structure.<sup>124</sup>

Despite the collapse of early-independence optimism, celebrity-type biographical series became a feature of Africanist publishing – just as in the Western world. Several dictionaries with biographical entries would see the light of

---

*Lesotho, 1786–1870* (Oxford, 1975). An early twentieth-century example of a biography of a pre-colonial ruler is B. Gutmann, *Häuptling Rindi: Ein afrikanisches Helden- und Herrscherleben* (Cologne, 1928). Discussion in Paul, ‘Bausteine zu einer Geschichte der Biographie-Forschung in Afrika’, 207.

122 J. Boyd, *The Caliph’s Sister: Nana Asma’u 1793–1865: Teacher, Poet and Islamic Leader* (London, 1989).

123 D. Henige, ‘Double, Double, Toil, and Trouble: The Ergonomics of African History’, *History in Africa*, 34 (2007), 112.

124 Eckert and Jones, ‘Historical Writing about Everyday Life’, 8.

day as well as regional overviews.<sup>125</sup> Yet, such publications were testimony to the popularity of the biographical genre with non-academic audiences (also as far as Africa is concerned) rather than their scholarly significance. By contrast, the African studies of the 1960s-1970s (including African history) were more driven by structuralist questions, which reflected both the influence of anthropology's structural functionalism in African studies itself and the general characteristics of the humanities and social sciences at the time. The desire to provide African studies with its rightful place in the (Western) academy went hand in hand with theoretical penchants that privileged structure over individuals. Political scientists were preoccupied with party formations, economists with trade unions and the nature of class structure, and anthropologists focused on kinship and ethnicity, amongst other broader issues. None of these institutions favoured the individual as unit of analysis. The deepening of Marxist analysis against the background of Africa's deteriorating economies reinforced a political-economy approach that was weak when it came to detailing people's actual consciousness.<sup>126</sup> As a consequence, Jan Vansina could remark that, until the 1980s, real biographies of African historical figures remained an exception.<sup>127</sup>

### Expansion and Diversification of Africanist Biographical Research

The further expansion of Africanist biographical research to the point where it is today owes much to these earlier developments in African studies, marked by anthropologists' early life-history research and (occasional) sustained historical biographies. The shifts and changes in general social historiography since the 1970s – involving a turn away from deterministic models and structuralism – assisted in this process by which scholars began to adopt an emic approach to social-historical developments that was concerned with

125 Important here was M.R. Lipschutz and R.K. Rasmussen, *Dictionary of African Historical Biography* (Chicago, IL, 1978; Berkeley, CA, 1986); the still-born 2-volume publication by L.H. Ofose-Appiah (ed.), *The Encyclopaedia Africana: Dictionary of African Biography*, vols 1 (*Ethiopia-Ghana*) and 2 (*Sierra Leone-Zaire*) (New York, 1977/1979); the more recent 6-volume series by E.K. Akyeampong and H.L. Gates (eds), *Dictionary of African Biography* (Oxford, 2012) and the biographical publications of Ohio University Press (2015). A regional overview was C.C. Saunders, *Black Leaders in Southern African History* (London, 1979).

126 B. Freund, *The Making of Contemporary Africa: The Development of African Society since 1800* (Houndmills, 1984), 13–14; Reid, 'Past and Presentism', 137.

127 Paul, 'Bausteine zu einer Geschichte der Biographie-Forschung in Afrika', 206 and J. Vansina, *Living with Africa* (Madison, WI, 1994), 216.

how different categories of people *experienced* (their) historical realities. As Caine commented in her book on biography and general historiography, the present recognition of the similarities in focus on individual lives by both history and biography should therefore put the old debate about the place of biography in history to rest; there is no longer a complete contrast between the two forms of writing but a continuum marked by extremes on either side (also in African studies).<sup>128</sup>

In the latter field, the groundwork of earlier biographical or life-history studies stimulated continuation of efforts (not always successful) at expanding biographical sources. In the early 1970s historians Ivor Wilks and Thomas McCaskie launched a collective biography project to complement the (already rich) historiography of the Asante empire. Though discontinued soon for financial reasons, it encouraged others to propose a similar initiative for the Fante communities of the Gold Coast (1991).<sup>129</sup>

Such projects followed in the footsteps of what historians of Antiquity called 'prosopography' and modern historians 'collective biography' (social scientists speak of 'multiple career-line analysis') – a biography tradition with roots in the study of the common backgrounds of elite groups in Britain and the United States and expanded in the early twentieth century by social scientists and historians with an interest in social movements and social mobility, as well as an appetite for quantitative methodologies; anthropologists' interest in family and kinship structures formed another stimulus for the collection of collective or group biographies.<sup>130</sup> With the advent of computer technology the analytical and research possibilities of collective biography were considerably enhanced (though this made it vulnerable for funding problems) and became the subject of new scholarly interest, also in France.<sup>131</sup> The pitfalls of real prosopography<sup>132</sup> concern lack of documentation on the categories of humble or less powerful subjects, which entails risks of generalisation of case studies. The method thus works best for a relatively small, well-defined group

<sup>128</sup> Caine, *Biography and History*, 124.

<sup>129</sup> Paul, 'Bausteine zu einer Geschichte der Biographie-Forschung in Afrika', 203; <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/008569094>, accessed 4 June 2019.

<sup>130</sup> L. Stone, 'Prosopography', *Daedalus*, 100 (1971), 46–52 and 56.

<sup>131</sup> C. Lemercier and E. Picard, 'Quelle approche prosopographique?', in E. Picard, L. Rollet and Ph. Nabonnand (eds), *Les uns et les autres ... Biographies et prosopographies en histoire des sciences* (Nancy, 2012), 605–630; S. Didier, 'La prosopographie, une méthode historique multiscalare entre individuel et collectif', *Cahiers d'histoire*, 35 (2017), 59–84.

<sup>132</sup> Προσωποποιία is a contraction of 'person' and 'to make'.



of actors.<sup>133</sup> An example is research on families, such as undertaken in the 1980s-1990s by Daniel Bertaux<sup>134</sup> (outside the field of African studies) and Richard Werbner and Terence Ranger, who published family histories from Zimbabwe.<sup>135</sup>

Thus, the expansion of Africanist biographical research also involved efforts at collective biography (even if this concerned a lesser part of the new interest in Africans' life experiences). Still in the 1970s, Bogumil Jewsiewicki began to collect life stories of 'ordinary' Zaireans. Only few of these were released in published form: *Naître et mourir au Zaïre* had the character of a collection of fairly heterogeneous life histories (presented in the first person singular and recorded by different Zairean researchers) rather than a database of comparable biographies.<sup>136</sup> More ambition marked the 'Oral Documentation Project' in South Africa launched by Charles van Onselen and Belinda Bozzoli in 1979. This involved, amongst other initiatives, the recording of over 1,000 life histories in the Tswana-Sotho areas of the Transvaal as well as single biography projects (Willan's book on Sol Plaatje being an example of the latter, as well as other publications mentioned below). More recent initiatives marked by a research focus on biographical commonalities, centred around (shared) experiences of activism, is a volume on radicalisation trajectories and 'Maitron-Afrique', an ambitious project in France concerning a database of activist personalities in a rather broad range of fields (trade unions, politics, art, literature).<sup>137</sup>

The push for an expansion of African biographical subjects came from other directions as well. While Africanists, with a familiarity of colonialism, were always somewhat allergic to the notion of 'great men',<sup>138</sup> scholars of women's lives and women's history, advocates of life-history research, innovative social

133 Stone, 'Prosopography'. A separate but related field is what is called socialisation studies (such as concerning children or students). Paul, 'Bausteine zu einer Geschichte der Biographie-Forschung in Afrika', 200–201.

134 D. Bertaux, 'Social Genealogies, Commented and Compared: An Instrument for Observing Social Mobility Processes in the "Longue Durée"', *Current Sociology*, 43 (1995), 2/3, 69–88.

135 R. Werbner, *Tears of the Dead: The Social Biography of an African Family* (Edinburgh, 1991) and T.O. Ranger, *Are We Not Also Men?: The Sakange Family and African Politics in Zimbabwe 1920–1964* (London, 1995).

136 B. Jewsiewicki et al., *Naître et mourir au Zaïre: Un demi-siècle au quotidien* (Paris, 1993).

137 De Bruijn, *Biographies de la radicalisation*; <http://maitron-en-ligne.univ-paris1.fr/spip.php?mot9745>, accessed 5 June 2019. A related type of research concerns biographies of friendships and cross-generational groups (besides families). See Caine, *Biography and History*, 3–4.

138 Vansina, *Living with Africa*, 216.

historians, and proponents of microhistory – also outside the African context – all contributed to the extension of the biographical field.

Thus, if Mary Smith and Marjorie Shostak set the stage for anthropological studies of African women's lives, they were followed, in the 1980s, by the voices of other 'silenced' sisters<sup>139</sup> that were sometimes also given expression by way of other source material than interviews. The volume on women's life stories edited by Patricia Romero (1988) was thus based on various oral and written sources (including archives, memoirs and interviews). Its multiplicity of sources made it fit better in the traditions of mainstream historical research; a chapter by Ivor Wilks on the role of an Asante royal in the conduct of diplomatic relations with European powers is an example of this.<sup>140</sup> Methodologically more conventional was Jean Davison's *Voices from Mutira* (1989), based on transcribed oral memoirs,<sup>141</sup> while an edited volume on women and slavery included transcriptions of oral stories collected by missionaries<sup>142</sup> (the contribution by Robinson in this volume uses a similar genre of source material).

The South African context also triggered new interest in women's history but produced publications that also had wider significance in terms of group biography (or 'social biography' in the parlance of Eckert and Jones). Belinda Bozzoli's seminal *Women of Phokeng* (1991) provided detailed female perspectives on rural-urban South Africa in the greater part of the twentieth century and was based on more than 20 life histories of women from one and the same village (there is a parallel here with Landeg White's *Magomero* [1987], a portrait of the political, social and economic travails of a village in Malawi as experienced through time by its several hundred residents).<sup>143</sup> Also beyond

139 Goodson, 'The Story of Life History', 133.

140 I. Wilks, 'Akyaaawa Yikwan of Asante', in P. Romero (ed.), *Life Histories of African Women* (London, 1988), 113–139. Other chapters in that volume contain more lengthy excerpts of life-story interviews. See for general discussion in Paul, 'Bausteine zu einer Geschichte der Biographie-Forschung in Afrika', 198–199 and Lindsay, 'Biography in African History', 15.

141 J. Davison, *Voices from Mutira: Lives of Rural Gikuyu Women* (Boulder, CO, 1989). This was comparable to S. Mirza and M. Strobel, *Three Swahili Women: Life Histories from Mombasa, Kenya* (Bloomington, IN, 1989). Discussion in Lindsay, 'Biography in African History', 14 and 16.

142 C. Robertson and M.A. Klein (eds), *Women and Slavery in Africa* (Madison, 1983), esp. ch. 11 by Edward Alpers ('The Story of Swema: Female Vulnerability in Nineteenth-Century East Africa').

143 B. Bozzoli, *Women of Phokeng: Consciousness, Life Strategy and Migrancy in South Africa 1900–1983* (Portsmouth, NH, 1991), 235–242. Detailed commentary in Paul, 'Bausteine zu einer Geschichte der Biographie-Forschung in Afrika', 204–205. Also see Eckert and Jones, 'Historical Writing about Everyday Life', 10 and L. White, *Magomero: Portrait of an African Village* (Cambridge, 1987). Comparable (though on the scale of a relatively small national but caste-riven society) is the early H. Codere, *The Biography of an African Society, Rwanda*

women's history was Timothy Keegan's *Facing the Storm* (1988), which traced the lives of four 'obscure' black men in the course of the transition to apartheid. Keegan did not reproduce the relevant life stories literally but reworked them (interspersed with quotations) on the grounds that these were not closed stories but creative reconstructions – the concept of self-fashioning also being relevant here. Bozzoli, in contrast, worked with lengthy excerpts, recorded by a Tswana academic, calling into question standard sociological categories (the analytical possibilities that life histories provide in this regard are also driven home by Iva Peša's contribution in this volume). Thus, discarding such categories, Bozzoli portrayed how experiences of constraint and opportunity in the context of apartheid South Africa gave rise to very personal, and idiosyncratic, worldviews. The studies by Keegan and Bozzoli were both offshoots of the Oral Documentation Project mentioned earlier.<sup>144</sup>

Some of the above type of life-story publishing was especially influenced by feminist concerns.<sup>145</sup> This does not stand in the way of an Africanist research agenda, but some argued that the desire to let (women) subjects 'speak for themselves' seemed to suggest – in some publications – that testimonies, accompanied by little commentary, could be taken at face value, while lengthy quotations at times suffered from lack of contextualisation and analysis.<sup>146</sup> Worse, some life histories appeared to underestimate the influence exerted by the well-meaning scholar in their very production – something Kirk Hoppe pointed out in a critical methodological essay about several of the above-mentioned texts (including Shostak's *Nisa*).<sup>147</sup> At an earlier stage, Susan Geiger opined in this respect that, rather than scholarly credentials, it is an academic's personal rapport with the persona concerned that matters here.<sup>148</sup>

For more recent studies, Lindsay observed better balance of contextualisation and presentation of stories, which also benefited from the analytical perspective of self-fashioning, demonstrating that one persona's trajectory could produce different tales. Appropriate examples here are Stephan Miescher's

---

1900–1960. Based on *Forty-Eight Rwandan Autobiographies* (Tervuren, 1973). Also see Geiger, 'Women's Life Histories', 343.

144 T.J. Keegan, *Facing the Storm: Portraits of Black Lives in Rural South Africa* (London, 1977), 161. Commentary in Paul, 'Bausteine zu einer Geschichte der Biographie-Forschung in Afrika', 204–205.

145 Lindsay, 'Biography in African History', 14.

146 *Ibid.*, 16.

147 K. Hoppe, 'Whose Life is it Anyway?: Issues of Representation in Life Narrative Texts of African Women', *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 26 (1993), 623–636. Amongst other texts discussed in his article is S. LeVine's psychosocial portrait *Mothers and Wives: Gusii Women of East Africa* (Chicago, IL, 1979).

148 Geiger, 'Women's Life Histories', 340.

*Making Men in Ghana* (2005), Stephanie Newell's *The Forger's Tale* (2006) and – in women's (life) history – the edited autobiography of Berida Ndambuki, a businesswoman and activist in Nairobi (2000).<sup>149</sup>

### Fragmentation, Morphing Genres, and the African Context

The great expansion in biographical subjects and the ways in which these were analysed in relation to wider historical patterns meant that the singularity of biography as a genre broke down further – reflecting also developments in Western historiography and life studies:<sup>150</sup> while life history had for long been part of anthropologists' methodological tools, sociologists of Western society had also worked with the method ever since the seminal *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (1918).<sup>151</sup> If they had progressively abandoned it after the 1930s for statistical (and more deterministic) approaches,<sup>152</sup> as noted earlier, by the 1980s social historians resurrected the method out of a new interest in non-structural history. Edward Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*, in using archival sources to resurrect the role of the Luddites and other worker-artisans in their own meaning-making,<sup>153</sup> was a precursor of social histories now privileging the experiences of the actors involved. Not only did life history, as a method, therefore help redefine what biography is (now also involving 'ordinary' personas),<sup>154</sup> but as Peša notes in this volume, as an oral-history source it helped to change the focus of historiography as such. In forcing a confrontation with other people's subjectivity, it is not surprising that this came about during the rise of post-modernism<sup>155</sup> and what came to be called in the West as the 'biographical turn' (perhaps a somewhat Anglo-Saxon phenomenon since a transition to the study of individual subjectivities had

149 Lindsay, 'Biography in African History', 16–17; S.F. Miescher, *Making Men in Ghana* (Bloomington, IN, 2005) (marked by thorough contextualised discussion); S. Newell, *The Forger's Tale: The Search for Odeziaku* (Athens, OH, 2006) (approximates a literary, contextualised biography); B. Ndambuki and C. Robertson, *We Only Came Here to Struggle: Stories from Berida's Life* (Bloomington, IN, 2000).

150 Caine, *Biography and History*, 119.

151 A study of Polish immigrants to the New World in 5 volumes. W. Thomas and F. Znaniecki, *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (Chicago, 1918–1920).

152 Goodson, 'The Story of Life History', 130–132 and Chamberlayne, Bornat and Wengraf, 'Introduction: The Biographical Turn', 3.

153 Note 86 above; Salvatore, 'Biography and Social History', 188.

154 Lindsay, 'Biography in African History', 23.

155 Goodson, 'The Story of Life History', 131 and 136–137.

already occurred earlier in France – thanks to the work of sociologist Daniel Bertaux – and Germany).<sup>156</sup>

The growth in importance attributed to human subjects also meant that different genres of historical writing began to share similarities, with the focus on lives helping to break down distinctions, and genres to some extent morphing into each other. For example, life stories, as a subset of comprehensive biography, form a source for the reconstruction of everyday life, with the result that what we know as *Alltagsgeschichte* has similarities with life-history research.<sup>157</sup> The micro perspective involved may not only provide building blocks for social-history writing (though as Peša argues, this requires careful contextualisation of life stories) but can even refine and nuance political historiography. Elena Moore's contribution in this volume, by its focus on the home life of a Coloured family in South Africa, shows how the personal dimensions of biographies can have political aspects, in the process producing an unexpected view of life under apartheid and after.

In turn, the micro perspective used in that and other studies – while a natural aspect of most biographical research – has been at the root of another genre of Western history writing since the 1970s, notably among Italian and German historians: this microhistory approach developed out of disillusionment with the tautological metanarratives of structural studies and, while it would remain a small field of research, formed a radical methodological change from *Annales* writing or the quantitatively oriented Cliometrics. Rather, it could be seen as a sub-genre of the *histoire nouvelle* which then came in vogue. Its underlying idea, as noted above in reference to the writings of Aby Warburg, is that the deepest insight is derived from a very close examination of something (or someone!) particular. This is elaborated further in Peša's contribution in this volume; here it must be noted that, by greatly reducing the scale of analysis, one can better dissociate subjects (specific events, things or persons) from the ideological packages of structural metanarratives and gain insight into the complex relation between human beings and their environment. This, consequently, could help gauge broader social dynamics: microhistory is very much a form of *social* history (indeed, it is defined as a method of social-history writing, and in its implicit discovery of the importance of culture and the individual, as an attempt to overturn narratives whose generalisations did not hold up

156 Chamberlayne, Bornat and Wengraf, 'Introduction: The Biographical Turn', 13, referring to D. Bertaux (ed.), *Biography and Society: The Life History Approach in the Social Sciences* (Beverly Hills, CA, 1981). Also see L.L. Langness and G. Frank, *Lives: An Anthropological Approach to Biography* (Novato, CA, 1981). The journal *Biography: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly* commenced in 1978.

157 Eckert and Jones, 'Historical Writing about Everyday Life', 6–10.

against the reality of small-scale life). Pioneering historian Carlo Ginzburg, in his study of the mental life of an Italian miller, attacked the *Annales* idea that the history of subaltern classes could only be studied with quantitative methods, in the process providing insight into the emotional life of Europe's pre-industrial peasantry.<sup>158</sup>

Because of its reduction of scale, however, microhistory at times also looks like the history of daily life (not least since the latter notion is more complex than is immediately apparent); alternatively, it approximates oral history as such, or, indeed, biography.<sup>159</sup> Microhistory could perhaps be distinguished from modern biographical study in that its objective is to obtain a view of the greater (social-cultural) whole rather than insight into the explanatory detail (microhistorians attempt to answer important historical questions more than, at least, traditional biographers), while its unit of analysis can also be something else than a human subject; the concept may also be more justified in studies of ordinary people for whom the historical evidence is too sketchy to warrant the notion of biography.<sup>160</sup> But since much of its analysis takes place in the realm of individual experience it also morphs into quotidian history, modern biography or life history research. Scholars, in any case, usually feel free to decide their own self-descriptions for their work.<sup>161</sup>

If Africanist historians ignored many of the debates about these definitional and methodological issues,<sup>162</sup> their work on biography did not develop in a vacuum. Indeed, the historical study area and interdisciplinary training involved<sup>163</sup> perhaps equipped Africanists better to pursue issues lying squarely in the realm of social, 'everyday' history or of the biographical study of the 'ordinary', the humble, the (somewhat) anonymous, or those resisting the powers-that-be. Africanist historians are accustomed to draw insights from anthropology that point to the historicising potential of cultural issues, phenomena or objects (such as food, ritual, dress, consumption patterns or the social embeddedness of technology). Thus, in 2002, the *Journal of African Cultural Studies* published a special issue on everyday life in colonial Africa, with articles on subjects ranging from funeral ritual and law to motor vehicles and

158 C. Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller* (Baltimore, MD, 1980); original version *Il formaggio e i vermi: Il cosmo di un mugnaio del '500* [Turin, 1976]; Magnusson, 'The Singularization of History', 709–712; Caine, *Biography and History*, 120; Lindsay, 'Biography in African History', 14–15.

159 See Eckert and Jones, 'Historical Writing about Everyday Life', 5 and 7–9.

160 Lepore, 'Historians Who Love Too Much', 133; Lindsay, 'Biography in African History', 15.

161 Caine, *Biography and History*, 119–120 and 123.

162 Eckert and Jones, 'Historical Writing about Everyday Life', 7.

163 Lindsay, 'Biography in African History', 17.

festivals – all of which allowed a reconstruction of issues of social life in different colonial contexts, while at the same time depicting the subtle and contradictory changes developing in African society in the twentieth century.<sup>164</sup>

As in other publications, it allowed the foregrounding of different historical actors that now occupy the continent's historiographical stage: bandits, women, children, peasants, migrants, the list has become endless (as have the sites of historical inquiry).<sup>165</sup> In 2012, Dennis Cordell concluded that one of the results of the growing emphasis on individual lives in African history – apart from humanising and enlivening it – is that it helps to demonstrate the power of personal action. Above all, it has assisted in the discovery of African women as historical actors, while African biographies are especially good in outlining how people deal with societies in transition.<sup>166</sup> Many of the lives discussed in this volume's chapters – such as that of Michael Timneng in colonial Cameroon, Cornelius Badu of the Gold Coast, Abdullah Abdurahman of Cape Town, and Barthélémy Boganda in French Equatorial Africa – are testimonies to what these complex shifts entailed and how people tried and succeeded (or failed) in influencing them and striking a new *modus vivendi*.

Admittedly, the formats of present-day biographical studies are heterogeneous – which also reflects developments in non-African historiography and biography as outlined above. In *Africa's Hidden Histories*, edited by Karen Barber (2006), an entire part is devoted to the analysis of letters, diaries, and autobiographies, while novel formats with biographically relevant data include obituaries, newspapers and other genres of writing.<sup>167</sup> They yield, in the words of Lindsay, 'snippets of life stories',<sup>168</sup> but this qualification ignores the fact that the focus in that volume is on everyday life and the role of incipient literacy in colonial society, rather than on life stories as such. Moreover, while life histories with block quotations and little contextualisation seem to become a passing phenomenon, individual lives are now often part of historical studies to help elucidate human experiences that structural perspectives could never do. They have therefore truly biographical features; the other theoretical purposes they may serve, or the historical insights they buttress, do not detract from their biographical interest, as all of this volume's contributions also demonstrate.

164 *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 15 (2002), no. 1.

165 Eckert and Jones, 'Historical Writing about Everyday Life', 7.

166 *The Human Tradition in Modern Africa*, 1–6.

167 See e.g. T.C. McCaskie, 'Writing, Reading, and Printing Death: Obituaries and Commemoration in Asante', in K. Barber (ed.), *Africa's Hidden Histories: Everyday Literacy and Making the Self* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN, 2006), 341–384.

168 Lindsay, 'Biography in African History', 17.

Nevertheless, Lindsay's observation that sustained contextual biographies are still rare holds true. The exception is formed by what she calls the 'black Atlantic' world, which may have much to do with the availability of archival sources (and which also reflects the relative abundance of Pan-Africanist biographies since the early days of Africanist publishing).<sup>169</sup> Against this the monumental biography by Charles van Onselen of a black South African sharecropper, Kas Maine, (1996) stands out even more. Born from the Oral Documentation Project mentioned in the previous section, Van Onselen conceived *The Seed is Mine* literally as a 'biography'<sup>170</sup> (though others saw it as a work of everyday history).<sup>171</sup> A sustained biography of one man – and his family – during the twentieth century, it was based on a decade of interviews with Kas Maine, relatives and others.<sup>172</sup> The sharecropper hardly figured in South African records, though numerous archives, in addition to personal papers that the subject had retained, were used to reconstruct the wider context, in the process mapping the tragedy, complexities and heroism of a humble Sotho-speaking African's life from the end of the nineteenth century all through that terrible age of racist extremes. Of course, such a sensitive and nuanced biography requires exceptional abilities on the part of the scholar, but also the latter's sustained presence in the country and life of the persona concerned. With more funding and involvement of African biographer-historians, one wonders what would be possible in terms of sustained biographies, based on oral sources, in other parts of the continent.

### The Significance of Biography and the Future of Africa's Past

Van Onselen noted that Kas Maine was both an ordinary and an extraordinary man,<sup>173</sup> an observation that brings us to an important theoretical-methodological issue of present-day biography. As Goodson argues, the evolution of life story into life history involves a biographer's interference in order to account for context; without this it risks producing anecdotal value only.<sup>174</sup> But the selection of persona is intimately related to this since the subject of modern biography is the point where individual and context meet, thus presuming prior

169 *Ibid.*, 17–22; Lindsay and Sweet, *Biography and the Black Atlantic*; note 119 above.

170 Ch. van Onselen, *The Seed is Mine: The Life of Kas Maine, a South African Sharecropper 1894–1985* (New York, 1996), vii and 3.

171 Eckert and Jones, 'Historical Writing about Everyday Life', 10.

172 See the impressive list in Van Onselen, *The Seed is Mine*, 556–562.

173 *Ibid.*, 11.

174 Goodson, 'The Story of Life History', 139.



knowledge of environment.<sup>175</sup> As long as biographies dealt with ‘great men’, theoretical criticism of the subject choice was articulated in a debate about the role of the individual in the structures of history<sup>176</sup> (‘heroes’, after all, reflected a lack of theory of both biography and history). But with the gradual replacement of heroes by ‘ordinary’ people the debate shifted to the persona’s representivity of wider social issues (life-history research implicitly assumes as such) – a debate sharpened by the genre of microhistory, since it tends to focus on human outliers. However, while Carlo Ginzburg, eager to posit a new theory, claimed his miller to be an authentic voice (which his critics doubted), Natalie Davis in her biography of Leo Africanus did the exact opposite when arguing that it is extreme cases that provide insight into broader historical issues.<sup>177</sup> Indeed, as this volume’s chapter on Barthélémy Boganda suggests, the subject’s very excessiveness may allude to matters far beyond the persona, particularly – as Cordell already observed – when it comes to societies undergoing fundamental transitions. In that sense, singularity can merge into representivity and the question whether or not biographical subjects deviate from the cultural norm becomes irrelevant.<sup>178</sup>

Generally, however, the ‘ordinary’ or non-powerful individuals that figure in modern African biography are not attributed exceptional status. They are seen as important because they illustrate something about the world in which they live(d).<sup>179</sup> But the concept of representivity generates its own discomforts. As Koorts argues in this volume, it may get reduced to political symbolism (of biographical personas involved), suppressing the complexities of an individual concerned and of his or her environment. The claim to representivity of one’s time may also recall ‘great-men’ historiography (there may be a curious echo here of the hagiographic exemplars of Antiquity and the Middle Ages). This reflects, in turn, the contentious place of biography in history as well as the more recent debate about the relevance of human agency (the subject’s uniqueness) in the context of structure (the persona’s representivity). The latter concept, then, requires further thought. Some conclude that the test for good biography is not whether the persona involved is representative (whatever that may mean), but the question what one may learn of the study of that

175 Geiger, ‘Women’s Life Histories’, 337.

176 Caine, *Biography and History*, 4–5.

177 *Ibid.*, 121; N.Z. Davies, *Trickster Travels: A Sixteenth Century Muslim between Worlds* (London, 2007).

178 Geiger, ‘Women’s Life Histories’, 337.

179 Caine, *Biography and History*, 2; Lindsay, ‘Biography in African History’, 15.

subject's life. As the study of 'extreme' cases suggests, the dichotomy between singularity and representivity may be flawed.<sup>180</sup>

Ironically, the key criticism of post-modernism about biography could not be wider off the mark either. Bourdieu opined that in its construction and evolution of a 'life', biography assumes a linearity that is illusory. But it is precisely by delineating the workings of a single life in the wider structures of history that modern biography provides its possibly greatest contribution to historiography. Duncan Money's chapter in this volume shows that the life trajectory of Jack Hodgson was rather unstable. His early career as a unionist pleading white workers' privilege could not have made anyone expect that, in his later years, he would become one of the most respected white activists in the struggle *against* apartheid. The impact of material conditions should have made him into its staunch supporter, yet the opposite happened and this change may have depended on influences that structuralists would dismiss as trivial (Hodgson's second marriage). In a similar vein, the chapter by Erik Kennes on Laurent Kabila shows the unexpected twists and turns of a life and, indeed, of the political history of his country and its failed turning-points. His life in the bush could have let few to believe that he was destined for Congo's presidency one day. His itinerary (and that of his country) would have made any such prediction frivolous – the favourite term used by biographers for the nature of the historical change involved is 'messiness'.

While biography therefore yields a view on history that is marked by the *Macbethan* cacophony that post-modernists see as the very characteristic of life, it will also show how idiosyncratic historical actors actually were. Consequently, it is the peculiarities, which, for example, Grant portrays in his chapter on Cornelius Badu, that render the past more human – and touching, as Moore drives home in this volume when depicting the travails of Wilma and Charlton Pietersen. Worse, the biography of Boganda reveals the sheer painfulness that is encapsulated in historicised lives, with glimpses of trauma that also recur in the biographical sketches of Zanzibar's slave children. The drama of people fighting conditions that constrict them in cycles of short life spans is the heart of all history.<sup>181</sup> If events can affect structure, and structure is also a product of human action, then a focus on individual acts and how humans can reach beyond the self and, indeed, change context, makes sense. In providing insight into how actors made choices in their engagement with larger forces biography then complicates broader geopolitical narratives; it becomes, in Vansina's

180 Salvatore, 'Biography and Social History', 189 and Eckert and Jones, 'Historical Writing about Everyday Life', 9.

181 Salvatore, 'Biography and Social History', 190, citing Bernard Bailyn.

words, a rebellion against 'isms'.<sup>182</sup> Its focus *humanises* history where, for example, the limits and nature of archives – the fount of most historical writing – reduces, limits and under-represents historical actors in their full personhood, especially, perhaps, if they were African.

Both the above survey of African biographical studies (by far not exhaustive) and the contributions to this volume show an enormous array of biographically relevant writing. Ranging from full life histories, standardised life-history sketches and autobiographical texts to biographical snapshots and full-sized biographies, they include both the humble and the powerful, children and adults, slaves and the free. These writings provide deeper insights into matters as diverse as religion, education, inter-cultural contact, social questions and the political (even the possibilities of 'great-men' biography have not been exhausted).<sup>183</sup> Biography is, thus, back in fashion. While this has undoubtedly something to do with its popularity outside academia,<sup>184</sup> some scholars argue that its strength lies in its transcending of the divide between empirical social history and the post-structuralist cultural turn in the social sciences and humanities, without giving up the epistemological and methodological gains of both.<sup>185</sup> Yet, while this volume shows that African studies still harbour an enormous biographical potential – especially as compared with other regional study areas –, this does not mean that the hegemony of the individual and emic approaches to history will continue unchallenged. Enduring conflicts and other chronic problems besetting Africans in the present might encourage scholars to search for shared causalities affecting their lives. Ideally, this should be done without losing sight of the creative responses towards context that are quintessential elements not only of human personhood but of history itself.

### The Chapters

This volume is made up of three parts, structured around some of the themes discussed above. Part 1 is made up of contributions especially relevant for the methodological insights they provide. Part 2 contains biographical studies of

<sup>182</sup> Vansina, *Living with Africa*, 216; E. Allina-Pisano, 'Resistance and the Social History of Africa', *Journal of Social History*, 37 (2003), 194.

<sup>183</sup> See, apart from the chapters on Hodgson, Abdullah Abdurahman, Kabila and Boganda in this volume, e.g. T. Lodge, *Mandela: A Critical Life* (Oxford, 2006).

<sup>184</sup> See the recent BBC article on Sayyida Salme, a daughter of the Sultan of Zanzibar who married a German merchant to spend the rest of her life in Germany and wrote her autobiography; <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-47556607>, accessed 5 June 2019.

<sup>185</sup> Nasaw, 'Historians and Biography', 577.

persons whose life itineraries were marked to greater or lesser extents by transitions (of societies and themselves). Part 3, finally, provides biographies or biographical sketches of individuals and the various discursive strategies they employed to make sense of the world, as preliminary steps towards changing or maintaining it, or improving their lives – in other words, the reflexivity that is a key part of how individuals interact with context.

In Chapter 1 Lindie Koorts discusses the role of biographies of figures that were highly controversial – or rather, hated by the great majority of people – in the context of South Africa's modern history. Reflecting on her already published biography of D.F. Malan, architect of the policy of apartheid, one of her painful conclusions was how human and how ordinary her biography's subject actually was (redolent, perhaps, of the idea of the banality of evil). She discusses the political and intellectual contestations taking place in present-day South Africa, involving heated exchanges in which also scholarly outputs – such as biography – may be put to the test on non-academic grounds. Koorts perceptively shows the complexity of context, which includes that of biographies' readers and cannot be controlled by the biographer: the subjects of biographies are human beings of flesh and blood – but also symbols (particularly controversial ones), standing for aspects of the larger context, even if this is reductionist of the complexity of the studied individual. This is illustrated by reference to various biographical texts about (in)famous South Africans, notably the figure of Eugene de Kock, an apartheid murderer about whom biographies were written that complicated – thus humanised – him (though did not absolve his deeds), therefore engendering public outrage.

Elena Moore also discusses life under apartheid, highlighting responses to political violence with the aid of a micro perspective. She does this with the help of sociologically oriented life histories. At the same time, her chapter is a biography of a family that provides an everyday angle on apartheid through the perspective of people's private lives centred on ideas of 'the home' – which through this became the very site of resistance. In doing so she demonstrates how people coped with the (structural) violence of apartheid through everyday family practices, which were crucial for upholding notions of dignity and respectability (also by maintaining inter-racial friendships) but which came under continual attack by way of segregationist practices. Viewed from that perspective the challenge of apartheid was not insurmountable. By contrast, the end of apartheid would produce paradoxical consequences: freed from the racial-spatial segregation imposed by apartheid Wilma and Charlton Pieteresen moved to another home, losing the comforts and loyalties of their erstwhile community and getting confronted with the violence of whites still stuck in a bygone age. Moore's chapter is a good example of how biographical study can help humanise our view of history.

The final chapter of Part 1 provides an extensive discussion of the methodological challenges of life-history research and how this can help refine older metanarratives of social history. Iva Peša's chapter employs several detailed life histories collected in the course of fieldwork in north-western Zambia to problematise received theories of labour migration in colonial Southern Africa. Arguing that a microhistorical approach can help link life histories to social history, she advances an intermediate category of explanation, centred around individual consumption, to show that push-and-pull explanations are inadequate for an analysis of colonial labour migration. This privileges the role of personal motivation rather than structural force, which, as part of the modernist narrative, failed to reflect the ambiguities and contradictions of labour migrant biographies. Thus, in one of her fascinating stories, each of which is marked by strong idiosyncrasies of personas concerned, she shows how notions of modern fashion influenced the travails of a labour migrant. Such consumption motives could also mediate the social space between town and countryside; for this Peša recounts the stories of Lucy Chiyengi and Gladys Samukoko, amongst others, to show how gift-giving of modern consumer items may affect social relations in Zambia's rural areas.

Part 2 centres on transitions. Grant's story about Cornelius Badu is set in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. It provides a fascinating account of how an African, raised in the cross-cultural settings of the West African coast and Pietist education in Europe, came to know the European world from within, in the process getting confronted with its manifold shortcomings. Upon his return to West Africa, Badu became a missionary assistant but fell out with white superiors whose claims to superiority he had grounds to dismiss. Having become a trader, Badu became financially independent and travelled widely, enacting a personal autonomy on a racial frontier that was about to close. In an account based on prejudiced travelogues Grant depicts how Badu joined a poorly run German expedition to the Congo. During this journey he played key roles to save the Germans from the consequences of their ineptitudes but also engaged in vivid discussions with them, mercilessly exposing the flaws of European racism. In thus playing a role in the Scramble for Africa, Badu embodied the transformation of the cross-cultural context, which had obtained till mid-century, into the hardened imperialism of the colonial dispensation: what that truly meant for people can be best portrayed by focusing on an individual life (the later life story of Abdullah Abdurahman in this volume provides another example of this).

Jacqueline de Vries' chapter traces this evolution further by analysing the political transformations taking place in an African society under early colonial rule as experienced (and also made) by one man – a former conscripted palace retainer of the pre-colonial Kom kingdom, which became part of

German Cameroon. Engulfed by the changes brought on by colonial rule and the dislocations of World War I, Kom's traditional leadership came to depend increasingly on German and, after the war, British benevolence. In the process its political hegemony came to be called in question by its citizens, represented by Michael Timneng, the former palace retainer and now Christian mission adherent. Evidence for the brutal eloquence with which he openly challenged the authority of pre-colonial officialdom has come to us through interviews that De Vries held in the 1990s with Timneng's descendants as well as by way of his fascinating autobiography, carefully preserved by his family and productively mined by the author. Thus, presenting an emic perception of what colonial transformation entailed in the political and social sphere, the story of Timneng is also a good example of the phenomenon of self-fashioning discussed earlier: Timneng consciously styled himself as a public figure who articulated both traditional and modern metaphors in his public standoffs with Kom's traditional ruler. These were so dramatic that they were still vividly remembered by people at the end of the twentieth century.

The shock and change that Timneng helped to unleash over Kom society also shows that political transformation seldom comes quietly. Chapter 6 not only deals with transition at an especially personal level but also charts this in ways to underscore its non-linearity. Duncan Money shows that, while biography is a central part of South African historiography, there is as yet no biography of Percy 'Jack' Hodgson († 1977), a famous white member of the African National Congress' struggle against apartheid. Since little is known, however, of his early life, few people are aware that Hodgson's earlier career was marked not simply by proletarian resistance to the forces of mining capitalism but also by strong aspirations to maintaining white workers' privilege. Thus, this is a biographical study that complicates a known 'hero' figure, describing the surprising turn that a white mineworker's life took as a result of various influences, both structural and purely contingent ones: the influences of Marxist ideology, the repercussions of the cataclysmic war against Nazism and Hodgson's meeting his later second wife rival in explaining what was an unstable biography, marked by a transformation of identity in denial of material context.

As shown above, the ability of personas to contemplate and reflect on their condition and that of the world is fundamental to their desire and capacity to try and change or maintain their environment. Part 3 thus focuses on the various discursive forms that such reflexivity may take since these are relevant to how individuals interact with their world: culture, ethnography, religion, cosmology, and political ideologies may all come into play here. Thus, in Chapter 7, Morgan Robinson outlines how liberated slave children articulated their social rebirth through their religious conversion. Robinson to this purpose fruitfully analyses what others might dismiss as standardised biographical sketches of

missionary endeavour, thus underscoring the rich biographical potential still harboured by missionary archives. The children at a mission on Zanzibar were encouraged to write up their story of enslavement, liberation and conversion. This conversion may have had much to do with the rebuilding of social networks that they had lost upon their terrible enslavement but was not only based on practical calculation; it was also infused by social, cultural and likely religious motivations. Thus, these narratives are not examples of the parroting of Christian doctrine but yield highly original data, in the process providing glimpses of pre-colonial worldviews: the students at the mission connected the new conception of God with their old lives without completely condemning the latter, a process of transformation that was not necessarily linked to Christian church doctrine but a deeply personal experience spurred by an individual's comparison of the present with the past. It entailed a form of autobiographical self-fashioning as discussed earlier in reference to the work done by Peterson.

Just like the contribution by Duncan Money, Chapter 8 by Eve Wong resurrects an important fighter – and precursor of fighters – for political rights for South Africa's non-white communities: Abdullah Abdurahman, Cape Town's first Coloured city councillor whose political reputation was criticised by later generations for his collaboration with white liberals (a view typical for a grimmer age, but which damaged the memory of such precursors, who also included Sol Plaatje mentioned earlier). Wong's contribution therefore refines a 'great-man' biography and is important in a number of other ways, too. First, it depicts the various religious influences that Abdurahman underwent in the course of his upbringing, which ranged from his own Islam to a variety of Christian creeds such as Dutch Reformed Church doctrine, New England transcendentalism and the teachings of the French Catholic Marist Brothers. Abdurahman did not convert to Christianity but in this environment learned to create his own more religiously neutral persona. While a Muslim, in his political work he united Islam and Christianity, feeding his public speeches with Biblical themes. Brought up with the holistic ethos and moral optimism of Transcendentalist doctrines, Abdurahman exhibited a fascinating syncretism that still worked before the closing of the racial frontier. Secondly, Wong's chapter privileges the importance of childhood in explaining the development of her persona. As she emphasises, histories of childhood are still rare, and in the course of this she charts the manifold parental and educational influences that, in their contradictory ways, helped create this complex biographical subject.

Childhood and religion are also privileged in Chapter 9, which discusses the biography of Barthélémy Boganda, priest and politician in French Equatorial Africa. Rather than chronicle his itinerary from orphan to convert to Catholic priest and – finally – anti-colonial leader, the chapter seeks to explain his erratic behaviour through two issues. First, there are the long-term

consequences of his childhood trauma, centred around family loss, although it is argued that different evidential regimes impose limits on insights from psychology for biographical research. Secondly, the chapter traces cultural lessons from the pre-colonial religious cosmology in the context of which Boganda was raised before he was put in an orphanage. As Wong notes, the age of three to seven is crucial for internalising norms and values, and Chapter 9 thus surmises that pre-colonial religion (by way of constitutive mythologies and fables feeding into oral tradition) may have exerted an enduring influence in terms of cultural-behavioural traits that Boganda occasionally exhibited in his work as priest and politician (one could interpret this also by way of Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*). Boganda, too, betrayed a religious syncretism that fed into his political worldview.

The final chapter centres political ideology in the travails of its persona. Erik Kennes, as in the previous chapter focusing on 'great-man' biography, depicts the ideological influences on the subject of Laurent Kabila, formerly a Lumumbist, then Maoist, but always rejecting Western influence in what became the Democratic Republic of Congo under his rule. Kabila's itinerary binds together the entire history of resistance in post-colonial Congo. Posing as an alternative to Western-dominated governance, the structure of Kabila's rebel groups, however, bore similarities to the Mobutist regime, including its personality cult. This may have mirrored Maoist movements elsewhere, but here it may perhaps be permitted to wonder whether one could search for a deeper layer of cultural issues relevant to politics. By contrast, Kabila genuinely pursued a policy of autonomy, intending to start history anew and tie his age to the Lumumbist epoch. His accession to power was – in that typical non-linear way – a question of circumstance and therefore allows us to search for alternative routes never explored in Congo's history. Kabila's moral credit owed to his refusal to compromise with Mobutu, but his message of self-confidence and self-help (at odds with his authoritarianism) became mired in disorganisation and Kabila's lack of experience. Kennes argues the need for comparative biographical research of Congo's political generations to systematise the political thought in a country where cynicism ignores the merits of individual initiative and practice. This could yield new insights into the creation and durability of elite groups.

## References

- Akyeampong, E.K. and H.L. Gates (eds) (2012), *Dictionary of African Biography* (Oxford).
- Allina-Pisano, E. (2003), 'Resistance and the Social History of Africa', *Journal of Social History*, vol. 37, 187–198.



- Alpers, E. (1983), 'The Story of Swema: Female Vulnerability in Nineteenth-Century East Africa', in C. Robertson and M.A. Klein (eds), *Women and Slavery in Africa* (Madison), 185–219.
- Ayandele, E.A. (1970), *Holy Johnson: Pioneer of African Nationalism, 1836–1917* (London).
- Backscheider, P.R. (1999), *Reflections on Biography* (Oxford).
- Bamberg, M. (2006), 'Biographic-Narrative Research, Quo Vadis?: A Critical Review of "Big Stories" from the Perspective of "Small Stories"', in K. Milnes et al. (eds), *Narrative, Memory and Knowledge: Representations, Aesthetics and Contexts* (Huddersfield), 63–79.
- Bernault, F. (2006), 'Body, Power and Sacrifice in Equatorial Africa', *Journal of African History*, vol. 47, 207–239.
- Bertaux, D. (ed.) (1981), *Biography and Society: The Life History Approach in the Social Sciences* (Beverly Hills, CA).
- Bertaux, D. (1995), 'Social Genealogies, Commented and Compared: An Instrument for Observing Social Mobility Processes in the "Longue Durée"', *Current Sociology*, vol. 43, 69–88.
- Bjorklund, D. (1998), *Interpreting the Self: Two Hundred Years of American Autobiography* (Chicago, IL).
- Boswell, J. (1791), *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D., Comprehending an Account of His Studies and Numerous Works etc.* (London).
- Bourdieu, P. (1986), 'L'illusion biographique', *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, vol. 62–63, 69–72.
- Bourdieu, P. (2006), 'Esquisse pour une auto-analyse', *L'orientation scolaire et professionnelle*, vol. 35, 477–479.
- Boyd, J. (1989), *The Caliph's Sister: Nana Asma'u 1793–1865: Teacher, Poet and Islamic Leader* (London).
- Bozzoli, B. (1991), *Women of Phokeng: Consciousness, Life Strategy and Migrancy in South Africa 1900–1983* (Portsmouth, NH).
- Braudel, F. (1949), *La Méditerranée et le Monde Méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II* (Paris).
- Brunel, P. (1977), *Histoire de la littérature française* (Paris), vol. 2.
- Burke, P. (1991), 'History of Events and the Revival of Narrative', in P. Burke (ed.), *New Perspectives on Historical Writing* (Cambridge), 233–246.
- Burke, P. (1991), 'Overture: The New History, its Past and its Future', in P. Burke (ed.), *New Perspectives on Historical Writing* (Cambridge), 1–23.
- Caine, B. (2019), *Biography and History* (London).
- Carlyle, Th. (1841), *On Heroes and Hero Worship and the Heroic in History* (London).
- Chamberlayne, P., J. Bornat and T. Wengraf (2000), 'Introduction: The Biographical Turn', in P. Chamberlayne, J. Bornat and T. Wengraf (eds), *The Turn to Biographical Methods in Social Science: Comparative Issues and Examples* (London and New York), 1–6.

- Clay, G. (1968), *Your Friend, Lewanika: The Life and Times of Lubosi Lewanika Litunga of Barotseland 1842 to 1916* (London).
- Codere, H. (1973), *The Biography of an African Society, Rwanda 1900–1960. Based on Forty-Eight Rwandan Autobiographies* (Tervuren).
- Cordell, D.D. (ed.) (2012), *The Human Tradition in Modern Africa* (Lanham, MD).
- Crais, C.C. and P. Scully (2009), *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus: A Ghost Story and a Biography* (Princeton, NJ).
- Cromwell, A.M. (1992), *An African Victorian Feminist: The Life and Times of Adelaide Smith Caseby Hayford 1868–1960* (Washington, DC).
- Cronon, E.D. (1955), *Black Moses: The Story of Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association* (Madison, WI).
- Davies, N. (1984), *Heart of Europe: A Short History of Poland* (Oxford).
- Davies, N.Z. (2007), *Trickster Travels: A Sixteenth Century Muslim between Worlds* (London).
- Davison, J. (1989), *Voices from Mutira: Lives of Rural Gikuyu Women* (Boulder, CO).
- De Bruijn, M. (2018), 'Introduction: La radicalisation et les messages cachés du changement social', in M. de Bruijn (ed.), *Biographies de la radicalisation: Des messages cachés du changement social* (Mankon), 1–13.
- De Goede, M. (2018), 'L'héritage de la résistance politique au Congo-Brazzaville', in M. de Bruijn (ed.), *Biographies de la radicalisation: Des messages cachés du changement social* (Mankon), 267–284.
- Delas, D. (2007), *Léopold Sédar Senghor: Le maître de langue: Biographie* (Croissy-Beaubourg).
- Didier, S. (2017), 'La prosopographie, une méthode historique multiscalaire entre individuel et collectif', *Cahiers d'histoire*, vol. 35, 59–84.
- Doortmont, M.R. (2005), *The Pen-Pictures of Modern Africans and African Celebrities by Charles Francis Hutchison: A Collective Biography of Elite Society in the Gold Coast Colony* (Leiden and Boston, MA).
- Eckert, A. and A. Jones (2002), 'Historical Writing about Everyday Life', *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, vol. 15, 5–16.
- Epstein, W.H. (ed.) (1991), *Contesting the Subject: Essays in the Postmodern Theory and Practice of Biography and Biographical Criticism* (West Lafayette, IN).
- Erikson, E.H. (1958), *Young Man Luther: A Study in Psychoanalysis and History* (New York).
- Freund, B. (1984), *The Making of Contemporary Africa: The Development of African Society since 1800* (Houndmills).
- Fyfe, C. (1972), *Africanus Horton, 1835–1883: West African Scientist and Patriot* (London and New York).
- Geertz, C. (1973), *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York).

- Geiger, S.N.G. (1986), 'Women's Life Histories: Method and Content', *Signs*, vol. 11, 334–351.
- Geismar, P. (1971), *Fanon* (New York).
- Ginzburg, C. (1976), *Il formaggio e i vermi: Il cosmo di un mugnaio del '500* (Turin).
- Ginzburg, C. (1980), *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller* (Baltimore, MD).
- Goodson, I. (2001), 'The Story of Life History: Origins of the Life History Method in Sociology', *Identity*, vol. 1, 129–142.
- Gusdorf, G. (1980), 'Conditions and Limits of Autobiography', in J. Olney (ed.), *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical* (Princeton), 28–48.
- Gutmann, B. (1928), *Hauptling Rindi: Ein afrikanisches Helden- und Herrscherleben* (Cologne).
- Handlin, O. (1979), *Truth in History* (Cambridge, MA).
- Henige, D. (2007), 'Double, Double, Toil, and Trouble: The Ergonomics of African History', *History in Africa*, vol. 34, 103–120.
- Hiskett, M. (1973), *The Sword of Truth: The Life and Times of the Shehu Usman Dan Fodio* (New York).
- Hobsbawm, E. (1998), *Uncommon People: Resistance, Rebellion, and Jazz* (New York).
- Hobsbawm, E. (1994), *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914–1991* (London).
- Hooker, J.R. (1967), *Black Revolutionary: George Padmore's Path from Communism to Pan-Africanism* (London).
- Hooker, J.R. (1975), *Henry Sylvester Williams: Imperial Pan-Africanist* (London).
- Hoppe, K. (1993), 'Whose Life is it Anyway?: Issues of Representation in Life Narrative Texts of African Women', *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, vol. 26, 623–636.
- Jewsiewicki, B. et al. (1993), *Naître et mourir au Zaïre: Un demi-siècle au quotidien* (Paris).
- Keegan, T.J. (1977), *Facing the Storm: Portraits of Black Lives in Rural South Africa* (London).
- Kripke, S.A. (1980), *Naming and Necessity* (Oxford).
- Lambert, C.J. (1995), 'Postmodern Biography: Lively Hypotheses and Dead Certainties', *Biography*, vol. 18, 305–327.
- Langness, L.L. (1965), *The Life History in Anthropological Science* (New York).
- Langness, L.L. and G. Frank (1981), *Lives: An Anthropological Approach to Biography* (Novato, CA).
- C. Lemerrier and E. Picard (2012), 'Quelle approche prosopographique?', in E. Picard, L. Rollet and Ph. Nabonnand (eds), *Les uns et les autres ... Biographies et prosopographies en histoire des sciences* (Nancy), 605–630.

- Lepore, J. (2001), 'Historians Who Love Too Much: Reflections on Microhistory and Biography', *The Journal of American History*, vol. 88, 129–144.
- Le Roy Ladurie, E. (1975), *Montaillou: Village occitan de 1294 à 1324* (Paris).
- Le Roy Ladurie, E. (1979), *Le Carnaval de Romans: De la chandeleur au mercredi des Cendres, 1579–1580* (Paris).
- Levi, G. (1989), 'Les usages de la biographie', *Annales: Economies, sociétés, civilisations*, vol. 44, 1325–1336.
- LeVine, S. (1979), *Mothers and Wives: Gusii Women of East Africa* (Chicago, IL).
- Lindsay, L.A. and J.W. Sweet (eds) (2014), *Biography and the Black Atlantic* (Philadelphia, PA).
- Lindsay, L.A. (2017), 'Biography in African History', *History in Africa*, vol. 44, 11–26.
- Lipschutz, M.R. and R.K. Rasmussen (1978 & 1986), *Dictionary of African Historical Biography* (Chicago, IL & Berkeley, CA).
- Lodge, T. (2006), *Mandela: A Critical Life* (Oxford).
- Lynch, M.R. (1967), *Edward Wilmot Blyden: Pan-Negro Patriot* (London).
- Lyotard, J.F. (1985), *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis).
- Magnusson, S.G. (2003), 'The Singularization of History: Social History and Microhistory within the Postmodern State of Knowledge', *Journal of Social History*, vol. 36, 701–735.
- McCaskie, T.C. (2006), 'Writing, Reading, and Printing Death: Obituaries and Commemoration in Asante', in K. Barber (ed.), *Africa's Hidden Histories: Everyday Literacy and Making the Self* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN), 341–384.
- McKinley Runyan, W. (1982), *Life Histories and Psychobiography: Explorations in Theory and Method* (New York).
- Miescher, S.F. (2005), *Making Men in Ghana* (Bloomington, IN).
- Miller, J.C. (2012), *The Problem of Slavery as History: A Global Approach* (New Haven, CT).
- Mirza, S. and M. Strobel (1989), *Three Swahili Women: Life Histories from Mombasa, Kenya* (Bloomington, IN).
- Nasaw, D. (2009), 'Historians and Biography', *The American Historical Review*, vol. 114, 573–578.
- Ndambuki, B. and C. Robertson (2000), *We Only Came Here to Struggle: Stories from Berida's Life* (Bloomington, IN).
- Newell, S. (2006), *The Forger's Tale: The Search for Odeziaku* (Athens, OH).
- Ntumba, T. (1973), 'La vision Ntu de l'homme: Essai de philosophie linguistique et anthropologique', *Cahiers des Religions Africaines*, vol. 7, no. 14, 175–197.
- Ofose-Appiah, L.H. (ed.) (1977/1979), *The Encyclopaedia Africana: Dictionary of African Biography*, vols 1 (*Ethiopia-Ghana*) and 2 (*Sierra Leone-Zaire*) (New York).
- Olney, J. (1973), *Tell Me Africa: An Approach to African Literature* (Princeton, NJ).
- Parsons, N., W. Henderson and Th. Tlou (1997), *Seretse Khama 1921–80* (Gaborone and Braamfontein).

- Patterson, O. (1982), *Slavery and Social Death* (Cambridge).
- Paul, S. (1996), 'Bausteine zu einer Geschichte der Biographie-Forschung in Afrika', *Paideuma*, vol. 42, 185–193.
- Perham, M. (ed.) (1936; 2nd ed. 1963), *Ten Africans* (London).
- Peterson, D.R. (2012), *Ethnic Patriotism and the East African Revival: A History of Dissent, c. 1935–1972* (Cambridge).
- Pruitt, I. (1945), *A Daughter of Han: The Autobiography of a Chinese Working Woman* (New Haven, CT).
- Ranger, T.O. (1995), *Are We Not Also Men?: The Sakange Family and African Politics in Zimbabwe 1920–1964* (London).
- Reid, R. (2011), 'Past and Presentism: The "Precolonial" and the Foreshortening of African History', *Journal of African History*, vol. 52, 135–155.
- Robertson, C. and M.A. Klein (eds) (1983), *Women and Slavery in Africa* (Madison).
- Rubenson, S. (1966), *King of Kings: Tewodros of Ethiopia* (Addis Ababa).
- Ruwa'ichi, T. (1990), *The Constitution of Muntu: An Inquiry into the Eastern Bantu's Metaphysics of Person* (Bern etc.).
- Sachs, W. (1937), *Black Hamlet* (London).
- Sahlins, M. (1981), *Historical Metaphors and Mythical Realities: Structure in the Early History of the Sandwich Islands Kingdom* (Ann Arbor, CT).
- Saunders, C.C. (1979), *Black Leaders in Southern African History* (London).
- Schäffner, W., S. Weigel and T. Macho (2003), *Der Liebe Gott steckt im Detail: Mikrostrukturen des Wissens* (Paderborn).
- Shepperson, G. and Th. Price (1958), *Independent African: John Chilembwe and the Origins, Setting and Significance of the Nyasaland Native Rising of 1915* (Edinburgh).
- Shostak, M. (1981), *Nisa: The Life and Words of a !Kung Woman* (Cambridge, MA).
- Smallwood, S.E. (2007), *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* (Cambridge).
- Smith, M.F. (1954), *Baba of Karo: A Woman of the Muslim Hausa* (London).
- Strachey, L. (1918), *Eminent Victorians* (New York).
- Salvatore, N. (2004), 'Biography and Social History: An Intimate Relationship', *Labour History*, vol. 87, 187–192.
- Stone, L. (1971), 'Prosopography', *Daedalus*, vol. 100, 46–79.
- Stone, L. (1979), 'The Revival of Narrative: Reflections on a New Old History', *Past & Present*, vol. 85, 3–24.
- Sumner, B.H. (1944), *Survey of Russian History* (London).
- Taylor, A.J.P. (1954), *The Struggle for Mastery in Europe 1848–1918* (Oxford).
- Taylor, C. (1989), *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA).
- Thomas, W. and F. Znaniecki (1918–1920), *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, 5 vols (Chicago).
- Thompson, E.P. (1963; 1980), *The Making of the English Working Class* (London).

- Thompson, L. (1975), *Survival in Two Worlds: Moshoeshoe of Lesotho, 1786–1870* (Oxford).
- Tonda, J. (2005), *Le souverain moderne: Le corps du pouvoir en Afrique centrale (Congo, Gabon)* (Paris).
- Vanoye, F. (1989), 'La biographie, quand même', in P. Lejeune (ed.), *Le désir biographique* (Paris), 197–205.
- Van Dijk, R., M. de Bruijn and J.B. Gewald (2007), 'Social and Historical Trajectories of Agency in Africa: An Introduction', in M. De Bruijn, R. Van Dijk and J.B. Gewald (eds), *Strength Beyond Structure: Social and Historical Trajectories of Agency in Africa* (Leiden and Boston, MA), 1–15.
- Van Onselen, Ch. (1996), *The Seed is Mine: The Life of Kas Maine, a South African Sharecropper 1894–1985* (New York).
- Vansina, J. (1980), 'Memory and Oral Tradition', in J.C. Miller (ed.), *The African Past Speaks: Essays on Oral Tradition and History* (Folkestone), 262–279.
- Vansina, J. (1994), *Living with Africa* (Madison, WI).
- Van Walraven, K. and J. Abbink (2003), 'Rethinking Resistance in African History: An Introduction', in J. Abbink, M. de Bruijn and K. van Walraven (eds), *Rethinking Resistance: Revolt and Violence in African History* (Leiden and Boston, MA), 1–40.
- Wagenaar, W.A. (1986), 'My Memory: A Study of Autobiographical Memory over Six Years', *Cognitive Psychology*, vol. 18, 225–252.
- Wagenaar, W.A. (1988), *Identifying Ivan: A Case Study in Legal Psychology* (New York).
- Werbner, R. (1991), *Tears of the Dead: The Social Biography of an African Family* (Edinburgh).
- Westermann, D. (1938; 2nd ed. 1952), *Afrikaner erzählen ihr Leben: Elf Selbstdarstellungen afrikanischer Eingeborener aller Bildungsgrade und Berufe und aus aller Teiler Afrikas* (Berlin).
- White, L. (1987), *Magomero: Portrait of an African Village* (Cambridge).
- Wilks, I. (1988), 'Akyawa Yikwan of Asante', in P. Romero (ed.), *Life Histories of African Women* (London), 113–139.
- Willan, B.P. (1984), *Sol Plaatje: South African Nationalist, 1876–1932* (London).
- Wright, M. (1984), *Women in Peril: Life Stories of Four Captives in Nineteenth Century East-Central Africa* (Lusaka).
- Zinn, J.O. (2004), *Introduction to Biographical Research* (Working Paper 4; Canterbury).

**PART 1**

*Methodological Insights*







## Human Symbols

### *The Biographical Pursuit and the Language of Symbolism in Contemporary South Africa*

*Lindie Koorts*

This contribution has been shaped by my own experience of writing a biography of a controversial figure in South African history and publishing it at a time when the country was consumed by raging debates about lingering colonial symbols, whiteness, and racism. Needless to say, such an experience drew me to reflect on the nature of biography in a tumultuous land.

I wrote a biography of D.F. Malan, the man who instituted the policy of apartheid in 1948. It was a cradle-to-grave biography that delved into his childhood in the colonial Western Cape and his Victorian education at a time when Social Darwinism was the accepted norm. It followed his career in the Dutch Reformed Church, and his welding of religion with Afrikaner nationalism, and then traced his evolution from clergyman to newspaper editor to politician. It was, inevitably, a tale of party intrigues, in which even race was subservient to political ambition. Moreover, it was a very human story. Malan loved and hated, like any other human being. It brought home the somewhat disquieting realisation that apartheid was instituted by very ordinary people – and it was instituted with surprising ease.

The book appeared in March 2014, almost exactly 20 years after South Africa's first fully democratic elections. It was the first biography of an apartheid leader published after 1994 and I was, therefore, uncertain about how it would be received. Yet, in its introduction I wrote optimistically that 'twenty years after apartheid ended, a space has opened up for a new generation of historians to explore the past in its own right'.<sup>1</sup> I could not, at the time, foresee the student protests that would rock the country a year later, and which continued to gain momentum in the year that followed. I do believe that space still exists, because scholars continue to write brave and original work. However, like all spaces, it is contested. The contestations in the South African intellectual landscape made it clear to me that context, which is such a crucial component in

---

<sup>1</sup> L. Koorts, *DF Malan and the Rise of Afrikaner Nationalism* (Cape Town, 2014), xii.

explaining the past, is not limited to recreating the world in which one's subject lived, nor is it limited to an awareness of one's own context at the time of writing. There exists a third layer, namely the context in which a biography is received and interpreted. Our understanding of prominent individuals and their roles in history is shaped by all three of these layers.

### Into the Fray

I was an obscure young historian when I wrote the biography. As a dedicated academic, I strove to answer all the appropriate scholarly rigours, yet I wanted my book to have a wider reach, beyond academia. I therefore adopted a writing style that would speak to a general audience, with a big trade publisher in mind. My elation, when I was offered a contract by an imprint of South Africa's largest trade publisher, knew no bounds. Nothing could prepare me for the experience that followed.

My publisher's formidable marketing machine quickly propelled me into the public arena. Of course, many scholars, myself included, agree on the need for public engagement, but the experience also contained something of an irony. Knowing that I was writing about a hated and controversial figure, I had consciously distanced myself from public debates, so as to write a dispassionate biography. Portraying Malan as evil would have been too easy an explanation, and I tried to delve deeper into his thinking and into the world around him. Yet, while one may try to avoid letting public perceptions shape the writing of a book, they do, inevitably, shape its reading. An elementary knowledge of hermeneutics had prepared me for this: the author has no control over the reader's interpretation of the text, and many readers will shape their interpretation according to their pre-existing worldview. In this regard, I had the surreal experience of my book being praised by the right-wing Afrikaner singer and activist, Steve Hofmeyr,<sup>2</sup> on the one hand, and careful and considered intellectuals such as Jacob Dlamini and journalist Mondli Makhanya on the other.<sup>3</sup> I did take some comfort in the fact that on extreme right-wing forums readers warned each other that my ideological undergarments were visible

2 S. Hofmeyr, 'n Vermensliking van die Afrikaner se strydrosse', *Netwerk24*, 11 April 2014, <http://www.netwerk24.com/Vermaak/Boeke/n-Vemensliking-van-Afrikaner-se-strydrosse-20140414> (accessed 17 April 2017).

3 J. Dlamini, 'Life Choices and South African biography', *Kronos*, 41 (November 2015), 1, 339–346; M. Makhanya, 'Book review – Insight into a champion of Afrikaner Nationalism', *City Press*, 27 April 2014, <http://www.news24.com/Archives/City-Press/Book-review-Insight-into-a-champion-of-Afrikaner-nationalism-20150430> (accessed 17 April 2017).

(because I had described Malan's family and its relationship with its farm labourers as 'paternalistic'),<sup>4</sup> while a number of individuals on the opposite side of the spectrum told me that mine was not the kind of book that they would even pick up. Then, there were those who had not read the book at all, but who made assumptions about its author's sympathies based on their perceptions. As a result, I was approached by a student activist who lobbied to change the name of the D.F. Malan centre in Stellenbosch,<sup>5</sup> as well as an individual who wanted to prevent a school named after him from having its name changed. In both instances, in spite of not having read the book, they assumed that they would have my unqualified support. My answer, in both cases, was that the name of a building or school had less to do with that individual's merits, and more to do with the value system he or she represents. It is therefore not the role of a biographer to pass the final verdict, but for the community in which such a building is situated to decide whether or not the name of the individual in question represents their aspirations. This was certainly borne out by the events that followed.

### Symbols Must Fall

In March 2015, a student at the University of Cape Town flung human excrement at a statue of the arch-imperialist Cecil John Rhodes, which still had pride of place on the campus. From a biographer's perspective, Rhodes himself is an intriguing, albeit controversial figure. He made his fortune on the Kimberley diamond fields in the late nineteenth century, and succeeded in elbowing out his competitors until his company, De Beers, was left with a monopoly. He was elected prime minister of the Cape Colony, and used his fortune to establish gold mines on the Witwatersrand, and to bring the territories that are today known as Zimbabwe and Zambia under the control of his British South Africa Company. He also orchestrated a failed coup against the Transvaal in 1895. His personal life was equally fascinating, given that all indications are that he was homosexual, which raises interesting questions about gender and sexuality in the nineteenth century.<sup>6</sup> Even more fascinating was his obsession

4 C. Landman, 'Nuwe boek oor DF Malan belig eietydse Afrikanerprobleme', *Praag*, 27 May 2014, <http://praag.co.za/?p=24644> (accessed 17 April 2017).

5 This predated #RhodesMustFall by a few months.

6 Rhodes is the subject of several biographies, as well as books that reflect on his legacy. Some of the most recent works include A. Davidson, *Cecil John Rhodes and his Time* (Pretoria, 2003); B. Roberts, *Cecil Rhodes: Flawed Colossus* (New York, 1988); P. Maylam, *The Cult of Rhodes: Remembering an Imperialist in Africa* (Cape Town, 2005).

with his own mortality and with leaving a legacy. Rhodes drafted will after will in a quest to turn the world into a wall on which he could write 'I was here'. The University of Cape Town was built on land that he had bequeathed, while the Rhodes scholarship to Oxford remains among the most prestigious in the world.<sup>7</sup> Racist, capitalist, imperialist: all these monikers are true, but to reduce Rhodes to these labels would inhibit our understanding of the ability of an individual to shape the fate of millions.

This, however, was a moot point in the protests that erupted.<sup>8</sup> In the era of Twitter handles, the movement that demanded the removal of Rhodes's statue soon became known as #RhodesMustFall. It was not only a statue that had to fall, but the social and intellectual landscape that he represented, one that, it was argued, still represented Eurocentric values and social structures, and which therefore had to be 'decolonised'. This rage against colonial-era symbols spread to other universities and across the country.<sup>9</sup> It is notable that there were relatively few statues of apartheid leaders to be attacked, as most of them had long since been removed – to the cellars of the Heritage Centre at the Voortrekker monument, or to a statue garden in the Afrikaner enclave of Orania – what one newspaper called the 'very real dustbin of history'.<sup>10</sup> Up to this point, there seems to have been little public reflection on pre-apartheid figures.<sup>11</sup> It was no longer the case. Some were shocked when a statue of Mahatma Gandhi, who had been celebrated as a pioneer of peaceful protest and civil disobedience during his time in the country, was splashed with white paint. Activists defended this action by pointing to Gandhi's racism towards blacks.<sup>12</sup>

7 A. Kenny, *The History of the Rhodes Trust, 1902–1999* (Oxford, 2001).

8 In an interview, the vice-chancellor of UCT, Prof. Max Price, tried to reflect on Rhodes's complexities, but subsequent events showed that such reflection was quickly drowned out. M. Morris, 'Rhodes still ignites fiery debates', *Sunday Independent*, 22 March 2015. <http://www.iol.co.za/sundayindependent/rhodes-still-ignites-fiery-debates-1835371> (accessed 17 April 2017).

9 D. Foster, 'After Rhodes Fell: The new movement to Africanize South Africa', *The Atlantic*, 25 April 2015, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/04/after-rhodes-fell-south-africa-statue/391457/> (accessed 19 April 2017).

10 S. O'Toole, 'Where apartheid statues go to die', *Mail & Guardian*, 17 June 2011, <https://mg.co.za/article/2011-06-17-finding-verwoerd-lifting-the-lid-on-dustbin-of-history> (accessed 19 April 2017); S. Dublin, *Transforming Museums: Mounting Queen Victoria in a Democratic South Africa* (New York, 2006), 15.

11 This denotes prominent figures whose historical role predate the institution of apartheid in 1948.

12 I. Chernick and S. Manda, 'Was Gandhi a racist?', *IOI News*, 14 April 2015, <http://www.iol.co.za/news/crime-courts/was-gandhi-a-racist-1.1844758#.Va5ZWvkiIU> (accessed 19 April 2017).

It represented a shift in which erstwhile heroes were being questioned, and it did not stop there. There had been mutterings for some time,<sup>13</sup> but now Nelson Mandela's legacy was openly disputed.<sup>14</sup> He was branded a sell-out for negotiating a settlement with the apartheid government, thereby depriving black South Africans of an outright victory. Furthermore, by emphasising reconciliation, he had robbed them of the opportunity to express their well-justified rage.

With statues and symbols literally falling, the media scrambled to make sense of it. Suddenly, I was sought out as a commentator on controversial characters. I was invited to comment on F.W. de Klerk, following a furore when the City of Cape Town decided to name a prominent street after him,<sup>15</sup> on Rhodes himself,<sup>16</sup> and on C.R. Swart (the first ceremonial state president of South Africa), whose statue on the University of the Free State's campus was vandalised.<sup>17</sup> It quickly became apparent there was little room for a biographical consideration of the individuals in question (and by that I mean a nuanced understanding of their complexities and their context). An interviewer cut me short to draw my response on the protests themselves, while online trolls assured me that the Afrikaners would not be erecting any statues of me.

It is the nature of the beast, but it left me with an impression of the limitations of biography in a society at war with its symbols. This is certainly not limited to South Africa or to the virulence of our public debates. It is the nature of public discourse to be built around prominent figures, and for these figures to act as symbols or rallying points. It stimulates biographical interest, but it also runs counter to deeply researched scholarly biography. It is on this tension that I would like to reflect.

13 See for example S. Hlongwane, 'Did Nelson Mandela sell out?', *Mail & Guardian – Thought Leader*, 10 March 2010, <http://thoughtleader.co.za/siphohlongwane/2010/03/10/did-nelson-mandela-sell-out/> (accessed 25 May 2017).

14 See for example Malaika wa Azania, 'I was not liberated by Mandela', *Sunday Independent*, 19 July 2015, <http://www.iol.co.za/sundayindependent/i-was-not-liberated-by-mandela-1887330> (accessed 25 May 2017).

15 This furore predated #RhodesMustFall by more than a month. See D. Smith, 'De Klerk's paradoxical presence', *Mail & Guardian*, 13 February 2015, <https://mg.co.za/article/2015-02-12-de-klerks-paradoxical-presence>; Interview: Dagbreek – Diskoers, *KykNET*, 21 January 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vVYE2AZmcAc> (accessed 19 April 2017).

16 Interview: Insig, *KykNET*, 23 March 2015.

17 L. Koorts, 'C.R. Swart was 'n teenstrydige figuur', *Netwerk24*, 25 February 2016, <http://www.netwerk24.com/Stemme/Menings/lindie-koorts-cr-swart-was-n-teenstrydige-figuur-20160225> (accessed 19 April 2017).

## Symbols to Celebrate, Symbols that Revile

The South African obsession with individuals as symbols most certainly predates the #RhodesMustFall movement. In that sense, #RhodesMustFall merely represents a shift in interpretation, accompanied by sometimes violent activism. Nationalist metanarratives – as well as nation-building stories – are infused with heroes who represent the pinnacle of bravery or humanity. Afrikaner nationalists rallied around figures like the erstwhile presidents of the Transvaal and the Free State, Paul Kruger and Marthinus Theunis Steyn, as well as Anglo-Boer War generals such as Koos de la Rey and Christiaan de Wet. In the second half of the twentieth century, concerted efforts were made by the National Party propaganda machine to deify party leaders – the most deified being Hendrik Verwoerd. His assassination added to his mythological status.

In the post-apartheid era, Nelson Mandela towered over the South African landscape, along with a pantheon of ANC heroes such as Walter Sisulu, Oliver Tambo, and Albert Luthuli. There were even concerted efforts at including Afrikaner heroes in the pantheon – in particular Bram Fischer and Beyers Naudé.<sup>18</sup> This reverence for heroes of the liberation struggle dominated the commemorative landscape, in spite of the ANC's best efforts at portraying itself as a collective. Nelson Mandela, they insist, was never greater than the organisation. It is therefore something of an irony to visit the Apartheid Museum in Johannesburg. In addition to its main exhibition of apartheid history, there is a large, separate display on Nelson Mandela. It celebrates him as an individual, but nevertheless tries to emphasise his place in the collective. This idea of a collective, as opposed to individual leaders, has been described as essentially African, and has been used by some youth activists to attack the veneration of Mandela the individual.<sup>19</sup>

In spite of these tensions, the general pre-occupation with individuals can also be seen in the South African publishing landscape. In a former British colony, where English is one of the official languages and where it has essentially become the lingua franca, South African authors writing in English are forced to compete with a global market. South African novelists face an uphill battle in this regard, and it is very rare for South African novelists to make it onto the local bestseller lists for fiction. The picture is very different when it

---

18 H. Giliomee, 'Rediscovering and Re-imagining the Afrikaners in a New South Africa: Autobiographical Notes on Writing an Uncommon Biography', *Itinerario*, 27 (2003), 3–4, 29.

19 Azania, 'I was not liberated by Mandela'.

comes to non-fiction. South African non-fiction outsells South African fiction,<sup>20</sup> and non-fiction authors do manage to scrape onto the local bestseller lists. Any time spent in a South African bookshop, or perusing the lists of prize-winning non-fiction will show that the non-fiction market is dominated by biographies, memoirs, and creative non-fiction, which itself often tends to revolve around an individual. Simply looking at past winners of the Alan Paton prize, South Africa's most prestigious award for English non-fiction, bears this out.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, the majority of these works are in some way or another related to the struggle, or to post-apartheid politics where apartheid-era social structures continue to dominate. I would also contend that the majority of these works focus on anti-apartheid activists, while there is a small, emerging category of works that concentrate on apartheid perpetrators, and which are acknowledged for their role in widening the South African narrative. I will return to this category in more detail later.

Whether or not the subject of a biography is considered a hero or a villain, in all instances they are seen to represent a wider story. Biography treads a fine line between the representivity of an individual, and that individual's uniqueness. While both components are important, I would like to express some discomfort with the way in which representivity may be reduced to political symbolism, and which may therefore suppress some of the complexities of the individual involved and of the context in which he or she operated.

A key example is Stephen Clingman's biography of Bram Fischer. In a beautifully written narrative, Clingman highlights Fischer's uniqueness: the lone Afrikaner who broke ranks to defend Nelson Mandela and his co-accused at the Rivonia Treason Trial. Fischer had been born into a prominent Afrikaner family, and this was not the path laid out for him. Nor was this a likely path for Afrikaners in general. Yet, without necessarily realising it, the author's narrative demonstrated that Fischer's Afrikaner identity (as all identities) was itself a complicated matter. Fischer's identity was not derived from the wider community and its key markers of language and religion, but rather from his somewhat dynastic family – a family with whom he never broke ranks. This did not deter the biographer from claiming an almost essentialist Afrikaner identity for his subject. 'Bram Fischer neither surrendered nor transcended his Afrikaner identity in taking up his struggle', Clingman insisted,<sup>22</sup> and went on:

---

20 L. de Kock (2015) 'An era in which fact is more desired than fiction', *Mail & Guardian*. Online. <http://mg.co.za/article/2015-07-23-an-era-in-which-fact-is-more-desired-than-fiction> (accessed 11 June 2017).

21 See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sunday\\_Times\\_Literary\\_Awards#Alan\\_Parton\\_Award](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sunday_Times_Literary_Awards#Alan_Parton_Award) (accessed 11 June 2017).

22 S. Clingman, *Bram Fischer: Afrikaner Revolutionary*, 2nd ed. (Johannesburg, 2013), xiv.

Bram was a prototype. He came out of Afrikaner nationalism; he died belonging to the whole of South Africa. He never saw this as a betrayal of Afrikaner identity, but rather as its fulfilment, its extension towards a true meaning of the name 'African'. He was a white man able to undertake, in the course of his own life, the personal transformation that must accompany, if not herald, the political. At a time when it would have been almost unimaginable to say so, instinctively and by conviction he understood that if whites were to have a meaning and future in South Africa, this was the kind of change they would have to undergo. And so he took it on – a story of identity, its retention and extension, into the marrow of his own life.<sup>23</sup>

While these are moving words, Fischer's symbolism, and his potency as a possible model for others to emulate, trumped his complexity. Biographies that attempt to complicate heroes inevitably feed into the hero-narrative. The classic hero fought his most essential weakness, in that he was not a god, and the same is the case for contemporary heroes – their weaknesses only serve to bolster their esteem, thereby bringing them closer to godliness. To some degree, the same can be said for villains, or in the case of apartheid South Africa, perpetrators: their humanity is highly problematic, and it seldom succeeds in complicating the wider public's understanding of their actions – not that understanding is in any way a justification, but as respected scholars have argued, understanding evil in others pushes us to face our own capacity for evil.<sup>24</sup>

This is, of course, not the default reaction when such works are released into the public sphere. I was present at one of the launches of Jacob Dlamini's book *Askari*,<sup>25</sup> where veterans of the ANC's former military wing, Umkhonto we Sizwe, became furious and heated about Dlamini's attempt to understand and explain the mind and the actions of the apartheid collaborator, Glory Sedibe, who turned on the ANC after being captured and tortured by the apartheid security police. This was in keeping with Dlamini's experience during the course of his research: as he related at his launch, ANC veterans were reluctant to engage with him. For them, a turncoat did not deserve any form of acknowledgement. They did not consider Dlamini's work a widening of the narrative,

23 *Ibid.*, 415.

24 P. Gobodo-Madikizela, *A Human Being Died that Night: A Story of Forgiveness* (Cape Town, 2003), 123.

25 J. Dlamini, *Askari: A Story of Collaboration and Betrayal in the Anti-Apartheid Struggle* (Johannesburg, 2014).



but instead as an unwelcome disruption and, what they considered, a celebration of a detestable character. This is based on a common assumption that biography is, by its nature, a tribute to its subject.

### A Symbol of Evil

There is another incident that illustrates this uncomfortable relationship with perpetrators, and the tension between the complexity of biography and the power of symbolism. It is an incident that has a number of layers, some of the most potent being the trauma of a society where victims and perpetrators still live together and sometimes come face-to-face with each other. It is also an incident where one perpetrator came to symbolise the atrocities of an entire system.

Eugene de Kock has been dubbed by the press as Prime Evil. In the 1980s, he commanded a covert unit named Vlakplaas, tasked with 'removing' black activists from society. Politicians would later hide behind this euphemism, claiming that they never gave any commands for assassinations to be carried out, nor that that had been their intention. To De Kock and his operatives, the phrase was anything but ambiguous. His unit tortured and killed hundreds of activists in a gruesome manner, and turned a number of MK operatives into so-called askaris, a name given to former ANC and Pan Africanist Congress militants who, either voluntarily or as a result of torture, had switched sides to fight against their erstwhile comrades as part of a counterinsurgency campaign. Testifying before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), a court-like body established to investigate apartheid atrocities and, where appropriate, to grant amnesty from prosecution, De Kock was brutally honest about his deeds, and did not flinch from naming names, thereby forcing many other operatives to come into the open and to apply for amnesty. What set him apart in the eyes of more than one observer, was the fact that he expressed unqualified remorse and sought the forgiveness of his victims – this stood in contrast to many other perpetrators, and even other significant historical parallels, such as Adolf Eichmann, who refused to see any wrong in his deeds.<sup>26</sup> While De Kock received amnesty for a number of the atrocities he committed, some of his deeds were deemed criminal, rather than politically motivated, and as such, he was sentenced to 212 years in prison. He was one of

---

26 Gobodo-Madikizela, *A Human Being Died that Night*, 6, 14–15, 22–23, 67–69; A. Jansen, *Eugene de Kock: Assassin for the State* (Cape Town, 2015), 241–244.

only three white men jailed for apartheid-era atrocities, and by far the most prominent.<sup>27</sup>

The public and the press maintained a grim fascination with De Kock, and he became the subject of more than one book. One of the most significant was the book by Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, a highly respected clinical psychologist and academic, and one of the TRC's commissioners. Her book, *A Human Being Died That Night*, was published in 2003 and awarded the Alan Paton Prize. Gobodo-Madikizela grappled with the concept of evil and with the dilemma of feeling empathy for a perpetrator. None of this absolved De Kock of his deeds, nor did it negate the trauma suffered by his victims. Yet, she did point out that his willingness to give the families of victims information about their loved ones' last moments, and his quest for mercy and forgiveness, assisted these families in their healing process and served to re-empower them.<sup>28</sup> In De Kock's quest for forgiveness, Gobodo-Madikizela heard 'the voice of an outcast begging to rejoin the world of the living'.<sup>29</sup>

In the years that followed his imprisonment, Eugene de Kock assisted the Missing Persons Task Team to locate the remains of victims, and also met with several victims' families.<sup>30</sup> While there were many who were cynical about his displays of remorse and his pleas for forgiveness, this was not the case for Gobodo-Madikizela. Nor was it the case for a number of these families, some of whom chose to forgive him.<sup>31</sup> As De Kock repeatedly applied for parole, they and other prominent voices joined in supporting him – and once he received it, in endorsing his release. These included Jacob Dlamini, Max du Preez, and Antjie Krog.<sup>32</sup> If one wants a measure of their stature as public intellectuals, it is worth pointing out that they had all won the Alan Paton prize for works of

27 J. van der Leun, 'The odd couple: Why an apartheid activist joined forces with a murderer', *The Guardian*, 6 June 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/global/2015/jun/06/odd-couple-apartheid-activist-madeleine-fullard-convicted-policeman-eugene-de-kock> (accessed 25 August 2017).

28 Gobodo-Madikizela, *A Human Being Died that Night*, 117–119, 130–132.

29 *Ibid.*, 115.

30 Van der Leun, 'The odd couple'.

31 Gobodo-Madikizela, *A Human Being Died that Night*, 14–15, 138–139; A. Jansen, *Eugene de Kock*, 245–246.

32 P. Gobodo-Madikizela, 'Towards an anatomy of violence', *Mail & Guardian*, 15 January 2010, <https://mg.co.za/article/2010-01-15-towards-an-anatomy-of-violence> (accessed 25 August 2017); J. Dlamini, 'De Kock can help state bring apartheid criminals to justice', *Business Day*, 7 February 2014, <https://www.pressreader.com/south-africa/business-day/20140207/281509339073773> (accessed 25 August 2017); A. Krog, 'Can an Evil Man Change? The Repentance of Eugene de Kock', *The New York Times*, 13 March 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/14/opinion/sunday/the-repentance-of-eugene-de-kock-apartheid-assassin.html?mcubz=0> (accessed 25 August 2017).

non-fiction that delivered piercing commentary on the post-apartheid order. Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela and Jacob Dlamini, in particular, argued that De Kock's re-entry into society would force many to re-examine their own complicity, instead of placing a safe distance between themselves and De Kock.

This was a matter that surfaced repeatedly in debates around De Kock's release. While he was one of the only individuals to serve time for the atrocities he committed, he was disowned by his superiors – and by the community whose comfort had been protected by his killing sprees. As Gobodo-Madikizela wrote in her book, it evoked in her a sense of anger: 'I was angry that the same society that had created de Kock, that had accepted his murderous protection of their privilege, had ostracised him and was now standing in judgement of him'.<sup>33</sup> This is what makes the most recent biography of De Kock, by Anemari Jansen, so significant. It was published early in 2015, and coincided with De Kock's release.<sup>34</sup> It also coincided with heated debates about race and the lack of reconciliation.

### A Human Symbol

Eugene de Kock's biographer, Anemari Jansen, has a postgraduate degree in literature. Yet, she framed herself as an apolitical mother of three, whose life was dictated by constant relocations due to her husband's career as a civil engineer – thus, as she put it, not a criminologist, a historian or a journalist, but a child of apartheid, the kind who had benefited from De Kock's killing sprees. A chance encounter with a friend of De Kock's led to her meeting him in prison. The experience shook her awake, and left her aghast at the atrocities committed on her behalf.<sup>35</sup>

Had I been asleep in the 1980s and the early 1990s? Born in 1964, I had grown up in apartheid's zenith. Thinking back to my youth, I am surprised and shocked at how uninformed and naïve I was. Did I not want to know why our country was burning, or was I just blind?<sup>36</sup>

33 Gobodo-Madikizela, *A Human Being Died that Night*, 34.

34 At the time of writing, I have never met or interacted with Anemari Jansen, but we do share the same publisher and editor.

35 Jansen, *Eugene de Kock*, 1–9.

36 *Ibid.*, 3.

While far from an academic study, Jansen's book sought to understand De Kock and to tell his story – without hiding or justifying any of his deeds. It was published in both English and Afrikaans, with its reception also split between the English and Afrikaans press. While the English media lauded her for humanising De Kock and complicating the post-apartheid narrative,<sup>37</sup> none of the Afrikaans newspapers, which form a tightly woven network, and which are all owned by the same company, reviewed the book. Instead, there were insinuations that her book was the result of a romantic fascination with De Kock.<sup>38</sup> What makes this interesting is that Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela faced similar insinuations while conducting her research, which she ascribed to attempts at disqualifying her work, rather than grappling with the discomfort a figure such as De Kock evokes.<sup>39</sup> Needless to say, such innuendos would not have been made about male authors.

Nevertheless, Jansen's book made it to the local bestseller lists. A *Sunday Times* reviewer listed it as one of the must-read books of 2015,<sup>40</sup> and it received further recognition when it was long-listed for the Alan Paton prize.<sup>41</sup> Jansen was also invited to participate in the prestigious Franschhoek Literary Festival, where the Alan Paton's shortlist would be announced. These are some of the most potent endorsements a South African author can receive, which may also signal that South African society, or at the very least, the reading public, is willing to accept a more complicated narrative of the country's bloody past.

Yet, as Jansen quickly discovered, support for her book and for De Kock's release existed in the abstract. I would venture to speculate that the experience of writing his biography had humanised him to her, to the extent that De Kock the symbol was replaced by De Kock the individual. Following its launch,

37 See for example M. Thamm, 'One woman's extraordinary journey: Je suis Eugene de Kock', *Daily Maverick*, 4 May 2015, <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2015-05-04-one-womans-extraordinary-journey-je-suis-eugene-de-kock/#.Waaq68gjHIU> (accessed 30 August 2017); S. Grant-Marshall, 'Tracing lost history through De Kock', *Business Day*, 24 July 2015, <https://www.pressreader.com/south-africa/business-day/20150724/281943131578463> (accessed 30 August 2017).

38 H. Scholtz, 'Eugene se stem het haar bekoor', *Netwerk24*, 22 March 2015, <http://www.netwerk24.com/Nuus/Misdaad/Eugene-se-stem-het-haar-bekoor-20150322#> (accessed 30 August 2017).

39 Gobodo-Madikizela, *A Human Being Died that Night*, 122–123.

40 N.A., 'The best books of 2015: Sunday Times book reviewers choose their top reads of the year', *Books Live*, 7 December 2015, <http://bookslive.co.za/blog/2015/12/07/the-best-books-of-2015-sunday-times-book-reviewers-choose-their-top-reads-of-the-year/> (accessed 30 August 2017).

41 N.A., 'The 2016 Sunday Times Alan Paton Award longlist', *Books Live*, 4 April 2016, <http://bookslive.co.za/blog/2016/04/04/the-2016-sunday-times-alan-paton-award-longlist/> (accessed 30 August 2017).

Jansen invited De Kock to attend public discussions of her book, but his parole conditions made it impossible.<sup>42</sup> However, by the time of the Franschoek Literary Festival and the shortlist party, these restrictions had been lifted. When De Kock appeared in the audience while his biography was being discussed, and then later accompanied Jansen to the shortlist party, shockwaves reverberated through Franschoek and across the country. At the shortlist party, authors banded together and, led by dystopian novelist Lauren Beukes, asked him to leave. De Kock did not protest. Instead, he thanked Beukes and left.<sup>43</sup>

The incident evoked a flurry of opinion pieces. Many expressed shock at the author's insensitivity for inviting him, as well as De Kock's own insensitivity for showing up, instead of disappearing into obscurity. A publisher who was present later related, 'I never imagined I would run into the man. In my head he would go find a farm and live as far as possible from people ... why does he think he can just socialise?'<sup>44</sup> A journalist, who was also present, wrote:

I am left pondering the psychology of a man who would turn up to hear his own terrible history dissected in public. In Jacob Dlamini's superb account of apartheid's collaborators, *Askari*, he mentions several intriguing facts about De Kock: that he was 'unhinged' by his pre-Vlakplaas experiences in the notorious Koevoet military unit; that he took anti-anxiety medication. These facts, while interesting, don't help me ... should I be speculating about his motives, when that places the focus on the perpetrator rather than his many victims?<sup>45</sup>

One of the most moving pieces, however, was written by Palesa Morudu, a publisher. Her brother had been strangled by the security police, his body tied to a pole and blown up with explosives, so that his bones could never be

42 E. Swanepoel, 'SA is baie vreemd vir De Kock, sê skrywer', *Netwerk24*, 30 August 2015, <http://www.netwerk24.com/Nuus/Misdaad/SA-is-baie-vreemd-vir-De-Kock-se-skrywer-20150830> (accessed 31 August 2017).

43 N.A. 'Not welcome: Thabiso Mahlape and Lauren Beukes on Eugene de Kock's presence at the Sunday Times Literary Awards shortlist event', *Books Live*, 15 May 2016, <http://bookslive.co.za/blog/2016/05/15/not-welcome-thabiso-mahlape-and-lauren-beukes-on-eugene-de-kocks-presence-at-the-sunday-times-literary-awards-shortlist-event/> (accessed 30 August 2017).

44 N.A. 'Not welcome: Thabiso Mahlape and Lauren Beukes on Eugene de Kock's presence at the Sunday Times Literary Awards shortlist event'.

45 R. Davis, 'Least stealthy assassin ever: Why was Eugene de Kock at the Franschoek Literary Festival?', *Mail & Guardian*, 20 May 2016, <https://mg.co.za/article/2016-05-20-00-why-did-de-kock-put-in-an-appearance-at-the-franschhoek-literary-festival> (accessed 30 August 2017).

found.<sup>46</sup> Her mother, desperate to know what had happened to her son, had visited De Kock in prison, and he delivered. Without knowing who she was, De Kock sat down next to Palesa during the discussion of Jansen's book. Both victim and perpetrator cried softly and privately during the discussion. Afterwards they spoke. De Kock remembered the encounter with her mother. 'I'm glad I could help', he said. 'I am completely conflicted', she wrote.

While De Kock walks the earth, I hope that if he does nothing else, he helps many more families who are yet to find closure. There are many who would like to know where they can find the bones of their loved ones, if only in a symbolic sense. De Kock is a free man. His presence at Franschhoek caused some to elicit moral outrage. I have a different take. If you walk, talk and drink in the same space as Neil Barnard, F.W. de Klerk, Pik Botha and their ilk, add Eugene de Kock to your list. He was their foot soldier. He took the proverbial bullet. Apartheid was prime evil; De Kock was simply its loyal servant. You can't be morally outraged by De Kock and not be morally outraged by De Klerk, or the devastation apartheid brought to black South Africans. So as Shakespeare might have said, screw your courage to the sticking place. And again, I ask, who was it who truly screwed South Africa? A brutal apartheid cop, or those who gave the orders?<sup>47</sup>

### Symbols and Biography

The De Kock incident made it clear that the acceptance of a biography complicating an individual does not necessarily translate into an acceptance of the individual himself. To some degree, the individual as symbol trumps the individual as biographical subject, which is not an invalid response. Biographies and symbols co-exist, even if this relationship is tense at times. Biography, in its quest for understanding, does not justify or excuse, but between sensitivity towards victims on the one hand, and the rough and tumble of public discourse on the other, much of that understanding is lost, and people may react

46 P. Morudu, 'Remember the past and question the present', *Business Day*, 29 October 2013, <https://www.businesslive.co.za/bd/opinion/columnists/2013-10-29-remember-the-past-and-question-the-present/> (accessed 30 August 2017).

47 P. Morudu, 'Eugene de Kock at the Franschhoek Literary Festival: Of screwed courage and a screwed country', *Daily Maverick*, 16 May 2016, <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2016-05-16-eugene-de-kock-at-the-franschhoek-literary-festival-of-screwed-courage-and-a-screwed-country/#.WabLkcjHIU> (accessed 30 August 2017).

viscerally to the discomfort that biographers try to evoke. One may argue that this is the nature of public opinion, but it is often public interest and public discourse that stimulate interest in prominent individuals and the urge to understand them in the first place.

We, as scholars, are faced with demands to answer to the public discourse, and in this sense, because of the genre's popularity, I would posit that biographers find themselves in the front line. Returning to my own experience, even I may claim to have distanced myself from public discourse while writing my book, but I am still a member of the society about which I write. My place in society shapes the questions I ask and I am, therefore, not removed from my environment. For this reason, I cannot make any claims to objectivity. Yet, reducing oneself and one's work to a mere product of one's environment would be simplistic. In the same manner that biographical subjects are both unique and representative of their times, so also do biographers tread the line between their context and the human capacity to reach beyond the self. Above all, there is the scholarly apparatus. It serves as both an anchor and a beacon, and it holds the biographer accountable.

## References

- Chernick, I. (2015) and S. Manda, 'Was Gandhi a racist?', *IOL News*, 14 April 2015, <http://www.iol.co.za/news/crime-courts/was-gandhi-a-racist-1.1844758#.Va5ZWvkiIU>.
- Clingman, S. (2013), *Bram Fischer: Afrikaner Revolutionary*, 2nd ed. (Johannesburg).
- Davidson, A. (2003), *Cecil John Rhodes and his Time* (Pretoria).
- Davis, R. (2016), 'Least stealthy assassin ever: Why was Eugene de Kock at the Franschhoek Literary Festival?', *Mail & Guardian*, 20 May 2016, <https://mg.co.za/article/2016-05-20-00-why-did-de-kock-put-in-an-appearance-at-the-franschhoek-literary-festival>.
- De Kock L. (2015), 'An era in which fact is more desired than fiction', *Mail & Guardian*. Online. <http://mg.co.za/article/2015-07-23-an-era-in-which-fact-is-more-desired-than-fiction>.
- Dlamini, J. (2014), *Askari: A Story of Collaboration and Betrayal in the Anti-Apartheid Struggle* (Johannesburg).
- Dlamini, J. (2015), 'Life Choices and South African biography', *Kronos*, vol. 41, 339–346.
- Dlamini, J. (2014), 'De Kock can help state bring apartheid criminals to justice', *Business Day*, 7 February 2014, <https://www.pressreader.com/south-africa/business-day/20140207/281509339073773>.
- Dublin, S. (2006), *Transforming Museums: Mounting Queen Victoria in a Democratic South Africa* (New York).

- Foster, D. (2015), 'After Rhodes Fell: The new movement to Africanize South Africa', *The Atlantic*, 25 April 2015, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/04/after-rhodes-fell-south-africa-statue/391457/>.
- Giliomee, H. (2003), 'Rediscovering and Re-imagining the Afrikaners in a New South Africa: Autobiographical Notes on Writing an Uncommon Biography', *Itinerario*, vol. 27, 3-4, 9-48.
- Gobodo-Madikizela, P. (2003), *A Human Being Died that Night: A Story of Forgiveness* (Cape Town).
- Gobodo-Madikizela, P. (2010), 'Towards an anatomy of violence', *Mail & Guardian*, 15 January 2010, <https://mg.co.za/article/2010-01-15-towards-an-anatomy-of-violence>.
- Grant-Marshall, S. (2015), 'Tracing lost history through De Kock', *Business Day*, 24 July 2015, <https://www.pressreader.com/south-africa/business-day/20150724/281943131578463>.
- Hlongwane, S. (2010), 'Did Nelson Mandela sell out?', *Mail & Guardian – Thought Leader*, 10 March 2010, <http://thoughtleader.co.za/siphohlongwane/2010/03/10/did-nelson-mandela-sell-out/>.
- Hofmeyr, S. (2014), 'n Vermensliking van die Afrikaner se strydrosse', *Netwerk24*, 11 April 2014, <http://www.netwerk24.com/Vermaak/Boeke/n-Vermensliking-van-Afrikaner-se-strydrosse-20140414>.
- Jansen, A. (2015), *Eugene de Kock: Assassin for the State* (Cape Town).
- Kenny, A. (2001), *The History of the Rhodes Trust, 1902–1999* (Oxford).
- Koorts, L. (2014), *DF Malan and the Rise of Afrikaner Nationalism* (Cape Town).
- Koorts, L. (2016), 'C.R. Swart was 'n teenstrydige figuur', *Netwerk24*, 25 February 2016, <http://www.netwerk24.com/Stemme/Menings/lindie-koorts-cr-swart-was-n-teenstrydige-figuur-20160225>.
- Krog, A. (2015), 'Can an Evil Man Change? The Repentance of Eugene de Kock', *The New York Times*, 13 March 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/14/opinion/sunday/the-repentance-of-eugene-de-kock-apartheid-assassin.html?mcubz=0>.
- Landman, C. (2014), 'Nuwe boek oor DF Malan belig eietydse Afrikanerprobleme', *Praag*, 27 May 2014, <http://praag.co.za/?p=24644>.
- Makhanya, M. (2014), 'Book review – Insight into a champion of Afrikaner Nationalism', *City Press*, 27 April 2014, <http://www.news24.com/Archives/City-Press/Book-review-Insight-into-a-champion-of-Afrikaner-nationalism-20150430>.
- Maylam, P. (2005), *The Cult of Rhodes: Remembering an Imperialist in Africa* (Cape Town).
- Morudu, P. (2013), 'Remember the past and question the present', *Business Day*, 29 October 2013, <https://www.businesslive.co.za/bd/opinion/columnists/2013-10-29-remember-the-past-and-question-the-present/>.
- Morudu, P. (2016), 'Eugene de Kock at the Franschhoek Literary Festival: Of screwed courage and a screwed country', *Daily Maverick*, 16 May 2016, <https://www.daily>



- maverick.co.za/article/2016-05-16-eugene-de-kock-at-the-franschhoek-literary-festival-of-screwed-courage-and-a-screwed-country/#.WabLkcgjHIU.
- N.A. (2015), 'The best books of 2015: Sunday Times book reviewers choose their top reads of the year', *Books Live*, 7 December 2015, <http://bookslive.co.za/blog/2015/12/07/the-best-books-of-2015-sunday-times-book-reviewers-choose-their-top-reads-of-the-year/>.
- N.A. (2016), 'Not welcome: Thabiso Mahlape and Lauren Beukes on Eugene de Kock's presence at the Sunday Times Literary Awards shortlist event', *Books Live*, 15 May 2016, <http://bookslive.co.za/blog/2016/05/15/not-welcome-thabiso-mahlape-and-lauren-beukes-on-eugene-de-kocks-presence-at-the-sunday-times-literary-awards-shortlist-event/>.
- N.A. (2016), 'The 2016 Sunday Times Alan Paton Award longlist', *Books Live*, 4 April 2016, <http://bookslive.co.za/blog/2016/04/04/the-2016-sunday-times-alan-paton-award-longlist/>.
- O'Toole, S. (2011), 'Where apartheid statues go to die', *Mail & Guardian*, 17 June 2011, <https://mg.co.za/article/2011-06-17-finding-verwoerd-lifting-the-lid-on-dustbin-of-history>.
- Roberts, B. (1988), *Cecil Rhodes: Flawed Colossus* (New York, 1988).
- Scholtz, H. (2015), 'Eugene se stem het haar bekoor', *Netwerk24*, 22 March 2015, <http://www.netwerk24.com/Nuus/Misdaad/Eugene-se-stem-het-haar-bekoor-20150322#>.
- Smith, D. (2015), 'De Klerk's paradoxical presence', *Mail & Guardian*, 13 February 2015, <https://mg.co.za/article/2015-02-12-de-klerks-paradoxical-presence>.
- Swanepoel, E. (2015), 'SA is baie vreemd vir De Kock, sê skrywer', *Netwerk24*, 30 August 2015, <http://www.netwerk24.com/Nuus/Misdaad/SA-is-baie-vreemd-vir-De-Kock-se-skrywer-20150830>.
- Thamm, M. (2015), 'One woman's extraordinary journey: Je suis Eugene de Kock', *Daily Maverick*, 4 May 2015, <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2015-05-04-one-womans-extraordinary-journey-je-suis-eugene-de-kock/#.Waaq68gjHIU>.
- Van der Leun, J. (2015), 'The odd couple: Why an apartheid activist joined forces with a murderer', *The Guardian*, 6 June 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/global/2015/jun/06/odd-couple-apartheid-activist-madeleine-fullard-convicted-policeman-eugene-de-kock>.
- Wa Azania, M. (2015), 'I was not liberated by Mandela', *Sunday Independent*, 19 July 2015, <http://www.iol.co.za/sundayindependent/i-was-not-liberated-by-mandela-1887330>.

# 'Your Surroundings Don't Make You; You Must Rise above all that'

*The Home in Life Histories as Site of Resistance to Racial Violence, Cape Town, South Africa*

*Elena Moore*

## Introduction

In order to find out more about the individual in African history and the importance of biography in African historical studies, this chapter focuses on the individuals' responses to everyday political, spatial, social, and economic violence at the micro level. The socio-biographical approach attempts to understand the role of social forces in shaping human behaviour, but also emphasises the viewpoint that biographies make society and are not merely made by it.<sup>1</sup> Whilst recognising that the life history method has drawbacks, including the limitations of conscious memory and difficulties of corroboration, this chapter is based on the memories, events, and the experiences of the past, and the stories people narrate about these experiences in the present.

This approach is particularly important given the methodological concerns with the data collection approach adopted by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), established to investigate apartheid atrocities. Andrews argued that the stories of 22,000 South Africans shared as part of the TRC were heavily influenced by a 'very blunt research tool'.<sup>2</sup> While the TRC acted in a capacity to advance national reconciliation, not everyone who wanted to give testimony before the TRC was allowed to do so. Field argued that for generations of Coloured residents of Cape Town, memories and emotions associated with forced removals during apartheid can be carried forward to the present.<sup>3</sup> Mohammed and Ratele argued that the TRC tended to focus on the more

---

1 M. Rustin, 'Reflections on the Biographical Turn in Social Science', in P. Chamberlayne, J. Bornat, and T. Wengraf (eds), *The Turn to Biographical Methods in Social Science: Comparative Issues and Examples*, (London, 2000), 46.

2 M. Andrews, *Shaping History: Narratives of Political Change* (Cambridge, 2007), 157.

3 S. Field, 'Fragile Identities: Memory, Emotion and Coloured Residents of Windermere', in Z. Erasmus (ed.), *Coloured by History, Shaped by Place: New Perspectives on Coloured Identities in Cape Town* (Cape Town, 2001), 98.

dramatic or salient narratives of apartheid atrocities ... thereby [it] effectively (albeit, perhaps, unintentionally) foreclosed the possibility of an exploration of the more quotidian but pervasive, and no less significant, manifestations of apartheid abuse means that much of the details of apartheid racism had not been publicly acknowledged or assessed.<sup>4</sup>

This chapter attempts to fill some of the gaps by revealing the emotions and efforts experienced to resist everyday forms of violence at the micro level. The families were sampled from a mixture of social networks, advertisements in local newspapers, and newsletters, and snowballing techniques.

In order to situate the lived experiences within the historical and social context, in-depth life history interviews were conducted. The data were collected in 2011 and 2012. The study included a visual methods component, whereby the participant was requested to select between five and ten images that characterized aspects of her/his experience of personal relationships.<sup>5</sup> Images, photos, and other material were selected and these data speak of particular relationships, forms of violence, and resistance. The selected images and subsequent explanation and discussion provide an additional source of data that enriches the researcher's understanding of the participants' experience of violence. For example, a photo selected by one participant (Wilma), taken in 1986, displayed a medium-sized swimming pool in the back garden of Wilma's house in a designated Coloured<sup>6</sup> area in Cape Town. In the photo, several children were splashing in the pool as they enjoyed a warm summer's day. Wilma, a 58-year-old respondent, had selected the photo as an image that characterized aspects of her experience of political violence as she explained:

They put signs up, 'Whites Only' and we just saw the signs going up and the police would patrol the beaches. So that's why when we extended our house we put in a pool, so my kids could learn how to swim. They don't

4 K. Mohamed and K. Ratele, 'Where My Dad Was From He Was Quite a Respected Man', *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, 18:3 (2012), 284.

5 L. Fenge, K. Jones, and R. Read, 'Connecting Participatory Methods in a Study of Older Lesbian and Gay Citizens in Rural Areas', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 9:4 (2010), 325.

6 For more see M. Adhikari, 'From Narrative of Miscegenation to Post-Modernist Re-Imagining: Toward a Historiography of Coloured Identity in South Africa', *African Historical Review*, 40 (2008), 77–100.

like the sea water because I had to explain to them ‘you cannot go to the beaches, you’re not allowed to go.’<sup>7</sup>

The building of a swimming pool in her house was a private response to the political and spatial violence Wilma experienced in Cape Town in the 1970s. Most scholarship on the effects of apartheid on family life has argued that apartheid violence resulted in lost communities,<sup>8</sup> fragmented families,<sup>9</sup> assaulted childhoods,<sup>10</sup> and profound shifts and dislocations in family practices<sup>11</sup> and gender ideologies.<sup>12</sup> Unlike much of this work, which focuses on how families experienced the political struggles and violence outside the home, this chapter focuses on the ways in which Coloured families in Cape Town, during the period 1950–2015, responded to violence through everyday family practices in the home.

Experiences of discrimination and segregation have not gone away in the post-apartheid era, they continue to haunt many Coloured citizens, affecting the ways in which they experience violence. Kesslerling stated that when systemic violence is endemic in a society, its traces will continue to shape the political sphere long after the violence has ended.<sup>13</sup> In 2004, Wilma erected a large wall in front of her house. High walls that protect families and home life in middle-class suburbia in Cape Town are common. One might think that the high wall is a way of protecting herself, her family, and her possessions from burglaries, a violation of a secure personal space. For Wilma, high walls are not a means of preventing potential burglaries but point to the social organisation

7 The interviews with Wilma Pietersen cited in this chapter were conducted on 30 and 31 October 2011.

8 S. Field (ed.), *Lost Communities, Living Memories: Remembering Forced Removals in Cape Town* (Cape Town, 2001).

9 C. Murray, *Families Divided: The Impact of Migrant Labour in Lesotho* (Cambridge, 1981); M. Ramphele, *A Bed Called Home: Life in the Migrant Labour Hostels of Cape Town* (Athens, OH, [etc.], 1993).

10 S. Burman and P. Reynolds, *Growing Up in a Divided City: The Contexts of Childhood in South Africa* (Johannesburg, 1986); S. Jones, *Assaulting Childhood: Children's Experiences of Migrancy and Hostel Life in South Africa* (Johannesburg, 1993).

11 A. Spiegel, V. Watson, and P. Wilkinson, ‘Domestic Diversity and Fluidity Among Some African Households in Greater Cape Town’, *Social Dynamics: A Journal of African Studies*, 22:1 (1996), 7–30.

12 M. Ramphele, ‘The Dynamics of Gender Politics in the Hostels of Cape Town: Another Legacy of the South African Migrant Labour System’, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 15:3 (1989), 393–414.

13 R. Kesslerling, *Law, Memory, and Emancipation in Post-Apartheid South Africa* (Chicago, IL, 2016).

of relationships with the neighbours. As she explained, 'we built the wall higher because we just felt that we didn't want to see them (neighbours)'. By building the wall, Wilma actively moulded the physical surroundings in order to create an appropriate environment for everyday home life. The construction of the wall was the response to contemporary racialised violence that occurred ten years after apartheid ended.

Despite the many descriptions of oppression and violence, this chapter is not primarily concerned with loss, victimhood, and the 'struggle for a home'. On the contrary, I argue that notwithstanding the conditions of having been forcefully removed, and being subjected to ongoing spatial and racial violence by white South Africans during and beyond apartheid, the people interviewed for this research responded with resistance and engaged in a wide range of everyday activities in challenging violence. In doing so, we see how notions of class, race, and respectability interacted in a highly racialised society. For example, Wilma and Charlton at times struggled to negotiate a way between competing systems, including Islamic notions of respectability. In what follows, I discuss two specific cases, Wilma and Charlton, a married couple, to outline the private responses to everyday forms of violence.

### **Wilma Pietersen**

Wilma is a warm, talkative, married woman in her early sixties. Born and raised in Cape Town, she described herself as a proud 'Coloured'. In response to my opening narrative-inducing question, Wilma stated 'well I think what matters to me the most is where I was born'. Wilma proceeded to describe her early childhood. She was born in the early 1950s and grew up in the inner city of Cape Town. She had eleven siblings. Her mother 'had the babies' and her father worked four jobs. There were clear levels of economic hardship and poverty, which is reflected in the expressive retelling of how they resisted the economic constraints they experienced during this period by relying on a credit system offered by the local shopkeeper: 'when mommy didn't have enough money to put [something] on our bread for the next day, we would go to the Indian shop and he had what they called a bookie system. And he would put my mom's name down ... and at the end of the month she pays him for it'. Wilma's portrayal of her early childhood minimised the economic hardships. Instead, she stressed how, in her community, people supported each other and established relationships of trust. In her telling, she prioritised and explained that these relationships were inter-ethnic, inter-faith, and inter-racial relationships. She described this as 'we all lived together as one big family'. Life was lived on the

streets and involved playing and engaging with neighbours and the community. The cultural diversity of the inner city neighbourhoods created a place where different habits, values, and cultures were learned as Wilma recalled:

I was surrounded by all the cultures. I was part of it, all the events that would happen from the gangster fights to the live shows. It was, we were accepted. I sat by that table and you learn to eat with your hands and you learn their cultures. I had a very close Muslim friend and her dad would say the afternoon and evening prayers in the mosque and I was allowed – she would take me right up to the Tarot and we would listen to her dad say the prayers.

These findings echo arguments presented by Field who wrote that:

the cultural activities of Windermere-Kensington (Cape Town) helped residents survive the harsh economic and political circumstances of the area financially and emotionally – these activities were like creative webs that made daily life more meaningful and at times more enjoyable.<sup>14</sup>

Swanson and Harries wrote how District Six was ‘renowned for the cosmopolitan mix of its residents, a melting pot of cultures including people descended from freed slaves, Africans, European immigrants from Ireland and Jews from Eastern Europe’.<sup>15</sup> Wilma’s narrative swings between evocative depiction of hardship and the positive warm relationships in the community. In doing so, she managed to convince the listener that the location of her home, a place of rich ethnic diversity where strong relationships were forged, triumphed over physical hardships exerted by the apartheid state.

The home is one of the first places where Wilma learnt how to actively resist political violence. She described how, during her early years, anti-apartheid protests were common and that, as a young school girl, she witnessed several violent demonstrations: ‘I remember standing outside my house, and my brother said to me “Wilma, take this thumb and you do this [stuck up her thumb] and you say Izwe lethu iAfrica [Africa our Country]” and I still remember that’. Exposure to political violence was met with resistance as Wilma, as a young girl, learned to protest on the steps of her home.

<sup>14</sup> Field, ‘Fragile Identities’, 36.

<sup>15</sup> F. Swanson and J. Harries, “Ja! So was District Six! But It Was a Beautiful Place”: Oral Histories, Memory and Identity’, in Field, *Lost Communities*, 63.

Wilma explained how her parents actively raised her to challenge the political violence exerted by the apartheid state, as she described how her parents taught her and her siblings to be proud of their identity:

The way I was raised I think I'm much stronger for that ... we didn't feel sorry for ourselves. We did not blame our parents for this, because they had no voice at that time. But they instilled in us that we do have a voice.

In response to the dominant discursive power the parents provided a counter-discourse of collective identities circulating at the time. Reddy argued that such dominant narratives made it possible to legislate individual identity along racial and ethnic lines.<sup>16</sup> Over fifteen years, some 60,000 people were to be uprooted from their homes, and Wilma's family was to be engulfed in this process. Swanson and Harries wrote that the greater part of District Six was declared an area of white settlement on 11 February 1966, in accordance with the Group Areas Act 1950 – it was the largest and oldest suburb in Cape Town.<sup>17</sup> Wilma told how her father received a 'letter' from the government and how her family was forced to move. Wilma and her family responded to the removal order by refusing to move to the townships. Instead, her father called for support from the family and built their own house in the Riverside region, which was declared a Coloured area in 1958:

[h]e couldn't see us moving to the townships. He didn't find it was right for his family. Because that's what the government told him 'you must move to the townships Bonteheuwel, Lavender Hill, Mannenberg and so on'. And my dad had saved a few pennies he'd earned – he had four jobs a day and he had saved. And he bought a piece of ground in Riverside and he built us a house. And my sister and I, we were doing our fourth years, and he said to us would we mind to stop our fourth years? He needs us to go and teach because he needs to build this house and it was only him working and I had three younger siblings. So my sister and I left teaching, left college, and we went to teach in Bonteheuwel and we had helped our dad and brick by brick – we would go help weekends and just help where we could, so we wouldn't have to pay for labour.

16 T. Reddy, 'The Politics of Naming: The Constitution of Coloured Subjects in South Africa', in Erasmus, *Coloured by History, Shaped by Place*, 77.

17 Swanson, and Harries, "Ja! So was District Six", 62.

Thus, Wilma and her family, together with the extended family, through their collective support, built a home away from the townships. The challenge directed by the apartheid state was not surmountable but it was resisted, and the home to which her family moved after the forced relocation in 1973 was a place built by way of family and community solidarity.

In setting up her own home, as a young married woman, Wilma faced ongoing challenges that curtailed the location of her house. Wilma and Charlton, who had married in the late 1970s and had been working for three years, were able to save enough to buy a plot of land and, unlike her father, pay for builders to build a house. Wilma and Charlton moved into their new house, a few doors away from her parents in Riverside: 'There were limited choices available to Coloured individuals. We were limited to areas that we could buy. We could only buy near the railway lines or they put you near to the bridge'.

Despite being limited in their choice of location, Wilma and Charlton thoroughly enjoyed living in their community. They had two children in the following four years and remained in the neighbourhood until the mid-1990s. Wilma described how she was able to 'get back' some sense of community she had enjoyed in District Six:

We were such a community. Everybody knew everybody and everybody's business, but in a good way. 'Oh, Elaine is getting married' and we would run and help. We had so much heart for one another. We reached out to each other, we supported each other. We encouraged each other, we cried with each other, we laughed with each other.

Just like Paulse described in a part of Sea Point, in another area of Cape Town, in the 1950s, extended family helped out when people needed a loan or assistance with a job.<sup>18</sup> Wilma explained how she went to a friend, neighbour, or relative to borrow items such as sugar and rice. By forging close relations with neighbours, and relying on neighbours for practical support, some individuals were able to overcome the economic marginalisation they were subjected to.

Later in her life, during the late 1990s, Wilma and Charlton decided to move to the northern suburbs of Cape Town, a place where her father had taken her and her siblings as a child. The choice of location for Wilma was deeply personal and political as it was a response to the spatial restrictions she had encountered in her earlier years:

---

18 M. Paulse, "Everyone Had Their Differences but There Was Always Comradeship": Tramway Road, Sea Point, 1920s–1961', in Field, *Lost Communities*, 48.





MAP 2.1 Cape Town

This is where my dad took us to the beach. We were limited to beaches we could go to and my dad would drive all the way to here. Every New Year's Day he would bring us, just to put our feet in the water. And that is why this place has, regardless of, of what this surrounding neighbourhood is like. And this is what I remember about this place.

At this point in her life, Wilma had retired from teaching and she spent more time at home. However, upon arrival, she and her family encountered racial violence from local white South Africans. The neighbourhood was characterised as a place of risk. As she explained: '... everybody who is Coloured who lives in Riebeecksville is [coloured], says you come from Houghton.<sup>19</sup> I was called scum, my daughter and I were called whores because we [were] from Houghton. Not knowing who we are – knowing nothing about us'.

Wilma's response to the racial violence was to challenge it by trying to engage with the community through volunteer work at the local school. As she told the story of another violent attack by white South Africans, Wilma pointed to a picture hanging on her wall. In the picture, she, and her husband, accompanied by her son, Ricky, and his friend stood around a table which was set for dinner. There were candles, a runner, linen napkins, wine glasses, everyone was smiling. As she pointed to the image, in a voice full of grief and anguish, she tearfully said: '... this was the last memorable and happy occasion and little did we know that as we stood there that two weeks later it would turn out the way it turned out. And Ricky [son] never came back to Cape Town for three years after that'.

A few days after that meal took place, Wilma's son was attacked on the road by whites and her husband was also injured when he tried to defend his son. The neighbours had gestured at her son and a fight ensued. In a very upsetting retelling of the events Wilma described:

We had a very unpleasant incident. He [Wilma's son] had gone out with his car and the neighbours' son and friends stopped him and assaulted him and beat him up. My husband, Charlton, ran out to stop the fight and he was beaten up too. It was quite sensational.

As mentioned earlier in the chapter, the high walls in front of Wilma's house were erected shortly after the incident: this was her response to the violence.

---

<sup>19</sup> Houghton is a town on the outskirts of Cape Town. Nowadays, it has approximately 200,000 residents. The area has high levels of poverty and unemployment. It was established during the apartheid era as a community for Coloureds.

The garden used to stretch from the sitting room window right onto the street, but Wilma described how the home had become a place of marginalisation and 'that is why we built the wall higher because we just felt that we didn't want to see them [neighbours]'. She felt guilty about leaving the volunteering position in the school. No one from the community contacted her or her family after the incident.

Seven years after the violent incident, Wilma talked about continuing to live in a hostile environment, where the neighbours' guests parked on her lawn when they had their weekly parties. They damaged her flower beds and even urinated against her wall. Wilma described plentiful examples of informal segregation and marginalisation in Riebeeckville. Despite several years of conflict and unrest, Wilma's response to the violence was noteworthy:

This is where I live, and this is where I sit, and this is where I am. I like where I am. I like who I am at the present moment and I have inner peace and contentment within myself. That's why I don't see the rest, I just ignore it.

Wilma recognised the contradiction between her desire for ethnically mixed vibrant community life and the reality of being trapped in a community that held conservative and racialised views. In order to reconcile this tension, she prioritised aspects of her current positioning that she was denied in the past: 'Space, garden, those are the things we did not have. It was taken from us but we brought it back into our own lives. We've never forgotten what we had – we brought it back into our own lives.' As Wilma adjusted her physical surroundings she preserved herself from violence. The home now, albeit behind high walls, was the place reclaimed.

Charlton and I love our garden – that's what we look for, from the ladybird to the mother doves, she's got the eggs she's protecting and that. And those are the things we did not have. It was taken from us but we brought it back into our own lives. We've never forgotten what we had. You actually enjoy this quietness. You enjoy this calmness around you. Like yesterday was such a beautiful day, so quiet, just the birds singing. And that is what you just get to accept as you go on in life. It cannot be taken away.

The garden and peace she created was a response to the racial violence she experienced after the formal abolition of apartheid. She spoke about the qualities that she was drawn to, the ladybird, the singing bird, and the flowers. The bird offered her encouragement, reminders, and consoling thoughts, as she

went about sustaining family life in a community where she felt estranged. The 'struggle for a home' was thus connected with a need to stabilise and organise complex selves that are located in an ongoing social context of violence. In Wilma's case, the location and physical home was a response to the violence:

We wanted to move [after the attack] but, uhm, you know once again, the way I was raised – I said to Charlton 'We've gone through worse than this. We are going to stay on here, we are not going to move'. This is where we wanted to be, this is where we are entitled to be. We can live wherever we want to and we are going to stay and he stayed put. And we are still here today.

### Charlton Pietersen

Charlton is Wilma's husband and he is a softly spoken 60-year-old who has been working in the same financial institution for over 30 years. In Charlton's story, he presents a picture of growing up in 'harsh economic living conditions in a sub-economic area'. Charlton was the eldest of eight children. He was born in Rainside, another area of Cape Town. As a six-year-old, Charlton took on extra cleaning jobs after school and endured long, early morning queues for food that he got from SHAWCO.<sup>20</sup> Finding additional sources of income and supporting the household was a necessary response to the economic violence exerted by the apartheid state. His response to the challenges experienced as a young boy was to step up as the oldest son and take responsibility:

... being the eldest boy and with my dad being out of home, I had to do a lot of caring and maintaining of the household and so I also helped his mom to rear the children and so you know, it was quite a bit of having to mature quite early in my life to assist with that responsibilities.<sup>21</sup>

Charlton's father worked long hours to support the family, and Charlton referred to the father as 'being away a lot'. Despite this, Charlton recalled how his father talked to them about the political situation as a way of challenging and providing a counter-narrative to what his children were hearing and

<sup>20</sup> SHAWCO is the Student Health and Welfare Community Organisation that was set up in 1943. During the apartheid era, the student volunteer organisations ran health and welfare projects in areas of Cape Town.

<sup>21</sup> All quotes in this section come from this interview, held on 7 June 2012.

experiencing on a daily basis: 'on Friday evenings, he [father] would talk to us about politics and the struggle. So that helped us and I think that is where we were switched on politically and academically'.

Charlton also spoke about the notorious gangs of the area and how he devised ways of protecting himself from them, including by learning Karate and Judo. In his life story, he narrated different forms of violence that he was exposed to including violence on the streets:

You find your biggest gangsters were there – your Mongrels and the Caspers and those were gangs that even for now are fearsome in these areas. So you had to fight your way through. And I remember one day coming home – my father was by the gate and this guy got hold of me and the next minute, you know because I had things in my hand. He hit me on my face and I chipped my tooth. And that's the other thing, my parents, because of the circumstances we were forced to do Judo and Karate so we could defend ourselves to a margin at least. But anyway, I got beaten and my father saw everything and I said, 'but why didn't you intervene?' and he said 'I wanted to see if you can defend yourself!' I remember that at that time we didn't have the money so at that time I had to work with a tooth nerve hanging for weeks and months before [I could get it fixed] – that to me shows you the intense struggle.

The struggle and experience of violence continued as he became a parent. Charlton and Wilma chose to send their child to a private racially mixed school,<sup>22</sup> which had multiple consequences on their children and home life in the community:

I think that getting them into a mixed school at that time, it was difficult because when your child went to a mixed school in that time, in a Coloured area, you got frowned upon because it's like you are working with the whites. You are with the system. And my son got a couple of hidings and had a mouthful of blood, somebody knocked him. Actually, it was a set-up because the teachers knew about it and probably said he comes from that home. So, I think that, that was also part of the struggle, but if you think up to now, although you've won the war we are still fighting the battle.

---

22 During apartheid, there were a few private schools which were racially mixed. For more see J. Hyslop, *The Classroom Struggle: Policy and Resistance in South Africa 1940–1990* (Pietmaritzburg, 1999).

Thus, violence was being exerted by community members and the apartheid state in different ways and Charlton's response to such violence was to look beyond the immediate suffering. For the most part, the state controlled where you lived, but the state could not control *all* the relationships that occurred at that place, or the interaction between members of the community. In this way, the home sometimes provided an intimate place away from state control. Charlton spoke about how he actively encouraged and nurtured interracial friendships despite the risk it incurred:

I had lots of friends across the colour bar and we understood each other well and we met socially after work in each other's homes ... even in the height of the riots my friend [white friend] would still come to us. We were very close friends but the system separates you but there was the attraction that people attracted one another from a friendship perspective.

In addition, Charlton described how his home continued to be a place of more active political involvement and resistance. Field wrote that the children of first-generation residents of Windermere (which was declared a Coloured area) later fought political struggles against the apartheid state and engaged in the school boycotts of 1976, 1980, and 1985 in Cape Town.<sup>23</sup> Field described how this generation of students and workers from both African and Coloured group areas united to build anti-apartheid organisations such as the United Democratic Front (UDF), the Western Cape Youth League, and the Unit Movement in the 1980s. In this regard, Charlton described how political meetings and preparations for demonstrations took place in his home:

My brothers were very actively involved with the ANC, it was the UDF and uhm, and they were locked up quite a lot of times. They got caught for things like putting up posters throughout the night. All the banners were made in our front room.

Charlton recalled with amusement how there was a time when both rooms in the downstairs area of his house were promoting relationships that were, at the time in the early 1980s, risky or illegal:

---

<sup>23</sup> Field, *Lost Communities*, 43.

So you know we had a lot of mixed friends at that time already and it's often quite strange because often Johnny [white friend] used to come and visit us, and was sitting in the dining room, and in the lounge, we had Mr. Johnson [prominent ANC political figure] that was in hiding in the same house.

As Charlton and Wilma completed their child-rearing years, and as I described in Wilma's account above, the couple decided to move out of Railside and move closer to Wilma's parents. Charlton's account of the move sheds more light on the motivation for their move as they began to strive for a place of higher status:

We had to move out of the area because what was happening – the natural cycle where you move – some people in Railside move to perhaps better areas or more peaceful areas and others that come from sub-economical parts move to economical parts of Railside – so because of that cycle we also decided to move.

In contrast to his narrative as a younger man, decisions about where to locate his home, as a middle-aged man, were based around choices. He was motivated to move on as he wanted this phase in his life to be a time for developing new ways of living and re-creating home:

We wanted to move into something different, where we can stay for years and make it our home. And that is how Riebeeksville got onto our agenda as a residential area. It is quiet and away from the city. There is obviously a very different type of relationship here than we had in Railside.

Whilst Charlton had a desire to start afresh, after the era of apartheid, he would not escape ongoing forms of racial violence as he was faced with a lack of freedom; almost ten years after apartheid had ended. The racial violence experienced during the earlier years was being relived and Charlton had mixed feelings about how his neighbours continued to deny the power of the past. At the same time, the neighbours seemed to continue living in the past while ignoring the present, as Charlton highlighted:

So, some of them [neighbours] are still stuck in the wedge of the old mentality. 'This is our domain and we not accepting these new people' – that mentality – 'it's ours here' – so from that situation I think that we are

not experiencing the same community life that we had there but we have made this our home and we are pretty happy where we are.

Charlton's response to this racial violence by white South Africans was to 'move on' and understand it as being a result of a lack of education, knowledge and racial integration on the part of the perpetrating whites:

I think also a lot of them because they are underexposed – they often don't know your intellect and they can't enjoy you and you can't enjoy them. I think that we have moved on and I think we've had one incident and I think we've moved on as a family because obviously, it was quite a setback. And uhm, but we moved on and I think that we are happy where we are now.

In the same breath, Charlton conveyed his concerns for his wife as he stated 'I think that, to a large degree she could be very lonely here at times, because part of what I gather, there's no other network she has in this area'.

### The Home as a Site of Resistance

I met up again with Charlton and Wilma when Charlton had retired. The couple were caring for a granddaughter and a nephew and were enjoying their home and garden. In particular, Wilma found meaning in assisting with the care of the children. This experience had meaning for her in many ways, but most importantly it reaffirmed her need to be a strong family and part of a larger community: 'we still keep it together like our parents would've wanted it to be ... that is how we were raised ... always there for each other, that is what makes us strong South Africans'.

It is estimated that at least 3.9 million people were forcibly removed in South Africa between 1913 and 1983.<sup>24</sup> Field described how it is thought that many more people were removed, but this is the number of people who are thought to benefit from land restitution claims. Several studies have examined how economic and legislative control from 1879–1945 and the Group Areas Act of 1966 mapped out the contours of space for home life for African migrants,<sup>25</sup> specifically for African women<sup>26</sup> and for Coloureds in Cape Town

24 Field, *Lost Communities*, 11.

25 Ramphele, *A Bed Called Home*, 68–88.

26 R. Lee, *African Women and Apartheid: Migration and Settlement in South Africa* (London and New York, 2009), 45–85.



during apartheid.<sup>27</sup> In his work on memory, emotion, and Coloured residents in a community in Cape Town, Field focused on the significance of feelings of loss, hurt, and fear amongst the community members.<sup>28</sup> He outlined how a central theme in the respondents' stories was a struggle for a home.<sup>29</sup> Resonating with Wilma's account, Field argued that the places and spaces where people grew up created a sense of togetherness and belonging that was central to the construction of their identity. But much of the focus of the memory work conducted by Field focused on what was happening beyond the front door, and less is known about the home and how internal familial relationships were used to challenge political violence. Additionally, much of the literature on 'losing home' focuses on displacement,<sup>30</sup> loss of identity,<sup>31</sup> belonging,<sup>32</sup> and a loss of childhood or history.<sup>33</sup> The focus on loss tends to overlook the critical role the space (and the relationships forged there) plays in challenging the oppressor. This chapter therefore linked the political and private world more directly by examining how the private – specifically the home and intimate relationships – were used to develop responses to everyday violence throughout the life course.

During apartheid, spatial, political, and racial violence were extremely powerful forms of marginalisation, discrimination, and exclusion. The violence was used effectively to reinforce relations of power between the state and people of colour. Despite the strength of these forces, Coloured families involved in the research, challenged such violence, by drawing on the strength of the relationships and solidarity that were forged in their homes. More specifically, the home was used as an active site of resistance against such violence. The political space people carved out through the home and the scale of everyday resistance activity varied across their life course and often depended on experiences within different economic, social and historical contexts.

Thus, the struggle for a home and respectability demonstrated by Wilma and Charlton has a far deeper historical context. Ross argued that many

27 J. Western, *Outcast Cape Town*, (Berkeley, CA [etc.], 1996).

28 Field, *Fragile Identities*, 99.

29 *Ibid.*, 100.

30 Field, *Lost Communities*; A. Makhulu, *Making Freedom: Apartheid, Squatter Politics, and the Struggle for Home* (Durham, NC, 2015).

31 N. Rapport and A. Dawson, *Migrants of Identity: Perceptions of Home in a World of Movement* (London, 1996).

32 J. Higgins, 'Homes and Institutions', in G. Allan and G. Crow (eds), *Home and Family: Creating the Domestic Sphere* (Basingstoke, 1989).

33 Jones, *Assaulting childhood*; A. Hecht, 'Home Sweet Home: Tangible Memories of an Up-rooted Childhood', in D. Miller, (ed.), *Home Possessions: Material Culture behind Closed Doors* (London, 2001), 123–149.

'respectable' members of marginalised communities were opposing the efforts of their enemies to degrade them.<sup>34</sup> Wilma and Charlton's search for respectability as members of the middle classes of South Africa resonates with Ross's examination of how notions of class, race, and respectability interacted in a highly racialised society, throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth century.<sup>35</sup> As well-educated, gainfully employed individuals, they were able to resist living in poor public housing or in a township. Instead, Wilma and her family moved to private housing, which allowed them to eventually move to a middle-class suburb in the post-apartheid era. This has meant not only a different 'middle class' community experience, but also suffering the consequences of post-apartheid discrimination. In framing their stories as tales of resistance, the people concerned tell us about the challenges and injustices that existed, prioritising the ways in which they responded to these challenges and forms of violence. In doing so, they highlight how their home and family gave them the necessary capital to challenge the violence. In their later lives, they drew upon the values transmitted by their parents and communities, to deal with the injustices and instability they faced in the post-apartheid period. In fact, Wilma shared with us the lessons she had passed on to her children: 'I always drummed into them: your environment doesn't make you, your surrounding don't make you; you rise above all of that'.

Wilma and Charlton are a married couple, hence the descriptions presented in the chapter highlight the different ways for casting memories of the same events. There are several notable differences in the way they recalled the past and shared events. Despite the racial divisiveness that plagues South African history, both Wilma and Charlton call upon stories where people of diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds came together. In Wilma's case, these stories of solidarity within ethnically diverse communities were used as a way of highlighting the inter-ethnic and racial relations that the state destroyed. Charlton, on the other hand, prioritised stories of inter-racial friendships and inter-racial schooling experiences, which spoke against the divisiveness. But Wilma appeared to foreground what was lost through racial segregation and the disruption of social relations, whilst Charlton centred on how individuals resisted racial segregation. Moreover, Wilma and Charlton focused on different ways of resisting political and racial violence. Most notably, this is evident in the way in which the attack on their son was presented as a powerful illustration of the complex intertwining of the past and present. Charlton located the recent

---

34 R. Ross, *Status and Respectability in the Cape Colony 1750–1870: A Tragedy of Manners* (Cambridge, 1999).

35 *Ibid.*, 146–173.

personal experiences of racism in a broader political battle against racism that stretched beyond the community, where the war has been won but 'we' are still fighting battles. Charlton's avoidance of talking about the attack in detail, and the link to the racialised oppression experienced in the past, suggests an avoidance of recognising the current disruptive aspects of family life. Does he purposefully silence them in order to stop them have a crushing effect? In contrast, Wilma spoke at length about the personal impact of the racialised attack on her son, reworking distant childhood pasts and actively connecting them to the present to deal with pain and the abuse of the present. In doing so, she reclaimed her sense of dignity and respect, as well as invoking the memory of her father and mother who taught her 'we do have a voice'. Unlike the dominant narratives that point to an idealised post-apartheid rainbow nation, Wilma confronted the undeniable present and spoke the truth. The differences highlight the ways in which individuals construct past events and actions in personal narratives to claim identities and to construct lives. Wilma and Charlton recounted their shared histories, but what they emphasised and omitted shapes what they as individuals claim of their own lives.

### The Relevance of Life Histories

By highlighting the responses to political violence at the micro level, I try to contribute to a wider understanding of a 'struggle for a home' by demonstrating how the home and the relationships enjoyed at home, were the forms of capital drawn upon to win the struggle. The strong explanatory value of life histories is revealed in the ways in which Wilma and Charlton maintained continuity and a sense of coherence and collective identity in the face of social and political tension. This approach foregrounds the ways in which the personal is political and highlights the importance of looking not only at the state, but also at the family and the members within them to generate explanations of resistance to racial and political violence that changes over time in response to different pressures.

The author does not assume that the experienced event, the memory of the event, and the narration of the event in the present are the same. Rosenthal reminds us that the reconstruction of a life history and the presentation of past events is constituted by the present of narrating.<sup>36</sup> Memory is based on a

---

36 G. Rosenthal. 'The Narrated Life Story: On the Interrelation between Experience, Memory and Narration', in K. Milnes *et al.* (eds), *Narrative, Memory and Knowledge: Representations, Aesthetics and Contexts* (Huddersfield, 2006).

process of reproduction where the past is subject to constant revision, reinvention, and change, according to the situation of the present telling and the anticipated future.<sup>37</sup>

This is particularly relevant in the South African setting. As Mohammed and Ratele suggest, 'remembering an apartheid self in the present therefore contains the possibility of altering one's relationship to the past and therefore remake the imaginary of a future in which past traumas, such as internalized racism, have little possibility of flourishing'.<sup>38</sup> Although this chapter drew upon aspects of biographical narratives, the difference between the experienced event in the past and the recollection and narration of it is acknowledged.<sup>39</sup>

Whilst I would not argue that the home and family relationships are always characterised by solidarity (or can be characterised by solidarity for all), or can always be used to fight injustices, the above life histories demonstrate that it was the family, community, and homes that were critical in developing and enacting resistance to the violence exerted by the apartheid state. Field argues that a community-in-memory is usually shaped around the experience of loss, but the findings in this research argue that the community in memory is also shaped around the experience of resistance. I believe it is important to gather, hear, share, and understand these stories of individual and collective acts of resistance against political and racial violence.

## References

- Adhikari, M. (2008), 'From Narrative of Miscegenation to Post-Modernist Re-Imagining: Toward a Historiography of Coloured Identity in South Africa', *African Historical Review*, vol. 40, 77–100.
- Andrews, M. (2007), *Shaping History: Narratives of Political Change* (Cambridge).
- Burman, S. and P. Reynolds (1986), *Growing Up in a Divided City: The Contexts of Childhood in South Africa* (Johannesburg).
- Fenge, L., K. Jones, and R. Read (2010), 'Connecting Participatory Methods in a Study of Older Lesbian and Gay Citizens in Rural Areas', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, vol. 9, 320–333.

37 Rosenthal, 'The Narrated Life Story', 3.

38 Mohamed and Ratele, 'Where My Dad Was From', 283.

39 T. Wengraf, *Qualitative Research Interviewing, Biographic Narrative and Semi-Structured Methods* (London, 2001).

- Field, S. (2001), 'Fragile Identities: Memory, Emotion and Coloured Residents of Windermere', in Z. Erasmus (ed.), *Coloured by History, Shaped by Place: New Perspectives on Coloured Identities in Cape Town* (Cape Town), 97–133.
- Field, S. (ed.) (2001), *Lost Communities, Living Memories: Remembering Forced Removals in Cape Town* (Cape Town).
- Hecht, A. (2001), 'Home Sweet Home: Tangible Memories of an Uprooted Childhood', in D. Miller, (ed.), *Home Possessions: Material Culture behind Closed Doors* (London), 123–149.
- Higgins, J. (1989), 'Homes and Institutions', in G. Allan and G. Crow (eds), *Home and Family: Creating the Domestic Sphere* (Basingstoke), 159–173.
- Hyslop, J. (1999), *The Classroom Struggle: Policy and Resistance in South Africa 1940–1990* (Pietermaritzburg).
- Jones, S. (1993), *Assaulting Childhood: Children's Experiences of Migrancy and Hostel Life in South Africa* (Johannesburg).
- Kesselring, R. (2016), *Law, Memory, and Emancipation in Post-Apartheid South Africa* (Chicago, IL).
- Lee, R. (2009), *African Women and Apartheid: Migration and Settlement in South Africa* (London and New York).
- Makhulu, A. (2015), *Making Freedom: Apartheid, Squatter Politics, and the Struggle for Home* (Durham, NC).
- Mohamed, K. and K. Ratele (2012), 'Where My Dad Was From He Was Quite a Respected Man', *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, vol. 18, 282–293.
- Murray, C. (1981), *Families Divided: The Impact of Migrant Labour in Lesotho* (Cambridge).
- Paulse, M. (2001), "'Everyone Had Their Differences but There Was Always Comradeship": Tramway Road, Sea Point, 1920s–1961', in S. Field (ed.), *Lost Communities, Living Memories: Remembering Forced Removals in Cape Town* (Cape Town), 44–61.
- Ramphela, M. (1989), 'The Dynamics of Gender Politics in the Hostels of Cape Town: Another Legacy of the South African Migrant Labour System', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, vol. 15, 393–414.
- Ramphela, M. (1993), *A Bed Called Home: Life in the Migrant Labour Hostels of Cape Town* (Athens, OH, etc.).
- Rapport, N. and A. Dawson (1996), *Migrants of Identity: Perceptions of Home in a World of Movement* (London, 1996).
- Reddy, T. (2001), 'The Politics of Naming: The Constitution of Coloured Subjects in South Africa', in Z. Erasmus (ed.), *Coloured by History, Shaped by Place: New Perspectives on Coloured Identities in Cape Town* (Cape Town), 64–79.
- Rosenthal, G. (2006), 'The Narrated Life Story: On the Interrelation between Experience, Memory and Narration', in K. Milnes et al. (eds), *Narrative, Memory and Knowledge: Representations, Aesthetics and Contexts* (Huddersfield), 1–16.

- Ross, R. (1999), *Status and Respectability in the Cape Colony 1750–1870: A Tragedy of Manners* (Cambridge).
- Rustin, M. (2000), 'Reflections on the Biographical Turn in Social Science', in P. Chamberlayne, J. Bornat, and T. Wengraf (eds), *The Turn to Biographical Methods in Social Science: Comparative Issues and Examples*, (London), Ch. 1.
- Spiegel, A., V. Watson, and P. Wilkinson (1996), 'Domestic Diversity and Fluidity Among Some African Households in Greater Cape Town', *Social Dynamics: A Journal of African Studies*, vol. 22, 7–30.
- Swanson, F. and J. Harries (2001), "'Ja! So was District Six! But It Was a Beautiful Place": Oral Histories, Memory and Identity', in S. Field (ed.), *Lost Communities, Living Memories: Remembering Forced Removals in Cape Town* (Cape Town), 62–80.
- Wengraf, T. (2001), *Qualitative Research Interviewing, Biographic Narrative and Semi-Structured Methods* (London).
- Western, J. (1996), *Outcast Cape Town*, (Berkeley, CA).

## From Life Histories to Social History

### *Narrating Social Change through Multiple Biographies*

*Iva Peša*

Nyambanza Kaisala was born in Sailunga Chiefdom in 1905. Over the course of his adult life, Nyambanza had various jobs, which took him far away from his home village in Mwinilunga District, an area that was part of Northern Rhodesia and later Zambia's North-Western Province. Having worked as a cook for four years in Élisabethville (Lubumbashi), Congo, Nyambanza spent eight years working as a mine foreman in the same city. Thereafter, he continued his employment as a foreman, but he moved to Kolwezi, Congo, where he held a position for ten years. He worked for a further six years at Nkana mine (Kitwe) on the Northern Rhodesian Copperbelt, after which he returned to Mwinilunga to work as a government messenger for six months. Having left as a single migrant, Nyambanza married after his return from Congo and he took his wife with him to subsequent places of employment. While he was working, he visited his home village, but irregularly. Moreover, although he did return to Mwinilunga District after his retirement from the Copperbelt, he settled in the township, rather than in his village of birth.<sup>1</sup> In describing the 'modernist narrative', James Ferguson asserts that labour migration in Zambia followed several distinct phases, starting with the short-term circulatory labour migration of single men in the 1920s and shifting towards the permanent urbanisation of entire families in the 1950s and thereafter.<sup>2</sup> Nyambanza Kaisala's employment history defies such neat categorisations. Although Nyambanza was not a short-term 'circular migrant', he was also not 'permanently urbanised', as he continued to move from place to place during his 28.5 years of employment. As a labour migrant, Nyambanza straddled the single and married categories, and, due to loose but significant links to his home area, he was neither 'localist', nor

1 Rhodes House, Bodleian Library, Oxford, UK: (BOD) Richard Cranmer Denning Papers, 15 boxes, uncatalogued, notes from 1948. See also I. Peša, *Roads Through Mwinilunga: A History of Social Change in Northwest Zambia* (Leiden and Boston, 2019).

2 J. Ferguson, 'Mobile Workers, Modernist Narratives: A Critique of the Historiography of Transition on the Zambian Copperbelt', parts 1 & 2, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 16 (1990), 3, 385–412 and 4, 603–621.

'cosmopolitan'.<sup>3</sup> Notwithstanding the merits of Ferguson's conceptualisations, this life history suggests that it is difficult to fit the intricacies of individual daily lives into smooth narratives of social change.

Life histories aptly illustrate the dialectics between structure and agency, or 'how individuals ... have influenced the flow of historical events, but also how these people, their ideas and understanding of the world in which they lived, have been shaped by this historical context'.<sup>4</sup> Especially since the postmodern and narrative turns in historical thought, there has been much attention for individual stories and how these fit into, challenge, or alter dominant theories of social change.<sup>5</sup> Yet, even if individual life histories can provide accounts that either confirm, or question existing narratives of social history, such smooth accounts are inevitably complicated when multiple life histories are gathered. No two lives are exactly the same and each story provides a different perspective from which to write about social change. Although life history can be a potent tool for writing social history, this chapter will question what to do with multiple biographies and the contradictions these create. How can one write a history of social change that does justice to the intricacies of daily life, without losing sight of an overarching pattern due to excessive detail? And is it possible to highlight the specificities and contradictions of individual narratives within broader social histories? In short, how can one link the micro-lived experiences of ordinary individuals to a more macro context of social change?

This chapter draws examples from 18 months of fieldwork, in 2008 and 2010, in Mwinilunga District, North-Western Zambia. I conducted approximately 300 interviews of various formats, ranging from casual conversations to extensive life history interviews. To write a social history of this area during the twentieth century, archival sources necessarily had to be paired with oral history in order to highlight individual experiences and life courses that challenged the 'official' (post-)colonial view. By conducting life history interviews with a variety of individuals (men and women, rich and poor, labour migrants and farmers), I attempted to extrapolate more general processes of social change.<sup>6</sup> Yet, these varied life histories could not be translated into a single social history. The individualised approach of biographical life histories highlights variety, nuance, and discord, which cannot be fully accommodated into one common narrative of social change. This chapter, therefore, questions how

3 J. Ferguson, *Expectations of Modernity: Myths and Meanings of Urban Life on the Zambian Copperbelt* (Berkeley, CA, etc., 1999).

4 See the prologue to this volume.

5 See P. Burke (ed.), *New Perspectives on Historical Writing* (2nd ed., Cambridge, etc., 2001).

6 Peša, *Roads Through Mwinilunga*.



to write a history of social change from these numerous biographical accounts. It examines how to pay attention to individual stories and experiences in a more general social history. And it asks, what should one do with narratives that do not 'fit', that is to say, that challenge the recollections of others or the accounts in archival sources? Taking inspiration from the methodological literature on social history, oral history, and microhistory, this chapter will reflect on how to write about social change while highlighting individual experiences.

### On Metanarratives and Microhistory

Jan Vansina, in a 1974 essay entitled 'The Power of Systematic Doubt in Historical Enquiry', advocated a social-science type of hypothesis formation for African history.<sup>7</sup> Although tentative hypotheses can be formulated, these will always be subject to new doubt. Only through this cycle of doubt and hypothesis reformulation can knowledge advance. Systematic doubt is relevant both for assessing the value of individual life histories and for scrutinising broader theories of social change. While the particular content of life histories can be doubted, they can also serve as sources of doubt for reframing (meta)narratives of social history:

Uncertainty is motivating. It opens us to anomalies and inconsistencies in the evidence we have and drives us to imagine possible associations ... . Every hypothesis is only a working one, a heuristic convenience, and every solution – provided that it's treated as tentative – generates new questions to answer and provokes a quest for new methods or evidence to fill the ongoing gaps that it reveals.<sup>8</sup>

If systematic doubt is applied to historical inquiry, then life histories can provide the input for doubting theories of social change. One theory is always in the process of being challenged by or discarded for another theory. Notwithstanding this ongoing cycle of disagreement and doubt, new hypotheses and theories are continually formulated, particularly to make sense of 'big issues' such as social change. Theories are frequently attacked for being abstractions that 'highlight only the logic of static structures, while history is principally

7 J. Vansina, 'The Power of Systematic Doubt in Historical Enquiry', *History in Africa*, 1 (1974), 109–127.

8 J.C. Miller, 'No Rest for the Weary – or: A Historian's Work is Never Done – or: One Damned Thing Always Leads Dubiously to Another', *History in Africa*, 40 (2013), s20–s21.

about dynamic dialectic processes of experience, motivation, strategic actions, and the responses they necessarily provoke.<sup>9</sup> Yet, even if theories of social history are only able to offer a glimpse of complex historical processes, they are necessary to make social change comprehensible. The central challenge, then, is to do justice to the intricacies and complexities of lived experience, while still formulating narratives of social change that make behaviour and mentalities intelligible to a broader audience. Whereas life histories are a useful tool for questioning theories of social change, their inherent particularity also makes them a problematic source in terms of generating theory.

Oral history has, since the 1960s at least, been seen as one means of upsetting dominant narratives, especially political narratives that only highlight the elite and those with the power to write history in their own image. Oral history can 'be used to change the focus of history itself, and open up new areas of inquiry', insofar as 'it can give back to the people who made and experienced history, through their own words, a central place'.<sup>10</sup> If the life experiences of different people are recorded from a multiplicity of standpoints, then oral history might make for 'a more realistic reconstruction of the past'.<sup>11</sup> Yet, oral history (and life history as its sub-genre) cannot be treated, uncritically, as a 'window to the past'.<sup>12</sup> The intellectual trajectory of oral history has moved from 'understanding an interview as an archival document, one that adds more information to the historical record that must, in turn, be evaluated for accuracy, to understanding it as a narrative construction, with attendant concerns about memory, subjectivity, and identity that must be interpreted'.<sup>13</sup> Life history interviews, therefore, must remain attentive to 'the richness that lies below the surface of an interviewee's words, the ways these words are deeply implicated in structures of meaning that refer outward to broader cultural constructions'.<sup>14</sup> Yet, to understand meaning and culture remains a methodologically difficult process. Individual experiences and life accounts, if interpreted with care, might be contextualised to provide the input for theories of social change. In line with the method of systematic doubt, theories should be used with great discipline to explain interviews, while those theories that do not accurately portray the views of an interviewee should be revised accordingly.<sup>15</sup>

9 *Ibid.*, s21.

10 P. Thompson with J. Bornat, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History* (4th ed. New York, 2017), 26.

11 *Ibid.*, 28.

12 See J. Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (Oxford and Nairobi, 1985).

13 L. Shopes, "Insights and Oversights": Reflections on the Documentary Tradition and the Theoretical Turn in Oral History, *The Oral History Review*, 41 (2014), 2, 258.

14 *Ibid.*, 263.

15 *Ibid.*, 267.

Frequently, however, interviews are pushed into the mould of pre-existing theoretical frameworks that do not fit their specific content. All-encompassing theories of social change end up homogenising real-life experiences, contingency, and agency. Ways should be sought to arrive at a more nuanced social history, one that pays attention to individual experiences and constructs theories from the bottom-up.

Although African history was built around counter-hegemonic narratives, the field has produced a number of its own metanarratives, which have proven 'able to live on well past their use-by dates'.<sup>16</sup> Such metanarratives might obscure 'the power and meanings of local evidence',<sup>17</sup> but they remain influential, particularly in terms of making sense of complex processes of social change. A deeper reflection is needed about what these metanarratives are, 'how they operate, and how they can be used in narrative inquiry more empirically and productively'.<sup>18</sup> Even though African social history 'is, with few exceptions, history from below', this does not mean that the narratives it produces are representative or unproblematic.<sup>19</sup> After all, 'reality is, by definition, more complex than any system devised to describe it'.<sup>20</sup> Because the life history method explores human interests, goals, and needs, while paying attention to nuance, ambiguity, and contradiction, it might provide a basis from which to write social history. Advocates of life history claim that it makes 'it possible to reach deeply into the social realm and explore the history of its distinct and diverse communities'.<sup>21</sup> In this view, life histories would allow for the construction of 'a thick historical narrative', which provides insight into 'how people made locally-inspired, creative choices about how to engage with wider forces of political [social] and economic change'.<sup>22</sup> Nonetheless, experiences of daily life are deeply problematic, not only because 'behaviour or values which are taken for granted in one society are dismissed as self-evidently absurd in another',<sup>23</sup> but,

16 D. Henige, 'Double, Double, Toil, and Trouble: The Ergonomics of African history', *History in Africa*, 34 (2007), 104.

17 L. White, S.F. Miescher and D.W. Cohen (eds), *African Words, African Voices: Critical Practices in Oral History* (Bloomington, IN, 2001), 2.

18 M. Bamberg, 'Biographic-Narrative Research, *Quo Vadis?* A Critical Review of 'Big Stories' from the Perspective of 'Small Stories', in K. Milnes *et al.* (eds), *Narrative, Memory and Knowledge: Representations, Aesthetics and Contexts* (Huddersfield, 2006), 63.

19 E. Allina-Pisano, 'Resistance and the Social History of Africa', *Journal of Social History*, (Fall 2003), 188.

20 A. Eckert and A. Jones, 'Historical Writing about Everyday Life', *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 15 (2002), 1, 8.

21 Allina-Pisano, 'Resistance and the Social History of Africa', 190.

22 *Ibid.*, 194.

23 Eckert and Jones, 'Historical Writing about Everyday Life', 5.

more importantly, because no two life experiences are ever the same. How, then, can the relationship between the micro and the macro, between individual life histories and social structures, be conceived?

One of the aims of African social history has been to transform ordinary people 'from anonymous units in broader social processes into identifiable individuals making their own histories'.<sup>24</sup> Due to its 'fascination with the everyday lives of ordinary people and their embeddedness in fluid social contexts', the life history method provides a potential starting point from which to write such social history.<sup>25</sup> Life history research highlights the 'messy confrontation with human subjectivity'.<sup>26</sup> Yet, despite their inherent multiplicity, life histories must be contextualised to become social history, for 'without contextual commentary on issues of time and space, life stories remain uncoupled from the conditions of their social construction'.<sup>27</sup> How should such contextualisation occur? Can the actions of individuals be analysed to understand more general processes of social change? The microhistorical approach, which shares its individualised and small-scale focus with the life history method, has long grappled with the issue of contextualisation. Microhistory can, therefore, provide guidance on how to relate life histories to social history.

Microhistory looks at lived experiences and at 'the invisible structures in which this experience is articulated'.<sup>28</sup> But how is the relationship between lived experience and social structure, micro and macro, to be conceptualised? Although 'no two subject positions are ever identical', 'each and every one that can be plotted tells us something more about the matrix within which all are situated'.<sup>29</sup> Microhistory is sometimes attacked for presenting 'odd disjunctive pieces left behind from the past', which 'are not seen as valid unless placed in an analyzable context'.<sup>30</sup> Yet, the microhistorical scale can provide certain benefits, because

24 N. Nieftagodien, 'The Place of 'the Local' in History Workshop's Local History', *African Studies*, 69 (2010), 1, 42.

25 D. Posel, 'Social History and the Wits History Workshop', *African Studies* 69 (2010), 1, 30.

26 I. Goodson, 'The Story of Life History: Origins of the Life History Method in Sociology', *Identity*, 1 (2001), 2, 131.

27 *Ibid.*, 139.

28 Z.B. Simon, 'Method and Perspective', *Journal of Microhistory* (2009).

29 Quoted in S.G. Magnusson, 'Social History as "Sites of Memory"? The Institutionalization of History: Microhistory and the Grand Narrative', *Journal of Social History*, (Spring 2006), 904.

30 *Ibid.*, 907.

it is impossible to know more than a tiny fragment of the story, ... the sources preserve only a minute selection of the moments, and ... if the compass is increased our possibilities of attaining an understanding of what has happened decrease still further.<sup>31</sup>

By fostering the 'inherent particularism' of the source material, microhistory moves away from metanarratives and instead seeks narratives that fit the micro scale in a more appropriate manner. Both microhistory and life history advocate an approach of 'scrutinizing the details and nuances of the events and objects of research and looking for meaning within them, rather than in larger contexts'.<sup>32</sup> Whereas social history aims to provide a synthesis, a continuous and coherent account of events, microhistory purposefully pays attention to specificities and contradictions, analysing small units and how people conducted their lives within them. By reducing the scale of observation, microhistorians assert 'that they are more likely to reveal the complicated function of individual relationships within each and every social setting and they stress ... its difference from larger norm'.<sup>33</sup> Microhistory attempts to depict the complexity of daily life, foregrounding fragmentation, contradiction, and the plurality of viewpoints.

Approaches such as life history and microhistory are 'necessary for the analysis of historical reality where macrohistory has failed to identify the problems raised by the real dynamics of social systems or has fallen into tautologies and pre-established models of reference'.<sup>34</sup> Yet, the danger is that life histories focus too much on the singular case and fail to adequately describe context. Eric Hobsbawm asserts that theories are a prerequisite to write social history: 'The nature of sources ... [has obliged the historian] to construct models, that is, to fit his partial and scattered data into coherent systems, without which they would be little more than anecdotal'.<sup>35</sup>

But, even if theories of social history sketch a necessary context, generalisation can easily lead to the glossing over of specificity or the imposition of alien theoretical categories on individual life experiences.<sup>36</sup> A solution to this conundrum might lie in the method of life history itself:

---

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> S.G. Magnusson, 'The Singularization of History: Social History and Microhistory within the Postmodern State of Knowledge', *Journal of Social History* 36 (2003), 3, 700.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 709.

<sup>34</sup> Eckert and Jones, 'Historical Writing about Everyday Life', 8.

<sup>35</sup> E. Hobsbawm, 'From Social History to the History of Society', *Daedalus*, 100 (1971), 1, 38.

<sup>36</sup> S.N.G. Geiger, 'Women's Life Histories: Method and Content', *Signs*, 11 (1986), 2, 334.

a biographical approach shows a way out of the dualistic dead-end of subject versus society, of individual versus structure, because a biography is conceptualized as a social construct which constitutes social reality as well as the subject's life worlds of knowledge and experience. This social construct permanently transforms itself within the dialectical relationship between biographical experiences and knowledge on the one hand and general social patterns on the other.<sup>37</sup>

In this sense, life histories provide a starting point from which to write social history. But, what should one do when life histories contradict each other? Which story should be taken as 'representative' or 'plausible'? Apart from factual contradictions, which are relatively easy to cross-check against other evidence, how should one ensure that theories of social change reflect personalised and diverse life experiences without ironing out the nuances and contradictions of individual trajectories? By looking at several examples of life histories of labour migrants from Mwinilunga District, these and similar questions will be tackled.

### Labour Migration and the Modernist Narrative

Zambian social history has produced heated debates about patterns of labour migration, which have been analysed for their broader socio-economic and political significance.<sup>38</sup> Notwithstanding the wide variety of individual trajectories of labour migration, James Ferguson has asserted that much of the historiography – notably, the works of the Rhodes Livingstone Institute – has adhered to a stylised 'modernist narrative'. For this, Ferguson has been accused of erecting a 'straw man'.<sup>39</sup> Despite well-founded critiques, which highlight the generalised nature of the typical migrant trajectory, some evidence can be found for each stage of the 'modernist narrative'. In Mwinilunga District, some labour migrants indeed fit into the category of short-term circular labour migrants. Others can be described as permanently urbanised, yet others do not fit any category at all. Analysing life histories of labour migrants within the

37 Eckert and Jones, 'Historical Writing about Everyday Life', 9.

38 Ferguson, 'Mobile Workers, Modernist Narratives'; H. Macmillan, 'The Historiography of Transition on the Zambian Copperbelt – Another View', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 19 (1993), 4, 681–712; D. Potts, 'Counter-Urbanization on the Zambian Copperbelt? Interpretations and Implications', *Urban Studies*, 42 (2004), 4, 583–609.

39 Macmillan, 'The Historiography of Transition'.

framework of the 'modernist narrative' can reveal the tension between individual experiences and social historical theories.

Spoon Kapanga engaged in his first labour contract at the age of 16, when he left Mwinilunga to work in Nkana (Kitwe) on the Northern Rhodesian Copperbelt.<sup>40</sup> This was in the 1930s, and Spoon was employed as a domestic servant for a white man named George. He gained experience in cleaning and cooking (hence his name Spoon), especially of dishes such as roast beef. When his father died, after only one year of employment, Spoon went back to his village in Chief Kanongesha's area to attend the funeral. After several months, he decided to return to the Copperbelt, but this time to Chingola, where he was employed as a cook for a mission. Spoon was fired after three years due to excessive drinking and he went back to Kanongesha. His knowledge of cooking European dishes secured him a job at the Catholic mission at Lwawu, where he worked for the next 30 years.<sup>41</sup> This employment history might be typified as circular labour migration, as Spoon went to town and returned several times during his career. Yet, Spoon's story does not fit the purposeful and very short-term back-and-forth movement that Ferguson describes.<sup>42</sup> Spoon went back to Kanongesha due to a funeral and because he was fired, not because he wanted to re-engage with the socio-economic activities (e.g. cultivation, hunting) in his home village. Spoon's story shows that employment in town and in the village can be related in complex ways, as experience gained in town could secure similar employment in the village. His trajectory suggests a degree of contingency, rather than any purposeful strategy of labour migration or a predetermined career path. In essence, this story is a singular one that does not fit neatly into the 'modernist narrative' and thus complicates existing accounts of labour migration in the area.<sup>43</sup>

Quite a different trajectory was followed by William Ngangu, who ostensibly fits the category of permanently urbanised worker.<sup>44</sup> In the 1940s, when he was 18, William moved to Ndola to stay with his uncle. William had pursued a missionary education, up to Standard IV, at Kalene Hill in Chief Nyakaseya's area and this secured him a low-level job at the mines in Chingola. He did not like the job, especially because he feared going underground. So he persuaded his uncle to finance further education in Ndola, which qualified him for a job as a clerk. William started as an administrative employee in Ndola and gradually

40 Interview with Spoon Kapanga, Kanongesha, 26 July 2010.

41 Interview with Brother Joe Weisling, Lwawu Mission, Kanongesha, 30 July 2010.

42 Ferguson, 'Mobile Workers, Modernist Narratives'.

43 I. Peša, 'Wealth, Success and Personhood: Trajectories of Labour Migration from Mwinilunga District, 1930s–1970s', *Zambia Social Science Journal*, 4 (2013), 1.

44 Interview with William Ngangu, Ndola, 26 February 2010.

worked his way up within the hierarchy of the mines. He married a woman from Southern Province, who detested his home village in Chief Nyakaseya's area. The couple scarcely visited William's home, except for special occasions and major ceremonies. Nonetheless, William became one of the founding members of the Lunda cultural association on the Copperbelt, organising meetings and support groups for fellow migrants from Mwinilunga District. When I visited William Ngangu, he was very eager to speak about the experiences of fellow Lundas on the Copperbelt, and, although he had lived on the Copperbelt almost his entire life, he still taught his daughters how to speak 'deep Lunda'. William financed his brother's pineapple transporting business and he educated several of his nieces and nephews in Nyakaseya. While Ferguson presents permanent urbanisation as a mentality shift,<sup>45</sup> an act of breaking all bonds with 'home', William Ngangu's story seems to be quite different. William maintained close and complex relationships with the people in Chief Nyakaseya's area and with fellow Lundas on the Copperbelt, even while carving out a distinctly 'cosmopolitan' lifestyle, which involved impeccable English speech, fancy furniture, and fashionable clothing.<sup>46</sup> Although William Ngangu may appear to be 'permanently urbanised', his life history conveys complex and multiple strategies of identity formation and intricate relationships with his 'home' village.

Mobility is central to the life history of Thomas Kasayi, yet his trajectory of labour migration diverges from previous narratives and does not seem to fit any of the categories of the 'modernist narrative'.<sup>47</sup> Thomas' father was a trader in Chief Ntambu's area and Thomas had decided from a young age that he would take over his father's trading business. He learnt to run the store in Ntambu through practice, but he lacked the capital to significantly expand the business. Thus, at the age of 22, in the 1950s, Thomas moved to Kolwezi in Congo, where he worked at a wood-cutting camp, which involved hard work but minimal pay. He soon discovered that it would be more profitable to trade chickens from Ntambu for second-hand clothing from Congo, which he transported back to his store in Ntambu to sell. Each trading trip would take him approximately six months to complete and he made at least four such trips over the next five years. The profit from selling second-hand clothing enabled

45 Ferguson, *Expectations of Modernity*.

46 Duncan Money has usefully pointed out that the Lunda cultural association could be a distinctly urban phenomenon, rather than necessarily signifying rural bonds. The Individual in African History: The Importance of Biography in African Historical Studies; workshop African Studies Centre, Leiden, 29–30 September 2016. See A. Simone and A. Abouhani (eds), *Urban Africa: Changing Contours of Survival in the City* (Dakar, etc., 2005).

47 Interview with Thomas Kasayi, Ntambu, 29 September 2010.



him to buy cattle, which he transported from Kasempa to Mwinilunga on foot. Once he had expanded his herd sufficiently he opened a butchery in Mwinilunga township. Thomas Kasayi's trips as a labour migrant and trader thus served the purpose of expanding his business in Mwinilunga. He strengthened this strategy by building a solid brick house with glass windows in Mwinilunga township in the 1960s, which entrenched his image as one of the most powerful businessmen in the area. Thomas Kasayi's story shows that rural and urban strategies could be intricately linked. Thomas was neither a circular labour migrant, nor permanently urbanised; in fact, his story fits none of Ferguson's categories of labour migration. Thomas Kasayi's story suggests that labour migration could be driven by complex motivations, which straddled the rural–urban divide.<sup>48</sup>

These three examples of labour migrant trajectories are all very different, even contradictory. Together, these stories merely complicate existing narratives of labour migration and theories of social change, without proposing one coherent alternative to replace the 'modernist narrative'. What they do suggest, however, is the centrality of personal motivation, rather than structural force, in explaining labour migrant trajectories.<sup>49</sup> Whereas Spoon Kapanga purposefully sought to migrate to town to gain wealth, circumstances propelled him to move back to his village. Even if short-term labour migration had not generated the desired wealth, it had endowed him with the skills to secure lucrative employment locally. Thomas Kasayi's labour migration trajectory followed a similar short-term pattern, yet his motivations were very different. Thomas' aim was never to secure urban wealth; rather, he used urban employment to boost his rural standing and earn an income with which to expand his trading business. By contrast, William Ngangu's career as a labour migrant involved long-term urban residence. Yet, his motivations might not have been too dissimilar from those of short-term labour migrants. Even as William earned wealth and status in an urban setting, he simultaneously maintained strong rural linkages. His urban career, in fact, served to bolster his carefully cultivated status within Mwinilunga District. Structural narratives and rigid categorisations of social change, as proposed by the 'modernist narrative', seem unable to reflect the ambiguities and contradictions of these labour migrant trajectories, the messiness of historical change involved and the varieties of responses to it.<sup>50</sup> How, then, can one do justice to the complexity and individuality of

---

48 Compare this with H. Englund, 'The Village in the City, the City in the Village: Migrants in Lilongwe', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 28 (2002), 1, 137–154.

49 See also Peša, 'Wealth, Success and Personhood'.

50 L.A. Lindsay, 'Biography in African History', *History in Africa*, 44 (2017), 16.

these three trajectories, while still arriving at a comprehensive narrative of labour migration and social change in Mwinilunga District? If the details of each life history are taken seriously, no single overarching narrative emerges. Yet, to make the individual trajectories comprehensible, to make them more than just vivid examples, contextualisation and the construction of a broader narrative of labour migration and social change are necessary.<sup>51</sup> Rather than stressing macro-historical structural forces or constructing metanarratives, a more useful approach would be to search for intermediate categories that depict the ambiguity of social change and highlight personal motivations. Examples of the relationship between labour migration and consumption will illustrate this point further.

### Searching for a Good Suit: Consumption as a Motive for Labour Migration

Labour migration has frequently been analysed as the outcome of economic 'push-and-pull' factors. Lack of employment and general poverty in rural areas would allegedly drive out young, productive men to urban areas where they could earn high wages.<sup>52</sup> It can be argued, however, that 'by portraying rural Africans as mere pawns in the impersonal clash between capital and organized labour, materialist interpretations of the region's history have obfuscated the full range of social experiences of Central African peoples.'<sup>53</sup> By looking at consumption, the complex individual motivations and socio-economic foundations of labour migration from Mwinilunga District can be reassessed. Moreover, a focus on consumption asserts that structural economic models of social change should be replaced by intermediate categories that highlight historically contingent relationships and diverse individual trajectories.

When Makajina Kahilu, who had come from Angola to Ikelenge Chiefdom in the 1940s, recounted his employment history, he kept stressing that he wanted to find a nice suit.<sup>54</sup> Economic hardship (meat hunger, *dikwilu*) had propelled him to leave Angola and join his relatives in Mwinilunga in search of

51 Magnusson, 'The singularization of history'.

52 G. Arrighi, 'Labour Supplies in Historical Perspective: A Study of the Proletarianization of the African Peasantry in Rhodesia', *The Journal of Development Studies*, 6 (1970), 3, 197–234, is only one example.

53 <http://www.ascleiden.nl/Pdf/MusketstoNokias.pdf>, accessed 1 May 2018; R. Ross, M. Hinfelaar and I. Peša (eds), *The Objects of Life in Central Africa: The History of Consumption and Social Change, 1840s–1980s* (Leiden and Boston, 2013).

54 Interview with Makajina Kahilu, Ikelenge, 8 March 2010.

work. In Mwinilunga he did not find a good job, so he decided to try his luck on the Copperbelt. Together with his friend, he boarded a truck to Chingola, where he worked for several months cutting wood. There, he saw men wearing smart suits and he got hold of a post-order catalogue from London with a collection of the latest fashion. His wood-cutting job did not pay him enough to afford such suits, so he decided to search for another job. This search took him to Ndola and onwards to Livingstone. He crossed the Victoria Falls bridge on foot and boarded a train to Johannesburg, where he worked for several years as a domestic servant. This job finally enabled him to buy a fashionable suit and a wireless radio. But because he had to work long hours, which left him with no time for socialising, he eventually moved back to Mwinilunga District, where he married and settled down. When Makajina recounted his employment history, he did not stress his jobs. Instead, he emphasised his journey, his experiences in town, and patterns of consumption. Mobility is pivotal to Makajina's life history and economic factors did play a role in spurring this mobility. Yet, Makajina's narrative reveals that labour migration was not simply, or even primarily, about economic motives. Rather than being coerced from Angola due to absolute poverty, Makajina moved to Mwinilunga, the Copperbelt, and Johannesburg voluntarily, in search of consumer goods and greener pastures. Crucially, labour migration revolved around aspirations and a way of life.<sup>55</sup> Makajina's employment experience and travels enabled him to return to Mwinilunga as a 'Big Man' and a desirable marriage partner.<sup>56</sup> His wife commended his fashion sense, as he would regularly bring her Congolese clothing upon return from his travels. Deterministic economic models, which focus on the push-and-pull factors behind labour migration, are inadequate to explain lived experiences. Life histories of labour migrants instead revolve around consumption, social relationships, and status. Makajina Kahilu's life history suggests that labour migration could function as a strategy for achieving aspirations, developing relationships, and enhancing one's status. Labour migration could be a pathway towards wealth, success, and personhood.<sup>57</sup>

Two women who live in Kalulushi on the Zambian Copperbelt, Lucy Chiyengi and Gladys Samukoko, equally underlined the importance of consumption to their experiences and lifestyle in town.<sup>58</sup> These women were able to

55 M. Barrett, "Walking Home Majestically": Consumption and the Enactment of Social Status among Labour Migrants from Barotseland, 1935–1965', in Ross, Hinfelaar, and Peša, *The Objects of Life*, 93–113.

56 See J.I. Guyer, 'Wealth in People and Self-Realization in Equatorial Africa', *Man*, 28 (1993), 2, 243–265.

57 Peša, 'Wealth, Success and Personhood'.

58 Interview with Lucy Chiyengi and Gladys Samukoko, Kalulushi, 6 February 2010.



PHOTO 3.1 Returned labour migrants, 1950s

recount exactly what type of fashion had been ‘the latest’ in which decade. Not only were they familiar with names (such as *sapato* or *kahilu*), but they also remembered precisely how different types of cloth would be tied to form a skirt, blouse, or headdress.<sup>59</sup> What was most striking from their narratives, however, was how cloth and clothing had mediated their relationships to village kin. Consumption, they stressed, was never a purely individualistic act. Instead, consumption was always embedded in multiple and complex social relationships. When visiting their home village in Chief Chibwika’s area, Lucy and Gladys would always be asked for pieces of cloth by their relatives, because they had access to the latest designs and good quality cloth. Although gifts of cloth might have elevated their status among rural kin, Lucy and Gladys soon stopped wearing their nicest suits when visiting home, because this would only lead to claims for more cloth. Consumption was thus not merely enacted through labour migration itself; rather, it could mediate the social space between village and town.<sup>60</sup> Fashionable clothing was a major incentive for Lucy and Gladys when moving to town. But instead of lubricating rural–urban relationships, Lucy and Gladys used clothing as a marker of status vis-à-vis other

59 See K.T. Hansen, ‘Fabricating Dreams: Sewing Machines, Tailors, and Urban Entrepreneurship in Zambia’, in Ross, Hinfelaar, and Peša, *The Objects of Life*, 167–185.

60 Ross, Hinfelaar, and Peša, *The Objects of Life*.

urban women. Such quotidian details highlight the interrelationship between consumption and socio-economic pathways. Looking at consumption through migrants' life histories brings nuance to economic hypotheses that posit push-and-pull factors as the driving force behind labour migration and it challenges grand narratives of social change. Instead of placing undue emphasis on economic motives for migration, life histories from Mwinilunga suggest the importance of socio-cultural dispositions and aspirations towards self-realisation, enacted through patterns of consumption.<sup>61</sup>

Through labour migration individuals sought 'the acknowledgement, regard, and attention of other people – which was the basis of reputation and influence, and thus constitutive of social being'.<sup>62</sup> Labour migration provided one avenue to earning wealth and accessing consumer goods with which to increase one's social standing. In this sense, migrants 'often [saw] their stay in town through the prism of their rural aspirations'.<sup>63</sup> Consumption highlights the relationship between individual trajectories and social history, because it is an individual act with profound social ramifications.<sup>64</sup> Studying consumption, therefore, offers a lens through which to understand social history and the motivations of labour migrants. Makajina Kahilu did not solely move to Johannesburg to find a suit. He did not foolishly pursue consumer goods, but instead focused on building social relationships. Once he realised that his job in Johannesburg would not grant him much social status, he moved back to Mwinilunga. Through labour migration and consumer goods, he was able to attain status in Ikelenge and ultimately settle down as a married man. Quite differently, Lucy and Gladys sought consumer goods to entrench their urban status and disliked rural claims on their wealth.

Thus, consumptive aspirations cannot be fully understood within a macro-economic context of push-and-pull factors. Rather, consumption served to cement social ties and enable self-realisation. By looking at consumption it becomes clear that 'similar socio-cultural dispositions regulating ... migrants' behavior ... may give rise to different urban [and rural] trajectories'.<sup>65</sup> Whereas the desire to purchase consumer goods prompted many individuals from

61 Guyer, 'Wealth in People and Self-Realization'; Barrett, 'Walking Home majestically'; Peša, 'Wealth, Success and Personhood'.

62 K. Barber, 'Money, Self-Realization and the Person in Yoruba Texts', in J.I. Guyer (ed.), *Money Matters: Instability, Values and Social Payments in the Modern History of West African Communities* (Portsmouth, 1995), 216.

63 Englund, 'The Village in the City', 153.

64 See R. Ross, *Clothing: A Global History* (Cambridge and Malden, MA, 2008).

65 J.A. Andersson, 'Reinterpreting the Rural-Urban Connection: Migration Practices and Socio-Cultural Dispositions of Buhera Workers in Harare', *Africa*, 71 (2001), 1, 105.



PHOTO 3.2 Women from Mwinilunga

Mwinilunga to get a job in urban areas, their trajectories afterwards diverged widely. Some stayed in urban areas and largely cut their ties with rural kin, whereas others saw their stay in town as a short-term interlude that would enable the realisation of rural aspirations. Crucially, not only urban trajectories but individual motivations to migrate varied and these motivations must be highlighted in order to reach more satisfactory explanations for social change. Not all individuals migrated to town, though, and scrutinising the life histories, motives, and experiences of those who ‘remained behind’ in Mwinilunga District can add a different perspective from which to understand social change.

### Staying in the Village: Deliberate Strategy or Default Choice?

Studies of labour migration tend to reify the rural–urban divide.<sup>66</sup> Within such a narrative, labour migration has been interpreted as the outcome of rural poverty and a symbol of proletarianisation; yet, it has equally been claimed that those who ‘remained behind’ in the village did so as a default choice and did not fare well either. Allegedly, labour migration took away the ‘able-bodied men’ and left only women and the elderly behind, those who did not have the

66 Andersson, ‘Reinterpreting the Rural-Urban Connection’; Englund, ‘The Village in the City’.

strength to cultivate large fields and therefore faced abject poverty.<sup>67</sup> Several life histories of those who never migrated to town reveal that staying in the village could equally be a deliberate strategy, which could generate its own form of wealth and status. Moreover, these life histories shed light on broad-ranging rural–urban connections that defy simplistic spatial divides.

Yiness Ikelenge, a member of the Ikelenge chiefly family, never moved out of Ikelenge Chieftom for protracted periods of time.<sup>68</sup> Her husband had worked in Sakania in Congo and later in Luanshya in Zambia, but Yiness never joined him. Her husband's trips had raised sufficient capital for Yiness to engage in pineapple cultivation in Ikelenge. With her husband's earnings, Yiness could plant a large field with pineapples, hire labourers for weeding and harvesting, and she could buy a truck to transport pineapples to the Copperbelt. Although Yiness managed the entire marketing process and negotiated good prices for her pineapples, she did not physically travel to the Copperbelt. Rather, her nephew was in charge of driving the truck and selling pineapples in bulk at the market in Ndola. Yiness managed to make good fortune out of this business, especially because she could secure transport and market access. Labour migration generated the starting capital for Yiness' business, but subsequent profits ensured that she did not need any external funds to keep expanding her fields. Yiness' story is exceptional. She is a member of the chiefly family, which gave her access to schooling, land, and riches even before she started her business. Moreover, Ikelenge is one of the few areas in Mwinilunga District that is particularly suited to pineapple cultivation.<sup>69</sup> Nonetheless, Yiness' story does show that labour migration was not a prerequisite to obtaining wealth, or to maintaining strong social relationships. Yiness' pineapple fields and the income generated through them enabled her to remain a prominent member of Ikelenge chiefly politics, as well as a role model for other women. Relying on social networks and having good business sense could lead to success, even for those who 'remained behind'.<sup>70</sup>

There were some paths towards wealth and success within Mwinilunga District that involved neither labour migration, nor cash crop marketing. Mandosa

67 For an overview of this narrative see H.L. Moore and M. Vaughan, *Cutting Down Trees: Gender, Nutrition, and Agricultural Change in the Northern Province of Zambia, 1890–1990* (Portsmouth, NH, and London, 1994).

68 Interview with Yiness Ikelenge, Ikelenge, 10 April 2010.

69 I. Peša, 'Between Success and Failure: The Mwinilunga Pineapple Canning Factory in the 1960s and 1970s', in I. Peša and J.B. Gewald (eds), *Magnifying Perspectives: Contributions to History. A festschrift for Robert Ross* (Leiden, 2017), 285–307.

70 See J. Pottier, *Migrants no More: Settlement and Survival in Mambwe Villages, Zambia* (Manchester, 1988).

Kabanda exemplifies this.<sup>71</sup> Mandosa's parents died when she was still young, so she was sent to live with her aunt. She met her husband at a young age and they married soon thereafter. Although Mandosa was good at cultivating cassava and beans, this did not bring her any wealth. One day, she attended the preaching of Charles Rowland Nightingale, a Plymouth Brethren missionary, and this left her so amazed that she converted to Christianity. She trained to become a local evangelist and she founded several churches in the area of Kanongesha, together with her husband.<sup>72</sup> The missionaries taught them how to cultivate crops such as soya beans and rice, which they sold at the local market. Together with donations from parish members, this made Mandosa and her husband quite well-off. They never considered migrating to town in search of employment, because their local employment constituted a satisfactory trajectory to them.

Their story, and that of Yiness Ikelenge, thus suggests that labour migration was not the only path towards wealth, although a number of people who migrated to town did earn high incomes. Others failed to find a good job in town and moved back to their home village to seek alternative occupations. Yet others found a personal path towards wealth and success within rural areas. Labour migration neither simply caused wealth, nor immiseration; it was only one among many rural strategies, which included cash crop cultivation, mission employment, and trade. Analysing life histories therefore suggests that rural–urban connections could manifest themselves in multiple and complex ways. Yiness never engaged in labour migration, but she did rely on her husband's income as a migrant labourer to start her first pineapple field. Moreover, she marketed her pineapples on the Copperbelt, without travelling there herself. Mandosa, equally, had numerous connections to urban areas. Firstly, she preached to former labour migrants in Kanongesha. Secondly, she travelled to the Copperbelt regularly to attend training sessions and to meet up with other evangelists. Rather than applying a strict rural–urban spatial divide, the social history of Mwinilunga District would benefit from an analysis that highlights mobility, personal motivation, and the multiple threads that tie rural and urban areas together.<sup>73</sup> The life histories presented here challenge some of the currently accepted theories of Zambian social history. If all these life histories were to be combined, they would not present one coherent image. Does this

71 Interview with Mandosa Kabanda, Kanongesha, 2 August 2010.

72 K.L.K. Mutenda, *The Christian Brethren in Zambia: Their Origins, Beliefs and Practices* (2016).

73 For a related argument, see O. Bakewell, 'Refugees Repatriating or Migrating Villagers: A Study of Movement from North West Zambia to Angola', (unpublished PhD, University of Bath, 1999).



suggest that we cannot arrive at any broader theory of social change while fully respecting the details from life histories?

### Conclusion: Life Histories of Labour Migration and Theories of Social Change

Individual life histories can serve as ‘as an allegory for broader issues affecting the culture as a whole’.<sup>74</sup> Life histories can, thus, provide the input to construct theories of social history and explain social change. This chapter has argued that it is possible to ‘understand broad social dynamics through close examination of individual lives’, as ‘historical forces and ordinary people act reciprocally on one another’.<sup>75</sup> Life histories ‘help us to understand relationships between structure and agency, revealing how individual lives, social processes, institutions, and contexts affect one another’.<sup>76</sup> Life histories, however, often show ‘that reality is more complex than the generalizations produced by too exclusive a focus on broad historical trends’.<sup>77</sup> To a certain extent, the life histories presented here contradict one another and disprove dominant theories of Zambian social history, such as the modernist narrative, economic models emphasising push-and-pull factors behind labour migration or rigid conceptualisations of a rural–urban divide. Rather than stressing structural forces, life histories suggest a degree of contingency more than any purposeful strategy of labour migration. Instead of metanarratives, social history should adopt intermediate categories that depict the ambiguity of social change and focus on personal motivations. This chapter has highlighted individual trajectories, motivations, and aspirations, by paying attention to issues of status, social relationships, and wealth in order to explain labour migration and social change in Mwinilunga District. Life histories thus complicate the bigger picture.<sup>78</sup>

Life histories constitute a unique source from which to write social history, as their voices ‘provide the thickness of historical context’.<sup>79</sup> Life histories reveal everyday experiences and they do so from a perspective different from that encountered in other sources.<sup>80</sup> They can therefore challenge existing

74 J. Lepore, ‘Historians Who Love too Much: Reflections on Microhistory and Biography’, *The Journal of American History*, 88 (2001), 1, 133.

75 Lindsay, ‘Biography in African history’, 15.

76 *Ibid.*, 23.

77 D.D. Cordell (ed.), *The Human Tradition in Modern Africa* (Lanham, MD, etc., 2012), 4.

78 *Ibid.*, 5.

79 Allina-Pisano, ‘Resistance and the Social History of Africa’, 195.

80 White, Miescher and Cohen, *African Words, African Voices*, 15.

theories of social history. Yet, the very thickness of life histories makes it difficult to construct overarching narratives of social change with which the individuality of experience can be explained, as the difference between the accounts of Spoon Kapanga, William Ngangu, and Thomas Kasayi illustrates. Narratives of social history and theories of social change 'remain possible and necessary, but a single narrative can never tell the whole story'.<sup>81</sup> Theories should allow for individuality and diversity:

To allow the contradictions and paradoxes freedom of expression, the emphasis must always be kept squarely on the subject matter itself and on nothing else ... [Historians should] search for a way in which history can research its proper subjects in their proper logical and cultural context and thus disassociate itself from the 'manmade' ideological package of the metanarratives.<sup>82</sup>

Life histories celebrate individuality, complexity, and contradiction, while allowing for a contextualisation of the subject matter so that it becomes intelligible to a broader audience. They shed light on a broader social context, but they adopt a distinctly small-scale focus: 'It is precisely the complex interrelationship between human beings and their environment that makes it necessary to reduce the scale; only in this way can we avoid the temptation to simplify the relations among people, phenomena and events'.<sup>83</sup> Gathering life histories reveals the diversity and complexity of daily life and reveals the relationship between individual actors and their social context. By doing so, a focus on individual trajectories, motivations, and aspirations of labour migrants becomes possible and less tangible issues of wealth, status, and social relationships can be accentuated. In order to take the specificity of life histories seriously, theories of social change should remain modest and avoid generalisations. Theories of labour migration can remain attentive to the individuality of lived experience and motivation by highlighting concepts such as self-realisation. In sum, life history interviews provide a sound basis from which to write social history.

## References

Allina-Pisano, E. (2003), 'Resistance and the Social History of Africa', *Journal of Social History*, vol. 37, 187–198.

81 M. van der Linden, 'Gaining Ground', *Journal of Social History*, 37 (2003), 1, 73.

82 Magnusson, 'The Singularization of History', 721.

83 *Ibid.*, 722.

- Andersson, J.A. (2001), 'Reinterpreting the Rural-Urban Connection: Migration Practices and Socio-Cultural Dispositions of Buhera Workers in Harare', *Africa*, vol. 71, 82–112.
- Arrighi, G. (1970), 'Labour Supplies in Historical Perspective: A Study of the Proletarianization of the African Peasantry in Rhodesia', *The Journal of Development Studies*, vol. 6, 197–234.
- Bakewell, O. (1999), *Refugees Repatriating or Migrating Villagers: A Study of Movement from North West Zambia to Angola*, (unpublished PhD, University of Bath).
- Bamberg, M. (2006), 'Biographic-Narrative Research, *Quo Vadis?* A Critical Review of "Big Stories" from the Perspective of "Small Stories"', in K. Milnes et al. (eds), *Narrative, Memory and Knowledge: Representations, Aesthetics and Contexts* (Huddersfield), 63–79.
- Barber, K. (1995), 'Money, Self-Realization and the Person in Yoruba Texts', in J.I. Guyer (ed.), *Money Matters: Instability, Values and Social Payments in the Modern History of West African Communities* (Portsmouth, 1995), 204–224.
- Barrett, M. (2013), "'Walking Home Majestically": Consumption and the Enactment of Social Status among Labour Migrants from Barotseland, 1935–1965', in R. Ross, M. Hinfelaar and I. Peša (eds), *The Objects of Life in Central Africa: The History of Consumption and Social Change, 1840s–1980s* (Leiden and Boston), 93–113.
- Burke, P. (ed.) (2001), *New Perspectives on Historical Writing* (Cambridge).
- Cordell, D.D. (ed.) (2012), *The Human Tradition in Modern Africa* (Lanham, MD).
- Eckert, A. and A. Jones (2002), 'Historical Writing about Everyday Life', *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, vol. 15, 5–16.
- Englund, H. (2002), 'The Village in the City, the City in the Village: Migrants in Lilongwe', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, vol. 28, 137–154.
- Ferguson, J. (1990), 'Mobile Workers, Modernist Narratives: A Critique of the Historiography of Transition on the Zambian Copperbelt', Parts 1 & 2, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, vol. 16, no. 3, 385–412 and no. 4, 603–621.
- Ferguson, J. (1999), *Expectations of Modernity: Myths and Meanings of Urban Life on the Zambian Copperbelt* (Berkeley, CA).
- Geiger, S.N.G. (1986), 'Women's Life Histories: Method and Content', *Signs*, vol. 11, 334–351.
- Goodson, I. (2001), 'The Story of Life History: Origins of the Life History Method in Sociology', *Identity*, vol. 1, 129–142.
- Guyer, J.I. (1993), 'Wealth in People and Self-Realization in Equatorial Africa', *Man*, vol. 28, 243–265.
- Hansen, K.T. (2013), 'Fabricating Dreams: Sewing Machines, Tailors, and Urban Entrepreneurship in Zambia', in R. Ross, M. Hinfelaar and I. Peša (eds), *The Objects of Life in Central Africa: The History of Consumption and Social Change, 1840s–1980s* (Leiden and Boston), 167–185.
- Henige, D. (2007), 'Double, Double, Toil, and Trouble: The Ergonomics of African History', *History in Africa*, vol. 34, 103–120.

- Hobsbawm, E. (1971), 'From Social History to the History of Society', *Daedalus*, vol. 100, 20–45.
- Lepore, J. (2001), 'Historians Who Love Too Much: Reflections on Microhistory and Biography', *The Journal of American History*, vol. 88, 129–144.
- Lindsay, L.A. (2017), 'Biography in African History', *History in Africa*, vol. 44, 11–26.
- Macmillan, H. (1993), 'The Historiography of Transition on the Zambian Copperbelt – Another View', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, vol. 19, 681–712.
- Magnusson, S.G. (2003), 'The Singularization of History: Social History and Microhistory within the Postmodern State of Knowledge', *Journal of Social History*, vol. 36, 701–735.
- Magnusson, S.G. (2006), 'Social History as "Sites of Memory"? The Institutionalization of History: Microhistory and the Grand Narrative', *Journal of Social History*, vol. 39, 891–913.
- Miller, J.C. (2013), 'No Rest for the Weary – or: A Historian's Work is Never Done – or: One Damned Thing Always Leads Dubiously to Another', *History in Africa*, vol. 40, s19–s22.
- Moore, H.L. and M. Vaughan (1994), *Cutting Down Trees: Gender, Nutrition, and Agricultural Change in the Northern Province of Zambia, 1890–1990* (Portsmouth, NH, and London).
- Mutenda, K.L.K. (2016), *The Christian Brethren in Zambia: Their Origins, Beliefs and Practices*.
- Nieftagodien, N. (2010), 'The Place of "the Local" in History Workshop's Local History', *African Studies*, vol. 69, 41–61.
- Peša, I. (2013), 'Wealth, Success and Personhood: Trajectories of Labour Migration from Mwinilunga District, 1930s–1970s', *Zambia Social Science Journal*, vol. 4, art. 6.
- Peša, I. (2019), *Roads Through Mwinilunga: A History of Social Change in Northwest Zambia* (Leiden and Boston).
- Peša, I. (2017), 'Between Success and Failure: The Mwinilunga Pineapple Canning Factory in the 1960s and 1970s', in I. Peša and J.B. Gewald (eds), *Magnifying Perspectives: Contributions to History. A Festschrift for Robert Ross* (Leiden), 285–307.
- Posel, D. (2010), 'Social History and the Wits History Workshop', *African Studies* vol. 69, 29–40.
- Pottier, J. (1988), *Migrants no More: Settlement and Survival in Mambwe Villages, Zambia* (Manchester).
- Potts, D. (2004), 'Counter-Urbanization on the Zambian Copperbelt? Interpretations and Implications', *Urban Studies*, vol. 42, 583–609.
- Ross, R. (2008), *Clothing: A Global History* (Cambridge and Malden, MA).
- Ross, R., M. Hinfelaar and I. Peša (eds) (2013), *The Objects of Life in Central Africa: The History of Consumption and Social Change, 1840s–1980s* (Leiden and Boston).

- Shopes, L. (2014), ‘“Insights and Oversights”: Reflections on the Documentary Tradition and the Theoretical Turn in Oral History’, *The Oral History Review*, vol. 41, 257–268.
- Simon, Z.B. (2009), ‘Method and Perspective’, *Journal of Microhistory*, 1–13.
- Simone, A. and A. Abouhani (eds) (2005), *Urban Africa: Changing Contours of Survival in the City* (Dakar).
- Thompson, P. with J. Bornat (2017), *The Voice of the Past: Oral History* (New York).
- Van der Linden, M. (2003), ‘Gaining Ground’, *Journal of Social History*, vol. 37, 69–75.
- Vansina, J. (1974), ‘The Power of Systematic Doubt in Historical Enquiry’, *History in Africa*, vol. 1, 109–127.
- Vansina, J. (1985), *Oral Tradition as History* (Oxford and Nairobi).
- White, L., S.F. Miescher and D.W. Cohen (eds) (2001), *African Words, African Voices: Critical Practices in Oral History* (Bloomington, IN).



**PART 2**

*Persons in Transitions*







# The Effervescence of Individual Life: Cornelius Badu, Born 1847 in Elmina, Gold Coast

*Paul Glen Grant*

## Introduction

On 23 August 1884, several officers of the German Congo Expedition disembarked in Accra in the Gold Coast Colony. They were stopping briefly on their way to what they called a scientific expedition in the Congo Basin. They had a purse full of money, hundreds of kilogrammes of scientific equipment, and nearly no human experience in Africa. Not one of them spoke a Congolese trade language, or even Portuguese or Arabic, but they expected to hire a few interpreters upon their arrival at Banana at the mouth of the Congo. They had no idea what they were doing. They were thus surprised to be approached by an African offering his services. He was clothed in ‘gentlemanly’ fashion, and addressed them in German.<sup>1</sup> Expedition leader Lieutenant Eduard Schulze, having checked this man’s impeccable references in the white business community, where he owned two houses and a ‘not insignificant’ business, decided to hire him. Richard Büttner, junior member and – after Schulze’s death – head of the expedition, narrated this encounter with an air of astonishment, as if this kind of man could not have been imagined, adding that this ‘David Cornelius Bardo’ would prove to have been a good decision. Cornelius, he wrote, had an intelligent and good-natured face and, with his well-groomed beard, made a bold impression. He was about 40 years old, Büttner said.

The German officers’ bewilderment over such a man as David Cornelius was more a reflection of the collapsing limits to their own imagination, coming as it did at a moment of high imperialism and of hardening European and American notions of race, than of Cornelius’ uniqueness. There was, in fact, nothing impossible about Africans being fluent in German, or of well-travelled African businessmen; such people had, of course, participated in the making of Atlantic history for centuries. But the contradictions underlying the Scramble for

---

1 ‘gentlemanmäßig’. R. Büttner, *Reisen im Kongolande. Ausgeführt im Auftrage der afrikanischen Gesellschaft in Deutschland* (Leipzig, 1890), 4–5. All translations in this chapter are my own.

Africa in the 1880s, whereby evolutionary visions of European supremacy rarely corresponded with the conditions on the ground – especially in West and Equatorial Africa where feverish, confused, and frustrated explorers and administrators relied on African intelligence for nearly everything – required leaps of the imagination that were not easy to reconcile. Johannes Fabian identified this contradiction with insanity or ecstasy, a (temporarily) cognitively broken state, emerging from cross-cultural frustration, malarial delirium, and drugged stupor.<sup>2</sup> Only at such ‘ecstatic’ moments could the intellectual artifice of European supremacy be breached sufficiently for a genuine encounter to take place. Ideally, the lessons of encounter might remain upon a return to health and sobriety. Florence Bernault has argued that the intensity of the culture gap between Europeans and Africans in high colonial Equatorial Africa tended to hold a mirror to the Europeans, which, in turn, activated ‘major contradictions within white cultures’ around the meaning of the human body, especially in terms of evolutionary racism. Living in Africa showed these foreigners the long-term unsustainability of these tensions and, Bernault continued, forced ‘Europeans into a reflexive journey to rethink what was going on’.<sup>3</sup>

Late in 1885, Cornelius was able to impose this kind of reflexive journey upon at least one of his travelling companions, Willy Wolff, as recorded in the latter’s subsequent book on the expedition. The subject matter was sensitive: it concerned the legitimacy of education – *Bildung* – which held such an important place in legitimating the German imperial project.<sup>4</sup> Wolff related, upon returning to the busy regional centre of São Salvador after being lost for months in the forest, that he had no interest in the ‘usual rounds of dominoes’ by which the multi-national European population in town preferred to pass the time amongst themselves. ‘For three months’, he wrote, ‘I had only gone in circles with the Blacks, without so much as a conversation with a real civilised person’. Mindless chatter with the Europeans in town was not what he was looking for: ‘I want to talk’.<sup>5</sup>

Wolff found his civilised conversation partner in Cornelius, who seems to have reciprocated Wolff’s need. Cornelius used the opportunity to tell Wolff

2 J. Fabian, *Out of Our Minds: Reason and Madness in the Exploration of Central Africa* (Berkeley, CA, 2000), 4.

3 F. Bernault, ‘Body, Power, and Sacrifice in Equatorial Africa’, *Journal of African History*, 47 (2006), 207–239.

4 S.L. Marchand, *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire: Religion, Race, and Scholarship* (Cambridge, 2013).

5 W. Wolff, *Von Banana zum Kiamwo: Eine Forschungsreise in Westafrika, Ausgeführt im Auftrage der afrikanischen Gesellschaft in Deutschland* (Oldenburg and Leipzig, 1889), 231.

that European scholars had certainly built an impressive body of knowledge, 'but are to no small measure immodest about their accomplishments. They know how to wrap themselves in a great nimbus, as if they knew a lot more than is the case'. Cornelius's opinion on German education ran deeper than annoyance: he saw it as religious, and as analogous to African indigenous priests with whom he had contended, years earlier, as an indigenous evangelist in the Gold Coast: 'Like the fetish men here, they clothe themselves in mystery and stand apart from the people'. To Wolff's objection that Germans alone among the nations were humble about the great many things they did not know, Cornelius replied:

Of course. But this modesty has long since been buried and converted into empty ritual. All that remains from the intellectual humility and contentedness of yesterday are the frumpy clothes, the studied awkwardness and the boring lectures. These three tokens of scholarship are all that distinguish your scholars from those of other nations. But the day will come, when you and everyone in the world will see that it is better to think less of oneself while striving after higher things, than to think of oneself at the pinnacle while holding everyone else in contempt.<sup>6</sup>

In this sarcastic critique of the German culture of education, Cornelius was challenging a racial mythology that was becoming a scientific consensus during the late nineteenth century. Like so many other Africans during the early colonial years, Cornelius simply appeared in a foreign record, supporting a foreigner's short-lived project, and disappeared again when that project came to its conclusion. Since so much of the archival record, especially in the areas of the natural sciences and geography, concerns the activities of European and American men, the question of an individual African's life often runs contrary to the archival record. This archival challenge has formed the backdrop to much historical writing in the last few decades, as studies focusing on individual lives have come to complement the world-historical studies of the earlier post-colonial years. These two approaches – longitudinal queries relying on archaeological, linguistic, and ethnographic sources, on the one hand, and detailed, archival-anchored research on individuals, or on families or cities – can complement one another nicely.

Relative to African history at the moment of high colonialism, the greatest potential to the biographical method's application lies in the ways a life story can complicate any broadly geopolitical narratives into which it is crammed.

---

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 231–234.

A human life that can be reduced to, for example, colonial victimhood or anti-colonial resistance, is not really a life at all. Accordingly, biography can do more than merely add detail to an existing framework; it might instead reveal dehumanising limits to that same framework. I address these theoretical questions through the life of David Cornelius Kwasi Badu, born 1847 in Elmina in the Gold Coast. Cornelius spent the late 1860s and early 1870s in the Netherlands, Germany, and Switzerland, before joining the Basel Mission in the Gold Coast. Later, he quit the Basel Mission in a dispute concerning his refusal to go without shoes, as was the norm for native employees. By the 1880s, he was an independent businessman in Accra, owning two ‘factories’, and enjoying good references in that city’s European business community. From 1884 to 1886, he joined the German exploratory Congo–Angola expedition as caravan foreman, during which time he regularly debated with his German employers. He argued that Christianity needed to be reconfigured for Africa and he married two women while in Angola. While in the region, he routinely forced the caravan to wait when he was preaching among the local population. After 1886, Cornelius settled in Calabar in the Niger delta, where he lived until 1905.

Biography is closely related to historical research on individual life, but is not the same thing. The biographical method typically privileges the peculiarities of the individual, or occasionally the family or small group of people, emphasising the constellation of strengths, weaknesses, tastes, traumas, deeds, and misdeeds making the subject unique in all of human history. At the same time, biography attempts to explain how these combinations came to be, and typically does this by means of a narration which expands to profile the environment of the subject’s childhood, and the backgrounds of people whose lives shaped the subject – parents, partners, and so on. The biographical method thus tends to affirm, often *a priori*, the autonomous individual.<sup>7</sup> It is important to recognise not only that autonomy is not the same as ‘fully realised personhood’ to quote a recent discussion of social death in the transatlantic slave trade, but that autonomy is a culturally rooted and historically contingent ideal, which has not been shared by many people throughout history.<sup>8</sup> Rather, as John Miller has observed in the same conversation, most survivors of social collapses related to the transatlantic slaving era spent much of the balances of their lives, and much of their human creativity on finding ways to

7 And for exactly this reason, biography has tended to minimise the lives of people for whom autonomy was neither possible nor desirable, especially women who, as wives and mothers, have tended to dissolve, in the historical record, into the lives of their husbands. See B. Caine, *Biography and History* (Basingstoke and New York, 2010).

8 S.E. Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* (Cambridge, 2007), 60.

cease being autonomous. ‘Most people in Africa’, Miller writes, ‘have been able to compete as individuals only on decidedly disadvantageous terms.’<sup>9</sup> To men and women who, as survivors of atrocity, were successful against great odds at recreating or replacing lost kinship groups, isolation as an individual subject of biography may well get the story wrong.<sup>10</sup>

On the other hand, relative to African history, especially of the colonial years, in which the uniqueness of an indigenous person is often simply missing from missionary and imperial archives – as a line item in a receipt, for example – biography has the potential to restore dignity to the deceased. At its best, the biographical method can slice against the archival record to reveal the horizons of possibility within which even those individuals faced with severe constraints made choices. I have found myself seduced by Cornelius Badu, ever since I first found him, eight years ago, in Richard Büttner’s 1886 travelogue.<sup>11</sup> He seemed so peculiar, so unpredictable and, above all, so irreducible to his social-political environment. He was neither an assimilated colonial collaborator, nor was he a proto-nationalist. He did not like the Pietist missionaries among whom he had laboured for years – but he nevertheless held his own early-morning devotional Bible readings, and preached to the porters on the caravan trail. As an ambitious African man living through the European Scramble for Africa, Cornelius Badu could never have attained a level of personal autonomy commensurate with his own aspirations. But in his biography, one may see the unpredictable effervescence of individual life.

### David Cornelius Kwasi Badu: Background

Cornelius Badu was a Fante man from Elmina, born on 24 July 1847.<sup>12</sup> His given name was Kwasi Badu, indicating a Sunday birth.<sup>13</sup> He would be baptised as

9 J.C. Miller, *The Problem of Slavery as History: A Global Approach* (New Haven, CT, 2012), 87.

10 This is not to say that biography is the wrong approach, but that individuals’ success at gaining a name for themselves, as for instance the remarkable Domingos Álvares, enslaved in eighteenth-century Brazil before running afoul of the Inquisition and hauled to Portugal for trial, must not be equated with their success at regaining a sense of communal embeddedness. See J.H. Sweet, *Domingos Álvares, African Healing, and the Intellectual History of the Atlantic World* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2011).

11 And that travelogue, in turn, I discovered in Fabian, *Out of Our Minds*.

12 This date is given in his employee file at Basel Mission Archives (BMA), BV 952: Cornelius, David (Kwasi Badu). This date contradicts the mission’s subsequent annual report, Evangelische Missionsgesellschaft in Basel: *Jahresbericht* 1876, xxi., which lists his birth as 1849. The generally less reliable Pilgermission St. Chrischona, also lists his birthdate as 1847.

13 24 July 1847 was a Saturday.

David Cornelius in Switzerland in 1867; it is unclear whether he was connected with the Euro–African Cornelius family of Elmina.<sup>14</sup> Mid-nineteenth century Elmina, a Dutch colonial trading settlement, was a thriving city with an indigenous population of 18,000 to 20,000, living in over 3,000 houses.<sup>15</sup> After the abolition of slavery earlier in the century, Elmina's market for bonded labour had evolved into several other arrangements, including Dutch military service in Surinam and Java. Between 1831 and 1872, 3,000 indigenous recruits were sent from Elmina to the Dutch East Indies, and many settled in Java for the rest of their lives.<sup>16</sup> At the time of Cornelius' birth, Elmina was administered by governors appointed from the Netherlands, and it was through that connection that he came to Europe as a youth. In 1858, Elmina's governor Karel Nagtglas began sending 'Africans to Holland for higher education in mechanical engineering, surveying, and botanical gardening'.<sup>17</sup> In comparison with Accra to the east, where the transition from Danish to English rule in 1850 had brought to an end a long era of open interracial socialising, the Elmina of Cornelius' childhood was a unique arena of cross-cultural creativity.<sup>18</sup> 'Prior to the 1870s', Larry Yarak writes,

Neither the Dutch nor the British acted with the authority, conviction or power that this was an area within their imperial ambit ... The Asante Empire had relinquished its imperial power over the region in 1831, having exercised its authority for only a brief period. The result was that the coastal littoral became a middle ground, where a unique culture of adjustment to difference arose, in which misunderstandings, both charitable and malicious, became the basis for the creation of new practices and meanings.<sup>19</sup>

14 W. Smidt, 'Les Africains De Bâle Au Xixe Siècle', in S. Bott (ed.), *Suisse – Afrique (18e – 19e Siècles): de la traite des noirs à la fin du régime de l'apartheid* (Münster, 2005), 215.

15 R. Baesjou, *An Asante Embassy on the Gold Coast: The Mission of Akyempon Yaw to Elmina, 1869–1872* (Leiden, 1979).

16 I. van Kessel, 'West African Soldiers in the Dutch East Indies: From Donkos to Black Dutchmen', *Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana*, no. 9 (2005), 41 and 47. With regards to remaining in the East Indies, Van Kessel adds that retired soldiers enjoyed the status of Europeans in Java, but in the Gold Coast would have been considered former slaves.

17 H.W. Debrunner, *A History of Christianity in Ghana* (Accra, 1967), 115.

18 C.E. Ray, *Crossing the Color Line: Race, Sex, and the Contested Politics of Colonialism in Ghana* (Athens, OH, 2015).

19 L.W. Yarak, 'A West African Cosmopolis: Elmina (Ghana) in the Nineteenth Century' (paper presented at the *Seascapes, Littoral Cultures, and Trans-Oceanic Exchanges* conference, Library of Congress) (Washington D.C., 2003). <http://webdoc.sub.gwdg.de/ebook/>

The Portuguese language constituted an important pillar to this unique Afro-Atlantic culture. Used both by the Fante and the Dutch populations in Elmina, Portuguese connected the community to the broader Atlantic and Indian Ocean worlds, and likely underlay the adult Cornelius' conflicts with his German employers.<sup>20</sup> In any case, it is clear from his service in the Congo in the 1880s that his facility in Portuguese was adequate for delicate negotiations with indigenous authorities.<sup>21</sup> Cornelius was thus born and raised in a globally oriented social setting, and it was within those horizons that he found his way in life.

In September 1864, Elmina's schoolmaster Dirk Demmers returned to his native Rotterdam on furlough, likely for health reasons, returning four years later.<sup>22</sup> Looking at Cornelius' records from his later years in Switzerland, Wolbert Smidt tells us that he 'lived with the Dutch missionary Dammers [sic], who sent him from Holland to [Switzerland] in 1866'.<sup>23</sup> It is most likely, then, that Cornelius, then 15 years old, accompanied Demmers to Rotterdam, and spent the next year and a half in that man's care. Working from Basel Mission archives, Hans Debrunner adds that Cornelius had 'been sent from Elmina to Holland in order to be trained as a craftsman'.<sup>24</sup> Many years later, after his death, Cornelius' wife and children moved to Elmina – thus indicating some kind of ongoing family relationship in that city.<sup>25</sup> I have no record, however, that Cornelius ever saw his native town again, nor do I have information on his short stay in the Netherlands.

---

p/2005/history\_cooperative/www.historycooperative.org/proceedings/seascapes/index.html, accessed 16 May 2018.

- 20 M.E. Kropp Dakubu, 'The Portuguese Language on the Gold Coast', *Ghana Journal of Linguistics* 1.1: 15–33 (2012), 15–17.
- 21 Numerous instances were described in Richard Büttner's travelogue, including a few conversations with the Yaka sovereign, who inquired of Cornelius about the Germans' real intentions: Büttner, *Reisen im Kongolande*, 149.
- 22 Nationaal Archief, Den Haag, Nederlandse Bezittingen op de Kust van Guinea, nummer toegang 1.05.14, inventarisnummer 370; digital scan at: [http://www.gahetna.nl/collectie/archief/inventaris/gahetnascan/eaidid/1.05.14/inventarisnr/370/afbeelding/NL-HaNA\\_1.05.14\\_370\\_0076](http://www.gahetna.nl/collectie/archief/inventaris/gahetnascan/eaidid/1.05.14/inventarisnr/370/afbeelding/NL-HaNA_1.05.14_370_0076), cited in M. Doormont, *Gold Coast Database* (<http://gcdb.doormontweb.org/>), accessed 31 August 2017; personal communication with Doormont, 30 September 2016.
- 23 Smidt, 'Les Africains de Bâle au XIXe Siècle', 215.
- 24 H.W. Debrunner, *Presence and Prestige, Africans in Europe: A History of Africans in Europe before 1918* (Basel, 1979), 310.
- 25 While conducting this research, I was contacted by Dr. David Cornelius of Cardiff, a great grandson of David Cornelius Badu; who has been developing his family's genealogy: personal communication, 22 January 2017.

### Switzerland and Württemberg, 1866–1873

In 1866, aged 17, Cornelius left Rotterdam for the Pilgrim Mission at St. Chrischona in German-speaking Switzerland, where he arrived and was registered on 23 May. Located in a rural part of the city of Basel, adjacent to the borders with both France and Germany, St. Chrischona, and the mountain upon which the institution was built, was then and remains to the present day a quiet backwater within an otherwise busy and worldly city. Moving to Chrischona put Cornelius at the centre of a globally networked grouping of German-speaking evangelical Protestants, collectively known as Pietism. With origins in the German reformation, mid-nineteenth century Western and Northern European Pietists were an informal group of devout parishioners, most of whom remained within their local Lutheran congregations (although some had formed independent, 'free' churches), supplementing their liturgical activities with Bible study, prayer meetings, and social charity work and overseas missions. In 1838, a group of Pietist donors organisationally independent from – but tightly socially connected with – the Basel Mission, had acquired an abandoned church building on the mountain, and had built an evangelistic vocational training institution there.<sup>26</sup>

Commonly known as Chrischona, the Pilgrim Mission [*Pilgermission*] at St. Chrischona was not tied to a state church, nor was it formally connected to the Basel Mission. It combined rigid spiritual and physical discipline with a proto-Pentecostal expectation of spiritual charisma and power, along with relaxed doctrinal and denominational boundaries. Founded by the same people as the Basel Missions Society, the Pilgrim Mission at St. Chrischona was an institute anchored to the agrarian soil of the upper Rhine valley, but which circulated newsletters and raised funds across a European network of spiritual fellow travellers.<sup>27</sup> Nearly a year after Cornelius' arrival as an applicant ('Petent') and subsequent baptism, Chrischona's staff sent him to the small Pietist village of Wilhelmsdorf in Württemberg for remedial education. Possibly, he required some preparatory training before he could successfully pursue his studies at Chrischona. As reported in a Chrischona newsletter:

26 J. Eber, 'Spittlers Versuche, im Raum Basel eine Pilgermission zu gründen', in Th. Kuhn and M. Sallmann (eds), *Das fromme Basel. Religion in einer Stadt des 19. Jahrhunderts* (Basel, 2002), 47.

27 For complementary accounts of St. Chrischona, published on either side of Cornelius' years there, see C.F. Schlienzen, *The Pilgrim Missionary Institution of St. Chrischona near Basle, in Switzerland* (London, 1850), and an unsigned article from 1884: 'A Visit to St. Chrischona', *The Sunday at home: A family magazine for Sabbath reading*, 31, no. 1583 (1884), 554–556.



**Brüderverzeichnis Nr.** 141

**Name:** David Badoe

**Vorname:** (Neger)

**Geburts-** { **Tag:** \_\_\_\_\_  
**Jahr:** 1847  
**Ort:** Cap Elmina (holländisch)

**Heimatberechtigt:** Westafrika

**Früherer Beruf:** ?

**Eintritt:** 23. Mai 1866 als Petent

**Austritt:** 1873

**Einsegnung:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Bemerkungen:** Frühjahr 1867 auf Chrischona getauft  
Vom 2. Sept. 1867 bis Mai 1869 zur Ausbildung in der Schule zu Wil-  
helmsdorf - vom Mai 1869 als Präparand hier  
(Dr. L. 1881: bei Dienstreise sagt Miss. von anderer Gedächtnisse  
seine Schriften fehlen. (1913))

FIGURE 4.1 David Badoe index card (BV no. 141), Pilgermission St. Chrischona

On Quasimodogeniti Sunday [that is, the first Sunday following Easter], after necessary preparation and the holy bath of second birth, the West African Kwasi Badu was accepted into the triune of God's bonds of grace and salvation. His baptismal name is David Cornelius; he is currently residing in Wilhelmsdorf on Lake Constance for further education.<sup>28</sup>

For the next 20 months, Cornelius lived in conditions approximating poverty.

Wilhelmsdorf was a village to the north of Lake Constance, and was one of two villages chartered by the king of Württemberg for Pietist non-conformists to state Lutheranism; the purpose was to give Pietists, who might otherwise be likely to emigrate to Russia or America, unused land by which they might be persuaded to remain in the country. The land was unused for a reason: as swampland, it was useless for crops and livestock alike. Residents' main income during the 1860s came from sales of peat, but also from donations from the broader Pietist network: Wilhelmsdorf was home to several charitable institutes, from a hostel for (scandalously pregnant) girls, to a school for the deaf.<sup>29</sup> Wilhelmsdorf was only able to sustain itself late in the century, and during the period in which Cornelius lived there, Wilhelmsdorf needed to beg for emergency funds from neighbouring Catholic villages.<sup>30</sup> As a pupil in Wilhelmsdorf, Cornelius thus gained an intimate acquaintance with the miserable conditions at the margins of late nineteenth century central European society, and accordingly harboured no delusions about Europe's superiority. Years later, in 1885, he told a German interlocutor:

What should move the Negroes to desert their old customs? Are the Europeans better? Are they perhaps happier than us? The old spinsters who knit wool socks for the benighted negro-children, and make all sorts of sacrifices – they should rather take care of their countrymen: I have seen a lot more need and misery over there than here, among the poor heathen children.<sup>31</sup>

In May 1869, he returned to the Pilgrim-Mission at St. Chrischona as a missionary candidate, a 'Präparand', graduating in the spring of 1873. As this period of Cornelius' life appears to have given greater shape to his opinions than his

28 *Rundschreiben an die Freunde der Pilgermission*, 19 (1867), 3.

29 A. Bühler, *175 Jahre Wilhelmsdorf: Festschrift; Beiträge zur Geschichte und Gegenwart* (Wilhelmsdorf, 1999).

30 J. Ziegler, *Wilhelmsdorf: ein Königskind. Die Geschichte d. Brüdergemeinde Wilhelmsdorf erzählt für meine Söhne* (Wilhelmsdorf, 1924).

31 Wolff, *Von Banana zum Kiamwo*, 108.

subsequent career with the Basel Mission, a discussion of the organisational culture at Chrischona is warranted. Chrischona was a small institution, serving about 60 students, of which several may have been East Africans during Cornelius' years there. Students regularly embarked on service projects among the sick and poor across Switzerland and Germany, and into Slovenia, Hungary, and Croatia. Chrischona was supported by donations from the lower middle classes in Europe, including England and Scotland.<sup>32</sup> The mission's Pietist founders understood belonging in distinctly transnational and non-racial terms. During Cornelius' years at Chrischona, he met several other Africans – Ethiopians, mostly – along with a core of students drawn from lower classes in Switzerland and Germany. This was no accident. Ludwig Krapf, an early graduate of the institution and Church Missionary Society missionary in Ethiopia, had returned to Chrischona to take a lead in its institutional development. Krapf believed that the evangelisation of Africa would proceed through Africans themselves, once 'a hunger [had] awakened' that only 'disciples from their own countries [could] meet'.<sup>33</sup> For these sociological and missiological reasons, talk of the 'civilising' mission of Europe was refreshingly absent from Chrischona. As pious young members of poor, lower-class and industrially dislocated Swiss and German families, they had little to gain by advancing civilisation. On the contrary, Chrischona's leadership put great stock in manual labour and industrial education. An English observer, writing a decade after Cornelius' time there, noted:

The whole place bristled with life; the students were everywhere, save in the dormitories; some of them were engaged in study, others were working in the extensive printing establishment, or in the book-binding department, or in some other manual employ. For it may be noted that there are tailoring and shoemaking departments in active working, as well as gardening, and field operations to be attended to, and certain hours of the day are given by most of the students to the work for which their hands are best fitted. The whole of the work necessary for the carrying on of the institution seems to be performed on the spot. The students wait on themselves, and keep their own premises in order, no servants being employed in their quarters. A home-like feeling pervades the place, and an earnest religious life animates all its proceedings.<sup>34</sup>

32 'A Visit to St. Chrischona', 555.

33 Krapf, Nov. 5, 1899, quoted in W. Smidt, "Schwarze Missionare" im Deutschland des 19. Jahrhunderts', in M. Bechhaus-Gerst (ed.), *Afrikanerinnen in Deutschland und schwarze Deutsche: Geschichte und Gegenwart* (Münster, 2004), 41.

34 'A Visit to St. Chrischona', 554.



PHOTO 4.1 1889 class photo, Pilgermission St. Chrischona  
Cornelius stands in the third row, second from right. The other African student is Abiala, from Abyssinia

Furthermore, according to this 1884 account, some Chrischona students, including at least one African, were lodged with local peasants in the Basel countryside, and presumably helped with the farm work. They were expected to help with the institution's own food production, including gardening and tending to the animals. Regardless of whether he had lived with farmers, Cornelius had seen the deadly realities of underdeveloped Switzerland: several of his African peers at Chrischona died of tuberculosis.<sup>35</sup>

Writing 16 years before Cornelius' arrival, Christoph Schlienz painted a strikingly similar image of life at the Pilgrims-Mission as that of the anonymous 1884 writer of the *Sunday at Home* (see note 26 above). Both are accordingly

35 Wolff, *Von Banana zum Kiamwo*, 95.

reliable descriptions of Cornelius' experiences from 1866 to 1873.<sup>36</sup> The rhythms of daily life were highly regulated: rising at five in the morning for devotions and bed-making; breakfast at six, manual labour until eight, and coursework from eight until noon, and from three until five. A bell summoned students to the classroom seven minutes before instruction. Saturday afternoons were free. Cornelius' responsibilities may have included working in medical clinics for the destitute in Basel, operating the institute's printing press, or distributing meals to the needy, as well as cooking, wood cutting, and cleaning for the institution. Some students were given street preaching assignments.<sup>37</sup> As evangelistic preaching was part of Cornelius' vocational and voluntary life as an adult, he likely learned his craft here, as he contributed to Chrischona's charitable work among the poor and lower classes: preaching as heart religion, not theological argumentation. The academic curriculum was designed with the practical needs of pastoral and missionary work in mind – Bible, history, preaching, physical training, basic medicine, etc. – along with English and modern Arabic, specifically because of their utility as trade languages throughout the world.<sup>38</sup>

Hebrew and Greek were not taught at Chrischona, and (in 1850) Schlienz dedicated an entire chapter to defend this practice, saying that these ancient languages were not needed for evangelistic purposes.<sup>39</sup> More so than the manual labour and charitable service to the poor, Chrischona's dismissal of ancient languages testifies to the institution's academic standing in the mid-century German-speaking academic world, then at the height of philhellenism. Friedrich Nietzsche was teaching Greek philology nearby at the University of Basel during Cornelius' years at Chrischona. Likewise, David Asante of the royal family of the Gold Coast kingdom of Akuapem, who had entered the Basel Mission seminary nine years earlier in 1858 before his deputation as missionary in his hometown, had learned Hebrew and Greek (both of which he put to use as lead native consultant in the Basel Mission's Twi language Bible translation project, which was completed in the 1870s).<sup>40</sup>

Cornelius clearly bought into the underlying philosophy of preferring practical work to classical education, or at least came to do so over time. Twelve

36 Schlienz and J. Kitto, 'The Pilgrim Missionary Institution of St. Chrischona.'

37 *Ibid.*, 55, 102.

38 *Ibid.*, 61, 63.

39 *Ibid.*, 63–65.

40 On Asante's experiences in Basel, see S. Abun-Nasr, *Afrikaner und Missionar: Die Lebensgeschichte von David Asante* (Basel, 2003), 117 ff.

years after his departure from Chrischona, in conversation with Congo expedition participant Willy Wolff, Cornelius would express his contempt for mainstream education in the German-speaking world:

Sir, you speak of education, but should rather call it mis-education. For twelve years, six or seven hours a day you squeeze your children like sheep in stalls into poorly ventilated rooms, and you wheeze at them about long-dead languages and institutions. Meanwhile, the child's wide open curiosity, and receptivity for everything fresh, alive and beautiful is artfully smothered. Your children are kept as far as possible from nature and truth, while their bodies and souls are methodically repressed, all the more to force upon them old parchments of long-gone peoples.<sup>41</sup>

It was not only the education which set Chrischona apart from most contemporary missionary training institutions. The spiritual atmosphere during Cornelius' time was unique, and in many respects anticipated twentieth-century Pentecostal praxis: absolutely unbending in matters of morality, duty and work, but quite ambivalent about finer points of doctrine. The institute affirmed only the earliest, universal Christian creeds. Students hailed from Lutheran, Reformed, and Anglican homes. More significantly, from the beginning, Chrischona was marked by a proto-Pentecostal streak relatively uncommon in European Christianity at this time: students prayed for the gift of tongues – the supernatural ability to speak and interpret strange languages – and were taught to lay hands on the sick, expecting miraculous healing, and to cast out demons.<sup>42</sup> In typically Pietist fashion, students were also taught that God required of them, even as they prayed for miracles, rigour in learning languages and medicine, rather than to merely wait for the miracles. This was hardly standard European Christianity at this time, and it would be interesting to see if Cornelius applied any charismatic praxis to his work with Basel. He did seem to retain the values of pragmatic work until the mid-1880s at least. Willy Wolff related that Cornelius spoke English, German, Portuguese, and Arabic 'in addition to his native language', while Büttner entrusted his finances to the 'businessmanly' Cornelius.<sup>43</sup>

During these years, Elmina came under English control and, shortly thereafter, bombardment.<sup>44</sup> A short local conflict pulled the Asante army into Elmina,

41 Wolff, *Von Banana zum Kiamwo*, 25.

42 Schlienz and Kitto., 156–157.

43 Wolff, *Von Banana zum Kiamwo*, 24.

44 N. Everts, "Brought up Well According to European Standards": Helena Van Der Burgh and Wilhelmina Van Naarsen: Two Christian Women from Elmina', in I. van Kessel (ed.),

upon which the British fired upon the town from the adjacent fort in March 1873. According to Larry Yarak, ‘the destruction of old Elmina brought the middle ground between Europeans, Euro-Africans and Elmina *asafo* (one of 7 political-military orders in Elmina that functioned as authorities over various parts of the city) to an end and opened the new era of colonialism’.<sup>45</sup> Elmina’s ruins were pillaged by people from the surrounding countryside. Its inhabitants, now refugees, were scattered throughout the region. As noted above, Cornelius’ family likely returned at some point: after Cornelius’ death nearly a half-century later, his Nigerian widow Elizabeth relocated to Elmina from her hometown in Calabar – thus suggesting that she had, at the very least, some kind of kinship support in that town.<sup>46</sup> What Cornelius knew of these events, and the meaning he gave to them, can only be a matter of speculation: the bombing took place near the end of his time in Europe, and may have contributed to his subsequent wanderlust. His home was now destroyed and, more importantly, the fragile middle-ground society he came from appears to have simply disappeared.<sup>47</sup> In a sense, he was a refugee who had voluntarily emigrated several years before actually becoming homeless. But the few available details shedding light on Cornelius’ personal life, individuality, and spiritual being indicate that he centred his life on his own – idiosyncratic – religious devotion: faith became his home, not in community with like-minded believers, but rather in a Pietist, syncretistic Christianity of his own concoction. The Swiss Pietist culture he had experienced for several years may have provided invaluable structure for him. Thirteen years after Elmina’s destruction, Richard Büttner would note that Cornelius never failed to apply himself to daily Bible reading.<sup>48</sup> If these were drilled disciplines in Switzerland, no one was holding him to the task in the Congo – he had, in other words, made Pietist practice his own.

### Gold Coast Years, 1873–1884

In 1873, Cornelius applied to the Basel Missionary Society. After his final exams at Chrischona, Wolbert Smidt relates, ‘it was decided he should work as a

---

*Merchants, Missionaries & Migrants: 300 Years of Dutch–Ghanaian Relations* (Amsterdam, 2002), 133.

45 L.W. Yarak ‘A West African Cosmopolis’.

46 David Cornelius, Cardiff, great grandson of David Kwasi Cornelius Badu: personal communication, 22 January 2017.

47 Ch.R. DeCorse, *An Archaeology of Elmina: Africans and Europeans on the Gold Coast, 1400–1900* (Washington, DC, 2001), 43.

48 Büttner, *Reisen im Kongolande*, 124.

missionary's assistant, because his intelligence was not deemed sufficient for any other occupation'.<sup>49</sup> What this meant can only be guessed at, but it may provide a clue as to why Cornelius left the agency after only three years, during which time he had held at least two different assignments: 'catechist', in Basel's 1874 annual report, and 'travelling preacher' in 1876. Nevertheless, admittance to Basel mission employment was no small achievement. It was a highly demanding application process, which put great emphasis on the candidate's personal and moral character. His admission to employment with the Basel Mission, then, suggests that by 1873 he had come to fully internalise the Pietism of his youth.

That autumn, he was deputed to the town of Akropong in Akuapem.<sup>50</sup> He landed at Accra on 2 December, having made the journey together with several Basel missionaries: three newly deputed men – Müller, Essler and Müh by name – and a woman named Barbara Rothfuss, who had volunteered to become a missionary wife to a man (named Klaiber) whom she was to meet upon her arrival in Africa. More importantly, the party included senior missionaries Johannes and Catherine Zimmermann, returning from furlough, together with several of their children. This couple were among the mission's most creative and effective missionaries, and simultaneously a source of endless frustration for the strictly hierarchical Basel Mission.<sup>51</sup> Catherine Zimmermann, furthermore, was not European: a native of Luanda in Angola by the name of Geveh, she had been kidnapped into slavery at the age of 13 in 1833, only to be shipwrecked in Jamaica, where she had been taken in by the Moravian Brethren community and trained as a teacher. In 1844 she had volunteered with the Basel Mission. She spent the rest of her life in the Gold Coast, marrying a German man along the way.<sup>52</sup>

One wonders if Cornelius and Catherine spoke with one another in Portuguese; at a deeper level, one could surmise about what he expected his career with the mission would hold. War was probably not part of his calculation. But it is likely that immediately upon arrival at his initial assignment as a catechist

49 Smidt, 'Les Africains De Bâle Au Xixe Siècle', 215.

50 This date and the following from *Die evangelische Heidenbote* 1874, 15.

51 Jonathan Miller has called Johannes Zimmermann a 'strategic deviant' for his success at violating mission rules and protocols without being fired: he was too good at his craft, and his work too strategic toward the Mission's long-term goals, to be subjected to the more customary modes of discipline. The Basel Mission did not hesitate to recall problem missionaries from the field. J. Miller, *Missionary Zeal and Institutional Control: Organizational Contradictions in the Basel Mission on the Gold Coast, 1828–1917* (Grand Rapids, MI, 2003), 10.

52 D. Konrad, *Missionsbräute: Pietistinnen Des 19. Jahrhunderts in Der Basler Mission* (Münster and New York, 2001), 235–251.



at Akropong, two days' march north of Accra, Cornelius was conscripted into the eastern wing of the British campaign against the Asante. If so, he was now involved in a war against an African kingdom, on behalf of an army that had only 2 years earlier destroyed his hometown. Was Cornelius involved? The Basel Mission's archives are not clear on this matter. But in his report to General Wolseley (of the main expeditionary force, which marched north from Cape Coast), Captain John Glover (who had approached Asante from the east with a force of locals, along with a few hundred Hausas), added this:

There are two bodies of Christians, each numbering about 109 men. They were accompanied by catechists belonging to the Basle Mission and had daily morning and evening prayer to which they were regularly summoned by a bell. In the conflict with the enemy on Christmas Day they were in the van [that is, the caravan consisting of the main body of soldiers] and behaved admirably. Their march was orderly and soldierly and they have shown themselves the only reliable troops among the many Native forces lately assembled on the Volta.<sup>53</sup>

The *Church Mission Intelligencer* added that the two Basel companies came from Christiansborg and Akropong.<sup>54</sup> Since Cornelius was then serving as catechist at Akropong at the time, it seems likely that he was involved in the Ashanti campaign.

Either way, he was back at his posting in Akropong by April, when he makes his first appearance in field correspondence. As catechist, Cornelius answered to Johannes Widmann, a contemporary of Zimmermann's, and the temperamental opposite. Widmann demanded hard work and obedience from everyone under him, and Cornelius' eventual departure from the Basel Mission was largely Widmann's initiative. The first problem was language: Cornelius had trouble with the local Twi language, and locals treated him as a foreigner. There was no shortage of foreigners in Akropong during those months; most were refugees from Britain's war with Asante.<sup>55</sup>

His status as a foreigner was directly connected with the second problem: his salary was too little. The Basel mission had an intricate formula for

53 Quoted in E. Stock, *The History of the Church Missionary Society: Its Environment, Its Men and Its Work*, vol. 2 (London, 1899), 429.

54 *Church Mission Intelligencer*, July 1875, 195.

55 Basel Mission Archives, D-1,25; Odumase item 11: letter from Chr. Buhl to BM headquarters, 15 October 1873; Buhl added that many of these refugees were victims of tangential and domestic conflicts made possible by the war.

calculating pay, according to which Cornelius earned £27.10 during the year 1874. But this formula assumed that ‘indigenous’ (*Eingeborenen*) workers were truly native, and had access to plots of land belonging to the local clans. In a December 1875 letter to the home office, Cornelius explained that the other catechists could grow most of their food in gardens belonging to their respective clans, and had only to purchase meat, but that he, as a ‘Fremdling’, a stranger, had to buy everything, and at higher prices.<sup>56</sup>

Late in 1874, and against Widmann’s council, Cornelius married a woman of an important mulatto family in Accra: Catherine Lutterodt.<sup>57</sup> The Mission’s 1876 annual report lists Cornelius with a different posting: travelling preacher. Perhaps his preaching skill and capacity for physical work made him an ill fit for his job as a catechist, or perhaps proximity to Widmann was the problem – it is unclear. His new responsibilities seem to have taken him on lengthy hikes to the northwest. In 1875, he wrote a letter to the home office about the prospect of Christians raising yams as cash crops in the kingdom of Akyem Abuakwa.<sup>58</sup> Even as an evangelist, it seems, Cornelius was thinking about business.

The material requirements to this new assignment presented a problem, ultimately leading to his dismissal. After many years in Europe, Cornelius did not feel he could fulfil his travelling responsibilities barefoot, as seems to have been Widmann’s expectation of his native workers. His modest salary, however, did not allow for him to purchase new boots, and he balked at Widmann’s orders, who in turn called him lazy.<sup>59</sup> In 1877, Cornelius suffered a snake bite, and travelled, without the mission’s permission, to London for specialist care under a certain Doctor Dixon.

While in Europe, however, he made a fatal mistake: he seems to have gone on a speaking tour in Switzerland and southwestern Germany, where he raised the funds he felt he needed for his personal usage, thus directly accessing local donors, who usually gave to visiting missionaries donations intended for the home office to distribute.<sup>60</sup> This seems to have been the catalyst for his

56 Basel Mission Archives, D–1,27, Akropong item 217: David Cornelius to Mission Committee, 20 December 1875.

57 Basel Mission Archives, D–1,26: Johannes Widmann, letter to Mission Committee, 7 October 1874.

58 R. Addo-Fening, *Akyem Abuakwa, 1700–1943: From Ofori Panin to Sir Ofori Atta* (Trondheim, 1997), 333 n.

59 WMMs Archives, West Africa Correspondence, Gold Coast 1835–1944, Box 265, 1877, no. 34, 11 November 1877, David Cornelius to General Directors.

60 BMA D–1.28 (1876) Akropong – Item 209, Cornelius to home office, with addenda from Mader and Widmann.

dismissal from the Basel Mission: unpermitted contact with donors was a red line.<sup>61</sup> The mission could tolerate his marriage and his failures to submit timely reports of his evangelistic preaching circuits. But his extravagant tastes violated Pietist aesthetics of modesty. In Cornelius's dismissal notice (missing from his employee file but excerpted in his letter in response), the home office accused him of 'desiring to live like a lord'. Cornelius replied asymmetrically, saying that 'the sheep [Basel Mission jargon for indigenous converts] belong to the Lord and He will hold us accountable for them'.<sup>62</sup> This statement seems to be an indirect assertion by Cornelius that he answered to God and not his employers.

Such talk-back, despite being couched in the idiom of simple devotion, constituted an offensive transgression of hierarchical protocol, and earned a furious response by Akropong missionary Johannes Mader (Widmann's brother-in-law), scribbled onto Cornelius' resignation letter before it was forwarded to the home office. Mader's accusation is enlightening, because it conflates distinct transgressions:

Cornelius concedes that he must not live like a lord, and that he knows where the mission's money comes from. But he has lived a lordly life nonetheless. One ought not mention it, but neither he nor his wife understand the meaning of modesty. With his wife's resources he ordered a noble harmonium from Württemberg. His lordly living was on display in his refusal to eat bread, made from European flour and well-baked by a negro woman, because he was accustomed to eating bread prepared by European hands. One could produce other examples: music boxes, every cut of clothing, the German language instead of Twi, and more.<sup>63</sup>

Mader's remarks about the German language enlighten Cornelius's predicament: in the eyes of his supervisor, an African was guilty of living like a lord if he lived like a European. Mader made the connection clear in his conclusion: Cornelius 'is a dirty and insipid gossip, clothed in European and pious robes'. In these lines, Mader connects a moral failing of Cornelius's (gossiping) with a racial transgression (acting like a European), while the word 'European' simultaneously carries a religious weighting close to 'pious'. Thus, Cornelius's preference to speak German instead of Twi (which was to him a new language) constituted a double transgression – both religious and social.

---

61 *Ibid.*

62 *Ibid.*

63 *Ibid.*

Cornelius sought employment with the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society in Accra, but met resistance in Thomas Picot, head of the mission in Accra, who found Cornelius' English to be wanting.<sup>64</sup> Picot's secretary Rossall, meanwhile, advised Cornelius to find work with a merchant.<sup>65</sup> I have found no solid record of his doings for the next six years, when he joined the German Congo expedition. What happened during that time? Did he remain married? Did he have children? At the very least, he opened a business in Accra and accumulated some property. He developed solid references in the white business community. At some point during these years, he 'accompanied an English merchant in his trip up the Niger'. He also gained financial and personal independence, to the degree that he was able, on short notice, to 'put his assets in order' and catch the next steamer to join the Germans in the Congo.<sup>66</sup> This latter arrangement hints at Cornelius' standing in the world: international travel was his fluent language; few college-educated Europeans in the 1880s would be this casual about business matters; even fewer Africans would be this comfortable navigating the infrastructures of the Scramble for Africa. He also seems to have had some financial means: he arrived at the meeting point at the mouth of the Congo with a cook and a carpenter in tow.<sup>67</sup>

Why did Cornelius seek to leave Accra? Büttner suggested exploration was more appealing to Cornelius than the business life – that the expedition was a matter of whim, in other words – but there may have been more. The Gold Coast economy underwent a painful recession from the early 1880s until 1888.<sup>68</sup> As an independent businessman, Cornelius may have been highly exposed to the business cycle, and may have needed the money. Regardless, he was well-equipped for this next undertaking. From the beginning, Cornelius participated in the expedition's diplomatic affairs, both with Europeans and African kings. The former's escalating rivalries in the lower Congo were at that time surpassing the International African Association's capacity to contain them. The Berlin Congress, ostensibly held to resolve these differences, was held while the German Congo Expedition was in the interior.<sup>69</sup>

64 WMMS Archives, West Africa Correspondence, Gold Coast 1835–1944, Box 265, 1877, no. 34, 26 October 1877, Thomas Picot to John Kilner.

65 WMMS Archives, West Africa Correspondence, Gold Coast 1835–1944, Box 265, 1877, no. 34, 11 November 1877, David Cornelius to General Directors.

66 Büttner, *Reisen im Kongolande*, 5.

67 *Ibid.*, 18.

68 G.A. Wanner, *Die Basler Handels-Gesellschaft A.G., 1859–1959* (Basel, 1959), 120.

69 Büttner, *Reisen im Kongolande*, 20.

### Angola-Congo, 1884–1886

The German Congo Expedition of 1884–1886 was a rolling disaster. Almost immediately upon decampment into the interior, the expedition's leader Eduard Schulze died. The expedition was organised according to the hierarchical models of the Prussian Army, according to which system academic rank could be translated to officer rank. This model of organisation was prejudiced against practical experience in Central Africa. Most of the surviving German officers seem to have been university educated in the natural sciences, but not one seems to have had any previous experience in Africa, or to have enjoyed any leadership, managerial, or cross-cultural skills.

This deficit revealed itself violently from the very beginning, when Lieutenant Tappenbeck shot and killed a man after a brief argument, conducted in 'pantomime' because Tappenbeck could not be bothered to understand his 'opponent's' language.<sup>70</sup> Aside from Schulze, however, and despite their incompetence, all the Germans survived. The expedition, however, fragmented. After Schulze's death, the ranking officers split off from the main caravan, pursuing various interests of their own. Lieutenants Tappenbeck and Kund went one way, taking a portion of the expedition's money and material with them; Willy Wolff did likewise, heading elsewhere. These departures left Richard Büttner in charge of the main caravan. He was a young botanist with next to no interpersonal skill or emotional intelligence.

Wolff and Büttner published popular accounts of the expedition upon returning to Germany. Both wrote in the first person, and combined adventure narratives with descriptions of the plant life, geology, hydrology, and climate of the Congo rainforests. In Büttner's case, botanical exploration served more than a scientific purpose. It also provided a measure of escape from the human conflicts – many of his own creation – which plagued the caravan. Büttner's book follows a loose sequence of alternating scenes of conflict, including violence, heated arguments, combusive negotiations with local authorities, strikes and work slowdowns by porters, with romantic day trips in the forest, unaccompanied but for the plant life. Büttner resorted to gunfire on multiple occasions. In one instance, he fired his revolver during an attack from villagers – the cause of which is as unclear in the published account as it likely was to the incompetent Büttner – while elsewhere he broke up a porter 'strike' by brandishing a revolver in one hand and a hippopotamus whip in the

70 *Ibid.*, 31–33. Tappenbeck, according to Büttner, had violated an association's shrine and, when confronted by 'natives', had opened fire before determining the nature of the problem. The issue was explained the next day in a meeting at the IAA district office nearby.

other.<sup>71</sup> Büttner eventually gave Cornelius a gun. On 4 September 1885, the caravan was attacked (Büttner was unclear by whom), and the porters threw down their loads and fled, leaving Büttner, the guide, and Cornelius alone to defend the material, as 'Cornelius and I alone were able and willing to fire'. The conflict was eventually settled, but not before Cornelius was shot in his right leg.<sup>72</sup>

In contrast to Büttner, Willy Wolff took interest in the Africans around him, albeit in the late-century register of scientific racism, describing foods, houses, markets, and music, and asking questions such as 'Why are the negroes black?'<sup>73</sup> Both authors seem to have used their conversations with Cornelius to advance various narrative points about the expedition or about Europe. Accordingly, the published conversations have the appearance of selective editing. Cornelius' character, however, seems generally consistent with that of the man who left the Basel Mission seven years earlier. He was a skilled intermediary for the bumbling Germans – although, as a native of the Gold Coast, he was every bit as foreign to the Congo as his employers. Unlike them, however, Cornelius had ample cross-cultural experience, and was able to improvise compromises with porters, bandits, and kings nearly as quickly and often as Büttner could get himself in trouble.

Büttner, whose management of the caravan was inept, used conversations with Cornelius to justify his managerial and navigational choices. The itinerary described a rough triangle, moving eastward from São Salvador to the Kwango, then northward to the Congo, and finally downriver to Kinshasa. But for much of the time, none of the travellers knew where they were. On 14 September, for example, after being lost for ten days on a dry and trackless plateau to the west of the Kwango, the caravan finally found the river again, but were confused to find it running in the wrong direction. Büttner and Cornelius had obviously arrived at the Congo, which in that region runs in a southwesterly direction.<sup>74</sup> At some point in the upper Kwango (Büttner's improvised spellings and near total ignorance of naming customs make his narrative challenging to map), a series of miscommunications with a local king forced a downriver retreat.<sup>75</sup>

71 *Ibid.*, 164–166.

72 R. Büttner, 'Die Congo-Expedition', *Mittheilungen der afrikanischen Gesellschaft in Deutschland* 5, no. 1 (1886), 5.

73 Wolff, *Von Banana zum Kiamwo*, 79.

74 R. Büttner, *Reisen im Kongolande*, 203.

75 Probably the Yaka kingdom. In 1887, Richard Büttner gave a botanical paper, subsequently published as 'Neue Arten von Guinea, dem Kongo und Quango', *Verhandlungen des botanischen Vereins der Provinz Brandenburg*, vol. 31 (1889–90), 64, in which he refers to 'the city of Muata Kiamwo von Mayakka'.

Büttner blamed the trouble on his interpreters, whom he suspected of turning the king against him, adding that ‘Cornelius alone shared my suspicions.’<sup>76</sup> Elsewhere, Büttner relied on Cornelius for nearly everything: accounting and inventory, negotiations with porters, navigation while lost in the forest, food purchases, and sending messages to local authorities.<sup>77</sup> More interestingly, Büttner relied on Cornelius for companionship: they drank beer together, reminisced about hiking in the Swiss Alps, and went trophy hunting for elephants.<sup>78</sup> On the other hand, Cornelius was interested in evangelisation. He gained Büttner’s trust, to the degree that the otherwise impatient and short-fused German allowed Cornelius to hold up the caravan for an entire afternoon in order to preach (in Portuguese?) an evangelistic sermon; he likewise led Bible studies among the porters.<sup>79</sup> As the expedition continued, Büttner grew increasingly feverish and indisposed. Cornelius eventually took over altogether, while Büttner was delirious and had to be carried by hammock. Upon the expedition’s arrival at Kinshasa in September 1885, Büttner entered the station of the Congo Free State, and signed full authority (*Vollmacht*) of the expedition’s assets over to Cornelius.<sup>80</sup>

Born in 1858 in Brandenburg, Richard Büttner had an address in Potsdam in 1886, the year of his return. In 1884 when he joined the expedition, he was a 26-year-old, with a new PhD in botany from the University of Berlin.<sup>81</sup> Despite his academic title, he nevertheless was unremarkable among nineteenth century Germans in Africa: 74 of 109 Germans travelling there at the time were university graduates.<sup>82</sup> This was a social world markedly different from that of Cornelius’ missionary co-workers. Basel missionaries hailed largely from modest families: 73 of 96 missionaries in Africa between 1885 and 1914 came from families whose fathers were artisans and farmers.<sup>83</sup> Büttner, and most of his peers, had rarely needed to learn hard manual labour. Africa was a short-cut to academic rank, and attracted those whose high self-confidence was ‘entangled with impatience and a low tolerance for frustration.’<sup>84</sup> Büttner displayed an

76 Büttner, *Reisen im Kongolande*, 156.

77 From *Ibid.*, *passim*.

78 *Ibid.*

79 *Ibid.*

80 Büttner, *Reisen Im Kongolande*, 229–230.

81 C. Essner, *Deutsche Afrikareisende im neunzehnten Jahrhundert: Zur Sozialgeschichte des Reisens* (Stuttgart, 1985), 61.

82 *Ibid.*, 71.

83 Th. Altena, ‘Ein Häuflein Christen mitten in der Heidenwelt des dunklen Erdteils’: zum Selbst- und Fremdverständnis protestantischer Missionare im kolonialen Afrika 1884–1918 (Münster and New York, 2003), 207.

84 Essner, *Deutsche Afrikareisende*, 101.

explosive temper when dealing with cross-cultural frustrations – even in his own travelogue, in which he presented himself as the very paragon of disinterested scholarship. He was not above, for example, grabbing an intransigent porter by the throat.<sup>85</sup> From managerial, diplomatic, and cross-cultural perspectives, Büttner was clearly in over his head, and on more than one occasion was rescued by Cornelius. Cornelius twice procured permission from an irate local ruler for the expedition to leave a town in which Büttner had offended the locals. One time Cornelius calmed Büttner's rattled nerves after an attack by villagers, possibly after Büttner had violated a secret ritual. Cornelius defused a strike by the porters with a timely dispersal of several bottles of rum from Büttner's personal supplies. When the porters mutinied over Büttner's unilateral changes to their contracts, he needed Cornelius to keep the expedition together: 'they wouldn't dare contradict him', Büttner wrote.<sup>86</sup> While Büttner never admitted a mistake, he regularly acknowledged his debt to what he calls 'the loyal Cornelius'. Upon the expedition's 9 March 1886 return to Banana at the mouth of the Congo, Büttner sent Cornelius, 'quite familiar with businessman things', off to São Salvador (today's Mbanza-Kongo in northwest Angola) to sell the expedition's remaining assets. Cornelius returned after 12 days, carrying several pieces of correspondence, an 'impeccable' receipt for everything, and 'nearly one hundred Pounds Sterling'. Items he had been unable to sell he had donated to the Portuguese mission. Finally, 'heart-felt farewells'. Büttner condescendingly referred to Cornelius as 'the only honest Black I met in Africa'.<sup>87</sup>

And then Büttner was gone. He boarded the 'Afrikaan' and never looked back. Africa was a stepping stone in his botanical career; he described his arrival at Rotterdam in terms of intermission: 'after an absence of twenty-one months, back on European soil'. For Cornelius, no such return would be possible. His hometown had been destroyed, and he seems to have sold his assets in the British Gold Coast before embarking on the expedition. His internal spiritual world may have been his real home. According to his great grandson's genealogical records, he moved to Calabar in the Niger Delta, where he eventually married and had children before dying in 1905, around 55 years of age.<sup>88</sup> His activities during these 20 years are unclear, as are his opinions during this time

85 Büttner, *Reisen Im Kongolande*, 182.

86 *Ibid.*, 182.

87 *Ibid.*, 282.

88 K. Kofi Cornelius, 'David Cornelius'; <https://www.geni.com/people/David-Cornelius/600000036000826277>, accessed 9 February, 2017.



about Nigeria's colonial subjugation. His parting message, perhaps, came in the name – Henry Morant Cornelius – that he gave to his young surviving son, after a British soldier who, during the Boer war, murdered a German missionary.<sup>89</sup>

### Conclusion

At the beginning of this chapter, I asserted that the biographical method had the potential to reveal individual actors' horizons of possibility during times of severe constraints. In the case of David Cornelius, raised in Switzerland, a Fante foreigner in a Twi kingdom in the Gold Coast and an intolerable misfit within his mission, but a brilliant businessman and cross-cultural negotiator, biography helps explain Europeans' inconsistent responses to his provocations, but also his own inconsistencies and hypocrisies. His idiosyncratic Christian life, including at least three wives, and his relatively luxurious tastes left him alienated from his Pietist missionary employers. In his relations with Europeans – missionaries and colonisers alike – Cornelius was an outsider, whose unwillingness to accept racialised limits to his own choices constituted a provocation to the unstable German foundations of racial difference.

In one of his letters to the Basel Mission home office, Cornelius recounted a two-week preaching circuit into the forest districts of Akyem Abuakwa in the Gold Coast. Having described several remote and impoverished villages, and having expressed revulsion at indigenous priests, he concluded in verse:

Wasserströme will ich giessen, spricht der Herr, aufs dürre Land, Kühlend  
sollen Quellen fließen in der Wüste heißen Sand; Wo jetzt Wanderer  
schmachtend müh'n, soll ein Gottesgarten blüh'n.<sup>90</sup>

Gesegnet sei der Freidenswort, es töne durch die Länder fort von Auf-  
gang bis zum Niedergang; hell wie der Engel Lobgesang.

Und wo der Streit die Völker trennt, In wildem Kampf die Selbst-  
sucht brennt, Da streu' es aus auf seinem Pfad Nach rechts und links die  
Friedenssaat.

89 *Ibid.* Since Henry Morant was court marshaled and executed in 1902, it is likely that Henry Morant Cornelius was younger than 3 years of age when his father died.

90 First verse of J. Josenhans (ed.) *Missionsliederbuch* (Basel, 1857) no. 453; see Isaiah, 41: 17–19. <https://books.google.com/books?id=YhJFAAAAYAAJ&pg=PA324#v=onepage&q&f=false>.

Wo eine Seele seufzt nach Ruh' Der weh' es stillen Frieden zu, Bis um  
das ganze Erdenrund Sich schlingt ein sel'ger Friedensbund.<sup>91</sup>

In English:

The Lord says: I will pour streams of water upon the dry land; cool springs  
will flow over the desert's hot sands. Where wanderers now thirstily toil,  
a divine garden shall grow.

Blessed be the word of peace; may it sound through the nations from  
sunrise to sunset, as brightly as angels' songs of praise.

And where conflict divides the peoples, and selfishness burns in  
mighty struggle, may the seeds of peace be sown to either side of His  
path.

Where a soul sighs for rest, may peace blow upon him, until the whole  
world is enveloped in holy bonds of peace.

These verses are excerpted from two different songs in the mission's field song-  
book. However, Cornelius quoted selectively, while omitting verse three:

Es pflanze Leben in den Tod des Negers, dem die Fessel droht; Der Götze  
werde weggerückt, Dem sich der arme Hindu bückt.

May life grow from death for the Negro, threatened by shackles; May  
the poor Hindu's idols be removed.

In selectively quoting these hymns, Cornelius reveals himself as fully the mas-  
ter of his German Pietist upbringing. He is able to express, as his own, prayers  
for world peace and for reconciliation among the peoples, while silently delet-  
ing patronising racial condescension. David Cornelius Badu was an innovator  
in the creation of African Christianity, and deserves reinsertion in the record  
on that account alone. As the African, but foreign, foreman to a German exp-  
edition in the Congo basin, he did not escape name-calling from both sides:  
'White Black Man', from the Congolese, and 'European-costumed Black  
Man' from the Germans.<sup>92</sup> But through skilful cross-cultural manoeuvres, he

91 First, second, and fourth verses of *Missionsliederbuch*, no. 57 <https://books.google.com/books?id=YhJFAAAAYAAJ&pg=PA42#v=onepage&q&f=false>.

92 Richard Büttner, *Reisen im Kongolande*, 115 and Wolff, *Von Banana zum Kiamwo*, 23, re-  
spectively. It should be noted that Wolff used this description to introduce Cornelius to  
his German readers. Throughout the book it is clear that he expressed a high opinion of

positioned himself as a 'civilised' conversationalist, with all the racial weight the word implies, while at the same time relentlessly and sarcastically attacking European customs defining 'civilised' life.<sup>93</sup>

Furthermore, as a devout, disciplined convert, committed to the emergence of an African Christianity, Cornelius was not content to merely create a cosmopolitan place for himself, as a fluently cross-cultural man: he was interested in remaking the world. This was missionary hybridity – what Lamin Sanneh has called 'translating the message', a defining feature of historical Christianity.<sup>94</sup> In Cornelius' view, Muslims were succeeding because of their willingness to accept African realities in marriage (that is, polygamy), and to enter people's daily lives. 'If there is a religion with a future here, it is Islam', he told Wolff in São Salvador, 'which is quietly growing in many places, without mission houses being built. Rather, it is going from hut to hut'.<sup>95</sup> Sanneh's study of Sierra Leone's early-nineteenth-century community of recaptives provides a good comparison. The spread of Christianity throughout West Africa, Sanneh wrote, was disproportionately the work of Sierra Leonean refugees, who found in the religion dignity to the uprooted and displaced.<sup>96</sup> Like the recaptives in their day, Cornelius had outgrown the limits of his hometown. He seems to have used the particularities of Swiss Pietist and proto-Pentecostal Christianity as a foundation upon which to develop an authentically African Christianity, an African Christianity he was keen to spread. After a few short years employed as a travelling evangelist for the Basel Mission, however, Cornelius seems to have been acting on his own, without a supportive society of fellow refugees.

In contrast to Sanneh's Sierra Leonean Christians, whose efforts at indigenising their religion included embrace of the forms and practices of European cultures, Cornelius was living in a time when the civilising mission of

---

Cornelius, and regarded the latter's views as authoritative. Wolff uses Cornelius' voice throughout the travelogue to articulate criticisms of Europe.

93 Wolff, *Von Banana zum Kiamwo*, 231.

94 L.O. Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*, 2nd ed. (Maryknoll, NY, 2008), 33–34. Sanneh distinguished two basic modes of world religious expansion – *diffusion* of a centralised and unified religious culture (used by Muslims and Christians alike); and *translation*, in which not only practices but core doctrine gets altered. *Translation*, Sanneh argued, is largely a Christian phenomenon, while admitting the fuzzy boundaries to his model.

95 Wolff, *Von Banana zum Kiamwo*, 108. It might be noted that Cornelius' favourable words about Islam in Africa predated by a few years African-American Christian missionary Edward Blyden's better-known argument that Islam was a more appropriate fit to African conditions than the American missionary Christianity of which he was a messenger. E.W. Blyden, *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race* (London, 1887).

96 L.O. Sanneh, *Abolitionists Abroad: American Blacks and the Making of Modern West Africa* (Cambridge, MA, 1999).

mid-century European missionaries was giving way to increasingly racialised visions of Africa. Brian Stanley notes how the ‘soft racism’ of mid-nineteenth-century missionaries in Africa, focusing on pity for the ‘poor heathens’, nevertheless assumed the fellow humanity of Africans. But by the time of the 1910 world missionary congress in Edinburgh, the simple Eurocentrism of the 1840s had been replaced with hard and fast racial categories and hierarchies.<sup>97</sup> This shift took place over a half-century, on either end of the imperial Scramble for Africa, and Cornelius’ navigation of these rapidly changing times deserves close inspection. Self-supported as a businessman, Cornelius had freedoms and constraints very different from those of most African evangelists and colonial clerks, who as employees of European missions and institutions needed to live within the limits of European tolerance. He seemed at home with an African twist on Swiss Pietism, with a Bible in one hand, and a compass in the other. He made his own way in a world in which African horizons of independent agency were rapidly collapsing. His biography exemplifies the historian’s imperative to balance sweeping narrative analysis against the basic human experience of moral imagination.



FIGURE 4.2 David Cornelius Badu’s signature of letter to Basel Mission Committee, 20 December 1875

## References

- Abun-Nasr, S. (2003), *Afrikaner und Missionar: Die Lebensgeschichte von David Asante* (Basel).
- Addo-Fening, R. (1997), *Akyem Abuakwa, 1700–1943: From Ofori Panin to Sir Ofori Atta* (Trondheim).

97 B. Stanley, ‘From “the Poor Heathen” to “the Glory and Honour of All Nations”: Vocabularies of Race and Custom in Protestant Missions, 1844–1928’, *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, 34 (2010), no. 1, 3–10.

- Altena, Th. (2003), *‘Ein Häuflein Christen mitten in der Heidenwelt des dunklen Erdteils’: Zum Selbst- und Fremdverständnis protestantischer Missionare im kolonialen Afrika 1884–1918* (Münster and New York).
- Baesjou, R. (1979), *An Asante Embassy on the Gold Coast: The Mission of Akyempon Yaw to Elmina, 1869–1872* (Leiden).
- Bernaut, F. (2006), ‘Body, Power, and Sacrifice in Equatorial Africa’, *Journal of African History*, vol. 47, 207–239.
- Blyden, E.W. (1887), *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race* (London).
- Bühler, A. (1999), *175 Jahre Wilhelmsdorf: Festschrift; Beiträge zur Geschichte und Gegenwart* (Wilhelmsdorf).
- Büttner, R. (1889–1890), ‘Neue Arten von Guinea, dem Kongo und Quango’, *Verhandlungen des botanischen Vereins der Provinz Brandenburg*, vol. 31.
- Büttner, R. (1890), *Reisen im Kongolande. Ausgeführt im Auftrage der afrikanischen Gesellschaft in Deutschland* (Leipzig).
- Caine, B. (2010), *Biography and History* (Basingstoke and New York).
- Debrunner, H.W. (1967), *A History of Christianity in Ghana* (Accra).
- Debrunner, H.W. (1979), *Presence and Prestige, Africans in Europe: A History of Africans in Europe before 1918* (Basel).
- DeCorse, Ch.R. (2001), *An Archaeology of Elmina: Africans and Europeans on the Gold Coast, 1400–1900* (Washington, DC).
- Eber, J. (2002), ‘Spittlers Versuche, im Raum Basel eine Pilgermission zu gründen’, in Th. Kuhn and M. Sallmann (eds), *Das fromme Basel. Religion in einer Stadt des 19. Jahrhunderts* (Basel), 37–50.
- Essner, C. (1985), *Deutsche Afrikareisende im neunzehnten Jahrhundert: Zur Sozialgeschichte des Reisens* (Stuttgart).
- Everts, N. (2002), “‘Brought up Well According to European Standards’: Helena Van Der Burgh and Wilhelmina Van Naarsen: Two Christian Women from Elmina”, in I. van Kessel (ed.), *Merchants, Missionaries & Migrants: 300 Years of Dutch–Ghanaian Relations* (Amsterdam), 101–109.
- Fabian, J. (2000), *Out of Our Minds: Reason and Madness in the Exploration of Central Africa* (Berkeley, CA).
- Josenhans, J. (ed.) (1857), *Missionsliederbuch* (Basel).
- Konrad, D. (2001), *Missionsbräute: Pietistinnen Des 19. Jahrhunderts in Der Basler Mission* (Münster and New York).
- Kropp Dakubu, M.E. (2012), ‘The Portuguese Language on the Gold Coast’, *Ghana Journal of Linguistics*, vol. 1, 15–33.
- Marchand, S.L. (2013), *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire: Religion, Race, and Scholarship* (Cambridge).

- Miller, J. (2003), *Missionary Zeal and Institutional Control: Organizational Contradictions in the Basel Mission on the Gold Coast, 1828–1917* (Grand Rapids, MI).
- Miller, J.C. (2012), *The Problem of Slavery as History: A Global Approach* (New Haven, CT).
- N.A., (1884), 'A Visit to St. Chrischona', *The Sunday at Home: A Family Magazine for Sabbath Reading*, vol. 31, no. 1583, 554–556.
- Ray, C.E. (2015), *Crossing the Color Line: Race, Sex, and the Contested Politics of Colonialism in Ghana* (Athens, OH).
- Sanneh, L.O. (1999), *Abolitionists Abroad: American Blacks and the Making of Modern West Africa* (Cambridge, MA).
- Sanneh, L.O. (2008), *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, NY).
- Schlienz, C.F. (1850), *The Pilgrim Missionary Institution of St. Chrischona near Basle, in Switzerland* (London).
- Smidt, W. (2004), "Schwarze Missionare" im Deutschland des 19. Jahrhunderts', in M. Bechhaus-Gerst (ed.), *Afrikanerinnen in Deutschland und schwarze Deutsche: Geschichte und Gegenwart* (Münster), 41–56.
- Smidt, W. (2005), 'Les Africains De Bâle Au Xixe Siècle', in S. Bott (ed.), *Suisse – Afrique (18e – 19e Siècles): de la traite des noirs à la fin du régime de l'apartheid* (Münster).
- Smallwood, S.E. (2007), *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* (Cambridge).
- Stanley, B. (2010), 'From "the Poor Heathen" to "the Glory and Honour of All Nations": Vocabularies of Race and Custom in Protestant Missions, 1844–1928', *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, vol. 34, 3–10.
- Stock, E. (1899), *The History of the Church Missionary Society: Its Environment, Its Men and Its Work*, vol. 2 (London).
- Sweet, J.H. (2011), *Domingos Álvares, African Healing, and the Intellectual History of the Atlantic World* (Chapel Hill, NC).
- Van Kessel, I. (2005), 'West African Soldiers in the Dutch East Indies: From Donkos to Black Dutchmen', *Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana*, no. 9, 41–60.
- Wanner, G.A. (1959), *Die Basler Handels-Gesellschaft A. G., 1859–1959* (Basel).
- Wolff, W. (1889), *Von Banana zum Kiamwo: Eine Forschungsreise in Westafrika, Ausgeführt im Auftrage der afrikanischen Gesellschaft in Deutschland* (Oldenburg and Leipzig).
- Yarak, L.W. (2003), 'A West African Cosmopolis: Elmina (Ghana) in the Nineteenth Century' (paper presented at the *Seascapes, Littoral Cultures, and Trans-Oceanic Exchanges* conference, Library of Congress) (Washington D.C.). <http://webdoc.sub>

[.gwdg.de/ebook/p/2005/history\\_cooperative/www.historycooperative.org/proceedings/seascapes/index.html](http://www.gwdg.de/ebook/p/2005/history_cooperative/www.historycooperative.org/proceedings/seascapes/index.html).

Ziegler, J. (1924), *Wilhelmsdorf: ein Königskind. Die Geschichte d. Brüdergemeinde Wilhelmsdorf erzählt für meine Söhne* (Wilhelmsdorf).

## The Leopard that Came to Laikom: Michael Timneng in Colonial Cameroon

*Jacqueline de Vries*

When I first visited Kom back in the 1990s, relatives and elders granted me interviews in which Timneng featured prominently: excerpts from these interviews are cited extensively here, as they provide a vivid and thought-provoking testimony.<sup>1</sup> The impact of these interviews is heightened by Timneng's 8,000-word handwritten autobiography, which I found largely intact, legible, and comprehensible, carefully preserved by Timneng's descendants. The manuscript contains a fairly chronological description – often very detailed, sometimes exasperatingly cursory – of various episodes in Timneng's life, in English. Sadly, some pages are missing from the notebook, and the text stops rather abruptly with a description of an event in the early 1920s, leading me to suspect that there is at least one more part to this autobiography. Several informants mentioned that there is a typed version of the text, but I was unable to locate a copy.

Timneng was quite obviously trying to make a point when he recorded his recollections in this text. It is both a summary of historical events, and an expression of his conviction that he had been doing the right thing and had been punished unjustly for that. He clearly conceived of himself as a public figure: his autobiography starts with a description of the first mission station in Kom, and makes no mention of his private life, his family, his children, or anything not strictly related to his public persona. While the text is coherent, it cannot stand alone and is impossible to understand, let alone assess, without the framework provided by other sources. But taken together with other sources, both written and oral, the autobiography is a powerful source because we

---

1 For this chapter special thanks are also due to Primus Forgwe and the late Henry Mbain of the National Archives in Buea. More or less conventional (if scattered) sources for my research on Timneng and the historical context of his life include state archives in Cameroon, Germany, and Britain, as well as less-used repositories such as the Kom Customary Court records kept at the courthouse in Kom, mission archives in Kom, Germany, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands, as well as photographs, both published and unpublished. Spanish newspapers and mission periodicals published on Fernando Po during the First World War furnished information on Cameroonian soldiers' internment in wartime Spanish Guinea.



hear Timneng recounting events in his own words – aimed at an English-speaking audience, and couched in the colonial idiom, but Timneng’s voice nonetheless.

### A Kom Boy

The Bamenda Grassfields in Cameroon will be familiar to many historians of Africa. Fertile, alpine, and spectacularly beautiful, it is a relatively thickly populated region of long-established, centralised kingdoms. The region is known for its pre-colonial hierarchical political structure and sophisticated systems of government, its economic prosperity, its strategic position in long-distance trade networks, its involvement in the slave trade, and the masked secret societies that underscored power relations well into the colonial era.<sup>2</sup>

In the northwestern part of the Grassfields lies Kom, a kingdom of some 30 settlements dotted dramatically throughout the deep valleys of a rugged, mountainous landscape. Before its fate became intertwined with European politics, Kom was a highly stratified, prosperous, and powerful state, firmly anchored in a regional network of political and economic alliances, especially from the second half of the nineteenth century, when the Kom ruler, known as the Fon, established Kom’s supremacy over neighbouring states and further centralised political power.<sup>3</sup> The royal palace at Laikom was the focus of religious and ceremonial life and the headquarters of the important regulatory secret societies, including the *Kwifoyn*, which buttressed the Fon’s authority and served as the executive arm of government. The Fon was further assisted by a large number of servants, messengers, and advisors, known collectively as *chisento* (singular: *chinda*). A sacred ruler, the Fon is generally considered to have been regarded with infinite respect and surrounded by secrecy.<sup>4</sup>

2 Beautifully portrayed by H. Koloss, *World-view and Society in Oku (Cameroon)* (Berlin, 2000). For the pre-colonial era and early European contact, see: P.N. Nkwi and J.P. Warnier, *Elements for a History of the Western Grassfields* (Yaounde, 1982); J.P. Warnier, *Échanges, développement et hiérarchies dans le Bamenda pré-colonial (Cameroun)* (Stuttgart, 1985); E.M. Chilver, ‘Nineteenth Century Trade in the Bamenda Grassfields, Southern Cameroons’, in Z.A. Konczacki and J.M. Konczacki (eds), *An Economic History of Tropical Africa. Volume One: The Pre-Colonial Period* (London, 1977) 147–165; E.M. Chilver and P.M. Kaberry, *Traditional Bamenda: The Pre-colonial History and Ethnography of the Bamenda Grassfields* (Buea, 1967).

3 The population of Kom is currently around 100,000. Rough estimates suggest that in the early years of British rule the figure was probably closer to 20,000.

4 See P.N. Nkwi, ‘The Kom Palace: Its Foundation, Growth and Significance’, *Paideuma*, 31 (1985), 105–110; *idem*, *Traditional Government and Social Change: A Study of the Political Institutions among the Kom of the Cameroon Grassfields* (Fribourg, 1976).

68 and reached Winton at 1 p.m.  
 and reached Njirikon at 1 pm.  
 FON ARRIVES.  
 Before the Fon arrived there  
 was a big crowd of thousands of  
 people. The Resident, the SO and the Resident  
 Fathers sat in a line then I led the  
 Christians who sat nearest to them.  
 When he came his Chair was  
 placed where he should sit but on  
 sitting he was missing the chair and  
 was only directed by Aupka before  
 he could sit.  
 When he was on the Chair  
 the Resident asked him to tell him  
 what was wrong. Waincham his son  
 stood up to speak for the Fon.  
 He said it pained the Fon much because  
 these boys came and said ① they were  
 not going to pay tax ② that they were  
 not going to do any Govt work and  
 ③ that they took the Chiefs' wives.

FIGURE 5.1 A page from Michael Timneng's autobiography

Nothing points to Timneng having had an unusual start in life. The fact that little appears to be known about his childhood or family background suggests that there was nothing very remarkable about them. Born to an unwed mother,

Timneng was raised as one of the many children of the compound headed by his mother's father. He bore his mother's name (Neng) as did most children in polygynous households, and that of his maternal grandfather (Tim, or Tum). According to the inscription on his gravestone in the churchyard of the village of Njinikom, Timneng was born in 1869, but I find this difficult to reconcile with his biography, and I strongly suspect that he was born quite a bit closer to the turn of the century.

At some point in his youth, Timneng was recruited into the service of Fon Yuh, as were scores of other Kom boys. Yuh, who reigned from approximately 1865 to 1912, had hundreds of servants at the Laikom palace. Service to the Fon was compulsory, but conscription appears to have been somewhat arbitrary. Representatives of the *Kwifoyn* selected promising boys, or boys from families somehow indebted to the ruling lineage, to serve at the palace. Some recruits had a family connection to the palace, some were presented to the Fon to cement alliances, some appear to have been handed over in payment of a debt. They did all manner of odd jobs at the palace, and the more talented youths were trained as messengers and even diplomats. Some were recruited into the *Kwifoyn*, ultimately even to its inner, highly secret lodges. All were sworn to secrecy and subjected to strict discipline. Association with the palace conferred status on the retainers, regardless of the mode of conscription, and retired retainers enjoyed many privileges.

The timing and circumstances of Timneng's conscription are unclear. While most royal pages were recruited in adolescence, Timneng appears to have been older when he went to the palace: he already led a masquerade society called *Nkah* in his grandfather's compound, and the society's xylophone was taken to Laikom. This might suggest that Timneng and his secret society were co-opted, whether by persuasion or by force, into the royal household, and that Timneng already had a certain social status and reputation when he was recruited by the Fon.

His time at Laikom was not a peaceful one. Nicknamed 'Chakara' – Pidgin English for 'scatterer' – Timneng made a name for himself as a troublemaker at the palace; nonetheless, he was initiated into the innermost lodge of the *Kwifoyn*. His younger brother Aloysius recalled:

He must have been very stubborn because reports came from the palace often, and again and again my uncle and father had to send something – a goat, a sheep, or some chickens – to appease the Fon and cleanse the offence he [Timneng] had committed. I was much more calm and at some point in time my uncle had considered replacing Timneng with me in the

Fon's service. In fact before he finally left, Timneng stoned a *chinda*, seriously injuring his head. The Fon was still considering what punishment to mete out when he was told Timneng had disappeared.<sup>5</sup>

One can only speculate as to the nature of the friction between Timneng and others at the palace. When Fon Yuh died in 1912, the accession to the throne by Fon Ngam was contested, and a period of intrigue and harsh repression ensued. German interventions buttressed the new Fon's clout, which came to depend on German support. Some of the political divisions which came to the fore at that time still play a role in Kom today, and the volatility of the issue combined with the lapse of time and lack of written documentation make it impossible to establish what role Timneng played. Clearly, he challenged the corporate norm in some way, and perhaps the new Fon's authority, too; this would be in line with his later actions.

### Life as a Soldier

What we do know is that when Fon Ngam was required, at the outbreak of the First World War, to provide troops for the German colonial armed forces, known as the *Schutztruppe*, he seized the opportunity to rid himself of Timneng and a few hundred other alleged dissidents by sending them to take up arms in the white man's war. Timneng had already defected from Laikom, and went into hiding in the forest to avoid being conscripted into the German forces but was eventually tracked down and compelled to submit.<sup>6</sup> Taking leave of his mother, he announced that 'this was the last time the palace would ever command him' and that 'he would rather be killed by the white man than by the Fon'.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, nobody expected the troops to survive the war.

British forces soon ousted the Germans and their Cameroonian troops from the Bamenda plateau. In January 1916, they fled together with their Cameroonian troops, retreating to neutral Spanish Guinea to escape capture by the allied British–French forces. Thousands of Cameroonians, including Timneng and his consorts from Kom, accompanied the Germans on a harrowing jungle trek to coastal Bata, in Spanish-ruled Rio Muni, in a dramatic exodus marked

5 Interview with Aloysius Ngomngeng, 16 August 1994, Njinikom. Aloysius believed that Timneng was recruited to Laikom because of his remarkable physical prowess.

6 He appears to have capitulated in the face of a supernatural threat. His brother recalled that a 'boundary stem' (i.e. plant ascribed supernatural powers) was presented to Timneng by *Kwifoyn* representatives. Interview with A. Ngomngeng, 16 August 1994, Njinikom.

7 *Ibid.*

by widespread illness, insecurity, and famine. The *Schutztruppe* soldiers travelled with wives, carriers, and servants in tow, in some cases with entire villages loyal to the Germans. Eventually over 20,000 Cameroonians were interned for three years on the island of Fernando Po, part of Spanish Guinea, in camps under German military leadership.<sup>8</sup> The presence of thousands of armed German–Cameroonian recruits within easy sight of the Cameroonian coast caused the British and French a great deal of worry, but it was not until well after the war ended that the troops were repatriated.

Conditions in the internment camps on Fernando Po were exceedingly difficult at first, and with famine and illness rampant, thousands died within the first months.<sup>9</sup> But within half a year, well-organised camps had been constructed, settlements laid out in tidy, efficient grids, and over 500 hectares of crops planted.<sup>10</sup> The camps soon had hospitals, churches, leather workshops and stables, tailors' and carpentry workshops, and even designated areas for recycling or burning refuse. People were free to move about, and engaged in a lively trade. A handful of German officers and non-commissioned officers was stationed in each camp, and the German officers continued to drill the troops.<sup>11</sup> The Cameroonian internees and the camp authorities communicated in German and Pidgin English, and occasionally Spanish. German officers supervised labour, settled disputes, took care of the accounts, and arranged the distribution of supplies.

Interned with the troops were several German *Herz Jesu* missionaries, including the priests Baumeister and Schuster, who were in charge of healthcare in the camps. They had been canvassing the Bamenda area prior to the outbreak of war, and had been stationed in Kom. In 1913, Fon Ngam had allowed – perhaps even encouraged – the establishment of a mission station and school at Fujua, a short distance away from Laikom.<sup>12</sup> Timneng had become acquainted with the priests during their brief stay at Fujua, and, according to some informants, he attended the mission school: Fon Ngam had sent his most

8 I have described the exodus and ensuing internment in J. de Vries, 'A "Menace to the Peace"? Cameroonian *Schutztruppe* Soldiers in Spanish-ruled Fernando Po during the First World War', *War & Society*, 37 (2018), no. 4, 280–301.

9 J. Scholze, *Deutsches Heldentum am Kameruner Götterberg: Allerlei Weltkriegspalaver* (Offenburg, 1934), 226.

10 *Ein Werk deutscher Kolonisation auf Fernando Poo* (Berlin, 1983); J. Vicent, *Una obra de colonización alemana en Fernando Poo* (Madrid, 1920).

11 J. Vicent, 'Los Campamentos Alemanes de Internación', *ABC* [Spanish newspaper], (29 November 1916), 31–35.

12 Described in J. de Vries, *Catholic Mission, Colonial Government and Indigenous Response in Kom (Cameroon)*, (Leiden, 1998), 31–34.

troublesome 'sons', of whom Timneng was one, to school to please the missionaries and to punish the young men at the same time. Timneng renewed his acquaintance with the German priests in the internment camp and became Baumeister's house servant.

On Fernando Po, daily life for Timneng involved providing assistance to Baumeister and Schuster, and joining the other internees in camp maintenance and construction, the cultivation and trade of food crops, and regular – at times daily – military drills. For three and a half years, he was part of a multi-ethnic community of relatively young refugees, removed from the social and political constraints prevailing at home, living in close contact with Europeans. Social stratification and social mobility in the camps were based on criteria starkly different from those pertaining at home, and the relative scarcity of elder men meant social and political opportunities for younger men. Many acquired money, goods, women, and a taste for European ideas.

Under the leadership of the interned German priests, the Catholic mission among the Cameroonian troops flourished, and the number of churchgoers in the camps rose sharply. The missionaries and their assistants organised doctrine classes and religious ceremonies in hugely popular, 'dangerously overcrowded' gatherings.<sup>13</sup> Over 3,500 internees, including Timneng and a large number of his comrades in the Kom contingent, received baptism; thousands more became catechumens. Timneng was among those who learned to read and write. The combined impact of the exposure to Christianity, increased literacy and language skills, and the progressive lifestyle in the camps was enormous, and set the refugees even further apart from their peers at home than their status as soldiers did.

### Home Sweet Home

Despite Allied pressure on the Spanish government to dismantle the internment camps on Fernando Po, repatriation did not commence until after the conclusion of the war. In October 1919, the Kom conscripts returned home: some 400 ex-soldiers, 170 women, 50 children, and 95 servants.<sup>14</sup> When Timneng approached home, having led a group of 80 Kom recruits on a three-month trek

13 F. Hennemann, *Werden und Wirken eines Afrika-Missionars* (Limburg an der Lahn, 1922), 169; Baumeister, 'Vom Kriegs- und Missionsdienst unserer aus Kamerun vertriebenen Missionare', *Das Reich des Herzens Jesu. Illustrierte Monatsschrift der Priester vom Herzen Jesu zu Sittard*, (1917), 243–246, 245; F.C. Schuster, 'Im Gefangenenlager auf Fernando Po', in *ibid.* (1920), 137–143.

14 Buea National Archives (BNA) Cb1918/2, Annual Report Bamenda Division, 1919, 9.

from the coast, he was called to report to Laikom immediately. His brother recalled how Timneng arrived in Kom, sporting German army fatigues, boots, and a cap, and bearing a copy of the German catechism and a typewriter given to him by Father Baumeister. The scene underscored how Timneng astutely combined traditional and Western symbols of power to challenge the status quo:<sup>15</sup>

News came to us that my brother and other soldiers were coming. My mother prepared food and sent me to meet them on the way and welcome them. The Fon had ordered that they come directly to the palace, bringing to him all the war booty... Some initially refused to go to the Fon, but my brother insisted that they go...

At Laikom, the Fon came out to meet them. My brother did not remove his cap.<sup>16</sup> While he was talking, the Fon kept watching Timneng's boots. My brother told him it was a good thing to have been sent to be killed by the white man, because instead of killing him, the white man had taught him the ways of the true and only God and had asked him to come back and preach his message to the Kom people. He showed the true God's instructions.<sup>17</sup> The Fon said it was a good thing but ordered that they bring him the war booty. He inquired why their shoes were so large and was told they were used to kick people and break their bones and skulls. The Fon requested the soldiers to remove their boots and uniforms and leave them at the palace. My brother swore an oath and told the Fon that could not be done.

The Fon's apprehension is easily understood. Soldiers in the *Schutztruppe* were widely feared, and the simple fact that they had returned unscathed from the white man's war suggested unusual strength and privilege, perhaps even supernatural protection. Timneng already had a reputation for challenging the Fon and the *Kwifoyn*, and now he and his fellow converts were evidently emboldened by a mysterious and apparently powerful message – they wore European clothing, and carried a book of secrets (a Catholic catechism) which appeared to cast doubt on the Fon's authority.

Much to the chagrin of the Fon and his councillors, Timneng and his fellow converts lost no time in founding prayer groups and doctrine classes for those

15 Interview with Aloysius Timneng, Njinikom, 16 August 1994.

16 Only notables who had been initiated (after payment of admission fees) were privileged to wear caps in an audience with the Fon. Various caps and the titles attached to them signify various rights to decision-making.

17 Presumably a copy of the German catechism.

interested in learning more about the white man's religion, precisely as Father Baumeister had admonished. Small gatherings in Timneng's compound or another convert's home quickly developed into a thriving Catholic community. In Timneng's words:<sup>18</sup>

It was a marvellous thing to the natives. When they saw us every Sunday gathered in Chiamba's premises for prayer, they asked themselves: 'What do these people mean by uniting themselves on Sundays?'... The Koms at that time did not know anything about prayers, except on juju medicines.

The only literate Christian in the area, Timneng, taught classes that were attended by curious people from all over Kom. They often attended in secret, for fear of being reprimanded or ostracised: from its inception, Timneng's Christian community was seen as subversive, and both the converts and their opponents viewed attendance at prayer meetings and doctrine classes as an act of rebellion against restrictive norms and traditional authority. The politicisation of the church community was closely intertwined with the ambiguous Indirect Rule policy of the new British administration, which relied heavily on traditional authority but also recognised the need for an educated elite and thereby undermined precisely the authority on which it depended. Thus, the Fon saw his legitimacy eroded not only by direct challenges from the Christian converts, but also by his nominal co-optation by the British administration.

Under Timneng's determined leadership and despite mounting opposition, the Kom Catholic community grew steadily. Together with his palace past, Timneng's experience as a German soldier enhanced his status, which, in turn, was boosted by the growth of his Catholic following. Prayer meetings were held morning and evening. Those wanting to convert to Christianity first became catechumens, also known as 'learners', and attended doctrine classes several times a week, sometimes even daily. On important Christian occasions such as Easter or Christmas, the converts made the two-day trek to neighbouring Nso, where a European missionary held Mass, heard confessions, performed baptisms, and gave the catechists instructions.

### Indigenous Leadership

The British administration, which had established a District Office in Bamenda upon the departure of the Germans, was well aware that Timneng's following

---

<sup>18</sup> Timneng, *Autobiography*, n.d.



in Kom was growing dramatically, as was tension vis-à-vis Laikom. The situation in Kom was not unique: in several other Grassfields communities, ex-soldiers were also at the helm of thriving young Christian communities that were seen by local rulers as a direct threat to their authority. But the British were adamant that the former German missionaries should not return to the Bamenda Grassfields to tend their flocks, for fear that they would stir up anti-British sentiments. Catholicism was readily associated with allegiance to Germany because the early missions in the Grassfields had been German-based (or Swiss, in the case of the Protestant Basel Mission). Already before the end of the war, District Officer Podevin had warned that missionaries should not return to the Bamenda Division before British rule was firmly established, lest 'an altogether erroneous impression will be formed by the native mind'.<sup>19</sup> His successor likewise withheld permission to resume mission work in the Bamenda area in 1919 'on account of the unsettled state of certain parts of the division'. German missionaries should be barred at all cost, he wrote, and the suggestion that the missions be re-staffed by Dutch, Belgian, or French priests was summarily dismissed.<sup>20</sup>

The District Officers' worries meshed neatly with traditional rulers' insistence that 'mission boys' not be allowed to continue their Christian activities because of the threat they posed to the traditional hierarchy. Fon Ngam – a 'first-rate chief [who] maintains excellent discipline [and] carries out all orders with promptitude'<sup>21</sup> – complained that ex-'German' soldiers living at Njinikom were having sexual relations ('for nothing') with his wives and other married women staying at the mission. Further, he claimed, they used violence towards his servants, refused to do communal labour, and had stolen a drum. Ngam had not objected to the German mission at Fujua, he said, because the priests had recruited only 'small boys', but he did not want a 'God palaver' (i.e. a church) run by Timneng and his peers.<sup>22</sup> The Fon asked for European priests to be stationed in Kom so as to keep Timneng and his followers in check, but the British administration saw no need to curtail indigenous leadership in the young Christian communities such as the one in Njinikom. Occasional visits from the priest in nearby Nso – Father Bintner, from Luxembourg and therefore not considered a threat – were expected to provide sufficient regulation, but it very quickly became clear that the British manifestly

19 BNA Sd 1917/5, District Officer Bamenda (Podevin) to Resident, 8 September 1917.

20 BNA Sd 1916/3, District Officer Bamenda (Crawford) to Resident, 17 November 1919.

21 BNA Gc/b 1920/1, Handing-over Notes, Capt. Crawford.

22 BNA Ib 1920/5, Complaints book, entry no. 65 (2 July 1920): Bekom Christians palaver.

underestimated the extent and intensity of the antagonism between the young Christian minority and the non-Christian majority.

In 1921, Bintner paid a visit to the budding Catholic community in Kom, and obtained Fon Ngam's consent for the construction of a chapel in Njinikom, as well as accommodation for those who travelled long distances to attend doctrine classes.<sup>23</sup> Bintner and his fellow European missionaries were seen, by converts and non-converts alike, as extensions of the new British administration, and the Fon speculated that Kom would gain by cooperating with the mission. At the same time, he keenly perceived the threat to his authority, and discouraged Kom people, especially women, from attending the Christian gatherings, threatening them with all manner of punishment should they not heed him.

The Fon's warnings had little effect. A church building conferred tremendous prestige and legitimacy on the Christian movement, and propelled the growth of the community. The building soon proved too small, so that Michael Timneng took to preaching outdoors, in front of the church. Just two years after the return of the recruits from Fernando Po, some 200 converts – mostly ex-German soldiers – were settled near the Njinikom church, and 500 Christians regularly attended Sunday worship.<sup>24</sup> Michael Timneng quickly developed a strong leadership position that would have been unthinkable in any other context. Not only was he the only Kom Christian able to read and write, he also had little left to lose in terms of his relationship with the Fon and *Kwifoy*. And while the new British administration depended on good relations with traditional rulers, the Europeans also had an interest in encouraging the young Christian communities: a loyal, Western-educated elite was instrumental to the implementation of British rule and the propagation of European norms.

### Persecution and Protection

The existence of a thriving, autonomous community in his kingdom, impervious to his control, riled the Fon no end, and throughout the first decade of the Catholic mission in Kom conflict was continuous and volatile. Not only did the Fon worry about the liberal worldview espoused at the mission, and the rights

23 BNA Ad/2, Bikom Assessment Report 1927, 80; Joseph Plissoneau, 'Souvenirs d'Adamaoua', *La Regne (Revue des Pretres du Sacre Coeur)* 1937–1939; Timneng, Autobiography.

24 BNA Sd 1921/1, Confidential memorandum (District Officer to Resident): Catholic Mission at Bansa (Kumbo) and Bikom, 20 December 1921; Timneng, Autobiography.

for women which this implied, he deeply resented the threat Timneng personally posed to his previously unfettered authority. Years of steady, violent conflict between Timneng and the mission adherents on the one hand and the Fon and his representatives on the other ensued. Control over women was central to the conflict. The Fon was particularly annoyed by the refuge offered by Timneng to runaway women – perhaps not so much because of a desire to keep his women at home (he had over a hundred wives), but because of the loss of face and the erosion of authority that their departure implied, not to mention the economic implications.

From the earliest days of the Catholic mission, women from all corners of Kom had seized with abandon the opportunity to break free of the control of husbands, fathers, and uncles. Often their association with the mission started out with purportedly innocuous visits and attendance of doctrine classes, but one thing led to another and eventually many settled at or near the church compound. In the words of the Bamenda District Officer, the crux of the trouble was the refusal of women to submit to the authority of their husbands: ‘If the ladies with pagan husbands returned dutifully to their homes at night, most of the ill feeling against the missions would die down.’<sup>25</sup>

The situation was all the more disturbing because many of the women who visited the mission came from Laikom. In the words of the Fon’s close advisor, Johnny Ngong, quoted with evident satisfaction by Timneng, ‘a leopard came out at Laikom and was catching sheep and goats.’<sup>26</sup>

Scores of young women who had been recruited into the Fon’s household as wives or as servants fled the palace and settled at the mission compound, knowing that the church would offer them protection. Timneng professed innocence. He had not pressed the women to come to the mission compound, he insisted. They came of their own free will and would not leave: ‘The women heard a song and came back to learn it’, and who was he to force them to return to the palace?<sup>27</sup>

The issue of the Fon’s women running away was personified by Bertha Biwa’a, the first in a long line of royal women to seek refuge at Njinikom not long after the new church building was opened. Biwa’a had secretly attended doctrine classes in Njinikom during family visits, and eventually decided to

25 BNA Nc/b(Bm) 1922/1, District Officer Bamenda to Resident, re. September cause list, 7 November 1922.

26 Timneng, *Autobiography*. In other words, Timneng was seducing women away from the palace. Throughout equatorial Africa, the leopard is closely associated with royal authority, supernatural power, and therianthropy. Access to the leopard, a symbol of royalty in Kom, is sharply restricted.

27 BNA Sd 1921/1, Bamenda Native Court case 1921 095, Timneng’s testimony.

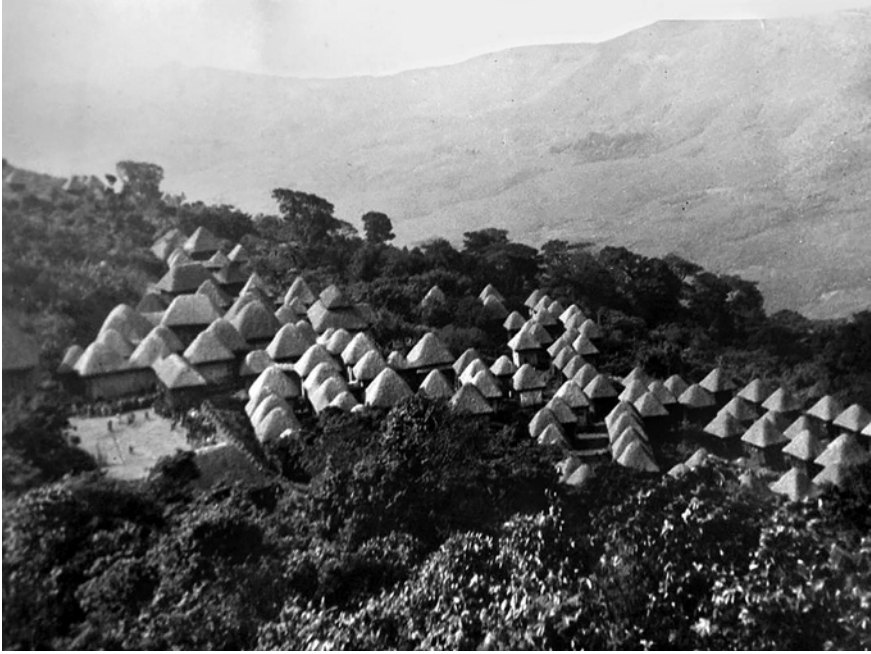


PHOTO 5.1 Laikom, ca. 1930

stay.<sup>28</sup> Her decision incensed the Fon, who sent *chisento* to Njinikom to drag her back to Laikom, where she was punished by elder wives. She escaped again.<sup>29</sup> When a second delegation of *chisento* was sent to Njinikom to recapture Bertha Biwa'a, Timneng intervened, insisting that she should be allowed to decide for herself where to live.<sup>30</sup>

I told this girl that she was wanted back at Laikom by the Fon. She refused to go back to Laikom and I told the messenger to go and inform the Fon ... I [then] ordered two Christians to go to Banso [Nso] and inform the Rev.

- 
- 28 Interview with Monica Iytana (daughter of Bertha Biwa'a), Njinikom, 18 August 1994. Also: BNA Ib 1920/5, Complaints book, entry no. 65 (2 July 1920): Bekom Christian palaver; BNA Sd 1921/1, Bamenda Native Court case 1921 095.
- 29 Interviews with Patrick Timneng (Timneng's son), Njinikom, 16 August 1994 and Monica Iytana (daughter of Bertha Biwa'a), Njinikom, 18 August 1994; BNA Sd 1921/1, Plissoneau to Resident, 26 November 1921.
- 30 Timneng, Autobiography. See also BNA Sd 1921/1, Plissoneau to Resident, 26 November 1921.

Father that the Fon was trying to withdraw some of the catechumens from the church... The Fon in hot anger sent the messenger again back to me... He asked me whether I did not understand that this girl was the wife of a Fon? That if I really wished to detain her for church services or to make her become a Christian I should pay dowry on her and claim her as my wife.

In 1921, at least eight other royal wives followed Bertha Biwa'a example, fleeing to Njinikom.<sup>31</sup> By mid-1923, at least 25 of the Fon's wives had fled to the mission, four of whom had borne children by persons unknown, and several others of whom were pregnant.<sup>32</sup>

Trying desperately to rid himself of the church and restore his household, Fon Ngam had Timneng and several close collaborators arrested on several occasions, and subjected them to extensive torture at the palace prison. He brought numerous cases against Timneng to the Native Court in Bamenda, hoping to enlist British support for his anti-mission campaign. The arrests and trials were major public events. In 1921, for example, when a hearing was tabled in Bamenda, the road was crowded with traditional leaders and their entourages from various parts of Kom, wanting to testify, and hundreds of angry catechumens and Christians who accompanied Timneng.<sup>33</sup>

The catechist recalled that the first charge made against him was that he had 'spoilt the country and caused food not to grow'.<sup>34</sup> He conceded that he had indeed done away with the 'medicines' believed to help crops grow because 'it was the law of God ... to do away with the primitive fashion'. Other charges concerned the use of an allegedly stolen drum in church, flogging opponents, and detaining *chisento* accused of stealing corn at the market. Timneng insisted repeatedly that his only intention was to ensure that those who want to attend church should be free to do so. His explanations apparently satisfied the District Officer: the catechist was released and the crowd returned home jubilant, celebrating what was perceived to be the humiliation of the

31 BNA Sd 1921/1, District Officer (Duncan) to Resident, Confidential Memorandum: Catholic Mission at Bansa (Kumbo) and Bikom, 20 December 1921.

32 BNA Sd 1921/1, Acting District Officer (Hawkesworth) to District Officer, Memorandum: The Missionary Controversy at Bikom, 27 June 1923.

33 The hearing and the upheaval it caused is a common theme in interviews I held in the area. See BNA Sd 1921/1, Bamenda Native Court case 1921 095.

34 Catechists were attributed with remarkably wide-ranging powers. In Nso, catechist Tangwa was held responsible for drought, for women not having conceived, and for people leaving Nso. See J. Plissonneau, 'Souvenirs d'Adamaoua'.

Fon. On the trek back to Kom, Timneng was cheered on by hundreds of followers chanting hymns loudly:

They were coming with peace plants in their hands, singing... Everybody who heard this song came out of the house. The peace plants they had, the way their voices blended, won the admiration of everybody.<sup>35</sup>

On another occasion, with a different District Officer presiding, Timneng was less fortunate. Once again, he was charged with ‘spoiling the country’, beating and detaining *chisento*, and stealing the Fon’s wives. District Officer Duncan found Timneng and fellow Christian William Fulmai guilty on all counts and sentenced them to six months imprisonment with hard labour for each offence, to be followed by exile from Kom.<sup>36</sup> Duncan described Njinikom as ‘entirely in hands of the natives, who give religious instruction to married and marriageable women who now live in the mission compound’. A ‘Bolshevistic society’, the Christians had ‘formed themselves into a political organization disregarding all Native Law and Custom’.<sup>37</sup> If Timneng and his assistants were not restrained, ‘all hope of developing Native Administration may as well be abandoned at once’, Duncan maintained, introducing a new political dimension to the conflict: not only was Timneng’s mission community considered a threat to the authority of the Fon, it posed a threat to the colonial project as well.<sup>38</sup> The Fon chimed in with this choir loudly, adopting Duncan’s analysis to underscore his plea that the Njinikom mission should be closed down permanently as it was controlled by ‘ex-German soldiers whose sole aim is to disorganize our native system of government and gain power themselves’.<sup>39</sup>

Luckily for Timneng, the Resident in Buea disagreed with District Officer Duncan’s interpretation, and released Timneng and his colleagues from

35 Interview with Nini Cheah Mbong, Njinikom, 17 September 2000.

36 A Bamenda Division cause list for November 1921 (BNA Mb/a 1921/1) includes a case that appears to be a subsidiary one: Bikom mission teachers are accused of 1. robbery with violence, 2. assault. Proceedings are missing from the archives, but Duncan refers to the case in later correspondence: ‘[M]ission teachers and followers ... are conspiring to undermine all native authority, law and custom under the cloak of religion’ (BNA Mb/b 1922/1, District Officer (Duncan) to Resident (Ruxton), re. Bamenda Native Court case, probably 1921 017).

37 BNA Sd 1921/1, District Officer (Duncan) to Plissoneau, 18 November 1921; BNA Sd 1921/1, District Officer (Duncan) to Resident (Ruxton), 31 January 1922.

38 BNA Mb/b 1922/1, District Officer (Duncan) to Resident (Ruxton), re. Bamenda Native Court case, probably 1921 017.

39 BNA Sd 1921/1, Telegram District Officer (Duncan) to Resident, 3 January 1922; BNA Sd 1921/1. Petition Fon Ngam of Bikom to Government, 27 January 1922.

Bamenda prison a few months later, to the Fon's dismay.<sup>40</sup> Such victories are recounted with great relish in Njinikom, with slight variations and differing degrees of dramatic flair. The conclusion is always the same: Timneng and his followers were seen to enjoy the support of the white man, who undermined the authority of the Fon. A palace official, Ngongkoukele, recalled in 1994:<sup>41</sup>

Timneng was a very strong man. He convinced the white man, and the white man not only left him alone but authorized him to go ahead with his scheme. Timneng came back and proudly told the Fon that he was wasting his time. You see, this showed the Fon that Timneng had the white man on his side. Besides, the Fon knew that Timneng knew a lot about the palace and could reveal a lot to the white man.

Having attempted to marshal British support in his struggle against Timneng to no avail, the Fon took the matter back into his own hands and decided that the Njinikom church should be burnt down or otherwise destroyed. He sent his close advisor, Johnny Ngong, to Njinikom to order the church to be burned down, but Ngong could find no one at Njinikom willing to carry out the Fon's instructions. All the Christians present were rounded up and imprisoned at Laikom. Hearing of the mass arrest, Timneng reported to Laikom, only to be imprisoned there along with seventeen other Christians. Chained, handcuffed, forced to do hard labour, and beaten, he later recalled:<sup>42</sup>

This was a terror ... At about 12 noon the *Kwifoyn* raised its usual alarm for about an hour and at one o'clock about forty *chindas* with skinned whips came to beat us while at work ... I was severely beaten by Johnny Ngong. As he started I leaned on the spade handle which I kept standing and showed my back to him so that he whipped until one of the strings of the whip broke. When he was tired of whipping he started [heaping] abuse. He talked and talked. He claimed that I said that the Fon was going to hell, and that if the Fon was to go, he would follow him ...

Prayers led us through our torments ... We prayed and sang loudly and even disturbed the whole of the palace ... In the fourth night Yong Fugeh [Johnny Ngong] was sent again to come while we were praying. He opened the prison door and whipped us all and said: 'If your voice is

---

40 BNA Sd 1921/1, Plissoneau to Resident (Ruxton), 10 February 1922 and Ruxton to Duncan, 10 April 1922.

41 Interview with Ngongkoukele (retired *chinda*), Njinikom, 16 August 1994.

42 Timneng, Autobiography.

heard again, Tim, the *Kwifoy*n is going to eat you'. On his going out there was an applause of loud prayer and singing. He never came again.

The converts were imprisoned at Laikom for two months, after which they were transferred to Bamenda prison, only to be released from there within a few months on instruction of Resident Ruxton.

When the unrest in Kom persisted, Ruxton travelled to Kom to try to persuade Fon Ngam to adopt a more conciliatory stance.<sup>43</sup> The Fon initially refused to meet the Resident, sending Johnny Ngong instead; but when Ruxton refused to negotiate with a servant, the Fon at last conceded to a meeting. According to Timneng and numerous informants, Ruxton threatened to depose the Fon if he continued to harass the churchgoers, and asked the Fon to demonstrate his acceptance of the Christian community by personally re-opening the church building.<sup>44</sup> Clearly the episode was perceived by all parties as an open contest for power. Thousands of Kom people witnessed the stand-off between the Resident, seated in the middle of the courtyard with the French missionary Plissoneau on one side and a British police official on the other, and the Fon with his entourage of notables and servants. Armed police maintained a large open space between the two parties. The Fon was intransigent, accusing Timneng and the Njinikom converts of all manner of crimes, but understood that he had no choice but to comply with the Resident's instructions. When Ruxton asked him to declare whether or not he would accept in peace the mission at Njinikom, the Fon exclaimed:

Me? But I am nobody here! I have no authority other than that which the administration has granted me. I therefore have nothing to say. You are the one in charge!

The church was reopened under the Resident's supervision.<sup>45</sup> The public humiliation of the Fon at the hands of the British administration was grist to the mill of the rebellious Christian community, and was celebrated loudly.

43 BNA Cb 1918/2, Annual Report Bamenda Division, 1922, 18; BNA Sd 1921/1, Plissoneau to Resident (Ruxton), 10 February 1922. The description of this episode is further based on accounts in Plissoneau, 'Souvenirs d'Adamaoua' and Timneng, Autobiography.

44 In the early 1970s, Ludwig Brandl's informants also claimed that Ngam 'was informed that he could not be Fon if he did not grant Christians freedom of worship': C. Geary, 'Ludwig Brandl's Historical Notes on the Kingdom of Kom', *Paideuma* 26 (1980): nos. 41–77, 72.

45 Some maintain that the Fon was forced to open the church, others claim Johnny Ngong performed the task. See also Njinikom Parish Archives (NPA), Semi-annual Sacred Returns to 16 August 1927 (Jacobs).



Relations between Laikom and Njinikom deteriorated rapidly, as did the Fon's hold on his people. The Kom Christians concluded that the Fon had been reduced to a mere tax collector who found it difficult to carry out even that task in Njinikom, and the recognition Timneng received from the British administration made the Fon's precarious predicament painfully obvious to all, leading District Officer Duncan to fret that 'native disturbances' accompanying the re-opening of the Njinikom mission might well lead to civil war.<sup>46</sup> Police troops were stationed near the mission compound to maintain order, but this merely fuelled the flames.

### An 'Imperium in Imperio'<sup>47</sup>

United by the routine of the regular church gatherings, the Kom Catholics shared more than religious beliefs. Duncan's fears for outright civil war proved unfounded, but the situation remained tense for many years to come – Njinikom's reputation as a hotbed of dissidence persists to this day. Hostility towards the mission grew, but so did its popularity, and the community acquired a reputation of being fashionable and modern, known for its liberal lifestyle, its monogamy, and, in time, its high level of education. 'When Timneng and his friends started this thing, it was like madness', said Ngongkoukele.<sup>48</sup> 'Njinikom was civilized, and everybody wanted a piece of it', recalled an early convert.<sup>49</sup> Clothing became a marker of Christian identity and affluence, and pointed to a weakening of male control over women.<sup>50</sup> A fascination with the white man's language drew many to Njinikom: Timneng initially taught prayers in German, and later in English.<sup>51</sup> Timneng's Christian message was interpreted as a liberating one, and people felt that 'the white man's religion could liberate them from the royal yoke ... [and in Njinikom] women were free to do as they wished as long as they respected their husbands'.<sup>52</sup>

46 BNA Sd 1921/1, District Officer (Duncan) to Plissoneau, 18 November 1921.

47 BNA Cb 1924/3, Annual Report Bamenda Division 1924, 21.

48 Interview with Ngongkoukele (retired *chinda*), Njinikom, 16 August 1994.

49 Interview with Immaculate Mulessim, Njinikom, 19 August 1994.

50 B. Stukart, 'A brief history of the Catholic Church in Cameroon', *Catholic Information Bulletin*, 51 (1966). Because clothing had formerly been a privilege of elder men, it was generally interpreted as a threat to traditional, male authority.

51 Interview with Aloysius Ngomneng (Timneng's younger brother), Njinikom, 16 August 1994. Another informant recalled the pleasure of reciting prayers in English without knowing what they meant (interview with Isidore Nyuogang, Njinikom, 6 September 2000).

52 Interview with Yindoh Mbah (second class chief), Njinikom, 15 August 1994.

Timneng and his assistants could not hold Holy Mass, but they organised day-to-day affairs, led prayer meetings and Sunday worship, conducted choirs, composed hymns, taught catechism and literacy lessons, held collections, settled disputes among learners and converts, managed construction projects, worked on translations of liturgical texts, and established out-stations in other areas of Kom. Under their leadership, the community became increasingly autonomous. Markets were held weekly to coincide with the church calendar – undermining the Fon's prerogative to regulate trade and thereby manipulate the accumulation and distribution of wealth. Converts were encouraged to entertain themselves on the mission grounds with sports, games, and music, rather than participate in traditional dances and rituals. Secret societies – a mainstay in traditional Kom – were forbidden. As the community increased in number and confidence, Christians refused to pay government taxes (because they already paid to the church), refused to contribute community labour (because they contributed to church building projects), and took their disputes to a local court over which Timneng presided (because the traditional justice system was deemed prejudiced).

The upheaval caused by Timneng and his followers cannot be overestimated. Both traditional and British government authorities feared the disorder and instability that Timneng and his people brought. Timneng himself was keenly aware of his position at the intersection of tradition and modernity. In one of his many confrontations with the Fon, Timneng accused him – custodian of tradition – of throwing tradition to the winds, while he, Timneng, was in fact safeguarding custom. He recalled bringing the Fon a fowl, as per tradition, when he visited him on one particular occasion:<sup>53</sup>

He [the Fon] said I had come to poison him. I told him this was not my intention. I added that in Native Law and Custom when the father of a child sends his son to a bad medicine house (*juju*) [i.e. jail], his father washes him with water and rubs him with camwood to signify a clear conscience. He [the Fon] ... asked: 'If I sent you to prison because you took my wife, why do you bring me a fowl again [i.e. still]? This really shows that you want to do away with me' ...

He [the Fon] told me that he had left the tax of Fanantui and Njinikom for me to collect. That if the D.O. [District Officer] sent for the tax, he [the Fon] would tell him to come over and visit Njinikom and take it from me ... He said I was already ruling Njinikom like a chief. He said that war used to arise in a country because of the Fon's wives, and that I ... was taking

---

53 Timneng, *Autobiography*.

his wives and harbouring them at Njinikom. So he would leave Kom for me to rule.

... He told me that the house [the church] I have built at Njinikom is for war, not Christianity, and that these soldiers (the Christians standing beside me) were preparing to wage war in Kom ...

He added that he had no doubt that there was medicine [i.e. supernatural power] in this church, since I dared to speak to him with no fear. He shifted behind and said: 'If I were not afraid of the English or Europeans who burnt Kom into ashes [in the 1904 war] ... you would not leave this place alive'.

In his description of this confrontation, Timneng wove together traditional and modern metaphors to underscore his autonomy. Consider the ease with which he adopted the phrase 'Native Law and Custom'. Borrowing the terminology of the British administration, Timneng portrayed himself, rather than the Fon, as the custodian of traditional society, while the Fon reneged on his traditional duties by not cleansing his subject after he was released from jail. At the same time, Timneng employed a traditional metaphor when he accused the Fon of abandoning his child (Timneng) and delivering him into the hands of the bad juju (the white man in Bamenda).

### Mission Accomplished?

For many years, Timneng and his assistants ran the mission on their own, with only occasional supervision. On several occasions, Timneng appears to have overstepped his bounds, and was suspended by Catholic authorities in Nso, 'in an effort to restore the peace'. But these suspensions were always short-lived, for the early mission depended heavily on its catechists.<sup>54</sup> It was not until 1927, after Fon Ngam's death, that a European priest was stationed in Kom, lending further prestige to Timneng and the numerous other catechists who had joined him.

54 BNA Sd 1923/7, District Officer Bamenda to Acting District Officer (Pollock), 20 August 1924. Timneng was suspended in 1921 in response to the Fon's complaints that Timneng seduced royal women: F. Isherwood, *The Story of the Diocese of Bamenda: Its Mission, Missionaries and other Memorabilia* (Bamenda, 1979), 19. In 1922 he was replaced temporarily by Mukong, who was expected to have fewer run-ins with the Fon (BNA Sd 1921/1, Notes by Plissoneau re. Mukong, 9 April 1922). He returned, only to be suspended by Nso priest Father Moran in 1923: J.F.F. Ngongbi, *Roman Catholic Mission Activities in Kom 1922–1964*, Bachelor's thesis in History, University of Buea, 1996, 12.

Timneng continued to play an important role in the mission community, focusing on translating the gospel and hymns from the late 1920s onwards. One would expect that, with his drive, outspoken ideas, and fearlessness, he would have gone on to play a public role in the ensuing years, when the mission at Njinikom became the centre of Catholicism, education, healthcare and modernity in the Grassfields. In fact, he appears to have retreated into a remarkably low-profile role. Even in the turbulent 1950s, when Njinikom was deeply involved in pre-Independence political strife, Timneng does not appear to have played a notable role outside his church activities and family life. Just like his early life, his later years appear to have been nothing out of the ordinary.

But the impact Timneng had on Kom can hardly be overestimated: the upheaval he caused changed political and gender relations in Kom forever. Education, dispute resolution, access to land, healthcare, even markets and farming methods became polarised: Timneng's church and his close association with Europeans stood for a modern lifestyle, associated with Western freedoms which threatened the very fibre of Kom society. Not only was Timneng seen by his contemporaries as having challenged the traditional authority of the Fon and having paved the way for women to leave forced marriages, he was held responsible for all manner of modern manifestations: when in 1922 the District Officer appeared in Kom riding a motorcycle, Timneng was believed to have brought the monstrous machine to Kom. Closely associated with custom, thanks to his role as palace retainer, Timneng was concurrently the personification of a modern worldview. One of the fascinating things about him is that he was acutely aware of this duality, and used it as an instrument in his campaigns.

Michael Timneng's life coincided with an era of tumultuous historical change. His life was framed by events which strongly determined the course of Cameroonian history: the annexation of Cameroon by Germany, the First World War, the transfer of colonial rule to the British. Closer to home, Timneng experienced the consolidation and centralisation of Kom rule by Fon Yuh, the Kom-German War of 1904–1905, the arrival of missionaries in Kom, and the confrontational rule of Fon Ngam, Yuh's successor. The Kom to which Timneng and his fellow troops returned in 1919 was a fragile one. War-induced economic hardship, demographic imbalance, havoc wreaked by illness, social instability, and a weak incoming administration created a fertile bed for political dissent and paved the way for Timneng to establish an independent community, which, by its very existence, challenged traditional rule. Without the entire repertoire at his disposal of both very traditional and very modern, European experiences, he would not have been in a position to challenge the Fon and foster change in Kom in the way he did, melding traditional and Western elements to increase his influence.

## References

- Baumeister (1917), 'Vom Kriegs- und Missionsdienst unserer aus Kamerun vertriebenen Missionare', *Das Reich des Herzens Jesu. Illustrierte Monatsschrift der Priester vom Herzen Jesu zu Sittard*, 243–246.
- Chilver, E.M. (1977), 'Nineteenth Century Trade in the Bamenda Grassfields, Southern Cameroons', in Z.A. Konczacki and J.M. Konczacki (eds), *An Economic History of Tropical Africa. vol. 1: The Pre-Colonial Period* (London), 147–165.
- Chilver, E.M. and P.M. Kaberry (1967), *Traditional Bamenda: The Pre-colonial History and Ethnography of the Bamenda Grassfields* (Buea).
- De Vries, J. (1998), *Catholic Mission, Colonial Government and Indigenous Response in Kom (Cameroon)* (Leiden), 31–34.
- De Vries, J. (2018), 'A "Menace to the Peace"? Cameroonian *Schutztruppe* Soldiers in Spanish-ruled Fernando Po during the First World War', *War & Society*, vol. 37, 280–301.
- Hennemann, F. (1922), *Werden und Wirken eines Afrika-Missionars* (Limburg an der Lahn, 1922).
- Isherwood, F. (1979), *The Story of the Diocese of Bamenda: Its Mission, Missionaries and other Memorabilia* (Bamenda).
- Koloss, H. (2000), *World-view and Society in Oku (Cameroon)* (Berlin).
- N.A. (1983), *Ein Werk deutscher Kolonisation auf Fernando Poo* (Berlin).
- Ngongbi, J.F.F. (1996), Roman Catholic Mission Activities in Kom 1922–1964 (Bachelor's thesis in History, University of Buea).
- Nkwi, P.N. (1976), *Traditional Government and Social Change: A Study of the Political Institutions among the Kom of the Cameroon Grassfields* (Fribourg).
- Nkwi, P.N. (1985), 'The Kom Palace: Its Foundation, Growth and Significance', *Paideuma*, vol. 31, 105–110.
- Nkwi, P.N. and J.P. Warnier (1982), *Elements for a History of the Western Grassfields* (Yaounde).
- Scholze, J. (1934), *Deutsches Heldentum am Kameruner Götterberg: Allerlei Weltkriegspalaver* (Offenburg).
- Schuster, F.C. (1920), 'Im Gefangenenlager auf Fernando Po', in *Das Reich des Herzens Jesu. Illustrierte Monatsschrift der Priester vom Herzen Jesu zu Sittard*, 137–143.
- Vicent, J. (1916), 'Los Campamentos Alemanes de Internación', *ABC*, 29 November 1916, 31–35.
- Vicent, J. (1920), *Una obra de colonización alemana en Fernando Poo* (Madrid).
- Warnier, J.P. (1985), *Échanges, développement et hiérarchies dans le Bamenda pré-colonial (Cameroon)* (Stuttgart).

# Underground Struggles: The Early Life of Jack Hodgson

*Duncan Money*

## Introduction\*

Following the death of Percy 'Jack' Hodgson, in exile in London in 1977, Oliver Tambo, then president of the African National Congress (ANC), delivered a moving tribute to his widow Rica: 'What Jack gave in service to our people, to our Movement and struggle, to all South Africa, neither death nor time can take away'.<sup>1</sup> Other vivid tributes were broadcast more widely, such as Hodgson's stature in the anti-apartheid movement as a former defendant in the Treason Trial (when 56 leaders of this nascent movement were arrested for high treason in 1956) and central figure in Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), the ANC's armed wing. From Luanda, MK commander Ronnie Kasrils declared on the ANC's Radio Freedom that Hodgson was 'the son of a worker; he learnt his politics, not in the classroom, but on the mines of the Reef, the diamond field and the copper belt'.<sup>2</sup> This was true, but the politics Hodgson learnt and espoused in mining regions across Southern Africa were certainly not those of the African nationalist movement he later joined. In fact, they could be regarded as the opposite.

This chapter focuses on the life of Jack Hodgson from the 1910s to the 1940s, before he became a man whose politics and actions Tambo expressed such profound appreciation for. Biography forms a central part of South African

---

\* I am grateful for the assistance and insights generously provided by Spencer Hodgson, Ronnie Kasrils and Franziska Rueedi. More generally, I would like to thank seminar audiences at the University of Witwatersrand and the University of Pretoria as well as attendees at 'The Individual in African History' workshop at Leiden University for their helpful feedback. Most importantly, this chapter owes a considerable debt to Sylvia Neame, who carried out eight in-depth interviews with Jack Hodgson in 1968 and shared with me corrected versions of her notes from those interviews. The interviews were not recorded and consist of Neame's handwritten notes taken during the interviews.

- 1 Tambo's letter was reprinted in 'Jack's fight against fascism', *Sechaba*, 12 (second quarter, 1978).
- 2 Historical Papers Archive, University of the Witwatersrand (hereinafter as HPA), A2729 E3, Script for ANC Radio Freedom, 12 December 1977.

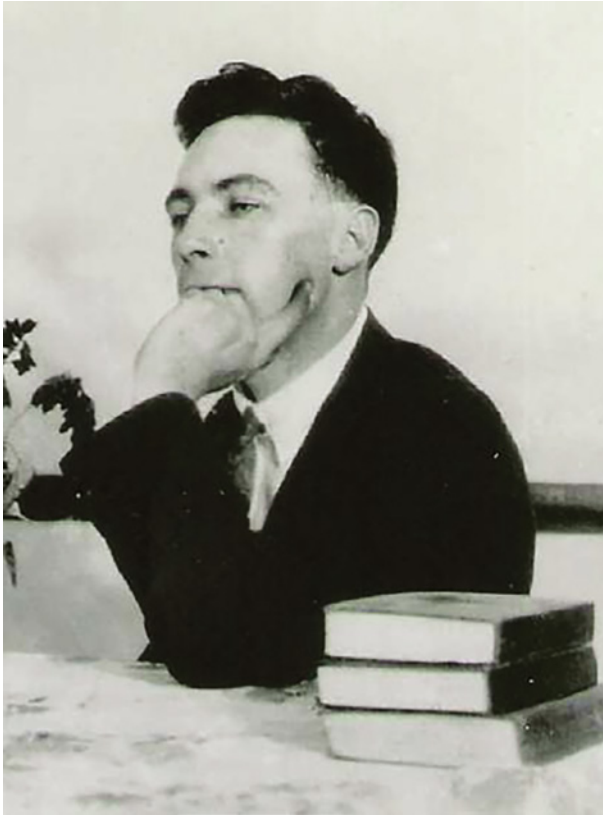


PHOTO 6.1 Jack Hodgson as a young man

historiography. Most leading figures in the African nationalist movement have been the subject of biographies, along with many other leading political figures.<sup>3</sup> There is no biography of Hodgson and, as will be seen, there has been

3 For biographies of African nationalists, see R. Barnard, *The Cambridge Companion to Nelson Mandela* (Cambridge, 2014); L. Callinicos, *Oliver Tambo. Beyond the Engeli Mountains* (Johannesburg, 2004); S. Clingman, *Bram Fischer: Afrikaner Revolutionary* (Cape Town, 1998); S.D. Gish, *Alfred B. Xuma: African, American, South African* (New York, 2000); B. Pogrud, *How Can Man Die Better: The Life of Robert Sobukwe* (Johannesburg, 2006); B. Willan, *Sol Plaatje: South African Nationalist 1876–1932* (London, 1984). For recent biographies of other major political figures in South Africa see L. Koorts, *D.F. Malan and the Rise of Afrikaner Nationalism* (Cape Town, 2014); A. Desai and G. Vahed, *The South African Gandhi: Stretcher-Bearer of Empire* (Stanford, CA, 2015); A. Drew, *Between Empire and Revolution: A Life of Sidney Bunting, 1873–1936* (London, 2007). Several MK veterans also produced autobiographies, many of which mention Jack Hodgson. The most famous, of course, is N. Mandela, *The Long Walk to Freedom: The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela* (London, 1994), but see also R. Bernstein, *Memory Against Forgetting: Memoirs from a Life in South African Politics 1938–1964* (Johannesburg, 1999), D. Goldberg, *The Mission: A Life for Freedom in South Africa* (Johannesburg, 2010);

little information available on his earlier life prior to this present chapter.<sup>4</sup> Yet, this chapter does not solely examine Hodgson's life to fill a perceived gap. There are two reasons why his biography illuminates wider themes in Southern African history. First, his life sheds light on white societies in Southern Africa in the first half of the twentieth century. Tens of thousands of whites experienced the same injustices that Hodgson did in these years and participated in the same political and labour movements, yet few of them came to the same conclusions as he did. His life is a vivid illustration that the impact of material conditions and experiences were not homogenous, and of the role of subjectivity. As will be seen, he remained hostile to the state and white employers, though most other whites made their peace with both.

Second, Hodgson's life is an excellent case study showing how individual lives are not stable, but often contradictory, fractured, and without coherence. This chapter draws on elements of Ciraj Rasool's critique of historical biography for this purpose. Rasool argued that South African resistance history and political biographies 'bear the conventional hallmarks of individualism, linearity, order, and coherence'. Life histories were seen to be 'formed by an ordered sequence of acts, events and works, with individuals characterised by stability, autonomy, self-determination and rational choice'. Consequently, biographies produced 'relatively unmessy narratives' where individuals encounter oppression and, in response, become radicalised and politically engaged.<sup>5</sup> Hodgson's life did not proceed in such an ordered sequence. The earlier and latter parts of his life do not fit easily together. Joe Slovo reflected on this at the memorial that took place after Hodgson's death, noting that Jack Hodgson's experiences during his formative years 'should have turned him into a malevolent, anti-social misfit' and that the Jack he knew 'was disconnected from his past'.<sup>6</sup>

---

R. Kasrils, *Armed and Dangerous: From Undercover Struggle to Freedom* (Johannesburg, 2004); F. Mbali, *In Transit: Autobiography of a South African Freedom Fighter* (Dartford, 2013); J. Slovo, *Slovo: The Unfinished Autobiography* (London, 1996).

- 4 Jack Hodgson wrote a brief account of his family history shortly before he died. HPA A3345, A3.2.7.1, short note by Jack Hodgson on his life, [undated]. Jack Hodgson's widow, Rica Hodgson, a prominent anti-apartheid activist in her own right, has written an autobiography: *Foot Soldier for Freedom: A Life in South Africa's Liberation Movement* (Johannesburg, 2010).
- 5 C. Rasool, 'Rethinking Documentary History and South African Political Biography', *South African Review of Sociology*, 41 (2010), 1, 28–29. Rasool makes this critique at greater length in his doctoral thesis: C. Rasool, 'The Individual, Auto/biography and History in South Africa', (unpublished PhD thesis, University of the Western Cape, 2004). For criticism of Rasool, see J. Hyslop, 'On Biography: A Response to Ciraj Rasool', *South African Review of Sociology*, 41 (2010), 2, 104–115.
- 6 Audio recording of Jack Hodgson's memorial meeting, 18 December 1977. In possession of Hodgson family.



Details about Hodgson's life prior to his active involvement in the struggle against apartheid are virtually unknown and any brief mentions in the secondary literature fall into two categories. First, that his experience as a miner and a soldier gave Hodgson an expertise with explosives that made him a valuable asset in MK.<sup>7</sup> Second, that his opposition to racial discrimination was consistent throughout his life.<sup>8</sup> This second assumption appears to be derived from claims made in his obituaries. *Anti-Apartheid News* claimed that 'for the whole of his adult life he was active in the struggle for a free South Africa', while the South African Communist Party noted that 'on the Copperbelt he also helped to defend the rights of his African fellow-workers'.<sup>9</sup> As will be discussed below, this bears little relationship to Hodgson's actual activities. However, it is not the case that the details in Hodgson's eulogising obituaries were wilfully deceptive. It is more likely that their authors simply did not know about his earlier life, assuming he had always been the man they had known in the anti-apartheid movement and having little or no contact with the people Hodgson associated with in his early life.<sup>10</sup> For subsequent historians, the problem is a different one: Hodgson's life slipped between different nationally bound archives, making it more difficult to recover.

Hodgson's childhood and early adult life were hard in a way that was unthinkable for subsequent generations of whites in Southern Africa. Indeed, Thomas Nkobi, then ANC Treasurer General, declared at Hodgson's memorial that 'he chose a life full of hardship and self-sacrifice' instead of enjoying 'the bribery and privilege that is part and parcel of the way of life for whites in South Africa'.<sup>11</sup> Yet, Hodgson did not choose his hardships. In some ways, it would be straightforward to construct a narrative where the hardships he suffered inspired his revolutionary politics, even though among the many

7 J. Cherry, *Umkhonto weSizwe: A Jacana Pocket History* (Auckland Park, 2011), 20; S. Ellis, *External Mission: The ANC in Exile, 1960–1990* (London, 2012), 11; J. Lazerson, *Against the Tide: Whites in the Struggle Against Apartheid* (Boulder, CO, 1994), 232; B. Magubane *et al.*, 'The Turn to Armed Struggle', in South African Democracy Education Trust, *The Road to Democracy in South Africa: Volume 1 (1960–70)* (Cape Town, 2004), 91. Obituaries in South African newspapers noted Hodgson's familiarity with explosives due to his military career and work as a miner. See 'Hodgson trained anti-SA saboteurs', *The Star*, 9 December 1977 and 'Jack Hodgson dies in London', *Cape Times*, 6 December 1977.

8 Lazerson, *Against the Tide*, 105. See also P. Naidoo, *156 Hands That Built South Africa* (Durban, 2006), 235; S. Zukas, *Into Exile and Back* (Lusaka, 2002), 71.

9 'Freedom Fighter Dies in London', *Anti-Apartheid News*, January/February 1978. 'Sad losses to the liberation movement', *The African Communist*, 73 (second quarter, 1978).

10 Among the 73 letters of condolences received by Rica Hodgson after Jack's death and deposited at the Historical Papers Archive, there is only one from someone who knew Jack Hodgson before 1942. HPA A3345, A3.2.7.1.

11 Reprinted in 'Jack's fight against fascism', *Sechaba*, 12 (second quarter, 1978).

thousands of whites who shared similar experiences, few drew the same conclusions. Hodgson was one of the only people from a white working-class background involved in MK.<sup>12</sup>

### Diamonds in the Rough: Early Years in South Africa

Hodgson was born in 1910 in Roodepoort, a mining town on the West Rand, to parents who had both emigrated from Britain, his father from Hull and his mother from Aberdeen. They had married in South Africa when Hodgson's mother, Jessie, was seven months pregnant.<sup>13</sup> Hodgson knew little of his father, who was killed in a mining accident at Durban Deep Mine when Hodgson was just four, but his father left one important influence: he named his son Percy, after himself, even though 'he detested the name Percy as intensely as I did and gained recognition as Jack Hodgson, as I did; with his fists if necessary'.<sup>14</sup> After his father's death, Hodgson and his younger brother were sent to an orphanage – where he was beaten and poorly fed – while Jessie Hodgson struggled to support her daughter by working as a waitress. It was only after she married again, two and a half years later – to Albert Little, a Scottish miner soon to be stricken with silicosis – that the two young boys left the orphanage and could begin school.<sup>15</sup> His step-father got a job at City Deep Mine on the Central Rand and the family moved into mine housing. They were living on the mine during the 1922 Rand Revolt, a strike by white mineworkers that escalated into an armed insurrection, and he would have witnessed the furious fighting around City Deep in March of that year, when armed strikers attacked soldiers guarding the property and succeeded in blowing up part of the mine.<sup>16</sup>

Formal education did not last long. Hodgson left school at 13 to start work, only six years after he had begun. He found a job as a leather boy for a few months and then left home for Potchefstroom, where he was apprenticed to a tannery for around two years.<sup>17</sup> Hodgson was effectively born into the mining industry, however, and it soon drew him in. His father was a miner, his step-father was a miner, his three uncles worked in the mines, and his aunt married

12 The other notable individual who shared a similar background is Fred Carneson. T. Lodge, 'Secret Party: South African Communists between 1950 and 1960', *South African Historical Journal*, 67 (2015), 4, 451.

13 HPA A3345, A3.2.7.2, Abridged Marriage Certificate: Percy Hodgson and Jessie Turner.

14 *Ibid.*, A3.2.7.1, short note by Jack Hodgson on his life, [undated].

15 *Ibid.*, A3.2.7.2, Marriage Solemnization Certificate, 15 November 1917.

16 J. Krikler, *White Rising: The 1922 Insurrection and Racial Killing in South Africa* (Manchester, 2005), 189.

17 HPA A2729 E3, First interview with Jack Hodgson, 17 September 1968.

a miner. The latter left Hodgson his clothes, including a tweed suit, after he died from silicosis in 1923. The suit fitted.<sup>18</sup>

Aged 16, he returned to the Rand and, lying about his age, secured a job on Consolidated Main Reef Mine as a trainee winding engine driver (a whites-only job responsible for lowering and raising men and ore). It was at this mine that he first encountered trade unionism and suffered the consequences. Hodgson joined the South African Engine Drivers' and Firemen's Association and soon learnt that the union's agreement stipulated that wages for trainees were supposed to increase in increments every six months. Enforcing the 'rate for the job' became an important aspect of his time on Northern Rhodesia's Copperbelt, and Hodgson first tried to organise other trainees around this principle on the Rand. For his troubles, he was sacked and blacklisted from mines across the Rand.<sup>19</sup>

The mid-1920s saw another of the mineral rushes that had been a regular occurrence in Southern Africa since the 1870s. Diamonds were discovered at Lichtenburg in 1926 and thousands flocked to seek their fortune. In 1925, there were 3,679 white diggers and 9,430 African labourers in the whole of the Transvaal Province. By early 1927, there were around 80,000 whites and over 100,000 Africans on the diggings in Lichtenburg District alone. Hodgson arrived in early 1927 and first worked for a butcher but was among the 27,000 people who rushed to Grasfontein when diamond diggings were proclaimed there in March 1927.<sup>20</sup>

Most shallow deposits, which could easily be worked by an independent digger, were exhausted by October 1926, however, and the riches of the diamond fields mainly accrued to those who owned the farms where alluvial diggings were taking place and who held commercial rights over trading and hawking.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, the price of Lichtenburg alluvial diamonds collapsed in mid-1927 and threw thousands of diggers into poverty. The diamond fields were one of the places visited by the Carnegie Commission investigation into white poverty in 1929, a study underpinned by ideas of white supremacy and fears of 'racial degeneration'.<sup>22</sup> Investigators attributed the impoverishment of the diggers to 'the whole atmosphere of the diggings, with their cosmopolitan population, their lack of community feeling or recognised moral standards,

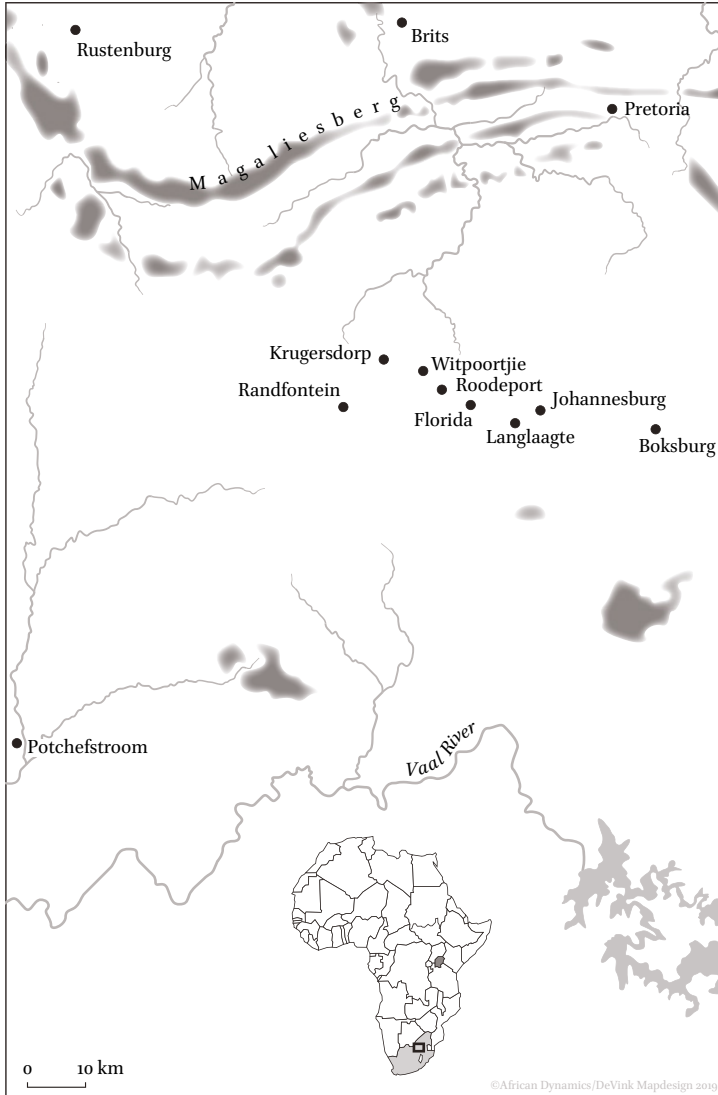
18 HPA A3345, A3.2.7.1, short note by Jack Hodgson on his life, [undated].

19 HPA A2729 E3, First interview with Jack Hodgson, 17 September 1968.

20 T. Clynick, 'The Lichtenburg Alluvial Diamond Diggers, 1926–1929', African Studies Seminar Paper, University of the Witwatersrand, 21 May 1984, 2–3.

21 *Idem*, 'Digging a Way into the Working Class': Unemployment and Consciousness amongst the Afrikaner Poor on the Lichtenburg Alluvial Diamond Diggings, 1926–29' in R. Morrell (ed.), *White but Poor: Essays on the History of Poor Whites in Southern Africa 1880–1940* (Pretoria, 1992) 80, 86.

22 T. Willoughby-Herard, *Waste of a White Skin: The Carnegie Corporation and the Racial Logic of White Vulnerability* (Oakland, CA, 2015).



MAP 6.1 Western Transvaal

and their all-pervading sense of gambling, recklessness and instability'. The Commission lamented that 'many of them have to learn the great lesson that, under modern economic conditions, they can only prosper by hard, thorough and regular labour'.<sup>23</sup> Such was to be the life of Hodgson after leaving the diamond fields and, though he learnt many lessons, he certainly did not prosper.

<sup>23</sup> Clynick, 'Unemployment and Consciousness', 75.

Scrabbling around in the dirt for diamonds was very different to industrial mining on the Rand and it attracted a different crowd. The diggings had a 'cosmopolitan crowd ... There were Australians, Americans and Englishmen, people from all over the world had come to the diamond diggings to get rich quickly, apart from all those who came from SA'.<sup>24</sup> This crowd brought with them a plethora of political influences from around the world. One such individual attracted to Lichtenburg was Solomon Buirski, a South African communist who had spent time in Britain. Buirski taught Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) study groups for the transient white population on the diamond fields, which Hodgson, then aged 16, attended regularly for six months.<sup>25</sup>

A commitment to communism could, at least in South Africa, co-exist comfortably with racist attitudes at the time. Africans did not attend the study groups, and Africans and their interests did not feature as subjects of discussion. Hodgson recalled that, at the time, he simply did not consider Africans to be a part of the working class.<sup>26</sup> Although the CPSA had consciously re-orientated towards African workers from 1924, this shift clearly took some time to filter through the communist movement.<sup>27</sup> In any case, hostility to Africans – or a perspective that African experiences and interests were not relevant – was a central part of the often radical, white political culture on the diamond fields. The Diggers' Union, an organisation representing white diggers across South Africa, railed against the diamond magnates who controlled the trade, but also demanded racially exclusive protection for white diggers from the South African Government.<sup>28</sup>

The literary culture that Hodgson immersed himself in blended with this general political culture. He read vociferously from an early age and the books he encountered had a huge influence on his life. Reading Charles Darwin, for instance, prompted him to abandon his family's Presbyterian faith and become an atheist. Other major influences included the works of Mark Twain, H.G. Wells, Upton Sinclair, and Sinclair Lewis. What really spoke to Hodgson, though, were the books of Jack London, especially *The Iron Heel*. London was an atheist, socialist writer who had joined the Klondike gold rush in the late 1890s and whose tales of adventure and political tracts were widely popular in the early twentieth century. Hodgson undoubtedly saw similarities in their two

24 HPA A2729 E3, Fourth interview with Jack Hodgson, 15 October 1968.

25 Solomon Buirski subsequently taught Joe Slovo, who also became an MK commander. A. Wieder, *Ruth First and Joe Slovo in the War Against Apartheid* (New York, 2013), 42.

26 HPA A2729, Third interview with Jack Hodgson, 2 October 1968.

27 A. Drew, *Discordant Comrades: Identities and Loyalties on the South African Left* (Farnham, 2000), 71–73, 76–79.

28 Clynick, 'Unemployment and Consciousness', 95–96.

lives and he even had a second-degree connection with London: he met a man on the diamond fields who had been with London in the Klondike (or claimed he had).<sup>29</sup> Significantly, London was also a white supremacist who saw socialism as a means 'to give more strength to certain kindred favoured races so that they may survive and inherit the earth to the extinction of the lesser, weaker races'.<sup>30</sup> This combination of opposition to economic exploitation and support for white domination strongly influenced Hodgson's own politics in these years.

The space for the freer life enjoyed by whites on the diamond fields rapidly closed. 'The diggers want to be independent and they want to remain independent. They do not want to work for others', declared the Diggers' Union, but independence was short-lived.<sup>31</sup> On the diamond fields, Hodgson pegged claims in several rushes and lived a hand-to-mouth existence doing any job he could obtain. Even after he was joined by his younger brother, they were too poor to afford African labour and insufficiently wily to take advantage of diamond smuggling from fields in Namaqualand owned by De Beers and closed to diggers. In early 1929, he left for the platinum mines at Rustenburg, some 140 km away. The reasons he left were simple: 'Because I was broke. There was nothing else to do. I needed the work, so I walked all the way to Rustenburg. Good reason. Why did the chicken cross the road?'<sup>32</sup>

In his later years, Hodgson openly acknowledged that he had racist attitudes during the 1920s and acted upon them. During interviews conducted in 1968, he recalled that his first criminal charge 'arose out of something that was essentially anti-Semitic' as he became involved in a large-scale brawl with a group of Jewish traders that ended with their stall being burnt to the ground.<sup>33</sup> However, he also recalled that he had beaten up an African man whom he suspected of stealing from a Jewish friend's clothing stall, and he characterised his interactions with Africans during this period as either joking with them or shouting at them.<sup>34</sup> During these same interviews, however, Hodgson was more selective about his beliefs and activities during his time on the Copperbelt in Northern Rhodesia, perhaps because, rather than reflecting the racist beliefs of the society he lived in, on the Copperbelt he propagated them.

29 HPA A2729 E3, Fourth interview with Jack Hodgson, 15 October 1968.

30 Quoted in Jay Williams, *The Oxford Handbook of Jack London*, (New York, 2017), 263.

31 Clynick, 'Unemployment and Consciousness', 97.

32 HPA A2729 E3, Second interview with Jack Hodgson, 24 September 1968.

33 *Ibid.*

34 *Ibid.*, Third interview with Jack Hodgson, 2 October 1968.



MAP 6.2 Copperbelt, 1930s

### Going Underground: Industrial Life and Struggles on the Copperbelt

The copper industry was booming in the 1920s and the two mining companies that had gained control over the Northern Rhodesian Copperbelt – the Rhodesian Selection Trust (RST) and Rhodesian Anglo American (RAA) – sought to begin production as quickly as possible. Men like Hodgson were in demand and thousands of white mineworkers and construction workers flocked to the Copperbelt. Hodgson’s step-father had already gone to the Copperbelt and suggested that Hodgson do the same. It didn’t take much to persuade Hodgson, especially as both his parents had moved across the British Empire to secure

better opportunities for themselves. He arrived at Nkana, one of the largest mines then in development, in 1929. Using skills he had picked up during brief stints working on Eerste Geluk Mine and Waterval Mine in Rustenburg in South Africa, Hodgson secured work first as an operator in the power plant at RAA's Nkana Mine, and then worked for a contractor painting newly erected chimneys and constructing the steel frames of new surface plants.<sup>35</sup>

There was a similar kind of rough cosmopolitanism on the Copperbelt as Hodgson had encountered on the diamond fields. White workers came from all over the English-speaking world on short-term contracts. At Nkana, Hodgson worked as a steel erector, alongside Glaswegian riveters, skilled workers who bolted together metal plates and beams in ships and buildings, and lived in a single-roomed hut with an Australian miner, who used to drink an entire bottle of gin every day. Both men also carried guns with them everywhere, like many other whites on the Copperbelt.<sup>36</sup> Yet, the real danger came not from gin-slugging, gun-slinging white miners, but from disease. So many whites were struck down with malaria and blackwater fever that white workers from across Southern Africa began to avoid the Copperbelt.<sup>37</sup> Hodgson himself contracted cerebral malaria in mid-1930 and lost his job, since the mines had no provision for sick pay. Instead, he was forced to return to South Africa to recuperate and could only get back to the Copperbelt by borrowing money from a boarding house in Nkana.<sup>38</sup>

Along with their industrial skills, whites from mining and industrial centres all around the world brought with them a whole array of radical political influences: Glaswegian riveters deeply imbued with the culture of 'Red Clydeside', syndicalist miners from the copper camps of the American West, veterans of the Rand Revolt, these were the men who Hodgson rubbed shoulders with. This was the political culture he was immersed in during his entire period on the Copperbelt. Later, when he lived at Mufulira, his neighbour was the son of Harry Spendiff, an insurrectionary leader of the Rand Revolt who had committed suicide rather than be captured by government troops.<sup>39</sup> It was on the Copperbelt that Hodgson joined the Left Book Club – established by British socialists in 1936 – and came to acquire books like Karl Marx's *Capital*:

35 *Ibid.*, Fourth interview with Jack Hodgson, 15 October 1968.

36 *Ibid.*

37 L. Schumaker, 'Slimes and Death-Dealing Dambos: Water, Industry and the Garden City on Zambia's Copperbelt', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 34 (2008), 4, 824–825.

38 HPA A2729 E3, Fourth interview with Jack Hodgson, 15 October 1968.

39 Interview with Dawn Hodgson, 10 January 2017.



*Volume I*, Hewlett Johnson's *The Socialist Sixth of the World*, which extolled the virtues of the Soviet Union, and Ellen Wilkinson's *The Town that was Murdered*, a harrowing account of poverty in Britain during the Great Depression. It was also on the Copperbelt that he first considered himself to be a communist.

Hodgson's radical politics were not unusual on the Copperbelt. Many white mineworkers regarded themselves as part of an international white working class and had an international outlook. Furious debates took place about subjects like the Spanish Civil War, yet whites who regarded themselves as working class rarely reflected on the interests of Africans on the Copperbelt, who constituted the large majority of the mine's workforce.<sup>40</sup> Attitudes towards the Africans who did the toughest jobs on the mines and in white households for low pay ranged from disinterest to active hostility. Like most other whites, Hodgson employed at least one male African servant from the time he arrived on the Copperbelt and had authority over others in the workplace.

The number of Africans Hodgson had direct authority over increased dramatically when he started working underground around 1932. He had been 'reluctant to go underground as a miner' as his father had been killed in an underground accident, his step-father was debilitated by silicosis and he had begun his working life wearing the clothes of a dead miner, his uncle.<sup>41</sup> The Great Depression effectively forced him underground as construction work ceased on all Copperbelt mines. Hodgson was not laid off, unlike thousands of others, but spent a year on night-shift as a scraperman, clearing out waste rock created by the blasting of new tunnels with a group of African subordinates at times dozens strong.

In 1933, with the depression easing, new shafts were sunk at Nkana Mine. Hodgson secured lucrative work as a shaft sinker and then began working as a contract miner, first at Nkana and then from around 1936 at RST's Mufulira Mine. After years of drifting between jobs, Hodgson now had a job that was relatively secure and well-paid, so long as copper prices held up.<sup>42</sup> Contract miners were paid by footage mined and supervised a group of around 12 African miners who did most of the manual work, though unlike in South Africa, white miners on the Copperbelt were not responsible for paying African miners out of their own wage packet, and this reduced tensions underground.

Another element of stability developed at the same time: Jack Hodgson became a family man. In July 1934, he married Esperanza Rosa Ruiters (known as Peggy from an early age), a young South African woman whose family had

---

40 HPA A2729 E3, Sixth interview with Jack Hodgson, 4 November 1968.

41 *Ibid.*, Fifth interview with Jack Hodgson, 22 October 1968.

42 *Ibid.*, Sixth interview with Jack Hodgson, 4 November 1968.

emigrated from Italy. The two families had known each other in Johannesburg and Jack and Peggy had first met there as children. The couple lived as most other whites did on the Copperbelt, in a modest detached house provided by the mine with African servants. More family arrived on the Copperbelt. Peggy's brother Peter came to work on the Copperbelt mines, as did Jack's younger brother George. Jack and Peggy had three children in three years, the eldest of whom Jack named Percy. However, his daughter recalled he didn't interact much with his children at that time. He was always busy, and they were usually asleep by the time he came off shift.<sup>43</sup>

Greater stability in his life encouraged Hodgson to re-engage with the trade union movement for the first time since being blacklisted on the Rand. On the Rustenburg platinum mines, his 'period of working there was of such transient nature, that I never felt at any stage that I had a need to become involved', but now he had a more secure position.<sup>44</sup> Hodgson was involved in efforts to form an industrial union for all white mineworkers on the Copperbelt mines from the outset in 1934, when the idea was first publicly proposed by Richard Olds, a British mineworker.<sup>45</sup> Olds made the purpose of this organisation, and the basis on which it was to be organised, very clear:

The white worker in Northern Rhodesia is faced with two alternatives viz. to either organise against the encroachment of the Native in their skilled trades or get ready to leave the country. ...

Who have we today who will champion the cause of the white population, Where are the Men who can think WHITE and will stand out and fight the cause of the white worker and his children?

Are we going to maintain our WHITE STANDARD or allow ourselves to descend to the level of the blacks by always thinking BLACK.<sup>46</sup> [*sic*]

These were politics Hodgson was entirely comfortable with at the time and these attitudes sat alongside his commitment to communism. He regarded the whites-only mineworkers' union as an avenue for radical politics and helped produce a paper called *The Mineworker*, which published articles praising the

43 Interview with Dawn Hodgson, 10 January 2017.

44 HPA A2729, Third interview with Jack Hodgson, 2 October 1968.

45 'To form workers' federation', *Bulawayo Chronicle*, 15 September 1934. Industrial unions aimed to organise all workers within the same industry, as opposed to unions which organised along a trade or craft basis, a type of organisation which predominated in South Africa.

46 Zambia Consolidated Copper Mines Archive, Ndola (ZCCM), 10.7.9A, Letter from R. Olds, *Copperbelt Times*, 12 October 1934.

Soviet Union and warning about the rise of fascism.<sup>47</sup> The first incarnation of the union proved ineffective, however, and it was thoroughly reorganised in Ndola in December 1938 when 19 men met to form the first General Council, Hodgson among them. Fearing retaliation from the mining companies, reorganisation was conducted surreptitiously and each man signed a pledge to keep 'all we may learn of the administration and affairs of the union as strictly secret'.<sup>48</sup>

Despite the secrecy, Hodgson's contemporary political ideas and actions come into clear focus during the tumultuous war years of the early 1940s. Copper from the Copperbelt made a crucial contribution to Britain's war effort. So, in early 1940, a group of white mineworkers resolved to use the opportunity presented by heightened wartime demand for copper to settle long-standing grievances over pay and conditions. Hodgson was at the centre of this and called for immediate strikes to win their demands, reflecting years later that, at the time, 'I [didn't] think I had the ability to be subtle about anything'.<sup>49</sup> More cautious members of the union leadership refused to countenance a strike, believing one was not possible as the workforce was 'too much a cosmopolitan lot'. Hodgson and Frank Maybank, a recently arrived British miner, were not prepared to take no for an answer and 'got together all the militants we knew and a strike was worked out'.<sup>50</sup>

At a riotous public meeting in Mufulira, where local union leaders were thrown out, the plan was endorsed and at 5 am on 17 March 1940, this group of militants blocked the road to the main shaft at Mufulira Mine. They had no qualms about disrupting the war effort and neither, it transpired, did much of the rest of the white workforce as not a single white mineworker crossed the picket line. Hodgson and others addressed the crowd of strikers gathered around the shaft and urged them to spread the strike.<sup>51</sup> Four days later, white mineworkers walked out at Nkana Mine – Hodgson's previous employer – after a similarly heated public meeting.

At both mines, African mineworkers initially went underground, and no effort was made to involve them in the dispute, to explain why thousands of them were thrown out of work, or to denounce them for crossing picket lines. Africans were not part of the working class, which mirrored the view of the

47 HPA A2729, Sixth interview with Jack Hodgson, 4 November 1968.

48 M. Mwendapole, *A History of the Trade Union Movement in Zambia up to 1968* (Lusaka, 1977), 6.

49 HPA A2729 E3, Seventh interview with Jack Hodgson, 12 November 1968.

50 *Ibid.*, Sixth interview with Jack Hodgson, 4 November 1968.

51 The National Archives, Kew (TNA), CO 795/117/2, Testimony of Gilbert Howe, 17 May 1940.

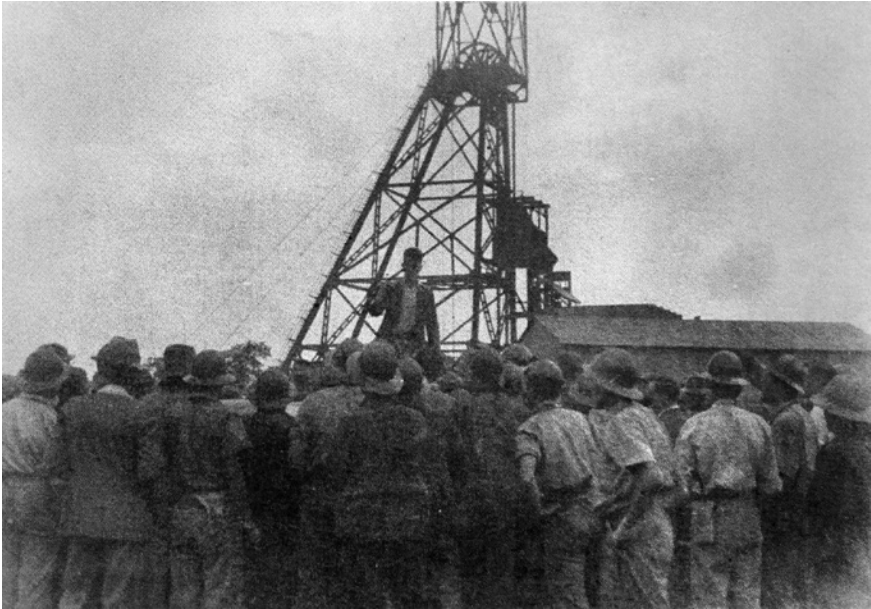


PHOTO 6.2 Jack Hodgson addressing strikers at Mufulira

colonial authorities that Africans were not to become permanent urban workers, so were to be kept out of the dispute. This attitude was made explicit at the public meeting preceding the strike at Nkana where the consensus was that 'Africans should remain in their compounds'.<sup>52</sup> African mineworkers themselves had different ideas and thousands came out on strike at Nkana and Mufulira immediately after the white mineworkers' strike. This dispute culminated in a protest at Nkana, where soldiers opened fire on the crowd after some strikers pelted them with stones, killing 17 and injuring around 65.<sup>53</sup>

Sympathy from white mineworkers after this blood-letting was muted at best. Several white mineworkers were called to give evidence to the Forster Commission established to investigate the African strike and subsequent shooting, including Hodgson.<sup>54</sup> African witnesses had complained to the Commission about being assaulted by white miners underground, but Hodgson used the opportunity to complain that Africans often:

52 ZCCM 3.8.1A, Notes of meeting of Mine Workers Held in Cinema Hall, Nkana, 19 March 1940.

53 I. Henderson, 'Early African Leadership: The Copperbelt Disturbances of 1935 and 1940', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 2 (1975), 1, 92.

54 *Report of the Commission Appointed to Inquire into the Disturbances in the Copperbelt, Northern Rhodesia* (Lusaka, July 1940).

deliberately caused a white man to strike them, with the object of getting him fired. It has happened on so many occasions that we are beginning to think that the Native is adopting that attitude in a spirit of antagonism.

He also reiterated his conviction that the mineworkers' union should be for white men only and called for greater control of African labour underground.<sup>55</sup> This control was to be provided by white mineworkers themselves. The union demanded a colour bar and that all African labour be under the direct supervision of a white mineworker (which would have significantly increased their numbers), both demands Hodgson supported. At a meeting with mine management a few days before the Forster Commission hearings, Hodgson had threatened 'that if the white man's livelihood were threatened to any serious extent the European could close the Mine. There must be some limit to which the native could rise'.<sup>56</sup>

At the same meeting, representatives of the white mineworkers' union demanded that the 'rate for the job' be adhered to; if Africans were to perform the same jobs as Europeans, they should be paid the same wages, banking on the fact that the mining companies had no intention of doing this. This was widely understood as a justification for enforcing a colour bar. Charlie Harris, then general secretary of the South African Mine Workers' Union (SAMWU), explicitly advised a meeting in Luanshya in 1936, which Hodgson likely attended, to win support for a colour bar by phrasing their demands as the 'rate for the job' because British trade unions '[could] not understand our difficulties in preserving the white races'.<sup>57</sup> Similarly, the whites-only Rhodesia Railway Workers' Union regarded the 'rate for the job' argument as 'subterfuge' because 'equal pay for equal work mean[t] a colour bar'.<sup>58</sup> Yet, the slogan underpinned efforts to defend the colour bar until the 1960s, and was endorsed even by radicals among the Copperbelt's white workforce like Frank Maybank.

Hodgson seems to have developed a close affinity with Maybank. Although they only worked underground together at Mufulira Mine for around a year, they quickly became collaborators and kept up an irregular correspondence for decades afterwards. According to Hodgson, Maybank was 'an old hand' who 'taught me a lot of tricks' and encouraged him to take an active role and speak

55 TNA CO 795/117/2, Testimony of Jack Hodgson, 29 May 1940.

56 ZCCM 12.2.10C, 'Colour Bar' in agreement between the companies and the Northern Rhodesia Mine Workers' Union.

57 'The labour meeting at Luanshya last Saturday', *The Mineworker*, July 1936.

58 R. Welensky, 'Africans and Trade Unions in Northern Rhodesia', *African Affairs*, 45 (1946), 181.

at meetings.<sup>59</sup> Maybank was a veteran communist who had toured the Soviet Union and met figures in the international labour movement who Hodgson had only read about. The two men not only had similar politics, but similar backgrounds. Like Hodgson, Maybank was sent to an orphanage after the death of his father and had spent years living an itinerant lifestyle working the same kind of jobs as Hodgson: construction, digging in gold rushes, and mine work in Australia and New Zealand.<sup>60</sup>

The reason the two spent such a short time working together was that Hodgson was removed from the Copperbelt in October 1940 after he and his family went on holiday to Durban. When Hodgson attempted to return to Northern Rhodesia, he was stopped at Johannesburg's Park Station by two military officers who informed him that he would be interned if he returned.<sup>61</sup> This was an unsurprising turn of events. Shortly before leaving the Copperbelt, he had been part of a union delegation that threatened the mine management that 'they would have to get the closed shop and, if necessary, might have to go to extreme ends to get it'. At the same meeting, for good measure, Hodgson also demanded the expulsion of the Roan Antelope Mine Manager from Northern Rhodesia and pay increases for artisans.<sup>62</sup>

### Behind Enemy Lines: Experiences During the Second World War

Having lost his job and with no prospect of work on the Rand mines – having been blacklisted in the mid-1920s – Hodgson needed to make a decision about his future, and make it quickly. On 30 November, he enlisted in the army in Pietermaritzburg, where the family had been staying with his mother's cousin.<sup>63</sup> This was fortuitous timing as the army had just begun making a concerted effort to recruit skilled industrial workers who could operate and repair new military hardware such as tanks.<sup>64</sup> Hodgson joined the 4th South African Armoured Car Regiment and by May 1941 was in North Africa.

59 HPA A2729 E3, Seventh interview with Jack Hodgson, 12 November 1968.

60 'The Story of the Life of a Man', Personal papers of Frank Maybank, in author's possession.

61 HPA A2729 E3, Eighth interview with Jack Hodgson, 19 November 1968.

62 National Archives of Zambia, Lusaka, SEC1/1420, Notes on a meeting between the Mine Managements and the N.R. Mine Workers' Union, 18 September 1940.

63 South African National Defence Force Documentation Centre, Pretoria (DC), Attestation of Percy John Hodgson (178459).

64 N. Roos, *Ordinary Springboks: White Servicemen and Social Justice in South Africa, 1939–1961* (Aldershot, 2005), 30.



PHOTO 6.3 Hodgson's desert rat patch

On arrival in Egypt, Hodgson was attached to the 11th Hussars, a British Army regiment then deployed as part of the 7th Armoured Division, better known by the nickname they acquired: the 'Desert Rats'.<sup>65</sup> He had arrived in North Africa in time to participate in some of the heaviest fighting in the region as Nazi Germany's Afrika Corps launched a ferocious counter-attack following the collapse of the Italian army in Libya in early 1941. Hodgson fought behind enemy lines, making rapid hit-and-run attacks, and was involved in the fighting to control the Halfaya Pass on the Libya-Egypt border, which raged from May to November 1941 and was so severe that the area was nicknamed the 'Hellfire Pass'.<sup>66</sup>

For the short time he was at the front, Hodgson did well in the army. Although he 'was known as the Bolshevik in [the] regiment', he rose to the rank of Acting Sergeant and kept a clean conduct sheet.<sup>67</sup> However, fighting took a heavy toll. In March 1942, he was shipped back to South Africa suffering from duodenal ulcers and internal bleeding.<sup>68</sup> Hodgson jokingly blamed the ulcers

65 DC, Application for Campaign Medals: Percy John Hodgson.

66 For a detailed study of the war in the Western Desert see B. Pitt, *The Crucible of War* (3 vols) (London, 1986).

67 HPA A2729 E3, Eighth interview with Jack Hodgson, 19 November 1968.

68 DC, Particulars of Discharge: Percy John Hodgson.

on the decisions he had to make during combat, and they left him with health problems that plagued him for the rest of his life. When Rusty Bernstein, later a defendant in the 1963–64 Rivonia Trial, during which key leaders of the anti-apartheid movement including Nelson Mandela were jailed, first met Hodgson at the CPSA's Johannesburg office in mid-1942, he encountered a man who 'was about my age, but gaunt and hollow cheeked as though all flesh had melted off his bones'.<sup>69</sup> Hodgson was discharged on medical grounds in May 1943.

The Second World War left a deep impression on many of the white communists who fought with the South African forces.<sup>70</sup> Yet, initially, Hodgson was more closely concerned with the white labour movement in Northern Rhodesia. He received news about the Copperbelt from Maybank and Roy Welensky – a trade unionist on Rhodesia Railways who later became a prominent settler politician – and regarded both men 'as being something closer than friends'.<sup>71</sup> Poor health inhibited a more active role in politics and he was hospitalised four times during 1942 and 1943. For the first time since the age of 13, he was without a job and likely used the opportunity to read political material vociferously. During his longest spell in a military hospital (from 27 August to 23 November 1942), he was sought out by Chris Meyer, a radical white miner who had worked alongside Hodgson at Mufulira. Meyer brought dramatic news: he had been deported from Northern Rhodesia, while Maybank had been arrested by the army and was awaiting deportation.<sup>72</sup>

Both Jack and Peggy Hodgson threw themselves into the campaign organised by white trades unions in Johannesburg to get Maybank released.<sup>73</sup> He lobbied white trade unions such as the SAMWU for support and accompanied their delegations to government ministers and General Smuts. Hodgson was privately critical of the SAMWU – advising trade unionists on the Copperbelt to use General Secretary Bertie Broderick but not to trust him. His critical attitude, however, was caused by the corruption of the union leadership and not its overt hostility to Africans.<sup>74</sup> Yet, there were some signs that his politics had changed. At a public meeting, Hodgson proclaimed his support for the strike

69 Bernstein, *Memory Against Forgetting*, 64.

70 Lodge, 'Secret Party', 441. Neil Roos has written on the impact of the war more generally on the 200,000 white South African volunteers: Roos, *Ordinary Springboks*.

71 HPA A2729 E3, Eighth interview with Jack Hodgson, 19 November 1968.

72 Hodgson was close to Meyer and the two families shared a house on his release from hospital. Bernstein, *Memory*, 65.

73 D. Money, 'The World of European Labour on the Northern Rhodesian Copperbelt, 1940–1945', *International Review of Social History*, 60 (2015), 2, 242–252.

74 HPA AH 646 Dc12.20, letter from P.J. Hodgson to General Council, Northern Rhodesia Mine Workers' Union, [undated].



by African mineworkers on the Copperbelt in 1940, though disingenuously claimed that 'the European workers lay unable to help them'.<sup>75</sup> Hodgson's close concern with the Copperbelt is most clearly demonstrated when the campaign failed and Maybank was deported, leaving the position of General Secretary of the white mineworkers' union vacant. Hodgson was offered the job and attempted to return to the Copperbelt to lead a union which, by this time, was successfully enforcing an industrial colour bar. However, the Northern Rhodesia Government informed him that he would not be allowed to enter the territory.<sup>76</sup>

Hodgson had joined the CPSA while in the army, and the party indicated to him that, failing to return to the Copperbelt, he should join the leadership of Springbok Legion, a newly formed progressive soldiers' trade union.<sup>77</sup> He became the Legion's National Secretary, a position he held for ten years, while Peggy also joined the Legion's staff.<sup>78</sup> Hodgson's active involvement in the CPSA was part of a small, but not insignificant influx of support for the party and an unprecedented growth in its respectability owing to the wartime alliance between Western countries and the Soviet Union. Membership quadrupled between 1941 and 1943 and the Friends of the Soviet Union, an organisation established by the CPSA, secured the Minister of Justice and Mayor of Johannesburg as patrons.<sup>79</sup> But the moment was short-lived, as was the success of the Springbok Legion. From a mass movement of soldiers and veterans over 55,000 strong in 1944, the Legion rapidly atrophied to a handful of activists after the war. The ideas of the Legion's radical leadership 'of a unified, non-racial South African working class was anathema to most white ex-servicemen, whose hopes for the post-war world were premised on a range of racialized assumptions'.<sup>80</sup>

It was under the auspices of the Springbok Legion that Hodgson travelled to Cape Town in 1943 to meet local activists there, one of whom was a young Jewish woman named Rica Gampel.<sup>81</sup> Rica shared fond memories of the first time

75 National Archives of South Africa, Pretoria, BTS 9/77/6A, Secret Report on Chris Meyer, 1 December 1942.

76 HPA A2729 E3, Eighth interview with Jack Hodgson, 19 November 1968.

77 *Ibid.*

78 Roos, *Ordinary Springboks*, 75–76.

79 B. White, 'The Role of the Springbok Legion in the Communist Party of South Africa's Common Front Strategy, 1941–1950', *Kleio*, 25 (1993), 1, 97.

80 N. Roos, 'The Springbok and the Skunk: War Veterans and the Politics of Whiteness in South Africa during the 1940s and 1950s', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 35 (2009), 3, 657.

81 Hodgson, *Foot Soldier*, 38.

she met Jack and how they quickly grew close: 'it was one of those things like you read about and don't really believe that it was true – it was kind of like that'.<sup>82</sup> Her marriage to a sailor in the South African Navy was already breaking down, and Jack and Peggy soon separated as well. After their respective divorces had been finalised, Jack and Rica married in August 1945.<sup>83</sup> Jack and Peggy's divorce seems to have been amicable. Their daughter recalled that the two were friendly when they met at social occasions, and Peggy, who joined the army in 1943 and was posted to Durban, became friends with Rica's sister, who lived there.<sup>84</sup>

### Conclusion

This new marriage characterised the abrupt rupture in Jack Hodgson's life. His self-identity as a white worker, a seemingly robust one developed and reinforced over a long time, dissolved with remarkable rapidity. He disengaged almost entirely from the white labour movement that had been at the centre of his life. His politics and attitudes changed as well. When asked 'did he [Jack Hodgson] impress you in the way he related with black people?', Rica replied, 'yes, it did impress me, but what impressed me was that he had so many friends amongst them'.<sup>85</sup> There is no reason to doubt that this was the case. By this time, Hodgson was national secretary of a non-racial organisation, the Springbok Legion, and had joined the Communist Party, which had a predominantly African membership.<sup>86</sup> Yet, this was only three years after he had been at the forefront of efforts to frustrate African aspirations on the Copperbelt by agitating for a colour bar, and a year after he had sought to lead the union enforcing this colour bar.

Hodgson's is a non-linear and unstable biography. The Springbok Legion certainly gave him greater opportunity to reflect on the ideological implications of fighting fascism, and took him away from workplaces where he would have direct authority over African workers and been a member of a white trade union. Yet, his changing ideas were not a kind of mechanical response to new experiences, something illustrated by the fact that so many others went

82 South African History Archive, Johannesburg, (SAHA) AL 2460 A08.05, Interview with Rica Hodgson [undated].

83 'Congrats', *Fighting Talk*, September 1945.

84 Interview with Dawn Hodgson, 10 January 2017.

85 SAHA, AL 2460 A08.05, Interview with Rica Hodgson [undated].

86 D. Everatt, *The Origins of Non-Racialism: White Opposition to Apartheid in the 1950s* (Johannesburg, 2009), 21.

through the same experiences as Hodgson did. Virtually none of the tens of thousands who passed through the Springbok Legion came to the same conclusions that he did, although many would also have had personal experiences of pre-war hardship during the Depression years. There were plenty of other radicals among the Copperbelt's white workforce, several of whom fought in the war, but they remained ardent supporters of the colour bar. It would be more explicable if all the experiences of the first decades of Hodgson's life had produced a resolute supporter of apartheid, as many of the poor whites and white mineworkers he lived and worked alongside became.

Continuities in Hodgson's life reveal how much changed. Both when he was an antagonistic shop steward in a whites-only trade union and when he was a militant anti-apartheid activist, Hodgson considered himself to be a communist. What it meant to be a political radical in Southern Africa had, however, altered considerably between those two moments in his life. The other major continuity is violence. Hodgson inhabited a violent world and the changes in his life mostly brought changes in the scale and targets of the violence he had encountered from the very beginning of his life. He was beaten at an orphanage as a young child, fought to gain recognition as 'Jack' from an early age after being christened by his father with a name he hated, survived brawls and shootings in what he termed the 'Wild West business' of diamond diggings as a teenager, worked alongside hard-bitten, gun-toting miners in the Copperbelt camps in his twenties, endured the hazards of underground mining that had killed several of his family members, took to the floor at riotous mass meetings to instigate showdowns with the mining bosses, and faced down the tanks of the Afrika Corps in fierce combat in North Africa.<sup>87</sup> All this before he became involved in the anti-apartheid movement and helped to establish MK.

In some ways, Hodgson was a remnant of a world that had disappeared by the late 1940s, a time when Johannesburg was convulsed by wildcat strikes and revolutionary upheavals by whites. Reflecting on the Rand Revolt, South African socialist Wilfred Harrison recalled that in Johannesburg some 50,000 whites had marched behind a red flag in the funeral procession of three strikers, who had gone to gallows singing internationalist socialist song 'The Red Flag', but:

That is many years ago and we may wonder what has become of those 50,000 people who followed those singers of the 'Red Flag' to their graves. Obviously they have buried the axe, so to speak, and their indignation against Capitalist machinations.<sup>88</sup>

---

87 HPA A2729 E3, First interview with Jack Hodgson, 17 September 1968.

88 W. Harrison, *Memoirs of a Socialist in South Africa, 1903-1947* (Cape Town, 1947), 48.

Jack Hodgson never buried the axe. His life was a life of struggle, but his were very different struggles in different times.

## References

- Barnard, R. (2014), *The Cambridge Companion to Nelson Mandela* (Cambridge).
- Bernstein, R. (1999), *Memory Against Forgetting: Memoirs from a Life in South African Politics 1938–1964* (Johannesburg).
- Callinicos, L. (2004), *Oliver Tambo. Beyond the Engeli Mountains* (Johannesburg).
- Cherry, J. (2011), *Umkhonto weSizwe: A Jacana Pocket History* (Auckland Park).
- Clingman, S. (1998), *Bram Fischer: Afrikaner Revolutionary* (Cape Town).
- Clynick, T. (1984), 'The Lichtenburg Alluvial Diamond Diggers, 1926–1929', African Studies Seminar Paper, University of the Witwatersrand.
- Clynick, T. (1992), 'Digging a Way into the Working Class': Unemployment and Conscientiousness amongst the Afrikaner Poor on the Lichtenburg Alluvial Diamond Diggings, 1926–29' in R. Morrell (ed.), *White but Poor: Essays on the History of Poor Whites in Southern Africa 1880–1940* (Pretoria), 75–100.
- Desai, A. and G. Vahed (2015), *The South African Gandhi: Stretcher-Bearer of Empire* (Stanford, CA).
- Drew, A. (2000), *Discordant Comrades: Identities and Loyalties on the South African Left* (Farnham).
- Drew, A. (2007), *Between Empire and Revolution: A Life of Sidney Bunting, 1873–1936* (London).
- Ellis, S. (2012), *External Mission: The ANC in Exile, 1960–1990* (London).
- Everatt, D. (2009), *The Origins of Non-Racialism: White Opposition to Apartheid in the 1950s* (Johannesburg).
- Gish, S.D. (2000), *Alfred B. Xuma: African, American, South African* (New York).
- Goldberg, D. (2010), *The Mission: A Life for Freedom in South Africa* (Johannesburg).
- Harrison, W. (1947), *Memoirs of a Socialist in South Africa, 1903–1947* (Cape Town).
- Henderson, I. (1975), 'Early African Leadership: The Copperbelt Disturbances of 1935 and 1940', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, vol. 2, 83–97.
- Hodgson, R. (2010), *Foot Soldier for Freedom: A Life in South Africa's Liberation Movement* (Johannesburg).
- Hyslop, J. (2010), 'On Biography: A Response to Ciraj Rassool', *South African Review of Sociology*, vol. 41, 104–115.
- Kasrils, R. (2004), *Armed and Dangerous: From Undercover Struggle to Freedom* (Johannesburg).
- Koorts, L. (2014), *D.F. Malan and the Rise of Afrikaner Nationalism* (Cape Town).
- Krikler, J. (2005), *White Rising: The 1922 Insurrection and Racial Killing in South Africa* (Manchester).

- Lazerson, J. (1994), *Against the Tide: Whites in the Struggle Against Apartheid* (Boulder, CO).
- Lodge, T. (2015), 'Secret Party: South African Communists between 1950 and 1960', *South African Historical Journal*, vol. 67, 433–464.
- Magubane, B. et al. (2004), 'The Turn to Armed Struggle', in South African Democracy Education Trust, *The Road to Democracy in South Africa: Volume 1 (1960–70)* (Cape Town), Ch. 2.
- Mandela, N. (1994), *The Long Walk to Freedom: The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela* (London).
- Mbali, F. (2013), *In Transit: Autobiography of a South African Freedom Fighter* (Dartford).
- Money, D. (2015), 'The World of European Labour on the Northern Rhodesian Copperbelt, 1940–1945', *International Review of Social History*, vol. 60, 242–252.
- Mwendapole, M. (1977), *A History of the Trade Union Movement in Zambia up to 1968* (Lusaka).
- Naidoo, P. (2006), *156 Hands That Built South Africa* (Durban).
- Pitt, B. (1986), *The Crucible of War*, 3 vols (London). Rassool, C. (2004), *The Individual, Auto/biography and History in South Africa*, (unpublished PhD thesis, University of the Western Cape).
- Rassool, C. (2010), 'Rethinking Documentary History and South African Political Biography', *South African Review of Sociology*, vol. 41, 28–55.
- Roos, N. (2005), *Ordinary Springboks: White Servicemen and Social Justice in South Africa, 1939–1961* (Aldershot).
- Roos, N. (2009), 'The Springbok and the Skunk: War Veterans and the Politics of Whiteness in South Africa during the 1940s and 1950s', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, vol. 35, 643–661.
- Schumaker, L. (2008), 'Slimes and Death-Dealing Dambos: Water, Industry and the Garden City on Zambia's Copperbelt', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, vol. 34, 823–840.
- Slovo, J. (1996), *Slovo: The Unfinished Autobiography* (London).
- Welensky, R. (1946), 'Africans and Trade Unions in Northern Rhodesia', *African Affairs*, vol. 45, 185–191.
- White, B. (1993), 'The Role of the Springbok Legion in the Communist Party of South Africa's Common Front Strategy, 1941–1950', *Kleio*, vol. 25, 95–109.
- Wieder, A. (2013), *Ruth First and Joe Slovo in the War Against Apartheid* (New York).
- Willan, B. (1984), *Sol Plaatje: South African Nationalist 1876–1932* (London).
- Williams, J. (2017), *The Oxford Handbook of Jack London* (New York).
- Willoughby-Herard, T. (2015), *Waste of a White Skin: The Carnegie Corporation and the Racial Logic of White Vulnerability* (Oakland, CA).
- Zukas, S. (2002), *Into Exile and Back* (Lusaka).



**PART 3**

*Discursive Worlds*







# Binding Words: Student Biographical Narratives and Religious Conversion

*Morgan Robinson*

It is not enough to be saved; one must tell the story.<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

In March of 1893, all of the Zanzibar schools of the Universities' Mission to Central Africa (UMCA) closed for a special holiday. The occasion was the ordination of the mission student Denys Seyiti as a deacon. On the day, all of the members of the community gathered at the cathedral in Stone Town for the ceremony, after which 40 people came together for a celebratory breakfast feast.<sup>2</sup> The UMCA was an Anglican missionary society established on Zanzibar in 1864. Situated as it was on a majority-Muslim island, the mission initially focused its evangelical efforts on former slaves from the mainland. In particular, the mission took in children who had been enslaved in Eastern and Central Africa, and then 'rescued' by the Royal Navy and dropped off on Zanzibar. Seyiti entered the mission's theological college in 1886, but he had been with the UMCA since at least 1880, when he, too, came to Zanzibar as a young boy and a 'liberated' slave. Kidnapped from his home and enduring a forced march with a slave caravan to the coast, Seyiti was packed onto a dhow with other slaves and barely survived the starvation conditions of the journey.<sup>3</sup> Eventually, however, the slave traders were spotted by a Royal Navy vessel and, following a gunfight, the dhow was captured and the now former slaves were brought to Zanzibar, where some of the children, including Seyiti, passed into the mission's care.<sup>4</sup> Within 13 years, Seyiti became a deacon, and just a few months after his ordination there was occasion for another celebration and school

- 
- 1 E. Brummel, "You Don't Have to Pray to Somebody in Special English": Style, Narration, and Salvation in Urban Kenya', *Journal of Religion in Africa*, vol. 44 (2014), 256.
  - 2 Bodleian Library (hereinafter as BDL): *Msimulizi* vol. 28, April 1893, 650; and 'The Ordination of Denys Seyiti', *Central Africa*, May 1893, 61–62.
  - 3 See BDL: UMCA Box List A–F: A1(11)C, 'Kiungani, 1880–81', 66; and BDL: UMCA TC F5, Appeal for support, no year.
  - 4 BDL: UMCA TC F5, Appeal for support, no year.

holiday when he married a former mission student named Rebekah.<sup>5</sup> Immediately thereafter the couple moved to Dar-es-Salaam to assist in opening a new mission station near the city, at Kichelwe. Some three years after their arrival in Kichelwe, an incident occurred that must have caused Seyiti to reflect on his own long path to that station. It appears that from the very beginning, the deacon had been welcoming runaway slaves to settle at Kichelwe.<sup>6</sup> In 1896, however, a group of slave owners from Zanzibar descended upon the village to reclaim them. Seyiti had good relations with the local German authorities (Tanganyika then was a German colony), so that when the slave owners demanded the return of their 'property', he was able to stall until the arrival of help from the mission leadership.<sup>7</sup> Having experienced and then escaped slavery himself, Seyiti must have felt acutely the fear of his congregation, and sympathised with their panic.<sup>8</sup>

From enslavement to the diaconate, then a personal reminder of the persistent reach of slavery: the turbulence of Seyiti's life and career was unusual only for its being so well documented. For the vast majority of the mission's students, we have fewer details about how they came to the mission or what life brought them afterwards. But there are some sources.

The children came to the mission having suffered countless personal and collective traumas. They also arrived with personal histories and stories to tell, and the missionaries periodically collected these 'slave narratives' from their students and printed them in various mission publications, including the story of Denys Seyiti. In 1887, the UMCA even published an extended collection of narratives entitled *Kiungani; or, Story and History from Central Africa*.<sup>9</sup> What to do with these biographical narratives, the historian must ask herself? On the one hand, they were obviously filtered through the questions, translations, and

5 BDL: *Msimulizi* vol. 30, August 1893, 685.

6 The Universities' Mission did not broadcast its openness as a refuge to runaway slaves, as did for instance the Church Missionary Society at Rabai, but the UMCA would fight to keep 'its people' once they had been with the mission for a time. See: BDL: *Msimulizi* vol. 3, July 1904, 39.

7 'Post Bag', *Central Africa* no. 158, February 1896, 32.

8 Six years after the incident, Seyiti became ill, and he died on Zanzibar on 3 August 1902, having fallen into debt and struggled with alcohol consumption in the interim. See: BDL UMCA Box List A-F: A1(XIII), Letter from Hine to Travers, 1902; BDL UMCA Box List A-F: A1(XVII)A, Letter from Weston to Ward, 25 April 1902; and A.E.M. Anderson-Morshead, *The History of the Universities' Mission to Central Africa, 1859-1909* (London, 1909), 368.

9 A.C. Maden (trans. and ed.), *Kiungani; or, Story and History from Central Africa. Written by boys in the schools of the Universities' Mission to Central Africa* (London, 1887). Kiungani was the name of the mission's main school for boys on Zanzibar.



MAP 7.1 Mission stations, East Africa

expectations of the missionary teachers who collected them for publication. The narrative structure was often formulaic, telling of students' home lives, their enslavement, travel to the coast, recapture by the Royal Navy or some other beneficent force, and ending with an expression of Christian faith. Yet, these are some of the few sources available to the historian of Eastern Africa that document the words and lives of former slaves. Is it enough to use the narratives to conduct a 'recovery project' of formerly untold stories? Or can these biographical narratives be pushed further to offer unique evidence of a specific historical phenomenon? With the biographical narratives of these mission students, the historian can do both. That is, one can indeed use the narratives to

recapture the subjectivity of people who would otherwise fall out of the historical record. Biography demonstrates how small accretions of change, brought about through the decisions and experiences of seemingly constrained individuals, can shape historical events, like drops of water eroding stone.

As for the second task, beyond the recovery of individual subjectivities in the telling of history, these student biographical narratives offer a particular contribution to the historiography of Africa, through their demonstration of change over the course of these specific lives. Thus, the main argument presented in this chapter pertains to the study of Christianisation and conversion in early colonial Africa. In fact, the biographical narratives of the UMCA students can tell us more about conversion in late-nineteenth-century Eastern Africa than any other available sources. These narratives make clear, as I will argue throughout this chapter, how closely linked were the processes of religious conversion and 'social rebirth'.<sup>10</sup> The narratives demonstrate how the students of the Universities' Mission engaged in the process of rebuilding their social networks within the mission community, a process that often looked like, and was written about in terms of, religious conversion.<sup>11</sup>

Comparison was central to the students' narratives – most of the authors reflected upon the differences between past and present, between mainland and island homes. Such comparisons are key to understanding the accounts as conversion narratives – stories that bound students to the mission's social, religious, and linguistic community. Conversion for these students occurred neither in a moment – whether baptism, emancipation, or graduation – nor was it the result of a carefully controlled process as conceived by the missionaries. Rather, conversion occurred as students were 'socially reborn' within the mission community. In the case of these mission students, the comparison was most often articulated with the idiom of Christianity, of religious conversion. But by situating conversion in the act of comparison, the historian can seriously consider the words of the historical actors as a true reflection of their

---

10 For more on the concept of social rebirth, see further below.

11 The idiom of Christianity is apparent in nearly all of the narratives. Perhaps this is not initially surprising, as the narratives were printed in mission periodicals. I purposely use the term idiom in this context because it leaves open the question of whether the narrators used Christian terminology literally or figuratively. The language of salvation and redemption, while prevalent in the Christian religion, is not exclusive to it, and though the UMCA's Christian idiom included these concepts, the students could have been employing them metaphorically. Regardless of the students' expressions of Christian faith – whether meant literally or figuratively – the narratives demonstrate that the narrators had been, in a sense, converted.

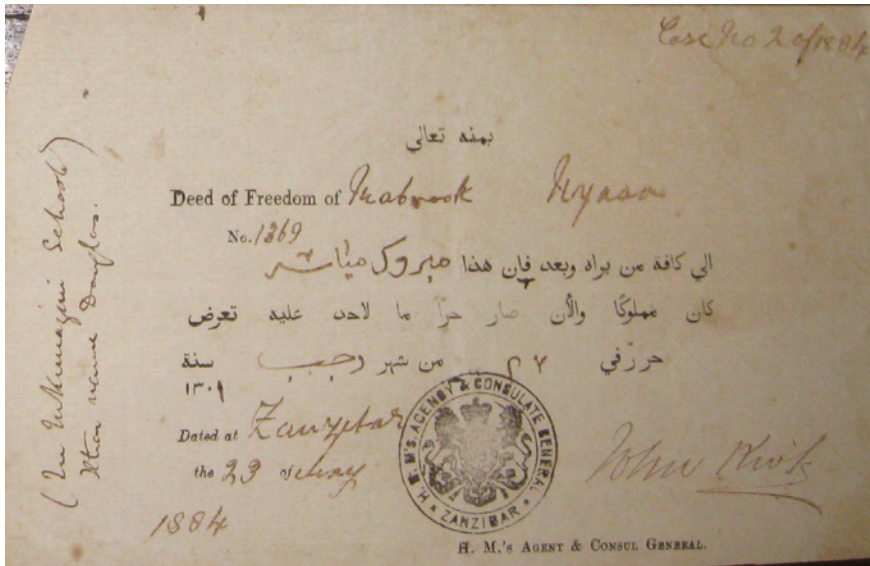


FIGURE 7.1 Deed of freedom of Mabrook Nyasa, 23 May 1884

experiences, while not needing to judge the ‘genuineness’ of their religious feelings.

In utilising these narratives as historical sources, there are several inescapable questions that confront the historian: Whose ‘voices’ are we hearing across the centuries? How exactly did individuals of multiple cultural and personal backgrounds define freedom and slavery, and how is the historian to categorise their actions (let alone their ‘consciousness’) in these various states?<sup>12</sup> These are questions I will return to in the course of this chapter. But regardless of whether or not the narrators understood their stories to have concluded with freedom or with Christianity, they clearly expressed a desire to be ‘socially re-born’ in the mission community. Conversion did not entail a renunciation of mainland memories – it required such memories. By drawing attention to the comparisons that the storytellers made between their past and current lives, these narratives can show us the inextricable link between religious conversion and social rebirth in the context of the East/Central African slave trade. In the pages that follow, I begin with a detailed look at three of the conversion

12 Jean and John Comaroff referred to ‘the colonization of consciousness and the consciousness of colonization’ by Nonconformist missionaries, of Tswana converts, in Southern Africa. See J. and J. Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*, volume 1: *Christianity, Colonialism, and Consciousness in South Africa* (Chicago, IL, 1991), xi.

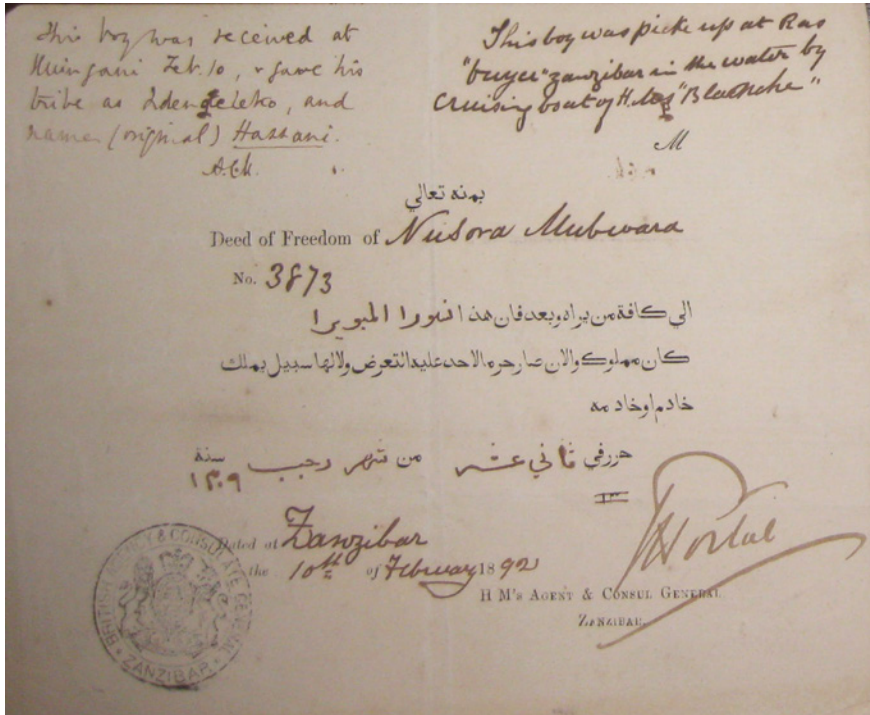


FIGURE 7.2 Deed of freedom of Nusora Mubwara, 10 February 1892

narratives. Then I briefly discuss the historiography of conversion in Africa, followed by an examination of the production and content of the biographical narratives of UMCA students, demonstrating how they offer the historian evidence of the intertwining of religious conversion and social rebirth.

### Panya, Fayida, and Yohana Hamisi: A Closer Look at Three Narratives

Panya and Fayida were classmates at Mbweni, the mission's all-female boarding school on Zanzibar. They had crossed paths in Bagamoyo and arrived on Zanzibar around the same time. Panya, the younger of the two, was born in Uganda, but as a very young child she was kidnapped after her family had moved into northwestern Tanganyika. She was sold multiple times, brought to the port city of Saadani, and eventually put on a slave dhow leaving from Bagamoyo. A Royal Navy vessel came upon the dhow when it had disembarked its

slaves on a beach, and Panya was taken along with some of the others to the British Consulate on Zanzibar, and then on to the UMCA school at Mbwani. Panya was about nine years old when she arrived at the mission in April of 1893.<sup>13</sup> She lived and worked at Mbwani for at least four years after composing her narrative:<sup>14</sup> 'I really belong to the Uganda tribe', Panya began her story (dictated to her teacher Alice Foxley):

and I was born in Uganda; but when I was about three years old, we left Uganda and went to live among the Nyamwezi. And one day I was playing with the Nyamwezi children and a man came and carried me off, and he deceived me, saying, 'Come along, and I will give you something very nice', and he carried me away to the houses of his people, and then that deceiver took me away to another house and sold me.<sup>15</sup>

Panya experienced multiple forced marches, and several embarkations and disembarkations on islands along the coast, until one night:

we saw the search-light from a big ship that was searching all the places where there might be slaves. And the ship came to our island where we were lying, and the sailors landed, and one came and climbed up the bank and saw us lying ... Then the Arabs awoke and we all awoke, and all the Arabs were taken except one, who jumped with his slave into the sea and was drowned. The last thing he said was, 'Slaves, stay where you are'; but every one of us jumped up, and we all rushed out on to the shore ...<sup>16</sup>

The group of slaves was brought to the British Consulate on Zanzibar and sent on to various places, including to the Universities' Mission. Panya listed the girls who were brought with her to Mbwani, recounting:

And then we were boarded out in the village [the former-slave settlement close to the school]. Rehema and Faith Holkar and I were taken by the youngest teacher to be nursed, and the others were taken by other people in the village. And we stayed some time, and then we were brought to Miss Bennett, and we all got new clothes. Every one received her clothes

13 All biographical detail taken from BDL: *African Tidings* vols 96 and 97.

14 BDL: *Stories of Africa* no.1: 'Panya' (1901).

15 BDL: *African Tidings* vol. 97, November 1897, 120.

16 *Ibid.*, 121.

from her school mother. Olivia was my mother at first. Then truly we settled here, all living in great peace and quietness at Mbwani.<sup>17</sup>

Panya's narrative hints at the social rebirth that began during her enslavement, and leaves the reader at Mbwani where, as we shall see, she worked to put down more permanent roots.

Fayida's story is similar to Panya's: she too was kidnapped, following a period of local unrest, and brought to Bagamoyo where she first encountered Panya in a holding house for slaves being shipped out from that port. Fayida was 'rescued' by the Royal Naval vessel H.M.S. Philomel and brought to Mbwani in 1893.<sup>18</sup> After graduating from Mbwani, Fayida stayed with the mission, marrying and living in Zanzibar Town near the mission's cathedral in Mkunazini.<sup>19</sup> Fayida began writing her own biographical narrative, but partway through the process began dictating it to Foxley.<sup>20</sup> She and her brother had been kidnapped and brought to Bagamoyo with a large caravan, where they were placed in a series of sheds to await embarkation on dhows. She recounted:

And there I found my brother, and he said, 'I will never leave you by night or by day, and we shall be sold together'. But one night we were sleeping side by side on the roof, and when I woke up in the morning he was gone. And they said, 'He is walking about outside'. But I *knew* they had come in the night and sold him away from me altogether ... . All the other girls who came with me to Mbwani were brought into that house from different places. And the people in that house were horribly wicked, and we lived in misery and deadly fear.<sup>21</sup>

At this point, Fayida's narrative transitioned to the third person, describing how she was held at Bagamoyo, met Panya, and came to Mbwani: 'Her account of the rescue,' wrote Foxley, '... is so like Panya's that there is no need to repeat it.'<sup>22</sup> Together, the narratives of Panya and Fayida demonstrate the centrality of relationships – begun on the road, and cemented at the mission schools – to the process of social rebirth, as the former-slave students began to integrate themselves into the mission community after arriving on Zanzibar.

17 *Ibid.*, 122.

18 All biographical detail taken from BDL: *African Tidings*, vols 99 and 100.

19 BDL: *Stories of Africa* no. 2, 'Fayida' (1901).

20 For more on the collection of the narratives, see below.

21 BDL: *African Tidings* vol. 99, January 1898, 5.

22 BDL: *African Tidings* vol. 100, February 1898, 13.



Yohana Hamisi's narrative appeared in the mission periodical *African Tidings*, having been reprinted from a letter he wrote to a sponsor in England.<sup>23</sup> 'Now I will try to tell you my story', he began:

... when there was a famine in the land I was stolen and sold to be a slave. My master set me to work to look after his donkey, and one day the donkey ran away and I could not find him, so I went and told my master. And he said, Go and look for him, and if you do not find him I will kill you. So I went and looked for him, and at last I found him, but he was dead. So I was afraid to return to my master, and I ran away and got into a canoe, and came to an island called Bawé (4 miles from Zanzibar).<sup>24</sup>

Hamisi encountered a group of British sailors on Bawé, who brought him on board H.M.S. *Turquoise*, where he was kept for two months before being dropped off at Kiungani. 'When I came here', Hamisi recounted, 'I was taught about religion, and at last I was baptised. And I have got a very good friend; his name is John B. Mdoe, but now he has gone away. I hope you will pray for me, that I may get on well in any work that is given me here in Kiungani...'<sup>25</sup> Yohana Hamisi went on to become a teacher, working at the Korogwe station (near Magila) and returning eventually to teach at Kiungani.

The narratives of Panya, Fayida, and Yohana Hamisi offer a brief overview of the types of narratives we are talking about: some written in the first person, some in the third person, and some pulled from letters or other correspondence; some dictated, some written by the student, and likely all composed in Swahili and then translated into English. They are archetypal in their recounting of enslavement, a forced march followed by a time at sea, and ending up in the schools of the Universities' Mission on Zanzibar. They show us the comparisons made between past and current lives, and the centrality of childhood relationships to the process of social rebirth within the mission community – factors that make these invaluable sources for the study of conversion in nineteenth-century Eastern Africa.

23 The magazine, on which more below, was called *Children's Tidings* until September 1892.

24 BDL: *Children's Tidings* vol. 30, April 1892, 27. It is unclear whether Hamisi wrote in English or in Swahili and the letter was then translated for publication.

25 *Ibid.* By 1892, Hamisi's friend, John Mdoe, had moved to Magila to teach. Mdoe was eventually ordained as a deacon in 1897.

## The Historical Study of Conversion

Historians and social scientists have long wrestled with the question of how to study something as personal and internal as religious conversion. How are we to analyse what our historical actors said and wrote about their experiences of spiritual change? From Robin Horton's argument that conversion to a 'world religion' represented a mere shifting of emphasis from the lesser spirits to the supreme being; to J.D.Y. Peel's masterful leaf-and-soap metaphor explaining how Christianity was 'Yoruba-ised' just as markedly as the Yoruba converted to Christianity; to the Comaroffs' dismissal of the concept of conversion altogether; to Derek Peterson's examination of conversion as a radical political action – most historians have focused on the pragmatic, material, social, or political reasons why people might join a mission and speak in terms of conversion.<sup>26</sup> In the case of the UMCA, too, the pragmatic reasons abound. Students with nowhere else to go, landed at a Christian mission, seem the archetypal marginalised people who often became early converts. What were their alternatives? No doubt, too, the Universities' Mission staff and leadership had an interest in projecting an image of dedicated, pious converts among their former-slave students, especially to put aside any criticism for their lack of success in evangelising among Zanzibar's Muslim population.<sup>27</sup>

My approach to the conversion question, however, is quite different. I examine conversion as an individual choice, a choice that took into account more than a simple economic calculation; and I see conversion everywhere in my sources, and especially in the students' biographical narratives. Narrative itself is a way of experiencing the world, organising it and understanding it, not least so for those who have experienced a serious dislocation like enslavement. Peterson referred to this as 'autobiographical self-positioning', an act in which the

26 See R. Horton, 'African Conversion', *Africa*, vol. 41, (April 1971), no. 2, 85–108; J.D.Y. Peel, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba* (Bloomington, IN, 2000); Comaroffs, *Of Revelation and Revolution*, vol. 1; and D. Peterson, *Ethnic Patriotism and the East African Revival: A History of Dissent* (Cambridge, 2012). For other examples, see P. Landau, *The Realm of the Word: Language, Gender, and Christianity in a Southern African Kingdom* (Portsmouth, NH, 1995); M. McKittrick, *To Dwell Secure: Generation, Christianity and Colonialism in Ovamboland* (Portsmouth, NH, 2002); E. Elbourne, *Blood Ground: Colonialism, Missions, and the Contest for Christianity in the Cape Colony and Britain, 1799–1853* (Montreal, 2002); and F. Becker, *Becoming Muslim in Mainland Tanzania, 1890–2000* (New York, 2008).

27 The UMCA did not, like some other evangelical denominations, insist that every adherent compose a conversion narrative prior to baptism. The Moravian missionaries in East-Central Africa, for instance, 'encouraged' converts to write their life stories. See M. Wright, *Strategies of Slaves and Women: Life-Stories from East-Central Africa* (New York, 1993), 24.

UMCA students also participated.<sup>28</sup> But I argue that this self-positioning was not simply the pragmatic parroting of missionary expressions and expectations. Rather, these narratives show how closely linked religious conversion was to social rebirth in the context of the East-Central African slave trade. The narratives reflect a process of social reconstruction and attachment to the mission that brought about – that was – conversion. Each narrator who reflected on the tumult and radical changes in his or her life was, in essence, telling a conversion story.

### Collection and Publication of the Conversion Narratives

There were some 20 narratives published between 1880 and 1904, most in the mission periodicals *Central Africa* and *African Tidings*, as well as in a short 12-issue series called ‘Stories from Africa’. Thirteen more narratives appeared in a volume compiled by the missionary teacher A.C. Madan called *Kiungani; or, Story and History from Central Africa*.<sup>29</sup> Seyiti’s narrative, for example, was published twice – once in a pamphlet about the mission’s high school on Zanzibar, and once in a fundraising letter – and in neither case is it clear exactly how he conveyed his story to whomever wrote it down. ‘One more story taken from the boy himself, (a very nice boy whom I knew well)’, explained the unnamed mission teacher who collected his narrative.<sup>30</sup> In some cases, the students wrote out their own narratives in Swahili, but most were collected orally and then translated into and printed in English for an English-speaking audience. Some narrators used the first person while other stories utilised the third person.

The stories of enslavement were very similar: often in the context of warfare or famine, most of the children were kidnapped or pawned and then sold to a slave caravan headed for the coast. Some were sold multiple times along the way, working in towns in both the interior and on the coast, until finally they were put on board a boat and sent to Zanzibar, Pemba, Madagascar, or points further east. Then came a maritime encounter with a British naval ship, and the narrator found him- or herself with the Universities’ Mission on Zanzibar. Given this narrative uniformity, establishing the authenticity of the stories is a potentially thorny task. I want to stress, moreover, that it is not the job of the historian to judge the authenticity of the students’ religious feelings. It is,

28 Peterson, *Ethnic Patriotism*, 43.

29 Kiungani served first as a general secondary school, and then as a teacher training and theological college.

30 BDL: UMCA Box List A–F: A1(111)C, ‘Kiungani, 1880–81’, 66.

however, my responsibility to address the production of these narratives, and to explain *how* I use them as sources to describe the experiences of historical actors. The standard of authenticity in that sense could demand simply that the stories were not fabricated by the missionaries. At the opposite end of the spectrum, it could require that the words of the students appeared unedited and untranslated. The ‘authenticity’ of the UMCA conversion narratives as sources falls somewhere between these two extremes. The missionaries did edit and translate the stories, and likely prompted the students with ideas about what such narratives should contain, or questions aimed at garnering certain kinds of information. But the narratives were not wholly fabricated. They were the words – either spoken or written – of the students themselves, no doubt prompted, edited, and translated, but still the product of the narrators’ memories and storytelling.

There is also the question of how representative these narratives are of the experiences of the overall UMCA student population. These thirty or so narratives represent a small fraction of the students educated by the mission through the turn of the twentieth century. To this question I can only answer that, first, the narratives were drawn from students covering the breadth of the mission’s educational options, from those training to be clergymen and teachers at Kiungani, to industrial students, to the female students at Mbwani. In that sense, we get a taste of the life at each of those institutions. Second, these narratives, limited though they may be, are some of the richest sources that directly describe the lives of the mission students; historians must use them, albeit carefully and thoughtfully. Finally, there is nothing so fantastical or unique in these conversion narratives that would lead one to conclude that they are outliers. These conversion narratives cannot be dismissed as inauthentic, unrepresentative, or historically useless; their value to the discerning reader is unquestionable. The narrators played to their audience, but also to their own agendas: neither wholly formulaic, nor totally unfiltered, the act of narration reflected a process of conversion as the students mediated between their memories and the construction of their current experiences.

And even if the students formulated their narratives along the dominant script, through that script they occasionally yielded unintended information. Many of the narrators in *Kiungani*, for instance, remembered the fear they felt on being captured, or rescued, by English sailors. The captains of the slave-carrying dhows, according to some narrators, told their captives that Europeans were cannibals, further reinforcing the children’s uncertainty.<sup>31</sup> And though in recounting their stories, all of the student narrators distanced themselves

---

<sup>31</sup> See, for example: *Kiungani*, ‘Makua Boy (1)’.

from their former fear, the cannibalism trope demonstrates the extreme uncertainty experienced by the students in the hours and days after their seizure, an uncertainty rife with misunderstandings that possibly carried over to their arrival at the mission stations on Zanzibar.<sup>32</sup> These comparative reflections took many forms. The student So Songolo's narrative, for instance, written in the third person, included the following detail about his experience on a Royal Navy vessel:

But after a while, one of the sailors saw how miserable he looked and kindly offered him a piece of biscuit. So had never seen anything like it before, and it was hard and grey and dry, and he would not eat it, for he thought it must be made of the pounded bones of men? But, he adds with a smile, 'If you gave me a piece of biscuit now, I *would* eat it'.<sup>33</sup>

This is a conversion narrative, a reflection upon great change. Songolo made clear that he was aware of all that had changed, including his own knowledge, since his pre-Zanzibar life. The narratives describe moments of fear, relief, helplessness, and hope, all in the course of a single re-telling. In these stories the student narrators periodised their emotional, intellectual, and spiritual states in ways that allow us to trace their social rebirth at the mission station.

### Enslavement and Social Rebirth: Relationships in Flux

In Orlando Patterson's classic analysis, enslavement is 'social death'.<sup>34</sup> The enslaved individual is sundered from family and friends and moved far away, prevented from reproducing his or her lineage. But the historian's analysis cannot stop here, as Walter Hawthorne, Stephanie Smallwood, Elisabeth McMahon and others have insisted.<sup>35</sup> Social death necessitates social 'rebirth' – humans

32 The suspicion of Europeans as cannibals had developed especially in the course of their involvement in the Atlantic slave trade. See J. Thornton, 'Cannibals, Witches, and Slave Traders in the Atlantic World', *William and Mary Quarterly*, 60 (2003), 273–294 and J. Miller, *Way of Death: Merchant Capitalism and the Angolan Slave Trade 1730–1830* (Madison, WI, 1988).

33 'Child life in the Mission, Chapter II', *Central Africa* no. 3, March 1883, 44.

34 O. Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, 1982).

35 See W. Hawthorne, "Being Now, as It Were, One Family": Shipmate Bonding on the Slave Vessel Emilia, in Rio de Janeiro and throughout the Atlantic World', *Luso-Brazilian Review*, vol. 45 (2008), no. 1, 53–77; S. Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* (Cambridge, 2007); and E. McMahon, *Slavery and Emancipation in Islamic East Africa: From Honor to Respectability* (Cambridge, 2013).

will not live as 'socially dead' individuals.<sup>36</sup> As Patterson himself framed it, a slave's very natal alienation, his or her social death, made him or her 'acutely sensitive to the realities of community'.<sup>37</sup> Likewise, the 'structure of African narratives of enslavement', historian Pier Larson found, 'often reveals their authors' sense of original placement and subsequent uprooting'.<sup>38</sup> The conversion narratives of the UMCA students described the experience of initial alienation, and then the re-rooting that occurred within the mission community. This process of social rebirth began as early as the 'middle passage' of slavery, whether by sea or by land, long or short. Slaver-traders, slave-owners, slaves, free people, Europeans, and Africans walked in and out of the students' stories. The relationships built on the road began the process of 'social rebirth' and, eventually, full integration at the mission station.

One striking feature of the students' conversion narratives is the use of the first person plural: the students referred to the slave caravans as 'we' and explained what happened to 'us' along the way. Even as the size of the group waxed and waned, and the individual story-teller was sold and re-sold, he or she described the group as a connected unit. And within this unit some remembered specific 'companions' or 'chums' or 'friends'.<sup>39</sup> Such relationships made the journey more bearable, but also more heartbreaking if these friends were taken away. We saw, for instance, how Fayida found and lost a brother on the journey to the coast. The account of the first 'Makua Boy' from the *Kiungani* volume is a poignant example of both the formation and sundering of social ties experienced during enslavement.<sup>40</sup> Of an early leg of the forced march, he recounted:

It took us quite a journey to reach their town, and while we were on the road they deceived me, and said, 'You shall go back to the place you came from,' because the man who sold me had been like a father to me ... I was very sad, because I had left all my companions whom I had come with,

36 The concept of 'social rebirth' was discussed, though not termed as such, by Walter Hawthorne in his article "Being Now, as It Were, One Family", in which he used the phrase 'social reincarnation'. John Mason used the term 'social resurrection' to discuss a similar process. J. Mason, *Social Death and Resurrection: Slavery and Emancipation in South Africa* (Charlottesville, VI, 2003).

37 Patterson, *Slavery*, 337.

38 P. Larson, 'Horrid Journeying: Narratives of Enslavement and the Global African Diaspora', *Journal of World History*, vol. 19 (2008), no. 4, 448.

39 See for example: *Kiungani*, 'Nassa Boy', 25; 'Makua Boy (1)', 40; 'Ganda Boy', 97; and 'Nyoro Boy', 112.

40 The volume does not give the names of the students, but rather refers to them through their supposed ethnic identities.

and I thought over this, and was very sorrowful. I kept on thinking and thinking, and fancying, 'I shall never get to a quiet, settled place, where there is no more going away and being sold over and over again'. I kept on brooding over this, and I could not get my food down; yet some of those people pitied me, but I refused to eat. I used to say I had had enough, because I was very, very sad indeed; and, besides, I had no one to play with.<sup>41</sup>

This lonely period was assuaged by the caravan's accumulation of slaves:

At last we arrived at a place where there were a very great many Arabs; indeed, there was a whole caravan there. When we had arrived, we stayed a very long time, while a number of our fellow-slaves were brought, and then sold and bought on the spot ... Here I was happy, because there were many of us, and not as at first, when I was all alone by myself.<sup>42</sup>

After being sold again at this market town, the boy found himself with others who would later become his classmates:

We were four altogether. After we had remained there a long time, our master sold us all together, and we were all bought together by two Arabs ... . We travelled on, and came to a place where we met several more playmates.<sup>43</sup>

Finally, after their dhow was intercepted by an English warship, the author accounted for all of those former slaves with whom he had arrived at the mission, concluding: 'This is the whole number of those who came with me, and this is the end of my story. These are my wanderings'.<sup>44</sup> Many of the narrators, like the 'Makua Boy', were careful to enumerate the names of the fellows who arrived with them on Zanzibar.<sup>45</sup> No matter how welcoming the missionaries and students were to new arrivals, those who had together endured forced travel over land and sea, had also experienced the first steps of social rebirth

41 *Kiungani*, 'Makua Boy', 40.

42 *Ibid.*, 41.

43 *Ibid.*, 43.

44 *Ibid.*, 44.

45 The 'Nyassa Boy' from the *Kiungani* volume even encouraged the reader to look at the mission register to verify the dates of their arrival and eventual baptism. See: *Kiungani*, 'Nyassa Boy', 25.

together, and this was an important connection that students noted frequently in their biographical narratives.

### Conversion, Comparison, and Social Rebirth: Rebuilding Social Ties at Mission Schools

After coming into the custody of the Royal Navy in the neighbourhood of Zanzibar, 'liberated' slaves were brought to the consulate and 'disposed' of in various ways.<sup>46</sup> While arrival on Zanzibar clearly marked a change in status for the former-slave students, it is not so clear that they understood themselves to be 'freed'. In fact, the process was not far different from what went on at a slave market. The consul would send a note to one of the mission priests on the morning when a group of former slaves was expected to arrive, letting him know the number of people and time they would be at the consulate, and inviting him to come choose those most 'suited' to the mission's work.<sup>47</sup> The slaves selected by the mission would then be sent to the appropriate institution: the small boys to Mkunazini or Kilimani, school-age boys to Kiungani, and girls and adults to Mweni. The discipline could be strict, their choices after arriving were few, and manual labour was certainly a part of daily life for mission students. Yet, the experience of newly-landed former-slaves on Zanzibar differed in one important respect from that of most slaves carried across the Atlantic, who were often scattered upon reaching the Americas. The former-slave, future-students of the Universities' Mission came in groups, in some cases carrying with them the relationships built during their 'middle passages'. Even if students had not literally travelled together, the empathy engendered by similar experiences was a strong source of connection.

If we return to the narratives of Panya and Fayida, we can trace the process of social rebirth as it continued at the mission schools. The necessary first steps included recovery of health, and learning how to interact with other students and with the missionary teachers at the school. But over time, the former-slave

46 Zanzibar National Archives (ZNA): AB 71-79: Consular and Agency Records, Released Slave Lists.

47 See: ZNA: AA2-10, Letter from Kirk to Tozer, 13 January 1871; ZNA: AA2-10, Letter from Kirk to Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, 5 September 1871; ZNA: AA2-10, Letter from Kirk to Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, 22 September 1871; ZNA: AA2-18, Letter from Holmwood to a Naval Captain, 27 May 1875; BDL: UMCA TC E15, Letter from Holmwood to Randolph, 1877; BDL: UMCA Box List A-F: A1(IV)A, Letter from Hodgson to Penney, 11 December 1880; BDL: UMCA Box List A-F: A1(VI)A, Letter from Farler, 1881; and BDL: UMCA Box List A-F: B5-6, Report on Annual Meeting, 1882.



students took on various responsibilities, built relationships, learned how to read and write Swahili, and were baptised, confirmed, and often married within the mission community. The narratives of both of these female students included introductory notes from their teacher, Alice Foxley, as well as the first-person accounts.<sup>48</sup> Of Panya's early days at Mbweni, Foxley wrote: 'She never ran about and played with the other girls, only when any one spoke to her and she smiled, and her voice was very low and sweet. She was perhaps nine years old, but very small for her age'.<sup>49</sup> Panya spent some time in the hospital after arriving at Zanzibar, recovering from injuries (which included having an ear cut off during a commotion on the slave dhow). But after about a year, Foxley described, Panya's personality began to show itself: she would laugh and tell fantastical stories until, finally, Panya began telling the story of her own life to her teacher, who wrote it down and then published it in *African Tidings*. Foxley similarly described Fayida's process of social rebirth at Mbweni, writing: 'At first Fayida gave a good deal of trouble at Mbweni. She was what her bringing up had made her – weakly, timid, and deceitful, and occasionally given to terrible fits of passion, when she seemed almost beside herself. But after a year, when I first saw her, she was beginning to grow and flourish'.<sup>50</sup> Without entering into a discussion about trauma and memory, it is instinctually understandable that some students, including Fayida, would need a period of time before feeling safe enough to recount the events of their past; still other students might have been too young to remember their homes. In Fayida's case, she prepared assiduously for baptism, and then confirmation, and was made head waiter of the Mbweni school kitchen before marrying and moving to town. As mentioned above, Fayida began writing her own narrative for inclusion in *African Tidings*. Partway through the text an editor's note explained: 'As far as here, Fayida wrote herself in Swahili; she had a great wish to write her own story, but she had a great deal of work, and I found she had not time to do it and her work properly, so she told me the rest and I took notes'.<sup>51</sup> The note reveals Fayida's

48 There is no doubt that missionary ideals regarding gender were at play in the soliciting and publication of many of the narratives of female students at Mbweni. That these young women were valued for their ability to reproduce the nuclear Christian family on Zanzibar is clear, and so their 'rescues' and conversion into 'good' Christian wives and mothers was of paramount importance for the mission and its readers. The gender dynamics of the mission stations, and how this influenced the production and consumption of these narratives, certainly deserves deeper study.

49 BDL: *African Tidings*, vol. 96, October 1897, 111.

50 BDL: *African Tidings*, vol. 100, February 1898, 13.

51 BDL: *African Tidings*, no. 99, January 1898, 4.

sense of ownership over her own story, as well as her growing role in the mission community.<sup>52</sup>

Like all of the conversion narratives, these stories documented each narrator's process of social rebirth; they were reflections of a transformation that had begun on the enslaved journey and continued at the UMCA schools. And these stories relied upon mainland memories, which were compared to the narrator's present state of being. Fayida's recollection of her pre-Christian life is telling: unlike Panya, who was young enough when she arrived to be baptised right away, Fayida spent her first few months with the mission preparing specifically for baptism. Foxley attributed Fayida's enthusiasm partly to the fact that the child 'knew a little Mohammedanism, and this made her so anxious to read the "Book"'.<sup>53</sup> It is impossible to know how large a role Islam played in Fayida's early life, but one can interpret Foxley's comment in two ways: first, Fayida was anxious to prove to her teachers that, despite her former introduction to Islam, she was dedicated to her new creed of Christianity. And second, perhaps Fayida remembered the central importance of the Qur'an in Islam, and so assumed that the Bible was likewise the key to Christianity. In any case, Fayida's apparent enthusiasm for baptism (as well as her work as head waiter) indicated her eagerness to enter fully into the mission community. Fayida's comparison between past and present religious belief was echoed in the narrative of the 'Ganda Boy' in the *Kiungani* volume. The student summarised his conversion with the metaphor of a person walking along a path, moving from 'heathenism' to Islam to Christianity. It is worth quoting at length:

First I was a lost wanderer. I lived like a poor miserable man, like a blind man, not seeing even a glimpse of the path in which people walk. While I so lived I saw one going his way and asked him, 'Can I go the same way as you go, easily?' He answered me and said, 'This way is very easy, and a very good way too. It is not difficult, but a way to follow with joy and laughter. Further, if you do not go this way, there is no other way like it. You are lost, lost, lost utterly'. So I too followed the path which he was following. And lo! it was a way of delusion, and not easy to follow, a way of

52 Fayida took her work so seriously, according to Foxley, that she 'really could not spare the time' for mandatory morning prayers, 'and it was not till she had gone without her breakfast three Saturdays running, that she realized that no exception would be made even for the hardest worker in the school'. See: *African Tidings*, vol. 100, February 1898, 15.

53 BDL: *African Tidings*, no. 100, February 1898, 13. Islam made inroads into east-central Africa over the course of the nineteenth century, so there is no doubt some of the UMCA's students had encountered, perhaps even begun practicing, the religion prior to or during their enslavement.

many troubles too, and many sorrows and tears. I went a little further, and began to see the whole path full of pits. I saw that it was hard to pass, and thorns closed it in on either side, till there seemed no room between. And then there was darkness on that path and no light, only journeying on in trouble, and sorrow, and tears. But as I went along this path, I lifted my head high up, and saw in another quarter a gleam of light. When I came to that path, I found people walking along the path, walking in joy and peace and calm, everyone. Troubles there were none. Then I joined them on this path, this path of joy and laughter, none forbidding me, and I was taught to know how to walk as they walked along this path. This path is the one I have followed to this day. I have been redeemed from the way which had no light. Those who followed it were utterly deluded. This is the end of my story.<sup>54</sup>

The passage is reminiscent of, if not a direct allusion to, *Pilgrim's Progress*, the ever-popular seventeenth-century Christian allegory written by John Bunyan.<sup>55</sup> But in the context of the student conversion narratives the specific interpretation seems clear. The 'lost wanderer' phase of this story represented the time before the boy encountered an Abrahamic religion. The thorny path represented Islam. And finally came Christianity, the end of this student's story, the path on which he would now stay. Such a presentation of his religious life – of slow enlightenment and the providential discovery of the correct path – allowed the Ganda Boy to admit to having lived as both a 'heathen' and a Muslim without eroding his current commitment to Christianity.

Like the Ganda Boy, Christianity was the end of the story for nearly all of the narrators: at the close of many of the narratives the students offered gratefulness at having been brought to the religion, asking for prayers of support, and expressing hope for a Christian future. 'I thank you all very much for praying for me', wrote Yohana Hamisi in 1892, 'so that now I am baptised, for formerly I was in darkness, but now I am in the light'.<sup>56</sup> Darkness was the time before knowing the Christian God, or before knowing 'how to worship him', as one student wrote.<sup>57</sup> 'In my country we knew the name of God', recounted another, 'We call God Mlungu, which means God'.<sup>58</sup> Another explained: 'we do not know about God (there) – yet we know Him, but because we cannot worship

54 Kiungani, 'Ganda Boy', 100–101.

55 For more on the translations and circulation of *Pilgrim's Progress*, see I. Hofmeyr, *The Portable Bunyan: A Transnational History of The Pilgrim's Progress* (Princeton, NJ, 2004).

56 BDL: 'The Story of Yohana Hamisi', *African Tidings*, no. 30, April 1892, 27.

57 *Kiungani*, 'Yao Boy', 56.

58 *Ibid.*

Him, we do not know how, but by name we know Him well ...'.<sup>59</sup> In retrospect the narrators ascribed the outcome of events to the will of the Christian God: any luck in their past, and especially their rescue, was attributed to 'God's Providence' or 'Almighty God'.<sup>60</sup> The 'Zaramo Boy' described in *African Tidings* in 1888: 'Another thing about the Zaramo people: If you find yourself in any danger, give a shout, and even if people are asleep, be sure that that day you will be preserved. But this is not from any power of their own, but of God, who gives it them'.<sup>61</sup> Though their past lives may have been un-Christian ones, and their families were likely still participating in that spiritual world, with such retrospective readings the students connected their new conception of God with their old lives, without completely condemning the latter.

Perhaps similar kinds of mainland memories and the comparisons they engendered were what prompted Denys Seyiti to overstep mission policy and take in runaway slaves at Kichelwe. His story exemplifies the starkly contrasting experiences of the students of the Universities' Mission, a contrast that was occasionally captured in his own biographical narrative and those of his fellow students. Whether explicitly or implicitly, the students used their conversion narratives to describe the process of social rebirth and adherence to their new community.

### Conclusion

The biographical narratives of the students of the Universities' Mission to Central Africa offer ample evidence for the connection between religious conversion and social rebirth on the society's stations. They help the historian to access invaluable information both about a difficult-to-document historical phenomenon, and about a group of people often lost in the historical record. Though we may not know what became of most of these students – we do not even know the names of some of them – these snapshots of biography demonstrate the process by which students became adherents of the mission, a conversion that was social, linguistic, cultural, and likely also religious. Rather than assuming a complete shift in religious worldview, however, the narratives allow the historian to talk about conversion as a process of transformation without necessarily linking it to church doctrine. Only through these short

59 *Kiungani*, 'Bemba Boy', 35.

60 For the former see: *Kiungani*, 'Makua Boy', 45; for the latter, see: *Kiungani*, 'Ganda Boy', 85.

61 BDL: 'History of a Zaramo Boy', *African Tidings*, no.11, January 1888, 6. Past transgressions, too, could now be explained as Satan's influence. See: *Kiungani*, 'Ganda Boy', 93.

biographies, moreover, are we able to begin to perceive conversion as the students themselves saw it, in all of its facets, not merely in the schoolroom preparation for baptism. In these ways, the careful study of these individual lives can begin to expand the historiography on conversion in early-colonial Africa: in this case, the choice to join a mission was not merely a pragmatic material decision. Nor was it a collective social process of ‘Africanising’ Christianity, or of political protest. Conversion could be a deeply individual experience, spurred by a single student’s comparison between his or her past and present life, and an individual desire to set down roots in a new community. This is the power of biography. The historian can use biography to recover the stories of historical actors that might otherwise be left untold; but the biographies of these same ‘voiceless’ individuals can also expand our understanding of specific historical questions. In this way, biographer and biographical subject are powerful collaborators in the process of historical knowledge production.

### References

- Anderson-Morshead, A.E.M. (1909), *The History of the Universities’ Mission to Central Africa, 1859–1909* (London).
- Becker, F. (2008), *Becoming Muslim in Mainland Tanzania, 1890–2000* (New York).
- Brummel, E. (2014), “‘You Don’t Have to Pray to Somebody in Special English’: Style, Narration, and Salvation in Urban Kenya’, *Journal of Religion in Africa*, vol. 44, 251–281.
- Comaroff, J. and J. Comaroff (1991), *Of Revelation and Revolution*, vol. 1: *Christianity, Colonialism, and Consciousness in South Africa* (Chicago, IL).
- Elbourne, E. (2002), *Blood Ground: Colonialism, Missions, and the Contest for Christianity in the Cape Colony and Britain, 1799–1853* (Montreal).
- Hawthorne, W. (2008), “‘Being Now, as It Were, One Family’”: Shipmate Bonding on the Slave Vessel *Emilia*, in Rio de Janeiro and throughout the Atlantic World’, *Luso-Brazilian Review*, vol. 45, 53–77.
- Hofmeyr, I. (2004), *The Portable Bunyan: A Transnational History of The Pilgrim’s Progress* (Princeton, NJ).
- Horton, R. (1971), ‘African Conversion’, *Africa*, vol. 41, 85–108.
- Landau, P. (1995), *The Realm of the Word: Language, Gender, and Christianity in a Southern African Kingdom* (Portsmouth, NH).
- Larson, P. (2008), ‘Horrid Journeying: Narratives of Enslavement and the Global African Diaspora’, *Journal of World History*, vol. 19, 431–464.
- Maden, A.C. (trans. and ed.) (1887), *Kiungani; or, Story and History from Central Africa. Written by Boys in the Schools of the Universities’ Mission to Central Africa* (London).

- Mason, J. (2003), *Social Death and Resurrection: Slavery and Emancipation in South Africa* (Charlottesville, VI).
- McKittrick, M. (2002), *To Dwell Secure: Generation, Christianity and Colonialism in Ovamboland* (Portsmouth, NH).
- McMahon, E. (2013), *Slavery and Emancipation in Islamic East Africa: From Honor to Respectability* (Cambridge).
- Miller, J. (1998), *Way of Death: Merchant Capitalism and the Angolan Slave Trade 1730–1830* (Madison, WI).
- Patterson, O. (1982) *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge).
- Peel, J.D.Y. (2000), *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba* (Bloomington, IN).
- Peterson, D. (2012), *Ethnic Patriotism and the East African Revival: A History of Dissent* (Cambridge).
- Smallwood, S. (2007), *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* (Cambridge).
- Thornton, J. (2003), 'Cannibals, Witches, and Slave Traders in the Atlantic World', *William and Mary Quarterly*, vol. 60, 273–294.
- Wright, M. (1993), *Strategies of Slaves and Women: Life-Stories from East-Central Africa* (New York).

## A Muslim Boy in Sunday School

*Abdullah Abdurahman's Early Childhood and Education in Cape Town at the End of the Nineteenth Century*

*Eve Wong*

Today, Dr Abdullah Abdurahman is an obscure figure, often reduced to little more than a footnote in South African historiography. Every few years, a passing mention of Abdurahman appears in the newspapers. These oblique invocations make Abdurahman's name 'sound familiar' to most young South Africans, but they know little more beyond that. How is it that Abdullah Abdurahman – a man who rose from his grandparents' slave origins to become one of the earliest doctors of colour in South Africa and the world, the first Cape Town City Councillor of colour and one of the first Cape Provincial Councillors of colour, the founder of two high schools open to students of colour and no less than nine Muslim primary schools – has receded so far into the shadows of history? It is an especially sharp contrast in light of the groundswell triggered by his death over 75 years ago. Then, *Cape Times* journalist Willem Steenkamp recalled in *Poor Man's Bioscope* that Abdurahman's funeral procession was the first time since Cecil Rhodes' send-off that '[laid] a busy city by the heels for an entire afternoon'.<sup>1</sup> 'Dr Abdurahman', wrote Steenkamp,

built no huge financial empires, passed no laws that changed the destiny of millions. He was the grandson of slaves, and because he was a man of colour he was almost automatically excluded from the highest forums in the land. Yet ... the day he was buried Capetonians flocked into the streets in the thousands in an expression of public grief.<sup>2</sup>

Yet, this man has never been the subject of a sustained biographical study.

---

1 W. Steenkamp, *Poor Man's Bioscope* (Cape Town, 1979), 63.

2 *Ibid.*, 62.

Abdullah Abdurahman was born on 18 December 1872<sup>3</sup> in the Verlatekloof<sup>4</sup> area of Wellington in the Cape winelands. Nestled at the foot of the Groenberg Mountains, north of Paarl and west of Bain's Kloof Pass, the first Europeans to settle there were the French Huguenots, who named the area Val du Charron or Wagenmakersvallei (Wagonmakers' Valley). The name changed to Wellington in 1840, to commemorate Napoleon's defeat by the Duke of Wellington at Waterloo.<sup>5</sup> A railway line between Cape Town and Wellington opened in 1863, bringing an influx of coloured<sup>6</sup> residents to the area, many of them middle class and franchise qualified.<sup>7</sup> Abdullah's parents, Abdul and Khadijah, were among them. After Abdullah received his earliest education in Wellington, his family moved to the central city, where Abdullah attended a Marist Brothers' night school for non-white<sup>8</sup> children. Then, Abdullah enrolled at the prestigious South African College School (SACS) for his secondary education. It was through the intervention of SACS' headmaster, Dr John Shaw, that Abdullah went on to his medical training at Dr Shaw's *alma mater*, the University of Glasgow and returned to Cape Town where he became known as 'The Doctor of District Six'.

Abdullah Abdurahman was an enormous influence in Cape Town throughout the early twentieth century. His advocacy for coloured education rights is

- 
- 3 There has been confusion about Abdurahman's birth year due to the absence of a birth record. However, when Abdurahman registered at the University of Glasgow, he reported his birth date as 18 December 1872. See University of Glasgow, University Archive Services, Records of the Registry: *Registrar's Roll of Graduates and Dates of Birth*, vol. 2, R3/1/1: 1893.
  - 4 R.E. van der Ross, *Say It Out Loud: The APO Presidential Addresses and Other Major Political Speeches 1906–1940 of Dr. Abdullah Abdurahman* (Cape Town, 1990), 3: 'probably' Verlatekloof; APO 1 Jan 1910.
  - 5 'Wellington Guide', *Wellington Tourism*. Accessed 18 June 2015. [wellington.co.za/info/wellington-guide](http://wellington.co.za/info/wellington-guide).
  - 6 The term 'coloured' is a long-contested and controversial term. It is a socially and historically constructed category built on a bricolage of narratives and mythologies, but, in general, the term reflects the outmoded notion that people of heterogenous origins or 'mixed race' constitute their own racial category. In light of this, there is also debate as to the term's lexical and textual treatment. In this chapter, outside of capitalisation in the original source, the term is neither capitalized, nor problematised through inverted quotes, unless specifically invoking the contested nature of the category.
  - 7 F.J. Cleophas, 'Writing and Contextualising Local History. A Historical Narrative of the Wellington Horticultural Society (Coloured)', *Yesterday and Today*, 11 (2014), 25–26.
  - 8 In the current *Zeitgeist*, 'non-white' is a contested term due to its previous use by the apartheid regime. However, as the key distinction in this chapter lies in the exclusivity of the 'white' category and its privileges, 'non-white' is used here as a purely adjectival description to differentiate between those who benefited from a 'white' classification and those who did not.



well-covered in the literature.<sup>9</sup> Class-inclined authors discussed Abdurahman's activities concerning 'civilised' labour policies.<sup>10</sup> Interest in how Abdurahman's faith might have influenced his civic actions or his politics has been rare.<sup>11</sup> But scholars primarily focus on his activism with respect to the Cape franchise and his involvement with the African Political Organisation (APO). There is little attention for his life before or apart from politics. There has never been more than a few lines on Abdurahman's childhood.

This chapter focuses on his childhood for two reasons. First, to challenge the ways in which childhood is typically minimised in conventional political biographies. And second, histories of childhood have been a particularly neglected area in South African historiography. Outside of education and psychology, childhood studies only developed after the early 1990s. In 1982, Richard Vann called the history of childhood 'an almost virgin field'.<sup>12</sup> A decade later, Penelope Hetherington said that only one book on childhood in South Africa existed.<sup>13</sup> Although some disciplines, like anthropology, have long included children in their research, *childhood*, as a unique and socially constructed phase of life, has rarely been interrogated. Reconsiderations of childhood have led scholars to reconceptualise children as dynamic social actors who impact, influence, and construct their own life experiences. Growing interest in women's studies in South Africa may have enriched childhood studies, but *histories* of childhood remain rare. African historiography emphasises political and economic history, topics where children and childhood have typically been absent. Part of the problem lies in the archives and available source material. Children, not

9 See M. Adhikari, *Let Us Live for Our Children: The Teachers' League of South Africa, 1913–1940* (Cape Town, 1993) and H. Willemsse, 'Identity, Place and Politics in the Auto/Biographies of Two South African Educators', *Life Writing*, 11 (2014), no. 2: 231–246.

10 See H.J. Simons and R. Simons, *Class and Colour in South Africa, 1850–1950* (Aylesbury, 1969).

11 See M. Adhikari, 'Protest and Accommodation: Ambiguities in the Racial Politics of the APO, 1909–1923', *Kronos*, 20 (1993): 91–106; G. Lewis, *Between the Wire and the Wall: A History of South African 'Coloured' Politics* (New York, 1987); the entire oeuvre of R.E. van der Ross; I. Goldin, *Making Race: The Politics and Economics of Coloured Identity in South Africa* (Boston, MA, 1987); F. Esack, 'Three Islamic Strands in the South African Struggle for Justice', *Third World Quarterly*, 10 (1988), no. 2: 473–498 and M. Ajam, *The Raison d'Être of the Muslim Mission Primary School in Cape Town and Environs from 1860 to 1980 with Special Reference to the Role of Dr. A Abdurahman in the Modernisation of Islam-Oriented Schools* (PhD thesis, University of Cape Town, 1986).

12 R.T. Vann, 'The Youth of *Centuries of Childhood*', *History and Theory*, 21 (1982), no. 2: 287.

13 P. Hetherington, 'Women in South Africa: The Historiography in English', *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 26 (1993), no. 2: 266. Hetherington was referring to S. Burman and P. Reynolds (eds), *Growing Up in a Divided Society: The Contexts of Childhood in South Africa* (Johannesburg, 1986).

unlike other marginalised people in society, leave few records. But studies are materialising. In 2000, Clive Glaser published *Bo-Tsotsi: The Youth Gangs of Soweto, 1935–1976* and in 2015, Palgrave marketed their publication of S.E. Duff's, *Changing Childhoods in the Cape Colony*, as 'the first book to trace the history of childhood and youth in nineteenth-century South Africa'.<sup>14</sup> Other emerging research can be found in *The Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth*, which began publication in 2008.

My research on Abdurahman began with studying manuscript collections in university libraries in Chicago, London, and Cape Town, but these collections contain few personal items. No diaries or journals exist, and few personal letters either from, or to, Abdurahman survive. His manuscript collections are half-occupied by news clippings, with the remainder made up of his daughter's papers. Private items are scarce, and there are few people still living who personally knew Abdurahman. Items pertaining to Abdurahman in these collections are overwhelmingly copies of published items and drafts of public documents, some with marginalia. One anecdote tells that when Abdurahman died, his daughter, Zainunnissa 'Cissie' Gool, destroyed all the contents of his office.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, this would explain why the Abdurahman archives at the University of Cape Town consist of documents of his other daughter: Waradea's ('Rosie's') news clippings and collected print ephemera and three microfilm rolls of news clippings collected by educationalist Dr Edgar Maurice. Since news clippings dominate the collections, one could easily undertake a media analysis and, to an extent, reconstruct Abdurahman's politics and political career. These materials do not reflect a sense of Abdurahman as a private individual. This availability of primary ephemera but absence of personal items make Abdurahman a kind of palimpsest that allows authors who wrote about him to interpret his life through their personal political ideologies.<sup>16</sup>

14 S.E. Duff, *Changing Childhoods in the Cape Colony Dutch Reformed Church Evangelicalism and Colonial Childhood, 1860–1895* (London, 2015), back cover.

15 Journalist Martin Plaut, in Skype correspondence with the author, 21 September 2017.

16 Cissie publicly called him an 'Uncle Tom' for his liberal, rather than radical politics. B. Herzberg (*Otherness: The Story of a Very Long Life* [London, 1998], 77) and Marxist-influenced scholars followed suit (Simons and Simons, *Class and Colour in South Africa*, 98). Others painted Abdurahman as a religious benefactor (M. Ajam, 'Dr. Abdullah Abdurahman – Benefactor of the Bo-Kaap', *Kronos*, 17 (1990), 48–58), a minority leader (G.G. de Salve, *Uma história de traição. Um projeto assimilacionista coloured na Cidade do Cabo, 1906–1910*, MA thesis Universidade Estadual de Campinas, 2012), a popular hero (J.H. Raynard, *Dr. Abdurahman: A Biographical Memoir* (edited by M. Adhikari; Cape Town, 2002), or even a trailblazing progressive and modern Muslim (Ajam, *Raison d'Être of the Muslim Mission Primary School*).

In fact, there is more ink spilt writing that Abdurahman was an important figure in need of further study than there has been writing actually devoted to studying who Abdurahman *was* or how he *became* who he was. Scholars write about Abdurahman without much consideration for his childhood and life before taking political office, already full-grown. Who Abdurahman was and how he became who he was have not been questions asked by scholars. This chapter therefore investigates Abdurahman's early childhood and education in Cape Town at the turn of the twentieth century and suggests that individuals may be significant or extraordinary for their *being* and how the in-between spaces of being and becoming, shaped their ethos. In piecing together Abdurahman's childhood, my research had to look further afield. Unusual repositories came to the fore, none more unexpected than the Mount Holyoke College Archives in Massachusetts. Contemporary accounts through letters, journals, and memoirs of visitors and tourists provided colour and details of this institution, which helped in furthering education in the town of Wellington. The Western Cape Archives Depot in Cape Town offered helpful clues, as did a few items in the Ottoman State Archives. Echoing the transnational archives that contain the remnants of his story, Abdurahman's life reflected the intertwined and intersecting flows of local, national, and international histories spanning the Indian Ocean and north from the southern tip of Africa through Turkey, England, and Scotland.

### The Seamstress and the Fishmonger

Abdurahman's parents, Abdul (b. 1835) and Khadijah (b. 1847), married after Abdul returned in 1866 after a decade studying abroad at Mecca and Al-Azhar University in Cairo. After his return, Abdul adopted the honorific 'Hadji'.<sup>17</sup> Abdul's dedication to his faith was unwavering. Although it was 'Hadji' Mohamed Dollie (Khadijah's brother and a close friend of Abdul's) who was the de facto leader of the *Hanafi* followers of Abu Bakr Effendi (a Turkish emissary to the Cape and educator),<sup>18</sup> according to family history, Abdul was also a founder of

17 See Western Cape Archives and Records, Cape Archives, State Depot, Cape Town/Master's Office, Supreme Court Cape Town 91: Ragman, Abdoll, alias Hadje Abrachman, Liquidation & Distribution Account. Abdul's funeral notice in an assortment of British newspapers also named him as Hadji Abdurahman. *Huddersfield Chronicle*, 9 April 1898; *Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, 7 April 1898; *The Daily Express*, 9 April 1898. Also noted in Simons and Simons, *Class and Colour in South Africa*, 117.

18 According to a neighbour of Ahmet Atallah Bey while the Beys lived in London. See A. Khan, *My Life and Experiences* (London, 1951), 47. Also see Western Cape Archives and

the *Hanafi* mosque at Dorp and Long Streets in Cape Town.<sup>19</sup> A discussion about the role of Abu Bakr Effendi and his introduction of *Hanafi* practices into what was almost a completely *Shafi* population in the Cape is beyond the scope of this chapter. But in the broadest of strokes, both *Hanafi* and *Shafi* are Sunni *madhahib* or schools of thought within *fiqh* or Islamic jurisprudence. These *madhahib* interpret how the codes of conduct within the Qur'an are to be followed.<sup>20</sup>

Abdurahman's daughter Begum said Abdul was 'the first person to teach Islamic theology' in the Cape.<sup>21</sup> Some secondary sources buttress this claim. In a volume written by Cissie's friends, they wrote that Abdul 'pioneered modern education for the Muslims.'<sup>22</sup> The South African College's 175th commemorative publication notes Abdul 'trained for the ministry.'<sup>23</sup> Other sources claim Abdul ran a Muslim school.<sup>24</sup> During Abdul's childhood, there were few formal educational options for *vryezwarten* or 'free Blacks'. Instruction, if any, was provided by imams in private homes.<sup>25</sup> Before 1850, there were only three mosques in the central city of Cape Town. Two of these also operated as *madrasahs* or informal schools. Imam Abdullah Kadi Abdus Salaam, or as he is often better known, Tuan Guru, founded the first and largest *madrasah* at Dorp Street near Chiappini Street in the Bo-Kaap district of Cape Town.<sup>26</sup> Abdul must have attended this school before Al-Azhar. In 1861, Abdul's father, Abdol took an English

---

Records, Cape Archives, State Archives Depot, Cape Town/Records of the Cape Supreme Court Registry 64: Record of Proceedings of Provisional Case, Mochamat Dollie versus Abou Beker Effendi.

- 19 A. Davids, *The Mosques of Bo-Kaap: A Social History of Islam at the Cape* (Athlone, 1980), 172–173; H. Gençoğlu, *Abu Bakr Effendi: A Report on the Activities and Challenges of an Ottoman Muslim Theologian in the Cape of Good Hope* (MA thesis University of Cape Town, 1986), 117.
- 20 There are four Sunni *madhahib* or schools of thought: *Hanafi*, *Maliki*, *Shafi*, *Hanbali* and two Shia schools: *Jafari* and *Zaidi*, and outside of the Sunni/Shia divide two further *madhahib*: the *Ibadi* and the *Zahiri*. For further reading of these schools in the South African context, see S. Dangor, 'The Expression of Islam in South Africa', *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 17 (1997), no. 1: 141–151 and S.E. Dangor, 'The Establishment and Consolidation of Islam in South Africa: From the Dutch Colonisation of the Cape to the Present', *Historia*, 48 (2003), no. 1: 203–220.
- 21 University of London, Senate House Libraries, Institute of Commonwealth Studies: ICS2 Abdullah Abdurahman Papers: Dr. Hendrickse's Notes (hereafter UOL), n.d., 3.
- 22 Simons and Simons, *Class and Colour in South Africa*, 117.
- 23 N. Veitch, *SACS 175: A Celebration* (Cape Town, 2003), 158.
- 24 See Raynard, *Dr. Abdurahman*, 9.
- 25 By 1832, the Cape Almanac lists 12 such 'schools' in operation.
- 26 According to the 1825 Imperial Blue Book, there were 492 'free black' and slave students in attendance.

tourist to the Dorp Street *madrasah* to ‘see a school kept by a Malay priest’.<sup>27</sup> Not much is known about Abdul’s parents, Abdol and Betsy. It is known they were originally slaves of the Dutch East India Company, but Abdol eventually purchased his own freedom and Betsy’s so that they could marry.<sup>28</sup> Abdol was Bengali,<sup>29</sup> but Betsy’s origins beyond Simonstown<sup>30</sup> – her faith, her lineage, or how she came to be at the Cape – remain a mystery. As slaves often abandoned their ascribed name upon emancipation,<sup>31</sup> without some additional information (like the names of their previous owners or the rare record of name change or the use of an alias), individuals like Abdol and Betsy become lost.

Some scholars report Abdol and Khadijah had five children, but others write that Abdurahman was one of nine. This was clarified by Van der Ross, who claimed Abdol had children with other women, possibly other wives, of which one has been identified. Begum identified a half-brother, Karim, and a further two paternal half-sisters.<sup>32</sup> The ninth possible child remains a mystery. Abdol owned and operated a fishmonger business in Wellington while Khadijah was a seamstress.<sup>33</sup> Khadijah has been invisible in the literature. She often goes unnamed, and, if mentioned at all, it was that she was ‘the prettiest Malay girl in Cape Town’.<sup>34</sup> But Khadijah was more than just a pretty face. Education was as important to her as it was to the Abdurahmans. In an 1894 letter to the Ottoman Sultan asking for help in keeping Abu Bakr Effendi’s all-girls’ Islamic school open when it struggled financially,<sup>35</sup> the letter reports,

27 L. Duff-Gordon, *Letters from the Cape*. Annotated by Dorothea Fisher (London, 1927), 135, 137–138.

28 Duff-Gordon, *Letters from the Cape*, 42–43.

29 Y.S. Rassool, *District Six – Lest We Forget. Recapturing Subjugated Cultural Histories of Cape Town (1897–1956)* (Bellville, 2000), 22.

30 R.E. van der Ross, *In Our Own Skins: A Political History of the Coloured People* (Cape Town and Johannesburg, 2015), 67.

31 For example, Frans van de Kaap (b. circa 1768–1865) became Abdol Ragman (See J. Loos, ‘How Abdol Kept his Furniture in the Family’, *Cape Argus*, 28 May 2009).

32 Van der Ross, *Say it Loud*, 4. Some scholars neglected daughters and only counted five children. See Simons and Simons, *Class and Colour in South Africa*, 117, and Van der Ross, *Say it Loud*, 3. Historian Bill Nasson wrote that Abdurahman was the ‘eldest son of the nine children’. Nasson, ‘Abdullah Abdurahman’, [dx.doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/73214](https://dx.doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/73214), accessed 12 March 2015. Begum, Abdurahman’s eldest daughter with his second wife Margaret May Stansfield, lists eight children in total. There is no information on the ninth sibling or half-sibling.

33 Van der Ross, *Say it Loud*, 3.

34 Duff-Gordon, *Letters from the Cape*, 54 and facing plate.

35 This was the girls’ branch of Effendi’s Ottoman Theological School on Bree and Wale Streets. Today it is known to local residents as an brothel.



KHADIJA DOLLIE  
wife of Abdul Rachman. Taken when nearly 50 years of age  
'The prettiest Malay girl in Cape Town' of the letters  
and the mother of Dr. Abdurahman



ABDUL RACHMAN  
'the young Malay student at Al Azhar'  
as an old man

PHOTO 8.1 Khadijah & 'Hadji' Abdurahman (1897)

We are Muslims living in Cape Town, in Southern Africa who desire to educate our girl children at a school, but as yet do not have a school for girls. For 14 years, the girls were educated at a Muslim school for girls, which were established by late Abu Bakr Effendi. After his death, the school remained and conducted by his students Hesna, Kadija Abdurrahman and Valiyt Muhammad Mufti ... At the school, the curriculum comprises of teachings of the Quran, writing and reading and mathematics, there are Tafsir, English and German languages classes.<sup>36</sup>

For Abdurahman, growing up with erudite parents – both teachers besides their work as seamstress and fishmonger – of some status within the Cape Muslim community who were devoted to Islam and to Islamic education, it is a curious development that most of Abdurahman's formal education was at Christian, evangelising institutions: the American Congregationalist *cum* Dutch Reformed Huguenot Mission Sunday School, the French Catholic Marist

36 The Ottoman State Archives of the Prime Minister's Office, Yabancı Arşivler: 310 Private: Letter to Sultan, 6 September 1894.

Brothers' School, the South African College School (SACS),<sup>37</sup> and the Catholic University of Glasgow in Scotland. The sole exception to Abdurahman's Christian education was the Islamic education he would have received at home from his parents.

### The Transcendalist Missionary Sunday School

Wellington, due in part to the efforts of Reverend Andrew Murray, a South African of Scottish descent, was developing a reputation as a centre of education. While on holiday at his 'Patmos' cottage in Kalk Bay,<sup>38</sup> he read Edward Hitchcock's *Memoir of Mary Lyon*. Mary Lyon laboured reforming Christian education for American girls, founding the Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts. Turning to his wife, Murray said, '[s]uch a school is just what we need for our own daughters and for the daughters of our people'.<sup>39</sup> Murray wrote to the Mount Holyoke College, inquiring if they could spare one teacher to assist with opening a similar school in Wellington. Mount Holyoke replied they would send two of their graduates.<sup>40</sup> Abbie Park Ferguson and Anna Elvira Bliss, both New Englanders and daughters of Congregationalist ministers, arrived on Saturday, 15 November 1873.<sup>41</sup> With Murray's support and financial backing from the Dutch Reformed Church, Ferguson and Bliss founded the Huguenot Seminary on 19 January 1874. In the same year, the Huguenot Seminary opened the Missionary Sunday School (MSS) for coloured children.

As there are no enrolment records for either the Dutch Reformed Church, or Huguenot MSS, it cannot be said definitively which of these institutions

37 SACS was never formally a religious institution. See W. Ritchie, *The History of the South African College, 1829–1918* (Cape Town, 1918). However, SACS was a de facto Christian institution.

38 Wall text, *Letter to Mount Holyoke Seminary*, Permanent exhibition at Wellington Museum, Wellington, Western Cape. Visited 13 July 2015; and S.D.L. Stow, *History of Mount Holyoke Seminary, South Hadley, Mass. during its First Half Century, 1837–1887* (Boston, MA, 1887), 340.

39 Mount Holyoke College, Archives and Special Collections (hereafter MHC): RG 22 Mount Holyoke Journal Letters and Journal Memoranda: Letter 23.

40 MHC: RG22: Notebook XII; Rev. A. Murray, *Letter to Mount Holyoke Seminary*, ink on paper, 1872. Permanent exhibition at the Wellington Museum, Wellington, Western Cape. Visited 13 July 2015.

41 D.L. Robert, 'Ferguson, Abbie Park and Bliss, Anna Elvira' in G.H. Anderson (ed.), *Biographical Dictionary of Christian Missions* (New York, 1998), 209–210; G.P. Ferguson, *The Builders of Huguenot, Being the History of the Huguenot Institution at Wellington, from the Intimate Papers of the Builders* (Cape Town, 1927), 14.

Abdurahman attended. Yet, this chapter argues against all scholarship to the contrary that Abdurahman attended the MSS and *not* a 'Dutch Reformed Church mission school'.<sup>42</sup> Although the Dutch Reformed Church was associated with *one* mission school in Wellington at this time, Murray's testimony to the Education Commission in 1891 reflected no intention to admit non-white students.<sup>43</sup> Without extraordinary intervention, Abdurahman's 'mission school' could not have been this mission school.<sup>44</sup> Abdurahman himself never gave specific details. In a speech addressing coloured electors at Stellenbosch, Abdurahman lambasted the government for the deplorable state of coloured education, 'as against that how much they are indebted to their missionaries, as he himself was indebted to a missionary at Wellington, where he was born, for his primary education'.<sup>45</sup> Only one school existed in Wellington that accepted coloured children and was linked to the Dutch Reformed Church – the coloured MSS run by the women of the Huguenot Seminary. The confusion and conflation of the Dutch Reformed Church mission school and the MSS is no doubt due to the erroneous attribution of the school to Andrew Murray.<sup>46</sup> The Dutch

42 Van der Ross, *Say it Loud*, 3; *ibid.*, *In Our Own Skins*, 38. It is possible that the 'white-school' Dr Murray refers to may be the poor school, and not the 'only DRC mission school in Wellington'. This chapter does not completely reject all possibility that Abdurahman attended what would become the DRC Pauw Gendenkskool, but the archival evidence is scant and inconclusive. The argument made in this chapter is that there are other equally or even more viable possibilities, especially for a child with two teachers who were parents, one of whom was said by Abdurahman's daughter to have run a school. Moreover, during Abdullah's time, the Pauw Gendenkskool was under the Paris Evangelical Society and not a DRC mission school. The origin of all claims for Abdurahman attending this particular DRC school is from historian Richard van der Ross, who never identifies a source. Van der Ross' work on Abdurahman and the APO has been criticised in the past for its wanting scholarly rigour in terms of inaccuracies and personal bias due to his own involvement in coloured politics.

43 *First Report and Proceedings, with Appendices, of a Commission appointed to enquire into and report upon certain matters connected with the Educational System of the colony*, 99–101. (Cape Town: W.A. Richards & Sons, Government Printers, Castle Street, 1891), 158–159.

44 It is not impossible that some exception was made, possibly resulting from the mission school's need for funds (*ibid.*, 159). However, given that Wellington at this time had many economically comfortable coloured families, it does not seem that Murray could continue to refer to the mission school as 'distinctly white' if it was possible to bribe one's way in.

45 *South African News*, 22 November 1903.

46 For example, '[a]s a result of the zealous labours of our minister, the number of coloured people who attend the Sunday-school in the Mission Hall on Sundays has now reached 120, with 12 teachers in rotation'. From J.C. du Plessis, *The Life of Andrew Murray of South Africa* (London [etc.], 1919), 265–266.



Reformed Church mission school did absorb the MSS in 1894, but Abdullah would have attended the MSS from around 1877 to 1880.<sup>47</sup>

Hundreds of coloured students, including Abdurahman, arrived each Sunday to receive instruction in an amended Mount Holyoke College curriculum focusing on the 'three R's': reading, writing, and arithmetic. They undertook scripture classes and basic introductory lessons to history and geography. The records and correspondence of the principals indicate that students were enthusiastic and reasonably well-behaved during lessons. Book learning and religious content occupied most Sundays, yet attendance held steady. Teachers assigned homework, which most of the students completed.<sup>48</sup> Sometimes the school provided small treats. Magic lantern shows were especially popular, and the school gave an annual feast.<sup>49</sup> For many coloured children, a Sunday-only school was preferable since they often worked to supplement the family income. Other aims of the MSS also flourished. Elizabeth Cummins ('Lizzie'), the MSS principal at the time of Abdurahman's enrolment, boasted that most of the children converted to Christianity.<sup>50</sup> Abdurahman did not convert, but probably learned to subsume or present a more religiously neutral persona in this environment. This early training in scripture proved useful in his adult oratorical career where he often referenced Biblical themes and motifs. For the rest of the week, Abdurahman was almost certainly home-schooled by his mother, who had experience as a teacher in Effendi's Muslim school for girls.

The MSS was entirely voluntary and 100% free. Children paid no fees and had no obligation to attend. Teaching was done on a volunteer basis. Success, however, was evident, and attendance was 'fairly regular'.<sup>51</sup> Hundreds of coloured children attended these classes.<sup>52</sup> When Ferguson wrote home to her sister in 1874, she lamented the 'terrible condition' of the town's coloured population.<sup>53</sup> Ferguson concluded that a Sunday School must be organised for the coloured children. Besides, Ferguson added, it could serve the dual purpose of

47 Education Commission, *First Report and Proceedings* (note 43 above), 209. It was only after two decades that the whites-only Dutch Reformed Church mission school absorbed the MSS (1894). Weekday sessions (and only in the evenings) only opened to coloured students in 1919. Du Plessis, *The life of Andrew Murray*, 265–266.

48 Dutch Reformed Church Archives, Huguenot Seminary Papers (hereafter DRC HMS): 605 and 615 (collections of letters for Ferguson and principal Cummings); MHC: MS 0687 Ferguson Papers, 1861–1919: Correspondence and Other Writings (Box 1, Folder 1); MHC: MS 0550 Huguenot Seminary papers, 1874–1978.

49 DRC HMS: 605, Lizzie Cummings to her family (23 September 1885).

50 *Ibid.* (24 March 1884).

51 Education Commission, *First Report and Proceedings*, 158.

52 DRC HMS: K-Div 615, Abbie Ferguson to Maggie Allen (7 September 1874).

53 *Ibid.*, Letters from Abbie Ferguson to Maggie Allen (12 April 1874, 7 September 1874).

providing missionary opportunities for Seminary girls who were unable or unwilling to train for stations further into the interior of South Africa.<sup>54</sup> With 30 children under twelve, the Seminary opened the MSS for coloured children in April 1874. As one of the few white mission schools to offer education to coloured children, the school was in incredible demand. After six months, the head count increased to approximately 500 pupils, 'squeezed close together on the benches, so close that you couldn't put a knife between them'.<sup>55</sup> Ferguson remarked to the Education Commission in 1891 that, in her experience, the best way to ensure academic success was for schools and teachers to reach beyond the classroom and engage with and include parents on the one hand, and on the other, to inspire the students. Punishment and discipline were not the answer. Truancy was remedied by providing incentives for attendance and insisting on notes from parents to account for absences.<sup>56</sup> This holistic ethos was a significant departure from the kind of education Abdurahman would have received at a stern Dutch Reformed Church school. For a young child, the influence of the MSS' softer approach must have made an impression. Therefore, it is important to turn a little attention to the ideologies and philosophies that permeated the Mount Holyoke College.

Mount Holyoke College reverberated with New England Transcendentalist ideology. In July 1896, an article appeared in *Demorest's Family Magazine* that describes the Mount Holyoke curriculum: 'The secrets of the transcendentalist are sought for; the philosophy of Coleridge, Arnold, and the pre-Raphaelites, and a study of the stern influences of Calvin's creed, call for thoughtful, close application'.<sup>57</sup> Deeply related to German and English Romanticism, American Transcendentalism is nevertheless distinct. Beginning as a religious reformation among New England Congregationalists,<sup>58</sup> American Transcendentalist views of the relationship between an individual, society, and the divine diverges from conventional Romanticism. For romantics, God is an external force that moves through an individual. For Transcendentalists, the dynamic is

54 Ferguson founded the Huguenot Mission Society in 1878. (MHC: Records of the HMS, Book 1, Constitution).

55 DRC HMS: K-Div 615, Letters from Abbie Ferguson to Maggie Allen (12 April 1874, 7 September 1874).

56 Education Commission, *First Report and Proceedings*, 196.

57 H.M. North, 'Our Girls at Mount Holyoke College', *Demorest's Family Magazine*, July 1896, 518.

58 See e.g. M.R. Barna, 'Transcendentalism Was A Religious and Intellectual Movement, in J.A. Hurley (ed.), *American Romanticism* (San Diego, 2000), 60; W.R. Hutchison, *The Transcendentalist Ministers: Church Reform in the New England Renaissance* (Hartford, CT, 2005); R. Grusin, *Transcendentalist Hermeneutics: Institutional Authority and the Higher Criticism of the Bible* (Durham, NC, 1991).

inverted. As the soul *is* the divine spark, God is an *internal* force within individuals. This view of personhood understands 'evil' as an alienation from the self. This minor variation is enough to make the two movements anathema to one another. The moral optimism of American Transcendentalism underlines the unalienable goodness of man and his indivisibility from the divine. Education was a tool for self-knowledge and self-realisation towards this more divine self and the refinement of a spiritual and moral character. As an early exposure to Christians and Christianity, Abdurahman must have been struck by the similarities between this and Islam's *tawhīd*. *Tawhīd* is perhaps the most significant doctrine of Islam. It is the absolute oneness of God in everything that exists, including human beings. Because of *tawhīd*, it is said that when one has forgotten one's own soul, one has forgotten God. Self-knowledge is key. The indivisibility of God from the individual is thus emphasised in both Transcendentalism and *tawhīd*. There were other connections that might have been familiar to Abdurahman as well – Transcendentalism syncretised not just European and classical philosophers, but also infused elements of Indian religion and philosophies.<sup>59</sup> And so Abdurahman, the son of Islamic teachers, found his earliest experiences with the greater world outside the family to be in an international Christian Sunday school, governed by Americans and young white girls in a Transcendentalist-influenced school.

### The Origins of the Palm Tree Mosque: Khadijah's Version

It is a unique upbringing to grow up immersed in both Islamic and Christian worlds. In child development studies, research shows a child builds social knowledge of morality from three to seven years of age. During this stage, the child internalises the values of his or her family. What is important to the parents becomes important to the child. For psychologists and child-development researchers, it is around six years of age that children begin saying, 'In our family, we do ...'. Norms and normative rules – including those for gender, race, and religion; notions of 'right' and 'wrong' – are being incorporated into the child's developing ontology and guiding his or her behaviour. The child begins

59 See A. Versluis, *American Transcendentalism and Asian Religions* (New York, 1993); R.B. Goodman, 'East-West Philosophy in Nineteenth Century America: Emerson and Hinduism', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 51 (1990), no. 4: 625–645. Moreover, after Ralph Waldo Emerson took over the *Dial* as editor in 1842, he began to publish a series he called 'Ethnical Scriptures', which included translations of Chinese and Indian philosophical and religious works. See J. Myerson, *The New England Transcendentalists and the 'Dial': A History of the Magazine and its Contributors* (Rutherford, NJ, 1980).

constructing his or her moral world.<sup>60</sup> For Abdurahman, his two pillars were faith and service from his father and family and education from his mother. With Abdul's credentials, he is often the one credited with impressing into Abdurahman a love of learning and the importance of education. But given his father's absence, it is more probable that the critical figure was Khadijah, whose influence was reinforced by the bright-eyed schoolteachers at the MSS.

Being taught by Khadijah seems to have left other intriguing residues in Abdurahman. For example, the origin story of the Palm Tree Mosque on Long Street described how Jan van Boughies and Frans van Bengalen founded a new congregation after a dispute about imamate succession at the Auwal mosque after Tuan Guru's death. The cause of the dispute is unknown.<sup>61</sup> Most scholars conclude that the matter must have simply been one of many 'struggles for power result[ing] from conflict among the dominant personalities'.<sup>62</sup> But Abdurahman relayed a different version to Dorothea Fairbridge, one that does not seem to have featured anywhere else.

There once was an imam, Abdurahman said, 'who had a wife whom he adored [but] he also had a hasty temper. One day, being annoyed over some trifling domestic mishap, he turned on her and pronounced the triple sentence of divorce. Then they looked at one another in dismay, for there had always been love between them. What was to be done?' Husband and wife concocted a scheme to resolve this 'disaster' by enlisting the help of the 'old imaum of the Dorp Street mosque' to agree to marry and divorce the wife so they could remarry. The wife and 'old imaum' were then married. When the younger imam returned after a respectable amount of time to the older imam to request a divorce, he responded 'Your wife? ... I will speak to my wife and see what she says'. The 'old imaum' thought about how much happier his life had become since taking her for a wife and returned to the younger imam, refusing to divorce her. 'Then the other husband went away in his wrath, and founded an opposition mosque in the old house in Long Street, before which two tall palms stand to this day'.<sup>63</sup>

60 See the literature in note 64 below.

61 S. Koolhof and R. Ross, 'Upas, September and the Bugis at the Cape of Good Hope: The Context of a Slave's Letter', *Archipel Année*, 70 (2005), no. 1. 286; A. Davids, *The History of the Tana Baru* (Cape Town, 1985), 68–69; and S. Jeppie, 'Leadership and Loyalties: The Imams of Nineteenth Century Colonial Cape Town, South Africa', *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 26 (1991), no.2, 139–162.

62 A. Davids, 'Imams and Conflict Resolution Practices among Cape Muslims in the Nineteenth Century', *Kronos*, 22 (1995): 55.

63 Duff-Gordon, *Letters from the Cape*, 55–57.

The contrast between these two versions is striking. Although it cannot be proven that Abdurahman's version came from Khadijah, every recorded account of this conflict in the imamate has been a single narrative, as told by the imams. The most likely source for this alternative view is the women in Abdurahman's life, notably his mother. Abdurahman's retelling diverges significantly by centring around the woman and the power of good moral character. One 'good' wife had the power to upend the political and religious matters of men. A man's happiness depends on his treatment of his wife. A man's moral character is paramount – if the young imam had learned not to succumb to hasty temper and unconsidered action, he could have avoided misery. Recent research in other fields show that this and other lessons from his mother had profound impact on Abdurahman's subjectivity.

But parents were not the only models, any consistent caretaker had a significant impact. Because children are soaking up social knowledge during this stage like thirsty sponges, they also look to trusted adults to fill the gaps in their social knowledge, making children at this stage extremely malleable.<sup>64</sup> For the first year or two of Abdurahman's time at the MSS, however, his father was absent. Abdul's obituaries<sup>65</sup> report he served in the Russo-Turkish war of 1877 to 1878. The Cape Malays overwhelmingly sided with their fellow Muslims and closely followed the news of the war in the *Graphic* newspaper. Abdurahman's father was so moved by the plight of the Turkic Muslims that he enlisted. Because of this, the earliest years of young Abdurahman's education were almost exclusively the responsibility of women. This indubitably impressed upon Abdurahman that education was essential but must be as accessible for girls as for boys.

Through his home life and his social life at the Mission Sunday School, Abdurahman would have had to incorporate multiple worlds into his moral and cognitive being. These were the overlapping yet discrete spheres of Islam and Christianity, white and coloured, coloured and Malay, Malay and Muslim, American and South African, South African Huguenot and South African

64 E.g. J.E. Grusec and J.J. Goodnow, 'Impact of Parental Discipline Methods on the Child's Internalization of Values: A Reconceptualization of Current Points of View', *Developmental Psychology*, 30 (1994), 4–19; G. Kochanska, N. Aksan and A.L. Koenig, 'A Longitudinal Study of the Roots of Preschoolers' Conscience: Committed Compliance and Emerging Internalization', *Child Development*, 66 (1995), no. 6, 1752–1769; and on the importance of the mother during this time G. Kochanska and N. Aksan, 'Mother-Child Mutually Positive Affect, the Quality of Child Compliance to Requests and Prohibitions, and Maternal Control as Correlates of Early Internalization', *Child Development*, 66 (1995), no. 1, 236–254.

65 *Huddersfield Chronicle*, 9 April 1898; *Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, 7 April 1898; *The Daily Express* 9 April 1898.

Dutch; not to mention the particular prominence of women in his life. The psychological impact that this unique socialisation must have had on a young child cannot be overstated. His early experiences meant that he had to thatch – layer, fold, interweave – some psychological coherence from these complex matrices of religious and social dissonances. While Islam and Christianity were worlds apart for most people at the time, Abdurahman must have clung to their commonalities and shared values to create a sense of cognitive order. Abdurahman's later moral adherence to non-racialism and continuous efforts to unite all non-whites, even when faced with the mutiny of his own organisation, must have had its seeds in these early experiences. The multiplicity of his identities and experiences continued when the family moved from Wellington to central Cape Town and Abdurahman continued his education with the Marist Brothers.

The family may have relocated from Wellington to Cape Town for different reasons. The first is that the family may have moved so as to be closer to Abdul's ageing mother, Betsy, after his father's passing. Abdul's parents, Abdol and Betsy, lived at 19 Cannon Street in 1868,<sup>66</sup> but in 1875, greengrocer 'Widow Abdol Ragman' lived at 86 Bree Street.<sup>67</sup> A second reason for moving concerns Abdul's *Hanafi* mosque – the founding of the mosque coincides with the purported date of Abdurahman's time at Marist Brothers. Abdul may have had a change in occupation. Although Abdul had operated a fishmonger business in Wellington, somewhere along the way, he moved from the *Shafi* practices of his own father Abdol's *Auwal* congregation to the *Hanafi* school of Abu Bakr Effendi sometime after his return to the Cape.<sup>68</sup> There is no doubt that Abdul was *Hanafi*, being a founder of a *Hanafi* mosque. Unfortunately for Abdul, Effendi declared shellfish – particularly crayfish – as *haraam* or prohibited.<sup>69</sup> This must have posed a serious inconvenience for a man in the fishmongering business. Thus, after Abdul's adoption of *Hanafi* practices, he may have left the fish business behind to teach full-time, probably Islamic theology, as Begum

66 In the 1868 directory, green grocer 'Abdol Jemalie' is listed as residing at 19 Cannon Street (*Cape of Good Hope commercial directory and general business guide for 1868*, Cape Town: Saul, Solomon & Co, 1868). Cannon Street and the portion of Mount Street that Albert Lodge (Abdurahmna's family home) occupied no longer exist.

67 See listing under 'Inhabitants' in *The General Directory and Guide Book to the Cape of Good Hope and its Dependencies* (Cape Town, 1875).

68 *Shafi* is dominant in African and Southeast Asia Islam. The *Hanafi* school has the largest number of followers and is dominant in the countries that were once part of the Ottoman Empire. See note 20.

69 The predominantly *Shafi* Cape Muslim Community had accepted crayfish as indisputably permissible. See A. Davids *The Mosques of Bo-Kaap: A Social History of Islam at the Cape* (Athlone, 1980, 50, 54).

attests, at the mosque. This does not seem to have lasted long, however. Evidence suggests that Abdul was in London by 1882.<sup>70</sup> Abdul and his brother-in-law, Mohamed Dollie, would later be instrumental in Muslim affairs in London through their ‘Temporary’ Mosque, near Regent’s Park, on Albert Street.<sup>71</sup> Perhaps his departure was the reason for the remaining family to move to Cape Town, possibly also to be closer to Betsy or Khadijah’s family.

### The Marist Brothers (c. 1881 to c. 1884)

The Marist Brothers are a Catholic order founded by St. Marcellin Champagnat of France in 1817. In 1867, this order sent five ‘brothers’ to Cape Town to establish a school. Initially housed at the Bishop Griffith’s mission school on Hope Street, the school soon moved to the crossroads of St. John’s, Vrede, and Hatfield Streets and was baptised St Aloysius. Despite many secondary sources pointing to Abdurahman’s attendance at Marist Brothers, there is no evidence that Abdurahman or any other non-white child enrolled at St. Aloysius Primary.<sup>72</sup> Much has been made of Abdurahman being ‘the first and last; Muslim or coloured child admitted to the Marist Brothers school (and later, the South African College). Certainly, this boosted his public mythology and image, but it appears to be inaccurate. At the time, Brother Willibrord van der Moortel of Belgium was in charge of the Marist Brothers’ non-racial offerings in night school. If such a non-racial night school facility existed, it seems fair to reason that the day curriculum was colour-barred. Therefore, Abdurahman must have attended the open night school. Other Cape Muslims of this time also claimed a Marist Brothers’ education without contradiction from past teachers and other students, which adds to the likelihood that the night school was popular and offered an excellent curriculum – possibly even the same curriculum as the day school.<sup>73</sup> Relations between previous night school students and teachers also seem to have continued to be friendly. For instance, in 1913, a Marist

<sup>70</sup> *Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, 8 December 1896.

<sup>71</sup> *St. James’s Gazette*, 22 September 1896; *Morning Post*, 22 September 1896; *Glasgow Herald*, 23 September 1896; *Leicester Chronicle*, 26 September 1896; *Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, 8 December 1896; *London Evening Standard*, 22 September 1896; *Dundee Evening Telegraph*, 20 January 1897. Abdurahman later named his family home ‘Albert Lodge’.

<sup>72</sup> I have conferred via email with Kervin Grove, the current Principal of Marist Brothers (today St. Joseph’s), who has further conferred with the Chairperson of the Marist school’s council. No enrolment or registration records have been found.

<sup>73</sup> See e.g. Abdol Burns’ testimony: Education Commission, *First Report and Proceedings*, 95.

Brothers teacher, Mr. Vermeerset, wrote to Abdurahman to query about some Muslim terms.<sup>74</sup>

### Tana Baru: Rising Politicisation and the Almost-first Muslim Councillor

Cape Town was experiencing a troubled time during Abdurahman's years at the Marist Brothers. In 1882, a smallpox epidemic struck Cape Town. Five per cent of the population (2,300 people) died. Those who had contracted but survived smallpox did not escape unscathed. Almost all suffered disfigurement or were blinded by the disease.<sup>75</sup> The following year, in 1883, the Cape Parliament passed a Public Health Act that required vaccination, notification of infectious disease, and restricted burial rites. Due to these regulations, the oldest Muslim graveyard in South Africa, the Tana Baru, was ordered closed. The Muslim community fought this edict.<sup>76</sup> The congregation of the new *Hanafi* mosque, which included Abdurahman's parents, urged Al Sayyid Al Amjadiy Ahmet Ataullah Bey (Abu Bakr Effendi's son and Abdurahman's brother-in-law), towards a greater leadership role. Ataullah acknowledged these desires and gave an address in defence of the Tana Baru and organised another meeting to organise further protests.<sup>77</sup> After the closure of Tana Baru, the Muslim community was outraged at what it saw as a violation of the Muslim community's 82-years of religious freedom.

Ataullah declared his candidature for the Cape Provincial Council during these tumultuous times. Imam Hassim Sahibo and his assistants called upon other imams in the Cape to promote and support his campaign. All the other imams agreed, and Ataullah accepted the nomination after a large community meeting, held with 'almost the order and solemnity of a religious service' at Abdurahman's family mosque. Sadly, Ataullah's campaign was unsuccessful. Even though Ataullah lost, his campaign may have been the first time Abdurahman considered that a non-white could be a councillor in South Africa.

74 Moslem Education Committee Letter Book, unpublished, 1913 to 1915, 359, 29 October 1913, to Mr. A. Vermeerset, Marist Brothers, CT.

75 Fatality figures: E.H. Burrows, *A History of Medicine in South Africa up to the End of the Nineteenth Century* (Detroit, MI, 1958); P.W. Laidler and M. Gelfand, *South Africa. Its Medical History 1652–1898: A Medical and Social Study* (Cape Town, 1971); Population figures: N. Worden, E. van Heyningen and V. Bickford-Smith, *Cape Town: The Making of a City* (Claremont, Cape Town, 1998), 212.

76 Davids, *The Mosques of Bo-Kaap*, 61.

77 *Ibid.*, 178–179, 128.



That Ataullah was a family member must have intensified this effect. Ataullah's detractors criticised him fiercely during the campaign as a foreigner and stranger, pointing to his religion as proof. Ataullah's failed campaign and the arguments used against him by his opponents unintentionally provided Abdurahman with foresight into what kind of rhetoric he could use to overcome his dissenters and, therefore, discredit those points. Abdurahman would have to play down his Muslim identity. Against this background, much of his later speeches and their Biblical content begins to make more sense. In this way, Ataullah's failure may have even helped carve the space for Abdurahman's success.<sup>78</sup> Although Abdurahman, as a young student, does not seem to have been directly involved with the Tana Baru protests or Ataullah's campaign, he would still have been intimately connected with these events. After all, it concerned his father's friends, his brother-in-law, and his congregation. In later years, Abdurahman served as a member on the Moslem Cemetery Board.<sup>79</sup> After his passing, he was buried in the new Muslim Cemetery his brother-in-law made possible.

### The South African College School (c. 1884 to c. 1887)

During the time of Abdurahman's attendance at the SACS, its headmaster was Dr. John Shaw (b. 1837–d. 1890). Shaw was a teacher and a mentor to Abdurahman. It was only through Shaw's intervention and influence that Abdurahman became a student at Shaw's *alma mater*, the University of Glasgow. Shaw's style as headmaster of SACS was more than that of an administrator behind a desk. He conducted weekly student drills and knew each student's intellectual capabilities as well their temperaments. One student, Bernard Lewis later described the students' sessions with Shaw:

Friday was a terrifying day, for then came 'rep' before Dr. Shaw himself. We stood in a double row while he marched, with a twinkle in his eyes behind his spectacles, along our ranks, cane in hand, popping off questions at one or other of us. Hesitation at answering brought a sharp rap on the legs; and failure to reply the added disgrace of being sent to the bottom of the row. Dr. Shaw's grand finale, those Friday afternoons, was

<sup>78</sup> Ataullah's campaign was not a complete loss, however. With his (and others) advocacy, the government conceded and allocated space for a new Muslim cemetery on grounds between Salt River and Mowbray. *Cape Argus*, 4 February 1905.

<sup>79</sup> UOL, 5.

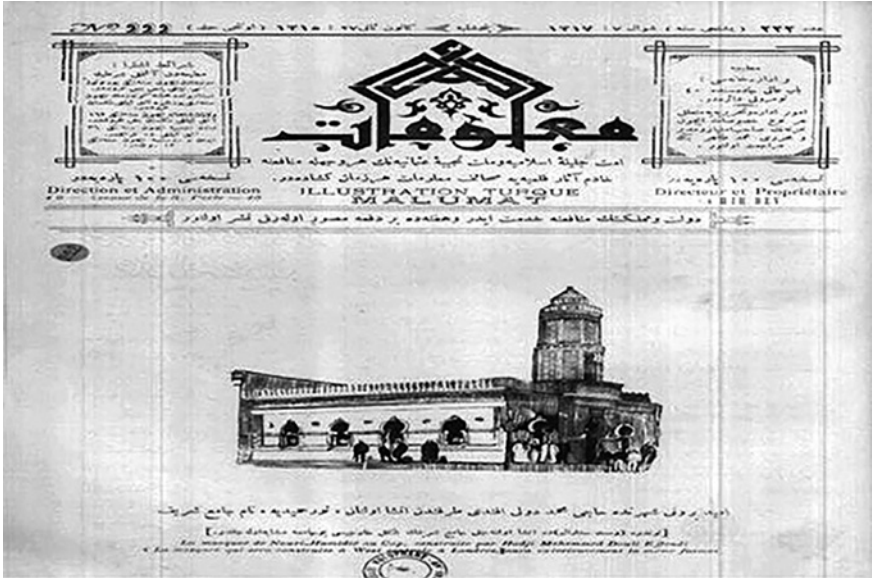


PHOTO 8.2 Hanafi mosque in Long Street, Cape Town (1881)



PHOTO 8.3 Hanafi mosque now

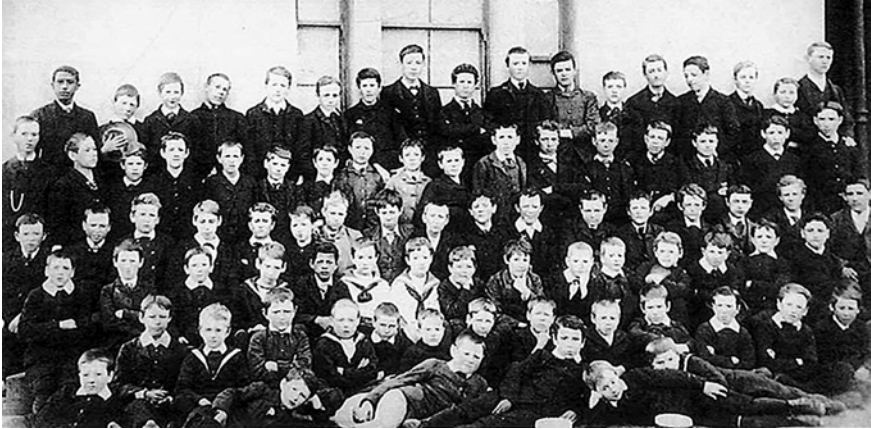


PHOTO 8.4 South African College School (1886). Abdurahman is in the back row, left.

an exposition on the laws of the tides with boys acting the roles of the sun, earth and moon in the middle of the room; and woe betide him who confused spring with neap!<sup>80</sup>

There, Abdurahman excelled, ‘where, by his diligence and ability, he outdistanced his comrades in almost every branch of school work’.<sup>81</sup> Part of this might be the sheer joy of learning. Part of this joy might be that, for the first time, Abdurahman had a formal and official platform from which he could shine. SACS was the first school in Abdurahman’s education where we can say with certainty that he was enrolled, as evidenced both by SACS’s documents and publications and his inclusion in an 1886 school photograph, appearing to be arranged by school year from youngest in the front rows to the eldest in the back rows. His cousin, young Mohamed Dollie, not to be confused with his maternal uncle, is in the fourth row, the fifth child in from the left, seated left of the Saunders twins in white (see Photo 8.4).<sup>82</sup>

80 Bernard Lewis, in N. Veitch, *SACS 175: a celebration* (Cape Town, 2003), 35.

81 *Owl*, 16 September 1904.

82 *SACS 175* also reports that Abdurahman’s younger brother (this was Ismail, although he was not specified by Veitch) and a ‘Dollie cousin’ were also students (158).

Like Shaw, many other teachers at SACS were also Scottish, giving the school a strong Scottish and Humean influence, particularly with regard to the sciences.<sup>83</sup> Shaw's own background in the natural sciences accentuated these influences. Morality and 'moral character' or a cultivated ethos in this Scottish model were of deep importance. SACS's pedagogical philosophy closely paralleled the Seminary's holistic perspective. Given that Hume had had a significant influence on American Transcendentalism, much of the philosophical underpinnings of the pedagogical processes at SACS would have been familiar to Abdurahman. This resonance of ideologies between the two schools probably fed Abdurahman's view that, despite differences between people, universal values (such as empathy) existed across social divides. SACS and Headmaster Shaw thus exercised influence over Abdurahman's intellectual development. 'When Abdurahman was refused admission to the [South African] College [for his tertiary studies], Dr. John Shaw helped arrange for his medical studies at Glasgow university'.<sup>84</sup>

SACS thus had a profound effect on Abdurahman as it was the first school that included him as a full student. Having had a taste of this measure of equality after a childhood of set-apart mission schools must have had tremendous influence on a young man. In his later life, Abdurahman showed a similar generosity to other academically promising children. He opened two high schools for coloured and black children, founded no less than nine Muslim primary schools: 'no deserving case was turned down by him. Many a parent whose resources were unable to stand the strain of higher education appealed to him for assistance, and they did not appeal in vain'.<sup>85</sup> Moreover, Abdurahman no doubt made a psychological connection between SACS's efforts to be non-racial with the school's strong Scottish influence.<sup>86</sup>

The family's movements are opaque during Abdurahman's years at SACS but sometime in early 1888, Khadijah and Abdul were together since Abdurahman's younger brother Ismail was born on 16 October 1888 in South Africa.<sup>87</sup>

83 For SACS's Scottish teachers of this time, see Veitch, *SACS 175: a celebration* and Ritchie, *The History of the South African College*. For several school activities, even today, students wear Scottish kilts. For photographs, see University of Cape Town, Special Collections: BUZV collection.

84 N. Veitch, *SACS 175: a celebration* (Cape Town: SACS 175 Book Committee 2003), 158.

85 Raynard, *Dr. Abdurahman*, 29.

86 There is a possibility that the Scottish were more favourable to non-racial education and social programmes at this time than the English. See e.g. J.M. MacKenzie, 'Scots in New Zealand and Elsewhere in the British Empire: An International Perspective', *Immigrants & Minorities*, 29 (2011), no. 2: 154–174 and *ibid.*, 'Essay and Reflection: On Scotland and the Empire', *The International History Review*, 15 (1993), no. 4: 714–739.

87 University of Glasgow, University Archive Services, Records of the Registry: *Registrar's Roll of Graduates and Dates of Birth*, vol. 2, R3/1/1: 1915.

During this time, however, Abdul generally lived in London. After Abdurahman had graduated from SACS, Abdul returned to South Africa to help with preparations and then accompany Abdurahman to Glasgow.<sup>88</sup> Khadijah and the rest of the family later followed, presumably for Ismail's education. Following Abdurahman's footsteps, his younger brother Ismail also chose the University of Glasgow for his studies, earning him an Mb ChB (1 April 1915).<sup>89</sup> Abdurahman's parents reunited in London and never returned to South Africa. When Khadijah passed away after Abdul in 1902 at about 55 years of age, she was buried in Willesden New Cemetery. Later, her brother Mohamed and one of her other children – her daughter and Abdurahman's sister, Gacilla Mohsena – was buried beside her.<sup>90</sup>

### Searching for Abdurahman

Abdurahman is a unique figure whose life maps vast political and ideological changes in South Africa. Abdurahman was celebrated for a while, in his time, then criticised towards the end of his life as the new generation of political activists radicalised and embraced new ideologies on Blackness and nationalism emerging out of the Atlantic World. This new perspective characterised Abdurahman as a cautionary tale of liberalism's limits and failures, especially with its promises of non-racialism. In this vein, Abdurahman was painted either as too naive, or less sympathetically, as a white adjunct and assimilationist. 'Abdurahman', one labour historian wrote, 'saw the process more clearly and gained a deeper insight into the structure of white power. Yet ... he maintained his trust in white patronage long after the futility of such an attitude had been revealed'.<sup>91</sup>

88 The language is imprecise – both of Abdurahman's parents are said to have moved to the UK with him. See e.g. S. Hendricks, *Tasawwuf (Sufism): Its Role and Impact on the Culture of Cape Islam*, Ph D thesis University of South Africa, 2009, 384 and Simons and Simons, *Class and Colour in South Africa*, 117. But with Khadijah expecting Ismail, this was impossible. The 1891 Scottish census shows that Abdurahman lodged alone in Glasgow. The only answer is that Abdurahman's father must have returned to the Cape to help Abdurahman relocate to Glasgow before returning to London.

89 'Medical News', *The Lancet*, 185 (1915), no. 4781, 837; Simons and Simons, *Class and Colour in South Africa*, 117.

90 General Register Office, Southport, England: Pancras Death Registration Index, Vol. 1B, Page 8, Line 81: Jul-Aug-Sep 1902: Khudeja Abdurahman; Khan, *My Life and Experiences*, 47. Unfortunately, I have been unable to identify where Abdul was buried.

91 Simons and Simons, *Class and Colour in South Africa*, 117. There is a parallel here with other figures in the history of resistance to white domination in South Africa. See e.g. B.P. Willan, *Sol Plaatje: South African Nationalist, 1876–1932* (London, 1984).

But it was also a public *froideur* with his daughter, Cissie, a member of the new generation, that later damaged his image. His daughter's friend later wrote, 'Dr. Abdurahman, though still pre-eminent in the Coloured community, had discredited himself and his party by clinging to the white liberals ... The younger generation disputed his authority and made a bid for leadership on their own account. Members of his own family led the revolt'.<sup>92</sup> One acquaintance remarked, '[Abdurahman's daughter] was occupying Socialist platforms publicly denouncing her father (the Doctor) and accusing him of having betrayed his people'.<sup>93</sup>

But this elite censure of Abdurahman never trickled down to the streets. Coloured communities demonstrated their loyalty not by public speech or pronouncements, but by faithfully returning him to office election after election.<sup>94</sup> These contradictions present a puzzle. Heavily criticised, he seemed to still capture the passionate loyalty and affection of the popular masses. It is here that a biographical approach can help, as it can unveil the complexities of the persona of Abdullah Abdurahman – complexities that found their parallels in the broader coloured community of South Africa. Thus, an exploration of his childhood makes clear how marginalised subjects have always had to navigate a multiplicity of identities and how their inherent frictions are managed. Through this, it helps peel Abdullah Abdurahman off the page and bring to light the early influences in his life – especially the intriguing intersections of religion and education to which he was exposed: these were to prove deeply significant in moulding the politician and man that he would become.

## References

- Adhikari, M. (1993), *Let Us Live for Our Children: The Teachers' League of South Africa, 1913–1940* (Cape Town).
- Adhikari, M. (1993), 'Protest and Accommodation: Ambiguities in the Racial Politics of the APO, 1909–1923', *Kronos*, vol. 20, 91–106.

92 Simons and Simons, *Class and Colour in South Africa*, 486.

93 Raynard, *Dr Abdurahman*, 34.

94 Even Abdurahman's critics conceded that 'Abdurahman himself built a first-rate electoral machine, which kept him in the Cape Town municipal council from 1903 until his death in 1940'. But this statement was written as another criticism that, because Abdurahman earned and held the affection and votes of coloureds, '[h]e did not need the white worker's vote and, when obliged to choose between white candidates, [he] preferred men of wealth or standing' (Simons and Simons, *Class and Colour in South Africa*, 139–140).

- Ajam, M. (1986), *The Raison d'Être of the Muslim Mission Primary School in Cape Town and Environs from 1860 to 1980 with Special Reference to the Role of Dr. A Abdurahman in the Modernisation of Islam-Oriented Schools* (Ph.D. thesis, University of Cape Town, 1986).
- Ajam, M. (1990), 'Dr. Abdullah Abdurahman – Benefactor of the Bo-Kaap', *Kronos*, vol. 17, 48–58.
- Barna, M.R. (2000), 'Transcendentalism Was A Religious and Intellectual Movement', in J.A. Hurley (ed.), *American Romanticism* (San Diego).
- Burman, S. and P. Reynolds (eds) (1986), *Growing Up in a Divided Society: The Contexts of Childhood in South Africa* (Johannesburg).
- Burrows, E.H. (1958), *A History of Medicine in South Africa up to the End of the Nineteenth Century* (Detroit, MI).
- Cleophas, F.J. (2014), 'Writing and Contextualising Local History. A Historical Narrative of the Wellington Horticultural Society (Coloured)', *Yesterday and Today*, vol. 11, 25–26.
- Dangor, S. (1997), 'The Expression of Islam in South Africa', *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, vol. 17, 141–151.
- Dangor, S.E. (2003), 'The Establishment and Consolidation of Islam in South Africa: From the Dutch Colonisation of the Cape to the Present', *Historia*, vol. 48, 203–220.
- Dauids, A. (1980), *The Mosques of Bo-Kaap: A Social History of Islam at the Cape* (Athlone).
- Dauids, A. (1985), *The History of the Tana Baru* (Cape Town).
- Dauids, A. (1995), 'Imams and Conflict Resolution Practices among Cape Muslims in the Nineteenth Century', *Kronos*, vol. 22, 54–72.
- De Salve, G.G. (2012), *Uma história de traição. Um projeto assimilacionista coloured na Cidade do Cabo, 1906–1910* (MA thesis Universidade Estadual de Campinas).
- Duff, S.E. (2015), *Changing Childhoods in the Cape Colony Dutch Reformed Church Evangelicalism and Colonial Childhood, 1860–1895* (London).
- Duff-Gordon, L. (1927), *Letters from the Cape*. Annotated by Dorothea Fisher (London).
- Du Plessis, J.C. (1919), *The Life of Andrew Murray of South Africa* (London).
- Esack, F. (1988), 'Three Islamic Strands in the South African Struggle for Justice', *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 10, 473–498.
- Ferguson, G.P. (1927), *The Builders of Huguenot, Being the History of the Huguenot Institution at Wellington, from the Intimate Papers of the Builders* (Cape Town).
- Gençoğlu, H. (1986), *Abu Bakr Effendi: A Report on the Activities and Challenges of an Ottoman Muslim Theologian in the Cape of Good Hope* (MA thesis University of Cape Town).
- Goldin, I. (1987) *Making Race: The Politics and Economics of Coloured Identity in South Africa* (Boston, MA).

- Goodman, R.B. (1990), 'East-West Philosophy in Nineteenth Century America: Emerson and Hinduism', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 51, 625–645.
- Grusec, J.E. and J.J. Goodnow (1994), 'Impact of Parental Discipline Methods on the Child's Internalization of Values: A Reconceptualization of Current Points of View', *Developmental Psychology*, vol. 30, 4–19.
- Grusin, R. (1991), *Transcendentalist Hermeneutics: Institutional Authority and the Higher Criticism of the Bible* (Durham, NC).
- Hendricks, S. (2009), *Tasawwuf (Sufism): Its Role and Impact on the Culture of Cape Islam* (Ph. D. thesis University of South Africa).
- Herzberg, B. (1998), *Otherness: The Story of a Very Long Life* (London, 1998).
- Hetherington, P. (1993), 'Women in South Africa: The Historiography in English', *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, vol. 26, 241–269.
- Hutchison, W.R. (2005), *The Transcendentalist Ministers: Church Reform in the New England Renaissance* (Hartford, CT).
- Jeppie, S. (1991), 'Leadership and Loyalties: The Imams of Nineteenth Century Colonial Cape Town, South Africa', *Journal of Religion in Africa*, vol. 26, 139–162.
- Khan, A. (1951), *My Life and Experiences* (London).
- Kochanska, G. and N. Aksan (1995), 'Mother-Child Mutually Positive Affect, the Quality of Child Compliance to Requests and Prohibitions, and Maternal Control as Correlates of Early Internalization', *Child Development*, vol. 66, 236–254.
- Kochanska, G., N. Aksan and A.L. Koenig (1995), 'A Longitudinal Study of the Roots of Preschoolers' Conscience: Committed Compliance and Emerging Internalization', *Child Development*, vol. 66, 1752–1769.
- Koolhof, S. and R. Ross (2005), 'Upas, September and the Bugis at the Cape of Good Hope: The Context of a Slave's Letter', *Archipel Année*, vol. 70, 281–308.
- Laidler, P.W. and M. Gelfand (1971), *South Africa. Its Medical History 1652–1898: A Medical and Social Study* (Cape Town).
- Lewis, G. (1987), *Between the Wire and the Wall: A History of South African 'Coloured' Politics* (New York).
- Loos, J. (2009), 'How Abdol Kept his Furniture in the Family', *Cape Argus*, 28 May 2009.
- MacKenzie, J.M. (1993), 'Essay and Reflection: On Scotland and the Empire', *The International History Review*, vol. 15, 714–739.
- MacKenzie, J.M. (2011), 'Scots in New Zealand and Elsewhere in the British Empire: An International Perspective', *Immigrants & Minorities*, vol. 29, 154–174.
- Myerson, J. (1980), *The New England Transcendentalists and the 'Dial': A History of the Magazine and its Contributors* (Rutherford, NJ).
- North, H.M. (1896), 'Our Girls at Mount Holyoke College', *Demorest's Family Magazine*, July 1896, 518.
- Raynard, J.H. (2002), *Dr. Abdurahman: A Biographical Memoir* (edited by M. Adhikari; Cape Town).



- Rassool, Y.S. (2000), *District Six – Lest We Forget. Recapturing Subjugated Cultural Histories of Cape Town (1897–1956)* (Bellville).
- Ritchie, Y.S. (1918), *The History of the South African College, 1829–1918* (Cape Town).
- Robert, D.L. (1998), 'Ferguson, Abbie Park and Bliss, Anna Elvira' in G.H. Anderson (ed.), *Biographical Dictionary of Christian Missions* (New York), 209–210.
- Simons, H.J. and R. Simons (1969), *Class and Colour in South Africa, 1850–1950* (Aylesbury).
- Steenkamp, W. (1979), *Poor Man's Bioscope* (Cape Town).
- Stow, S.D.L. (1887), *History of Mount Holyoke Seminary, South Hadley, Mass. during its First Half Century, 1837–1887* (Boston, MA).
- Van der Ross, R.E. (1990), *Say It Out Loud: The APO Presidential Addresses and Other Major Political Speeches 1906–1940 of Dr. Abdullah Abdurahman* (Cape Town).
- Van der Ross, R.E. (2015), *In Our Own Skins: A Political History of the Coloured People* (Cape Town and Johannesburg).
- Vann, R.T. (1982), 'The Youth of Centuries of Childhood', *History and Theory*, vol. 21, 279–297.
- Veitch, N. (2003), *SACS 175: A Celebration* (Cape Town).
- Versluis, A. (1993), *American Transcendentalism and Asian Religions* (New York).
- Willan, B.P. (1984), *Sol Plaatje: South African Nationalist, 1876–1932* (London).
- Willemse, H. (2014), 'Identity, Place and Politics in the Auto/Biographies of Two South African Educators', *Life Writing*, vol. 11, 231–246.
- Worden, N., E. van Heyningen and V. Bickford-Smith (1998), *Cape Town: The Making of a City* (Claremont, Cape Town).

# Barthélémy Boganda between Charisma and Cosmology

## *Interpretive Perspectives on Biography in Equatorial African History*

*Klaas van Walraven*

### Disaster in the Forest

The life of Barthélémy Boganda (ca. 1910–1959), political leader in Oubangui-Chari before independence, is a challenging subject of study.<sup>1</sup> The reason for this is that an enquiry into the biography of Boganda, who was raised to become a Catholic priest and later developed into an anti-colonial activist, yields one thing in particular: ambiguity. Boganda is important for our understanding of twentieth-century African history for a number of reasons. These are spelt out further below, but here it should be noted that they revolve around the extraordinary character of Boganda as a political agitator and an underlying narrative of religious beliefs and the societal relevance these had in the context of Equatorial civilisation – beliefs that, by their very nature, are indefinite and hard to describe with any precision.<sup>2</sup> This is the case not just because the spirit-populated cosmologies of Equatorial Africa<sup>3</sup> constituted an invisible universe with which people could communicate (through divination) and which they could call upon in their interaction with other human beings.<sup>4</sup> In the course of the twentieth century, these religious beliefs themselves became convoluted through missionary endeavour. Western missionaries introduced the dogmas of the Christian faith in – even tried to impose them on and have them replace – the region's variant pre-colonial cosmologies. This went hand

1 Oubangui-Chari was the colonial name of the Central African Republic, CAR. For reasons of clarity this chapter adopts the francophone spelling of Central African toponyms. Hence, Oubangui-Chari, not Ubangui-Shari, etc.

2 P. Geschiere, *Witchcraft, Intimacy, and Trust: Africa in Comparison* (Chicago, IL and London, 1997), 8–10; B. Meyer, 'Response to Ter Haar and Ellis', *Africa*, 79 (2009), 415.

3 Equatorial Africa is loosely defined here as encompassing the territories of the former 'Afrique Equatoriale Française' (AEF) plus Cameroon and Equatorial Guinea.

4 The literature is vast. See e.g. S. Ellis and G. Ter Haar, *Worlds of Power: Religious Thought and Political Practice in Africa* (London, 2004), 56–60; D. Gordon, *Invisible Agents: Spirits in a Central African History* (Athens, OH, 2012); A. Ceriana Mayneri, *Sorcellerie et prophétisme en Centrafrique. L'imaginaire de la dépossession en pays banda* (Paris, 2014).

in hand with misinterpretations of African religions or flawed translation of (doctrinal) concepts that would, in turn, impact on Equatorial Africans' understanding of spiritual issues.<sup>5</sup>

The ambiguity of the fractured belief worlds that ensued can be seen in the life and work of Boganda. In the course of his priestly and political careers, he would propound a syncretism of beliefs that included the Catholic faith and adherence to notions of modernity, as well as an articulation of ideas that were part of cosmologies in pre-colonial times. The evidence for these beliefs, 'old' and 'modern', is often ambiguous, as is that for their persistence and function. While, for example, Boganda would later break with the Catholic Church over the issue of celibacy, it is not easy to be conclusive about whether certain of his beliefs – especially those tied to pre-colonial notions – were intrinsically held or instrumental. Even the evidence for their existence is ambiguous, as it partly depends on rumour or attribution by contemporaries.

Moreover, Boganda's life and work were, to some extent, marked by a volatile character, erratic behaviour, and a certain turbulence. This observation invites questions that are appropriate in the field of psychology or psychiatry, but which have a thorny relationship with the empirical demands of historical scholarship. The consequences are the more serious in the study of Barthélémy Boganda, as his childhood and personal trajectory were part of a broader history of colonialism whose impact on Equatorial societies was catastrophic – one could be tempted to say 'traumatic' were it not for its empirically contentious quality.<sup>6</sup> Fundamentally, the elusiveness and tension surrounding Boganda are caused by the impossibility to actually *know* what went on inside the head of his persona, whilst this is precisely what biographers crave and are obliged to attempt.

Fortunately, since Boganda was educated by missionaries there are abundant sources in missionary archives – notably those of the Spiritans or Holy Ghost Fathers, who contributed substantially to his upbringing.<sup>7</sup> These sources include Boganda's personal diaries whose entries stretch from the late 1920s to mid-1940s.<sup>8</sup> In the latter period, he embarked on a political career that quickly became turbulent, with the result that an additional paper trail developed in

5 Ceriana Mayneri, *Sorcellerie et prophétisme*, *passim*.

6 J. Vansina, *Paths in the Rainforests: Towards a History of Political Tradition in Equatorial Africa* (Madison, WI, 1990), 239–245; C. Coquery-Vidrovitch, *Le Congo au Temps des Grandes Compagnies Concessionnaires, 1898–1930* (Paris, 1972), 103–115, and 171–219.

7 The Archives Générales Spiritaines (hereafter AGS) are located in Chevilly-Larue.

8 AGS, SF-242.1/113539. See K. van Walraven, 'The Diaries of Barthélémy Boganda: Priest and Politician in French Equatorial Africa (1910–1959)', *History in Africa*, 44 (2017), 237–264.

the files of the colonial administration.<sup>9</sup> Lack of space precludes discussion of the methodological challenges posed by these sources, but two points must be made. First, that, in contrast to missionary sources, some colonial reports provide insight into Boganda's religious imagination<sup>10</sup> and its relevance for politics – indeed, reveal the arguable nature of the distinction between the 'political' and 'religious' in Equatorial society. Second, that at the basis of Boganda's appearance in the written historical record lay an accident. It was a calamity that not only created a fundamental turning-point in his life, but would also exercise long-term influence on his being, choices, and functioning that can only be explained by reference to certain psychological aspects and enduring cultural-behavioural traits as ingrained in the morals of the Equatorial region's (pre-colonial) cosmologies.

Thus, lost as a child in the rainforest, Boganda was picked up by a colonial patrol in June 1920 and put in a state orphanage in the town of Mbaïki.<sup>11</sup> From there, he was brought by a missionary to a post of the Spiritans in Bétou<sup>12</sup> for his christening and education in a range of missionary institutions. This would span much of the following decades and culminate in his ordination in 1938 as the first African priest of Oubangui-Chari.<sup>13</sup> The way in which Europeans picked up Boganda in 1920 cannot be reconstructed from sources of that period. Archival sources provide a detailed context, however, to this distinct event. The area where it took place, the Lobaye region, was then part of the French colony of 'Moyen Congo'. As other parts of the rainforest, it was torn apart by the duopoly exercised by colonial administrators and concession companies. Terror was used to coerce the population into furnishing local produce, especially wild rubber. The outrages by which these practices were marked led to the break-up of local societies, with populations fleeing before the encroaching Europeans.<sup>14</sup> Pre-colonial networks were dislocated and changes in local ecologies brought disease. Populations were decimated. The extent to which

9 Mostly stored later in France's Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer, Aix-en-Provence (hereafter ANOM).

10 This chapter refers to 'imagination' as the deep-seated human consciousness with its total imaginary abilities in the Sartrian sense. The term 'imaginary' (equivalent to the French 'imaginaire') is eschewed for an adjective.

11 The time can be inferred from *Colonie du Moyen Congo, Circonscription de la Lobaye. Rapport Mensuel, 1920, 2ème trimestre, tournées*; ANOM, GGAEF, 4 (2) d 27.

12 Probably the following October. *Dossier et texte final manuscrit d'une émission radio (Radio Notre Dame, Bangui) faite par Ghislain de Banville en 1996*; AGS, SF-263.5/13507.

13 *Journal de la Mission Notre-Dame de Bangui, 27–28 March 1938*; AGS, 5J2.3a,b/108572.

14 For numerous by now well-known details, see Coquery-Vidrovitch, *Congo au Temps des Grandes Compagnies Concessionnaires*, 173 ff; A. Gide, *Voyage au Congo. Carnets de route* (Paris, 1927); R. Maran, *Batouala. Véritable roman nègre* (Paris, 1921); M. Homet, *Congo*.



PHOTO 9.1 In missionary care ca. 1923

the Lobaye region in particular was ravaged can be gauged from the numerous orphans that began roaming the forest. The phenomenon became so prevalent that by the late 1910s the colonial administration established infrastructure to provide shelter.<sup>15</sup> For their part, missionaries, in search of converts, focused on children as these had not been fully formed by their society's culture. In particular, they had not gone through the rites of passage to adulthood and were therefore more susceptible to new religious teachings than grown-ups.<sup>16</sup>

It was in this context that Boganda was found. A later testimony from a nephew provides a narrative of what occurred – it is likely that this story was transmitted through the family line: having lost, a few years previously, his parents as well as a guardian through European violence (his mother reportedly murdered by the militia man of a concession company), Boganda contracted

*Terre de souffrances* (Paris, 1934); A. Vermeulen, *De Ingang der Hel. Episode uit het Afrikaansche Pioniersleven* (Amsterdam, 1938).

15 Notice Circonscription de la Lobaye (n.d. but 1921), *Ecoles – Oeuvres des orphelins de la Lobaye*; ANOM, GGAEF, 4(2) d 30.

16 Vansina, *Paths in the Rainforest*, 245.

smallpox in 1920. In June that year, his elder half-brother (the nephew's father) was ordered to bring him to one of his uncles. On their way they ran into the colonial patrol and – as Central Africans had by then learnt to do when encountering whites – Boganda's brother fled into the forest. The smallpox victim was left to confront the patrol on his own.<sup>17</sup> The young boy, of Ngbaka extraction, would have muttered the word 'Gboganda'. It meant something like 'I am (from) elsewhere'.<sup>18</sup> Probably he wanted to explain that he was lost, with the patrol thinking he was mentioning his name – which in its European form 'Boganda' stuck with him for the rest of his life.<sup>19</sup> The patrol's head had him brought to the orphanage.<sup>20</sup> The story, if surrounded by some uncertainty of sources,<sup>21</sup> is pregnant with historical and religious meaning. Through a little boy's nightmare, it encapsulates the colonial catastrophes that struck Equatorial society, redemption and, in the alleged origin of his name, a contemporary or posthumous<sup>22</sup> allusion to the Gospel of St John<sup>23</sup> – underscoring, in turn, Boganda's later role as (political) saviour.

In focusing on these aspects, this chapter does not centre on Boganda's biography as such. Rather, it explores the possibilities that the study of his life holds for a deeper understanding of the dramatic meanderings in the history of Equatorial Africa in the early twentieth century. It tackles this from two different but related angles. One is the perspective of 'cosmology'<sup>24</sup> (or

17 French Wikipedia entry on Boganda (accessed 24 June 2015), based on an interview with Boganda's nephew. D. Gbanga, 'L'interview du général Sylvestre Xavier Yangongo', Grands événements radiophoniques, Radio Centrafrique, 28 March 2008 (no longer accessible).

18 This detail seems based on P. Kalck (an ex-colonial administrator and amateur historian who knew Boganda in the 1950s): *Barthélémy Boganda 1910–1959. Elu de Dieu et des Centrafricains* (Saint-Maur, 1995), 18. Kalck did not cite sources. Did he hear this from Boganda? *Ga nda* signifies 'elsewhere', but the meaning of *Gbo* remains unclear. J. Calloc'h, *Vocabulaire Français-Gmbwaga-Gbanziri-Monjombo précédé d'éléments de grammaire* (Paris, 1911), *passim*.

19 He would receive his Christian name 'Barthélémy' upon baptism.

20 The officer does not mention the event, probably because finding orphans in the forest was not unusual. It is certain he was touring the Yaka area between 14 and 19 June 1920. See Colonie du Moyen Congo, Circonscription de la Lobaye. Rapport Mensuel, 1920, 2ème trimestre, tournées.

21 See note 18.

22 A crucial point that seems tied to the question of the source. See note 18.

23 'I am not of this world'. John, 8: 23.

24 A body of beliefs based on mythological, religious and esoteric oral literature and traditions of creation and eschatology. In encompassing stories constitutive of societies, it is considered here a specific dimension of 'religion'. The two concepts overlap, as 'religion' also harbours mythology. Ellis and Ter Haar, while privileging 'religion' or religious beliefs, also show the two are intertwined. See *Worlds of Power*, 14.

cosmological imagination): religious-cultural registers, African and European, which purported to differ yet at times allowed comparable interpretations of Boganda's life and, in doing so, blended in confusing ways. The other involves reference to psychological explanations that can help put features of his biography in sharper relief.

### The Interest of Boganda

First, however, a few more words are in order on the historical import of Boganda's person. From the outset, it is the drama of his childhood days that catches the eye. What happened to him then is not unique – it stood for the cataclysm of colonisation. But, as shown below, there is evidence for a later, troubled mind on Boganda's part over his boyhood years. The study of his life thus affords a look into the mental consequences that colonial destruction wrought in one individual being. In turn, the discrepancy between his destitute beginnings and subsequent priestly-political careers reflects the means of self-advancement that were also part of the colonial dispensation (especially through its missionary dimension). His missionary upbringing profoundly affected Boganda's person, as seen in his relations with women and his ambivalence towards aspects of pre-colonial civilisation that he caricatured with the perverting terminology of missionary education but from whose values he could not completely free himself.

In the course of the 1940s, Boganda's relations with his missionary superiors became fraught with difficulties. He grew resentful over their paternalism and condescension and was dissatisfied with the financial side of his priestly status. Relations with women would eventually lead to Boganda's eviction from the priesthood. As numerous other Africans who had benefited from a missionary education, he embarked on a political career that was marked by a meteoric rise to fame. With a racial and political awareness that began to develop in the 1930s, Boganda clashed head-on with colonial officials and settlers the following decade, and his problems with them were to continue deep into the 1950s. Unrelenting and uncompromising in his criticism of their racism and hypocrisy, he exasperated the French and became an inescapable factor in the colony's political equation. In the course of this, Boganda became a gifted leader and agitator. Besides articulating Pan-Africanist sentiments (which he shared with other anti-colonial leaders), he formulated a human-rights perspective on decolonisation that was grafted on a colonial system marked by abuse and memories of European terror. In 1946, he gained his first electoral victory – a seat in the National Assembly in Paris. He was never dislodged from

it, and it afforded him a crucial if not complete immunity from harassment. By 1951, Boganda had to all intents and purposes become unassailable (there is a parallel here with Kwame Nkrumah in the Gold Coast). Dominating political rivals and boasting an unbroken electoral record, he accumulated positions in rapid succession.<sup>25</sup>

His political *practice* was extraordinary. Steeped in the Classics by his missionary upbringing, he had an aptitude for Latin and became a tremendous orator. He was virulent in his cynicism, showed off his education to whites less endowed than himself and never declined from pointing out the inconsistencies of his adversaries: he was confrontational. Rhetorically brutal, Boganda also expressed a fierce anti-communism, and while implacable towards racist settlers pleaded the preservation of constitutional links with France; both points contributed to his invulnerability. As shown below, the cosmological aspect to his politicking is the most fascinating – it incarnated the fractured spirit world of Equatorial Africa. In the pantheon of Africa's leaders of independence, he was complex and atypical.

### Equatorial Cosmology and the Imagination of Boganda

Boganda was ten, possibly two or three years younger, when he was picked up in the forest.<sup>26</sup> He had thus been exposed to some extent to the beliefs and values of his people, as embodied in the cosmologies, religious and mythological, of the northern Equatorial region. These cosmologies were invariably characterised by the existence of an invisible supreme being. Boganda's people, ethnically defined in the nineteenth–twentieth centuries as Ngbaka-Mabo, called this superior spirit *Mungo*, which materialised itself and created heaven, earth, animals, and human beings. Incarnated in the form of a man, it was at the origin of the world but – as in most African religions – then turned its back on it. Substantialised in the multiple forms of the universe, *Mungo* was an

25 A seat for the Lobaye in the Territorial Assembly (1952), the mayoralty of the capital Bangui (1956), the presidency of the 'Grand Conseil' (AEF's federal parliament in the federation's capital Brazzaville, 1957), vice-presidency of the 'Ligue internationale contre le racisme et l'antisémitisme' (1951) and the presidency of the CAR's autonomous government (December 1958).

26 J.D. Pénel, *Barthélémy Boganda. Ecrits et discours. 1946–1951. La lutte décisive* (Paris, 1995), 19–20; J. Serre, *Biographie de David Dacko. Premier président de la république centrafricaine 1930–2003* (Paris, 2007), 281.



immanent and not a transcendental divinity: abstract, distant but everywhere, it was not the object of worship – at any rate by the mid-twentieth century.<sup>27</sup>

In the nineteenth century, this supreme creator spirit became known as *Mokome/Moome*, a term derived from 'Muhammad' and whose introduction likely coincided with the Muslim slave raids to the north of the Lobaye.<sup>28</sup> It was this term that missionaries later used in their Ngbaka catechisms as the name for the God of Christendom.<sup>29</sup> But if it was Christian missionaries that made *Mungo* disappear (the Muslim factor was too ephemeral in the Lobaye region), *Mungo* became assimilated to *Mokome/Moome* rather than being substituted by it – thus raising questions about Central Africans' early understanding of Christianity.<sup>30</sup>

Essentially spiritual cosmologies, the religion of the Ngbaka and other Equatorial peoples abounded with ghosts – apart from the supreme being itself. First among them, for the Ngbaka-Mabo, was *Gbaso*, a mythological figure who was pure and possessed supernatural powers and in stories and fables later (under Christian influence?) developed more human features.<sup>31</sup> *Gbaso* stood in contradistinction to another cosmological force, *To* – the trickster, a central figure in Ngbaka myth who had a creative and a destructive side. *To* fell out with the creator spirit and by subterfuge took everything from heaven necessary for people to live on earth. For the Ngbaka-Mabo, *To* had a human form without incarnating the ancestors (there being a separate cult for them).<sup>32</sup> Perhaps equivalent to the Christian idea of the Fall or, rather, the Promethean emergence of earthly-celestial opposition, this myth explained the cleavage between heaven and earth and the differentiation between the wild and domesticated spheres: bush vs village, in the latter of which peace reigned. In combination with *Gbaso*, the trickster embodied a duality that undergirded much of the Equatorial worldview, both in its metaphysical and

27 This phenomenon is called *deus otiosus* in religion studies. This chapter eschews the signs used in Ngbaka orthography. S. Arom and J.M.C. Thomas, *Les Mimbo. Génies du piègeage et le monde surnaturel des Ngbaka-Mabo (République Centrafricaine)* (Paris, 1974), 27–28.

28 Arom and Thomas, *Les Mimbo*, 28–29; J.M.C. Thomas, *Contes Ngbaka-Ma'Bo (République centrafricaine): Proverbes, devinettes ou énigmes, chants et prière* (Paris, 1970), 162.

29 Thomas, *Contes Ngbaka-Ma'Bo*, 162; Arom and Thomas, *Les Mimbo*, 28; *Vocabulaire Français-Gmbwaga*, 88.

30 Arom and Thomas, *Les Mimbo*, 28–29.

31 Thomas, *Contes Ngbaka-Ma'Bo*, 30 ff and M. Henrix, *Croyances et rites des Ngbaka-Minagende (RDC)* (Ghent, 2009), 19. The Ngbaka-Minagende in the north-west of the Belgian Congo shared traits in common if not ancient common origins with the Ngbaka-Mabo.

32 For neighbouring peoples, he was the 'héro civilisateur' or mythical spider. Thomas, *Contes Ngbaka-Ma'Bo*, 33; Arom & Thomas, *Les Mimbo*, 38–40; D. Bigo, *Pouvoir et obéissance en Centrafrique* (Paris, 1988), 213 ff; Henrix, *Croyances et rites des Ngbaka-Minagende*, 21 ff.

worldly (political) manifestations. Thus, with *Gbaso* being the sage, *To* was the fool, a comical, burlesque figure, an ordinary, strong man but without special powers – a fallen angel.<sup>33</sup> This duality represented the positive and negative aspect of human nature, stood at the basis of the social order<sup>34</sup> and fed concepts about power and legitimacy – force combined with cunning being the criterion of ‘good’ power. One without the other would lead to weakness, tyranny, and disorder.<sup>35</sup>

This cosmology, which served as a warning against the abuse of power, reflected the characteristics of pre-colonial organisation among the peoples in the wider region, where political power was duplicated by way of different institutions.<sup>36</sup> The cosmological values underlying this became subject to shifts as a result of colonisation and the missionary endeavour. The spiritual forces inhabiting the Ngbaka imagination became hierarchised into more and less important entities, among which the *mungo*, ‘genii’ of stones,<sup>37</sup> were to retain or develop a regular cult. These represented anthropomorphic beings believed to settle in translucent stones with the help of people of whom they had taken possession – a ritual practised by women through a secret society, with initiation resulting in special knowledge and healing. Geared at preserving equilibrium between the forces of good and evil, these spirits formed the extension of the belief in the supreme being, *Mungo*, but as a result of Christianity became relegated to the realm of initiation associations.<sup>38</sup> Then there was the concept of *kulu* – soul or an individual’s spirit, which enjoyed some autonomy vis-à-vis the person (it could leave the body at night, as demonstrated through dreams). Individuals could project their soul beyond their person, materialising into another physical form (such as a mini leopard) or desubstantialising in case of danger. If this could enhance a person’s powers, *kulu* could also be drawn from the body against one’s will and become the playground of sorcerers. At death, one’s soul would join the ancestor spirits, who could communicate with the

33 Thomas, *Contes Ngbaka-Ma’Bo*, 30 ff; Arom and Thomas, *Les Mimbo*, 33. The concept of the fallen angel resembles the trickster figure though in more demonic form. Revelation, 12: 7–10.

34 Its creation represented the second key moment, after the creation of the world itself. Bigo, *Pouvoir et obéissance en Centrafrique*, 215–216.

35 *Ibid.*, 216. On legitimacy, see M.G. Schatzberg, *Political Legitimacy in Middle Africa: Father, Family, Food* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN, 2001).

36 Bigo, *Pouvoir et obéissance en Centrafrique*, 19–25; J.M.C. Thomas, *Les Ngbaka de la Lobaye. Le dépeuplement rural chez une population forestière de la république centrafricaine* (Paris and The Hague, 1963), 115–117.

37 Actually seven stones. Arom and Thomas, *Les Mimbo*, 29. Is there a Christian influence here?

38 *Ibid.*, 28–34.

living. Their cult, however, progressively declined and its underlying ideas blurred into other manifestations of *kulu*. The exception to this was formed by the *wama*, who, by the end of the colonial period, still assured ancestor worship.<sup>39</sup> The *wama* ('he of the cure', magical or natural), represented a key intermediary between the Ngbaka people and the forces of their cosmology. Responsible for healing (of body and soul), he performed auguring rituals and sanctioned chiefly decisions. The *wama* operated at village level in the context of the family ancestor cult. Of all Ngbaka institutions his authority was least affected by European rule.<sup>40</sup>

The missionary endeavour led to the imposition of a colonial-theological frame destructive of the cosmological aspect of Ngbaka life. The supreme being may have been transformed and imported into the Christian faith, but other spiritual forces – and associated values – were dismissed as representations of the devil. Such was the strength of the missionary condemnation of what were inseparable emanations of *Mungo*, the supreme pantheistic entity, that the Ngbaka language developed a dismissive word for spirit – *zabolo*.<sup>41</sup> In the process, the *wama* became seen as 'féticheur' ('sorcerer'), which blurred his benevolent mobilisation of supernatural forces for the community with the malevolent recourse to magical powers by anti-social individuals. The latter was known as *mbu*, i.e. 'impure', 'jealous', and, by extension, 'sorcerer', who upset the community's moral equilibrium and against whom the *wama* afforded protection.<sup>42</sup> As elsewhere in colonial Africa, the missionary failure to realise that African spiritual power was employed for socially constructive and destructive purposes, coupled with the condemnation of both, represented a fundamental attack on the moral health of entire communities.<sup>43</sup> Thus, decades of proselytising led to conversion to Christianity, but Ngbakas would retain the belief that various spiritual powers exercised control over the material world. In the process, missionaries came to be seen as 'super *wamas*' equipped with formidable powers.<sup>44</sup>

39 *Ibid.*, 34–39.

40 Thomas, *Les Ngbaka de la Lobaye*, 115–116 and G.V. Sévy, 'Le wama des Ngbaka de la Lobaye', *Cahiers d'études africaines*, 1 (1960), 3, 103–104, and 109.

41 Derived from 'diable'. Arom and Thomas, *Les Mimbo*, 29 and 40. *Minakele*, derived from 'miracle', came to signify more or less malevolent magic. Sévy, 'Le wama', 122.

42 Arom and Thomas, 'Les Mimbo', 37; Thomas, *Les Ngbaka de la Lobaye*, 115; Calloc'h, *Vocabulaire Français-Gmbwaga*, 188; Sévy, 'Le wama', 103 and 118–119.

43 G. ter Haar and S. Ellis, 'The Occult Does not Exist: A Response to Terence Ranger', *Africa*, 79 (2009), 400 and Vansina, *Paths in the Rainforests*, 246.

44 Sévy, 'Le wama', 111–112.

While in its early stage of shift, it is unlikely that a seven- to ten year-old like Boganda would not have been affected by the cosmology of his people. As noted in the chapter by Eve Wong in this volume,<sup>45</sup> child development studies demonstrate that a child builds its knowledge of morality when being three to seven years of age. It is during this period that it begins to internalise group values and norms – including religious ones – as well as notions of right and wrong. In the case of Boganda, this must have been facilitated by the fact that the spirit-populated universe of the Ngbaka fed into stories and fables that were part of oral tradition.<sup>46</sup> These embodied a diverse range of moral lessons, including on the consequences of losing the support of one's family,<sup>47</sup> the adventures of the disfavoured youth who overcomes through cleverness,<sup>48</sup> the supernatural saviour,<sup>49</sup> the magical adversary<sup>50</sup> and the meeting out of supernatural justice.<sup>51</sup>

In any case, Boganda's biography is marked by Equatorial African representations of the supernatural at different stages in his life. Some accounts thus claim that his father was a 'sorcerer' or 'witch doctor', who practised anthropophagic ritual. There is nothing to connect this to as data for this are lacking.<sup>52</sup> Boganda himself made reference to his father in such vein, asserting that the rituals in which his father engaged involved the consumption of human flesh.<sup>53</sup> If true, it could have referred to the symbolic 'eating' of body parts – a widespread practice in west-Equatorial Africa where the body was also seen as a 'fetish',<sup>54</sup> i.e. harbouring supernatural powers located in the belly, which could be manipulated and which were associated with notions of authority.<sup>55</sup> Had Boganda in his childhood heard about his father's feats? Were they the practices of a *wama*? As shown below, Boganda understood the difference

45 See Chapter 8.

46 See the rich corpus by Thomas, *Contes Ngbaka-Ma'Bo, passim*, recorded in the 1950s and 1960s.

47 *Ibid.*, stories 20, 27, and 28.

48 *Ibid.*, stories 2, 4, 7, 21, 24, 27, 28, and 38.

49 *Ibid.*, stories 17, 19, 26–28, 30–32, 34, 35, 38, 39, 46, 48, and 49.

50 *Ibid.*, stories 6, 19, 25, 26, 30–35, 38, 39, 41, 44, and 50.

51 *Ibid.*, stories 6, 9, 21–23, 30, 33, 35, 38, 39, 42, 44, 46, and 47.

52 J. Petitjean, 'L'Oubangui autonome', February 1960; AGS, SF-241.15/113538; C. Kinata, 'Barthélémy Boganda et l'église catholique en Oubangui-Chari', *Cahiers d'études africaines*, 191 (2008), 549–565; Wikipedia entry on Boganda (note 17).

53 'Death of a Strongman', *Time*, 13 April 1959.

54 I.e. an object for communication with the supernatural, for healing or other (evil) purposes.

55 F. Bernault, 'Body, Power and Sacrifice in Equatorial Africa', *Journal of African History*, 47 (2006) 210–214.

between *wama* and *mbu* – the latter magical exploits for anti-social gains and thus hardly a reason for bragging. While his Christian upbringing made Boganda refer to (supposed) anthropophagic practices in terms of the missionary caricature – his ‘fathers showed bravery for any piece of fresh meat’ – he did (or could) not distance himself completely from his ‘cannibalistic’ forebears. In 1933, he wrote to his missionary patron that the ‘blood of the Bondjos<sup>56</sup> flowed in [his] veins’, while in the late 1940s he challenged an audience of French priests with the comment that his father and grandfather had been cannibals but that *he* had not yet had the pleasure.<sup>57</sup> The latter remark was certainly made to expose European stereotyping of his political struggle, but the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation (whereby the host and wine at the Eucharist upon consumption become the blood and body of Christ) made his reference to *African* religious practices ambiguous, both at a personal level and in broader cultural respects.<sup>58</sup>

From early on, Boganda was thus used to set his religious activities partly in the cosmological idiom of his flock (though he certainly cherished the status embodied by his priestly habit).<sup>59</sup> He did not discourage its cultural interpretation of his work, although, like his European colleagues, he confiscated ‘fetishes’ that were not part of Catholic worship.<sup>60</sup> In 1942, he wrote his superior that Banda communities in the Grimari region (still more steeped in pre-colonial beliefs than the Ngbaka)<sup>61</sup> explained his priestly severity through the attribution of various epithets, including *mourou* – leopard, that Equatorial symbol of power.<sup>62</sup> That he felt far from embarrassed about this becomes clear in a logbook entry, which noted that his reputation as a leopard enhanced his effectiveness. Toughness (to combat polygamy, amongst other

56 A colonial fantasy about a non-existent group practising extreme forms of cannibalism. W.J. Samarin, ‘Bondjo Ethnicity and Colonial Imagination’, *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 18 (1984), 345–365.

57 Boganda to Mgr Grandin, Yaoundé, 30 December 1933; AGS, SF-241.14/113537; author’s conversation with Father René Charrier, Chevilly-Larue, 18 March 2015 (‘pères ont été si vaillants pour un peu de viande fraîche’; ‘le sang mbonjo [qui] coule dans mes veines’ – all translations in this chapter kvw).

58 See Bernault, ‘Body, Power and Sacrifice in Equatorial Africa’, 227.

59 As witnessed by several diary entries (n.d. but 1930s). AGS, SF-242.1/113539.

60 He asked his superior to send him crosses, medals and pictures (obviously of Catholic saints) to replace them. Boganda to Mgr Grandin, Bambari, 16 June 1942; AGS, SF-241.14/113537.

61 Ceriana Mayneri, *Sorcellerie et prophétisme*, *passim*.

62 Vansina, *Paths in the Rainforests*, *passim*. Other epithets were *bamara* (lion) and *kpala-kongo*, scorpion – he who stings without warning. Boganda to Grandin, 16 June 1942.

things) was necessary as long as the Banda were not convinced Christians.<sup>63</sup> It demonstrates that he was completely familiar with the Equatorial imagination of power in its worldly and metaphysical representations. Thus, while travelling the Banda region on his motorbike to build chapels, baptise 'pagans', discourage polygamy, and enrol girls in school – was he a kind of 'super *wama*' whose material superiority betrayed the command of unknown cosmological forces?<sup>64</sup> Or was he *mbu* – impure, a sorcerer,<sup>65</sup> who did not shy away from striking at the moral equilibrium of Banda society? It is difficult to say anything definitive about this, not only because the answer would vary with the people who were on the receiving end of Boganda's actions, but also because the developments of the twentieth century had led to a crisis in the cognitive realm of Equatorial cultures.<sup>66</sup> Opinions about Boganda must have differed as values were shifting. The young were generally more likely to listen to him than the old.<sup>67</sup>

Boganda, at any rate, showed little sign of regret about his actions. His anger at Banda authorities who resisted his proselytising<sup>68</sup> must have been partly caused by an awareness of his ambiguous position, caught as he was between an African society from which he had become progressively alienated<sup>69</sup> and a colonial-churchly hierarchy in which he occupied a subaltern place. In any case, he became frustrated with what he saw as the insufficient means that the Church put at his disposal – 'the devil' was living in his purse, he wrote to his superior.<sup>70</sup> His years in the Grimari region (1941–1946) would become a turning point for his relations with the Church, missionaries, and Europeans generally, a necessary stepping-stone for his embarking on a political career and the development of a uniquely confrontational style. This was presaged in a row with a colonial official in 1943–1944 over his construction of chapels and his broader interference in the socio-religious life of the Banda region, which the official feared risked impairing stability. The administrator had imprisoned a catechist, who on Boganda's authority had built a chapel without traditional

63 Journal de Grimari, 10 February 1943; AGS, SF-241.14/113537.

64 On the link between the material and immaterial in the lives of missionaries, see Sévy, 'Le *wama*', 112.

65 *Ondro|eyiondro* are the equivalents in Banda. Ceriana Mayneri, *Sorcellerie et prophétisme*, 9–10.

66 Vansina, *Paths in the Rainforests*, 239 ff and Ceriana Mayneri, *Sorcellerie et prophétisme, passim*.

67 Ceriana Mayneri, *Sorcellerie et prophétisme*, 234–235.

68 On one occasion, he allegedly shot a cartridge filled with salt at a chief. Mgr Grandin, Bangui, to Mgr Le Hunsec, Paris, 3 April 1947; AGS, 5J1.3a8/108522.

69 A visit to his native village in the 1930s would have underscored this. *Annales des Pères du Saint Esprit*, November 1938, 269; AGS, 5J1.2b9/108513.

70 Boganda to Grandin, 16 June 1942.

sanction. This triggered correspondence with Boganda, who had had small fights with the ‘chef de subdivision’ before<sup>71</sup> and now treated him to a barrage of legal arguments, biting cynicism and a show of knowledge of the Classics. In his logbook Boganda wrote contentedly that, while for the administrator he was a mere ‘little Ngbaka from Bangui’, the officer had nevertheless apologised.<sup>72</sup> Was this an insignificant detail illustrating the changing balance of power between colonial officialdom and members of an emancipating African elite? Or did we witness *To* in action here, the trickster, who became embroiled with the divine spirit and through sheer cunning stole its learning? In his logbook, Boganda likened the ‘chef de subdivision’ to ‘the devil’ and mentioned that the official was outraged – the administrator’s surname actually happened to be ‘Dieu’.<sup>73</sup>

This is not an essentialist argument, but an attempt to trace the different possible paths that contemporary imaginations, centred around the persona of Boganda, could take. The trickster figure represents a fundamental mythical concept across human cultures – African,<sup>74</sup> European and other – standing for and depicting a range of human attributes and morphing, according to context, from one related archetypal character into another.<sup>75</sup> That Boganda was aware of ways of imagining different from the Catholic one and the purported rationality of European culture becomes clear in his response to French efforts to dismiss him and his anti-colonial passions, as driven by the dark forces of African ‘superstition’. Partly out of exasperation with his relentless agitation, but also because of their seeming familiarity with (or confusion about) African religious thinking, Europeans also saw supernatural dimensions in his politics.<sup>76</sup> When a colonial paper in 1957 claimed that ‘the evil spirit, that is to say the demon that appeared to have left Boganda, ha[d] retaken possession of him’, he retorted in Oubangui’s Territorial Assembly that

71 Journal de Grimari, 24 February 1943; Journal de la mission catholique de Grimari au Centrafrique (ex Oubangui-Chari) de 1922 à 1976, 10 April 1943; AGS, 5J2.6a,b.

72 Journal de Grimari, 30 June 1944 and draft letter, 10 July 1944, personal unbound diary; AGS, SF-242.1/113539 (‘un petit Ngbaka de Bgui’ [sic]). As the logbook entry post-dated the (draft) letter, did Boganda register the entry at a later moment?

73 Journal de Grimari, 30 June 1944 (‘le diable est furieux’).

74 D. Paulme, ‘Typologie des contes africains du Décepteur’, *Cahiers d’études africaines*, 15 (1975), no. 60, 569 ff.

75 Such as the clown, the fallen angel, the jester, Frankenstein, Prometheus, the sorcerer’s apprentice. The literature on this is vast. See e.g. S.E. Lunquist, *The Trickster: A Transformation Archetype* (San Francisco, CA, 1991); W.H. Hynes and W.G. Doty (eds), *Mythical Trickster Figures: Contours, Contexts and Criticisms* (Tuscaloosa, AL, 1997); L. Hyde, *Trickster Makes this World: Mischief, Myth, and Art* (New York, 1998); P. Radin, K. Kerényi and C. G. Jung, *The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology* (London, 1956).

76 See the confidential report by Petitjean, ‘L’Oubangui autonome’ (note 52).

one must never awaken a sleeping cat<sup>77</sup> ... I am ... possessed and congratulate myself, for it is there that my strength lies. But the whole question is to know which spirit possesses me ... I am haunted by the spirit of the French of 1789 who proclaimed 'Liberté – Égalité – Fraternité'. I am haunted by the spirit of the Church Fathers who declared: *Omnes pariter nascuntur – Omnes et equaliter moriuntur*.<sup>78</sup>

If Boganda's response alluded to possession ritual (with which Ngbakas were familiar), the ambivalence of his message turned the tables on the French. Its language indicated that the differences between African and European thought were smaller than the French (notably missionaries) liked to think.<sup>79</sup> Boganda was probably not angry over the allusion to the supernatural as such, but about the racist slur implied. His priestly training can only have deepened his sensitivity towards the cosmological dimensions of Equatorial culture. Thus, when, upon his election as mayor of Bangui, crowds flocked to the quayside of the Oubangui River in response to rumours that he would walk its waters (1956), there seems to have been little reaction on his part. It was only when the *Figaro* newspaper suggested, in an article laden with racist undertones, that it showed the backwardness of his people that Boganda became enraged.<sup>80</sup>

### The Cosmological Shift and an Anomalous Politician

Europeans' allusion to the cosmological imagination of Oubanguians could only be counterproductive, as Boganda incorporated it in his worldly projects. In an attempt to break the stranglehold that French trading monopolies held

77 In the Banda imagination, the link between cat and sorcerer remains close. A cat in Equatorial Africa stands for harmful magical forces – as in European (medieval) beliefs. It inhabits the belly of people and is called *ondro* in Banda, which now stands for sorcery. Ceriana Mayneri, *Sorcellerie et prophétisme*, 9 and 53.

78 All are born in like manner. All also die in equal way. *Equaliter* should read *aequaliter*. This may be an error in parliamentary minutes though Boganda often made mistakes in Latin quotes. АТОС, séance du 5 octobre 1957, in J.D. Péné (ed.), *B. Boganda: Ecrits et discours*, vol. 2, 1955–1957, 249; AGS, 5J1.5b3/108550 ('Le malin, c'est-à-dire le démon qui semblait avoir quitté Boganda l'a repris'; '[O]n ne doit jamais réveiller un chat qui dort' ... 'Je suis [...] possédé et je m'en félicite car c'est là ma force. Mais toute la question est de savoir quel est l'esprit qui me possède ... Je suis hanté par l'esprit des Pères de l'Eglise qui ont déclaré : « *Omnes pariter nascuntur – Omnes et equaliter moriuntur* »').

79 See on this also Bernault, 'Body, Power and Sacrifice in Equatorial Africa', 227–228 and 238.

80 *Le Figaro*, 31 January 1958; Petitjean, 'L'Oubangui autonome'; L. Sanmarco, *Le colonisateur colonisé. Souvenirs d'un gouverneur de la France Outre-Mer* (Paris, 1983), 163–164; Kalck, *Barthélémy Boganda*, 147.



over rural production, he established a modern co-operative (1948), whose French-language statutes provided management roles for the lineage and village 'sorcerers'.<sup>81</sup> These were certainly not *mbu* but *wama*, whose authority remained intact and whose mobilisation for the project was a rational ploy to boost peasant support. From the perspective of Equatorial cosmology, spiritual power afforded effective control over the material world. In that sense, Boganda's recourse to (pre-colonial) religious institutions cannot be reduced as politically 'instrumental' – religion *did* hold sway over matter.

One may ask whether the same is true for the modes and style of his political agitation, in which Africans and Europeans alike saw evidence of the supernatural or hidden recourse to cosmological forces. Already in 1951, the colonial administration dubbed him the 'Pope of the Crypto-Christians' for what it saw as an anti-colonial discourse that blended a conception of Christianity with ancestral beliefs celebrated by 'sorcerers' who acted as the pillars of a new 'church' and over which Boganda exercised control.<sup>82</sup> Oubanguians quickly saw him as the 'Black Christ', the 'instrument of a divine plan' or the reincarnation of Karnou, leader of 'Kongo-Wara' – the last millenarian-inspired insurgency against colonial rule in the late 1920s.<sup>83</sup>

Some have argued that Boganda disowned these perceptions.<sup>84</sup> But, if true, this seems to have occurred more through the contradictions between his political style and his programme (which contained modernist traits such as pleas for development aid, the preservation of an Equatorial federation in a constitutional union with France, and a human-rights perspective on decolonisation)<sup>85</sup> than by explicit disavowal of 'traditional' interpretations of his political mission. On the contrary. Boganda, on numerous occasions, employed symbols and behaved in ways that alluded to or betrayed notions, narratives or rituals with roots in the pre-colonial past. In itself this is not surprising, as the cosmological shift in Equatorial Africa did not amount to a complete rupture

81 Arts. 29–30 Société Coopérative de la Lobaye « SOCOLO »; ANOM, 1AFFPOL/2254.

82 Rapport sur la mission d'inspection effectuée en Oubangui-Chari par l'inspecteur général des affaires administrative de l'A.E.F., no. 101/IGAA/CF, Brazzaville, 20 March 1951; ANOM, 1AFFPOL/2253.

83 P. Kalck, *Histoire centrafricaine. Des origines à 1966* (Paris, 1992), 278; Bigo, *Pouvoir et obéissance en Centrafrique*, 40–41; *Terre africaine. Organe de liaison du Mouvement d'Evolution Sociale de l'Afrique Noire*, May–June 1951; ANOM, 1AFFPOL/2253. On Karnou, see R. Nzabakomada-Yakoma, *L'Afrique centrale insurgée. La guerre du Kongo-Wara (1928–1930)* (Paris, 1986) ('l'instrument providentiel du plan divin').

84 Bigo, *Pouvoir et obéissance en Centrafrique*, 40–41.

85 See e.g. his speech to the 'Grand Conseil' of AEF in Brazzaville, 21 October 1957. Péné, *Boganda. Ecrits et discours*, vol. 2.

with the pre-colonial cognitive realm.<sup>86</sup> But it is remarkable how far these religious-cultural traits still expressed themselves in the personage of Boganda, whose missionary upbringing had, at face value, amounted to a complete (re-)education in the European-Christian tradition. To some extent, these aspects were purposively instrumental; in other respects, we may be looking at the behavioural traits of a man who could not help himself.

As a politician fighting the colonial system, it was logical that Boganda mobilised the force and symbols of Oubangui's cultural past. In May 1954, he hurried to the western town of Berberati to quell an uprising after the murder of a white man's domestic (abuse by settlers continued deep into the 1950s). In retaliation, a mob had lynched a European passer-by. Boganda spoke to the crowd in Sango, the emergent colonial lingua franca that some of the Gbaya-speaking population must have understood, comparing himself with Karnou and saying that he would free the people not with spears and arrows but with the force of French law.<sup>87</sup> While blending a powerful symbol of the past with the modernity of the colonial dispensation, he managed to calm the crowds, in the process consolidating his political dominance in the colony.<sup>88</sup> This fusion of the modern and the traditional was everywhere. When establishing his political vehicle, the Mouvement d'Evolution Sociale de l'Afrique Noire, its acronym 'MESAN' suggested a messianic connotation.<sup>89</sup> Boganda's tendency to maintain the party, over which he exercised absolute control, in an embryonic state and develop its influence through the support of lineage and family chiefs<sup>90</sup> reinforced this effect. As one perceptive French observer noted, his very personality constituted the party's programme.<sup>91</sup>

This makes the study of his person important for understanding the nature of the transformations that Oubangui-Chari underwent at the time. In his contacts with the crowds, Boganda spoke simple Sango slogans, such as *zo kwe zo* ('every human being is a person'), a human-rights doctrine that sent a shock-wave through an electorate suffering the forced cultivation of cotton.<sup>92</sup> The same was true for his plea that *séssé*, Sango for earth,<sup>93</sup> should be given back to

86 As demonstrated in the work of Florence Bernault and even that of Jan Vansina.

87 B. Boganda, *La logique des faits*, Bangui, 1 May 1954; ANOM, 1AFFPOL/2254.

88 Kalck, *Barthélémy Boganda*, 113–115.

89 *Idem*, *Histoire centrafricaine*, 276–277.

90 Situation politique et coopérative [sic] en Oubangui, 16 January 1952; 1AFFPOL/2254.

91 J. Petitjean, *L'Oubangui autonome*, February 1960; AGS, SF-241.15/113538.

92 As the governor noted, it was cotton that made Boganda. Territoire de l'Oubangui-Chari, Note pour Monsieur le Haut Commissaire Brazzaville, Bangui, 20 May 1956; ANOM, 1AFFPOL/2254.

93 L. Bouquiaux, *Dictionnaire sango-français* (Paris, 1978), 587.

the people. This did not solely refer to land issues (including the hated ban on hunting) but, more fundamentally, alluded to recuperation of the control that Oubanguians had lost over their lives since the colonial occupation – *séssé* harboured a mythical connotation of Earth as the ultimate, i.e. metaphysical, source of power.<sup>94</sup> Boganda reinforced this message by posing as a peasant himself (he owned a coffee plantation in his native village of Bobangui). Extolling ‘peasant virtues’ in his speeches and pointing to the supposed bucolic life of the pre-colonial era he articulated a reactionary message of hard work and a return to the countryside.<sup>95</sup> This also helped to distance himself from fellow ‘*évolués*’ and the embryonic intellectual elite in Bangui – competitors he hated if not despised – and intimate an organic connection with the peasant world. Crowds wanted to touch him.<sup>96</sup>

Did they<sup>97</sup> recognise the supernatural saviour of Ngbaka fables?<sup>98</sup> Time and again, Boganda littered his speeches with Latin proverbs and expressions, and audiences in the assemblies of Bangui and Brazzaville applauded – uncomprehending but in hearing strange words surely witnessing someone initiated in secret knowledge and power.<sup>99</sup> In 1956, angered over the continued abuse in cotton cultivation (‘Gestapo methods’), Boganda lashed out against colonial administrators in the very presence of the governor’s representative: ‘*nomina stultorum in pariete scribuntur*’,<sup>100</sup> he remarked, adding that the names of the secretaries-general were missing on the walls of the colonial palace. He, the ‘Great Macaque’ (the colony’s ‘*petits blancs*’ still likened Africans to monkeys), had suggested numerous measures for the reorganisation of the sector since ‘*ablata causa, tollitur effectus*’.<sup>101</sup> But, alas, the ‘Gallo-Roman’ *vae victis*<sup>102</sup> had prevailed and nothing had changed. Boganda recalled the ‘disaster of Dien

94 Petitjean, *L'Oubangui autonome*, 9. The party paper was named *Terre africaine*.

95 His speech to the ‘Grand Conseil’ of Brazzaville (note above 85) is typical. Yet, these views had greater historical depth, as shown by his diaries. Van Walraven, ‘The Diaries of Barthélemy Boganda’, 255.

96 See for this Petitjean, *L'Oubangui autonome*, 7–9.

97 Boganda’s core supporters were Ngbaka but his popularity extended across Oubangui-Chari.

98 See at note 49 above and Petitjean, *L'Oubangui autonome*, 7. One of Boganda’s periodicals was called *Pour sauver un peuple. Bulletin mensuelle d'action politique, économique et sociale en A.E.F.* AGS, 5J1.5b1/108549 and ANOM, 1AFFPOL/2253–54.

99 Bigo, *Pouvoir et obéissance en Centrafrique*, 42.

100 The names of fools are written on the wall.

101 The effect ceases when the cause is removed (medical maxim).

102 Woe the vanquished. Attributed to Livy and Plutarch in describing the Gauls’ siege of Rome, 390 BC.

Bien Phu', undoubtedly as this battle incarnated French fallibility,<sup>103</sup> and observed that Oubangui's 'cannibals' – also sons of Danton and Robespierre – therefore had the right to take up arms. If he, who 'condemn[ed] the 'cannibalism practised by [his] father Soualakpe fifty years ago', would not put himself at the head of Oubangui's revolution, it could turn bloody.<sup>104</sup>

The governor, not amused, sent letters of protest,<sup>105</sup> but the French had noted long before that Boganda was a 'mystic' who was 'untouchable'.<sup>106</sup> Could this be compared, in another cultural register, to the magical adversary whose exploits were the subject of standard Ngbaka tales?<sup>107</sup> Seven times the National Assembly in Paris tried to lift his immunity, seven times it failed.<sup>108</sup> His invulnerability was reinforced by his political worldview, which, while fiercely anti-settler and anti-colonial, was marked by violent anti-communism and staunch support of the link with France. There was little that officials could use against him. In January 1951, in the midst of his attempts to break the economic stranglehold of French trading houses, Boganda defied a colonial official in a public disturbance. Watched by hostile Ngbaka supporters, Boganda told the officer to his face:

To hell with you, to hell with you, to hell with you! And if you dare to enter my property I will bash in your face, yes, I will bash in your face.<sup>109</sup>

103 The battle where the Viet Minh defeated the French, ending colonial rule in Indo China (1954).

104 Discours récemment prononcé à l'Assemblée territoriale de l'Oubangui (en dehors de la session de cette Assemblée) par M. Boganda, député de l'Oubangui, en présence des conseillers territoriaux, spécialement convoqués à cet effet, et du représentant du chef du territoire (n.d. but 7 May 1956); ANOM, 1AFFPOL/2254 ('le gros macaque'; 'le désastre de Dien-Bien-Phu'; 'condamne le cannibalisme pratiqué par mon père Soualakpe il y a une cinquantaine d'année').

105 Le gouverneur de la France Outre Mer, chef du territoire de l'Oubangui Chari, à Monsieur le président de l'Assemblée territoriale de l'Oubangui Chari, Bangui, 7 May 1956; ANOM, 1AFFPOL/2254. The letter to Boganda is in the governor's memoirs: Sanmarco, *Le colonisateur colonisé*, 193–195. Background in Kalck, *Barthélémy Boganda*, 125–130.

106 Situation politique et coopérative en Oubangui, 16 January 1952.

107 See note 50 above.

108 J.D. Péné, 'Sept tentatives, entre 1949 et 1953, pour lever l'immunité parlementaire de B. Boganda, député du deuxième collège de l'Oubangui-Chari', *Civilisations*, 41 (1993), 443–458. Was the mystical number 7 suggested? <http://www.humanreligions.info/seven.html>, accessed 29 June 2018.

109 Le chef de district de M'Baiki à Monsieur le gouverneur, chef du territoire de l'Oubangui-Chari s/couvert de Monsieur le chef de région de la Lobaye, Bangui, 13 January 1951; ANOM, 1AFFPOL/2254 ('Vous m'emmerdez, vous m'emmerdez, vous m'emmerdez ... [s]i vous entrez chez moi, dans ma propriété, je vous casse la gueule ... oui, je vais vous casser la gueule').



PHOTO 9.2 Boganda (hidden from view) and wife confronting a colonial official, Mbaïki, January 1951

He had to be pulled away by his wife – Boganda had recently married a Frenchwoman and been evicted from the priesthood. Again, he may have cut as burlesque a figure as *To*, the trickster, but the incident earned him a night in a prison cell, delivering him the fruits of martyrdom.<sup>110</sup> But Boganda could also be reasonable, affable even. One colonial observer noted that he was able to multiply his faces.<sup>111</sup> Changing physical manifestations, as noted, betrayed the workings of metaphysical forces – it is the key act of the sorcerer.<sup>112</sup> Thus, a closer look at Boganda's speeches and writings, while yielding signs of preparation,<sup>113</sup> shows their rambling character, a sign, perhaps, of improvisation.

All this betrays the hallmarks of charismatic leadership, a concept that sets authority in an interpretive framework of personal qualities and supernatural

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>111</sup> Petitjean, *L'Oubangui autonome*, 7–9, also referring to Boganda as 'the ambiguous' ('l'ambigu').

<sup>112</sup> Also see Ceriana Mayneri, *Sorcellerie et prophétisme*, 49.

<sup>113</sup> He would build on themes developed earlier, such racial discrimination in the Caribbean, which he penned in his diaries in the 1920s–1940s. Van Walraven, 'The Diaries of Barthélémy Boganda', 256.

inspiration, whether or not in a social-constructivist form:<sup>114</sup> touched by God in the views of his supporters, touched by the devil in the eyes of detractors (the missionary blurring of *mbu* and *wama* allowed positive and negative views), Boganda pursued a programme driven by rage and hurt. Anger fuelled his oratory – anger over the colonisation of Equatorial Africa (of which he was a personal victim), anger over continued racism and exploitation (privately acknowledged by the French), anger over the institutionalised hypocrisy of the administration.<sup>115</sup> It was his fearlessness vis-à-vis Europeans, rather than his programme, that made him popular. Decades of seminary education provided him in this respect with insight in the weaknesses of whites.<sup>116</sup> By contrast, his political stances involved aspects alien to Equatorial Africans, notably his obsession with a Latin-Christian civilisation and his Pan-Africanist designs that violated the norm of local autonomy cherished in pre-colonial culture.<sup>117</sup>

Formed by and caught in between cultures that differed considerably even if they spoke constantly to each other – could Boganda have acted otherwise? Part of his fury was fed by disappointment. His co-operative project was run into the ground and his Pan-Africanism perished in the disintegration of French Equatorial Africa. In her later reminiscences his wife, Michèle Jourdain, recalled her husband's regrets about the evolution of Oubangui-Chari in the 1950s. She also brought to mind the pain he had felt over the discrimination to which he was subjected by missionaries and other Europeans, referring to him as that 'poor negro humiliated for too long'.<sup>118</sup>

### ***To's Folly: Individual Tragedy and Charismatic Leadership***

Charismatic leadership, because of its dependence on (attributed) personal qualities, may involve psychological – even psychiatric – dimensions that warrant discussion.<sup>119</sup> Early on in Boganda's political career the French already noted his turbulence, and this was to remain part of their evaluations about

114 See P. Joose, 'Becoming a God: Max Weber and the Social Construction of Charisma', *Journal of Classical Sociology*, 14 (2014), 266–283.

115 Boganda himself was evicted from whites-only establishments in Bangui. Péné, *Boganda. Ecrits et discours. 1946–1951*, 52.

116 Bigo, *Pouvoir et obéissance en Centrafrique*, 42.

117 Vansina, *Paths in the Rainforest*, 237.

118 Michèle Jourdain to Father Frison, 12 November 1989; AGS, SF–242.1/113539 ('un pauvre nègre trop longtemps humilié').

119 L. Oakes, *Prophetic Charisma: The Psychology of Revolutionary Religious Personalities* (Syracuse, NY, 1997).



PHOTO 9.3 Boganda as agitator

him. Boganda had barely begun his work in Paris as Oubangui's new post-war MP when his former missionary superior lamented about him that, having 'escaped from his cage ... he [was] flying like an idiot'.<sup>120</sup> The colonial administration quickly became obsessed with him, building up a huge file in which it wondered about 'profound complexes'. It noted Boganda's bitterness (both in Paris and Bangui his pleas for reform were ignored) and observed that he '[had] lost his way in a very confused religious conception in which his Christianity [became] mired in a mass of ancestral beliefs and customs'.<sup>121</sup> They surmised on the influence of his wife, some observing that Boganda calmed down in her presence, others that this was not the case. The French were at a loss.

120 Mgr. Grandin, Bangui, to Mgr. Le Hunsec, Paris, 3 April 1947; AGS, 5J1.3a7/108521 ('échappé de la cage ... il vole comme un fou').

121 Rapport sur la mission d'inspection effectuée en Oubangui-Chari (note 82 above) ('complexes profonds'; s'égare ... dans une conception religieuse très confuse ou son christianisme s'englué dans une masse de croyances et de coutumes ancestrales').

By contrast, Africans admired his political confrontation of colonialism while also having laughs about him:

Boganda you have just lost the village in spite of us.  
 Boganda you have just made us feel bad in spite of ourselves.  
 You want to make the priest and you put a woman in your bed.  
 You take a wife among the whites and you make her pregnant.<sup>122</sup>

The second part of this song, chanted by Oubanguians at the time, made fun of Boganda, who appeared voracious in ways resembling the foolishness of *To* but whose gluttony and imperfection stood in sympathetic contrast to the purity of *Gbaso*.<sup>123</sup> *To*'s folly, an essential element of the archetype, need not stand in the way of political legitimacy – as Central Africans would again show when associating the orgies of Bokassa with the tragicomedies of the jester.<sup>124</sup> The foundation of charisma is formed by the (perceived) idiosyncracies of the persona involved, blending, in this context, the trickster and the charismatic leader into a single political prodigy whose guile and deception earned popular acclamation as the weapons of the weak *par excellence*.<sup>125</sup>

However, in mocking Boganda over his French wife, Oubanguians also pointed to the dual significance of his life and struck at the core of his tragedy as noted in the song's first phrases: the alienation from his own milieu. Because Boganda got lost in the rainforest when he was around seven to ten years old, he did not undergo the rites of passage. Someone who was not initiated into adulthood – like Boganda –<sup>126</sup> became the object of ridicule. Such a person had difficulty finding a wife, in fact was not considered, culturally, a man. Among the Banda (in whose midst Boganda spent most of his priesthood years), the

122 Boganda's first (legitimate) child was born in 1950. Quote based on French translation of the Ngbaka original: 'Boganda tu viens perdre le village malgré nous; Boganda tu viens nous rendre foutu [sic] malgré nous; Tu veux faire le prêtre [sic] et tu mets une femme dans ton lit; Tu prends épouse [sic] chez les blancs et tu la mets enceinte'. Rapport sur la mission d'inspection effectuée en Oubangui-Chari.

123 See Thomas, *Contes Ngbaka-Ma'Bo*, 30 ff.

124 Bigo, *Pouvoir et obéissance en Centrafrique*, 218 and 222–224. That such standard responses exist across culture and time is shown by popular support in the US for the leadership style of Donald Trump.

125 Paulme, 'Typologie des contes africains du Décepteur', 570. There is a link with James Scott's work here: *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, CT and London, 1985).

126 As claimed by Benoît Siango, who knew Boganda in the 1950s. B.B. Siango, *Barthélémy Boganda. Premier prêtre oubanguien. Fondateur de la république centrafricaine* (Pierrefitte-sur-Seine, 2004), 43.



uninitiated could not take the floor.<sup>127</sup> Under the circumstances, his choice of a white woman was understandable, although the French doubted this would end Boganda's social predicament – he remained defensive about his marriage.<sup>128</sup> It hurt, in a double way, that his marriage was ridiculed in *Climats*, in the 1950s something of a racist rag.<sup>129</sup> Should we see him then as the disfavoured youth of Ngbaka fables who lost his family but overcame through cunning?<sup>130</sup> The traumatic childhood is a trope and its effects later in life ignore potential turning-points, yet his diaries contain pained references to the mother figure that go beyond the Catholic celebration of saintly women:

Be my mother, my counsellor, my help ... Give me back my innocence ... help me to overcome the infernal powers ... like me you have passed through that valley of tears, like me you have been the target of the fury of hell.<sup>131</sup>

With 'hell' defined as 'a little child wrested from the kisses [and] caresses of his mother'.<sup>132</sup>

In many cases colonial violence led to 'trauma', i.e. an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events. Their abrupt, calamitous nature, in addition to delayed response by the person subjected to them, form trauma's key elements.<sup>133</sup> Boganda's childhood experiences fall within this definition, while his diary notes (including another, rather explicit reference to depression)<sup>134</sup> all date from the 1930s and could be interpreted as a belated reaction to the disaster that struck him in the forest. His years in the Banda community (1941–1946) then perhaps confronted him with the irreversible consequences of the forest adventure: fellow Africans did not consider him an

127 Bigo, *Pouvoir et obéissance en Centrafrique*, 27. On the region's initiation practices, commonly by way of circumcision/excision, see Henrix, *Croyances et rites des Ngbaka-Minagende*, 175 ff; P. Vidal, *Garçons et filles: Le passage à l'âge d'homme chez les Gbaya Kara* (Nanterre, 1976), 117 ff; and Ceriana Mayneri, *Sorcellerie et prophétisme*, 81 and 89. A.M. Vergiat, *Les rites secrets des primitifs de l'Oubangui* (Paris, 1936), 79, claimed that among the 'Mbakwas' (i.e. Ngbaka-Minagende) children were circumcised when young. I have no other data on Boganda's personal situation.

128 Rapport sur la mission d'inspection effectuée en Oubangui-Chari, 18.

129 Texts in Pénel, *Boganda. Ecrits et discours. 1946–1951*, 283.

130 See at note 48.

131 AGS, SF-242.1/113539. Also Van Walraven, 'The Diaries of Barthélémy Boganda', 254 ('Soyez ma mère, ma conseillère, mon aide ... Rendez-moi mon innocence ... aidez-moi à vaincre les puissances infernales ... comme moi tu as passé dans cette vallée de larmes, comme moi tu as été en butte à la fureur des enfers').

132 *Ibid.* ('un petit enfant arraché aux baisers, aux caresses de sa mère').

133 C. Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Baltimore, MD, 1996), 11.

134 Van Walraven, 'The Diaries of Barthélémy Boganda', 255.

adult and refused to take him seriously, making this period the turning-point that transformed trauma into turbulence.<sup>135</sup> Lack of belonging led to awakening and awareness of a 'mission'.<sup>136</sup>

Boganda's experience of colonial violence finds expression in many works of African literature.<sup>137</sup> Yet, while psychiatry notes that childhood trauma increases the risk of mental disorder and associates adversity in childhood with neuroticism,<sup>138</sup> empirically we can go no further in denoting Boganda's inner world. Moreover, it only puts into perspective some of his more private attitudes, which may not bear an immediate relation to his politics. However, an associated problem was posed by his seminary upbringing, whose discipline and seclusion in a unisex world, when set against his non-initiation in Equatorial rites of passage, formed a double punishment. Celibacy battled with his libido, as revealed in an early entry in his diaries,<sup>139</sup> and may have informed his vehemence towards polygamy. It is certain that he succumbed, at least from the mid-1940s, to temptation. At the level of imagination ('religious' as well as 'political'), the celibacy of the Catholic faith also went against the cult of fertility as ingrained in Equatorial cosmologies, where fecundity constitutes the fount of power. Thus, upon consummating his rupture with the Spiritans in the late 1940s Boganda expressed himself favourably about the Orthodox Church. He wrote a letter to his superior in which he argued that celibacy did not stem from the bible but churchly discipline and that it made priests the laughing stock of Africans. He threatened to go to the Vatican over the issue.<sup>140</sup> While seminary life and its effects are themselves a trope (at least in missionary biographies), Boganda's attitudes were shared by numerous other African priests, many of whom – such as Fulbert Youlou in Congo-Brazzaville – would violate their vow of chastity and turn to the political profession.

Boganda's eviction from the priesthood underlined that his Catholicism was rather complex: he formed the embodiment of the spiritual confusion to which the missionary endeavour had given rise.<sup>141</sup> Among the Ngbaka the

135 In the 1930s, Boganda had been an obedient novice.

136 Oakes, *Prophetic Charisma*, 21–22 and 74–77.

137 E.g. Ferdinand Oyono's *Une vie de boy. Roman* (Paris, 1956). See C.N. Iheka, 'Colo-mentality: Colonial Trauma in Oyono's *Houseboy* and Condé's *Crossing the Mangrove*', *Research in African Literatures*, 45 (2014), 4, 33–49.

138 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Psychological\\_trauma](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Psychological_trauma), accessed 31 October 2017.

139 Van Walraven, 'The Diaries of Barthélémy Boganda', 253.

140 Barthélémy Boganda, Paris, to Mgr Cucherousset, Bangui, 1 December 1949 (text in Péné, *Boganda. Ecrits et discours. 1946–1951*, 237–244).

141 Comments by G. ter Haar to M. de Goede and K. van Walraven, *Politics and Prophecy: Imagining the World in French Equatorial Africa, 1940–1960*; seminar African Studies

spiritual forces had become hierarchised, with the imported Christian God – *Mungo*-ised or not – sharing the pantheon with lesser spirits.<sup>142</sup> Nevertheless, key values of the Christian faith, such as love and equality, exercised a profound influence on Boganda, whose creed was deemed by some as a Christianity of the ‘catacombs’ – explosive, rebellious, and freed from the constraints of hierarchy.<sup>143</sup> To Boganda, Christianity belonged to Europeans and Africans alike, as did the Classics and the ideals of the French Revolution. Seeing him as a tormented soul only is reductionist, since his missionary upbringing carried the seeds of self-emancipation. It engendered views on the reformability of colonialism that clashed, however, squarely with racist attitudes, explaining, in turn, part of his turbulence.<sup>144</sup>

### Deus ex Machina

The predicaments of Boganda’s biography ended abruptly when, *en route* from Berberati to Bangui, his plane crashed, killing all aboard. It was 29 March 1959 – Easter Day. Boganda’s premature passing on the day of the Lord’s Resurrection sealed the process of his deification among Oubanguians,<sup>145</sup> who were left to face the independence era as rudderless as their prophet had sometimes seemed. His sudden death led to questions, with many arguing that the plane had been downed, or that he had survived and been deported by de Gaulle to Devil’s Island, or that he now resided in France<sup>146</sup> – as any true sorcerer (or political leader relying on supernatural powers), Boganda travelled abroad, accessing his foreign contacts that were the source of magical forces.<sup>147</sup> From the perspective of Equatorial cosmology, Boganda was now dead *and* alive. He had passed on to the invisible world and continued to exercise influence over the lives of Oubanguians.

---

Centre, Leiden, 12 May 2016. Also G. ter Haar, *Spirit of Africa: The Healing Ministry of Archbishop Milingo of Zambia* (London, 1992).

142 Arom and Thomas, *Les Mimbo*, 29.

143 Petitjean, ‘L’Oubangui autonome’, 7–8.

144 On racial condescension also see Ter Haar, *Spirit of Africa*.

145 Bigo, *Pouvoir et obéissance en Centrafrique*, 41–42.

146 J.P. Tuquoi, *Oubangui-Chari. Le pays qui n’existait pas* (Paris, 2017); blog by Moammar Bengue-Bossin, <http://panafrican-union.over-blog.com/article-33586245.html>, 2009, accessed 1 November 2017.

147 Ceriana Mayneri, *Sorcellerie et prophétisme*, 49, 65, 70. A metaphysical representation of ‘extraversion’? See J.F. Bayart, ‘Africa in the World: A History of Extraversion’, *African Affairs*, 99 (2000), 217–267.

Boganda therefore remained an enigma – but in a double way. Socialised as an Equatorial African and raised a Catholic, he featured in the imagination of Africans and Europeans alike. He was difficult to understand as he moved in between different cosmological registers, all marked by ambiguities. Whether he did so on purpose is a moot question. The context of African religious thought, whereby spiritual forces exercise control over the material world, problematises a distinction between instrumental and intrinsic values, while Boganda's childhood socialisation in the Ngbaka universe makes it likely that he continued to live, to a certain extent, in respect of its beliefs. He therefore behaved and acted in accordance with its underlying *esprit*.

Boganda's life points to the fascinating shifts and continuities in the cosmologies of Equatorial Africa and with it, Africans' imagination of the world around them. His historical significance lies in the light that his troubled belief world cast on the cosmological confusion that characterised the Equatorial region as a result of missionary activities since the inception of colonial rule. The enabling power of the spirit world,<sup>148</sup> if not neutralised was weakened through the moral havoc wreaked by colonial and missionary action. The damage that missionaries inflicted on Africans' understanding of the colonial predicament, by interfering with the old cosmological techniques of spiritual protection, worsened the horrors of conquest.<sup>149</sup> The biography of Barthélémy Boganda provides a unique opportunity to gauge the depths of this tragedy.

## References

- Arom, S. and J.M.C. Thomas (1974), *Les Mimbo. Génies du piègeage et le monde surnaturel des Ngbaka-Mabo (République Centrafricaine)* (Paris).
- Bayart, J.F. (2000), 'Africa in the World: A History of Extraversion', *African Affairs*, vol. 99, 217–267.
- Bengue-Bossin, M. (2009), 'Boganda: Déportation secrète le 29 mars 1959'; blog; <http://panafrican-union.over-blog.com/article-33586245.html>.
- Bernault, F. (2006), 'Body, Power and Sacrifice in Equatorial Africa', *Journal of African History*, vol. 47, 207–239.
- Bigo, D. (1988), *Pouvoir et obéissance en Centrafrique* (Paris).
- Bouquiaux, L. (1978), *Dictionnaire sango-français* (Paris).
- Calloc'h, J. (1911), *Vocabulaire Français-Gmbwaga-Gbanziri-Monjombo précédé d'éléments de grammaire* (Paris).

<sup>148</sup> I owe this concept to Gerrie Ter Haar (note 141 above).

<sup>149</sup> Vansina, *Paths in the Rainforest*, 221.

- Caruth, C. (1996), *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Baltimore, MD).
- Ceriana Mayneri, A. (2014), *Sorcellerie et prophétisme en Centrafrique. L'imaginaire de la dépossession en pays banda* (Paris).
- Coquery-Vidrovitch, C. (1972), *Le Congo au Temps des Grandes Compagnies Concessionnaires, 1898–1930* (Paris).
- Ellis, S. and G. Ter Haar (2004), *Worlds of Power: Religious Thought and Political Practice in Africa* (London).
- Gbanga, D. (2008), 'L'interview du général Sylvestre Xavier Yangongo', Grands événements radiophoniques, Radio Centrafrique.
- Geschiere, P. (1997), *Witchcraft, Intimacy, and Trust: Africa in Comparison* (Chicago, IL and London).
- Gide, A. (1927), *Voyage au Congo. Carnets de route* (Paris).
- Gordon, D. (2012), *Invisible Agents: Spirits in a Central African History* (Athens, OH).
- Henrix, M. (2009), *Croyances et rites des Ngbaka-Minagende (RDC)* (Ghent).
- Homet, M. (1934), *Congo. Terre de souffrances* (Paris).
- Hyde, L. (1998), *Trickster Makes this World: Mischief, Myth, and Art* (New York).
- Hynes, W.H. and W.G. Doty (eds) (1997), *Mythical Trickster Figures: Contours, Contexts and Criticisms* (Tuscaloosa, AL).
- Iheka, C.N. (2014), 'Colo-mentality: Colonial Trauma in Oyono's *Houseboy* and Condé's *Crossing the Mangrove*', *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 45, 33–49.
- Joose, P. (2014), 'Becoming a God: Max Weber and the Social Construction of Charisma', *Journal of Classical Sociology*, vol. 14, 266–283.
- Kalck, P. (1992), *Histoire centrafricaine. Des origines à 1966* (Paris).
- Kalck, P. (1995), Barthélémy Boganda 1910–1959. Elu de Dieu et des Centrafricains (Saint-Maur).
- Kinata, C. (2008), 'Barthélémy Boganda et l'église catholique en Oubangui-Chari', *Cahiers d'études africaines*, vol. 48, 549–565.
- Lunquist, S.E. (1991), *The Trickster: A Transformation Archetype* (San Francisco, CA).
- Maran, R. (1921), *Batouala. Véritable roman nègre* (Paris).
- Meyer, B. (2009), 'Response to Ter Haar and Ellis', *Africa*, vol. 79, 413–415.
- N.A. (1959), 'Death of a Strongman', *Time*, 13 April 1959.
- Nzabakomada-Yakoma, R. (1986), *L'Afrique centrale insurgée. La guerre du Kongo-Wara (1928–1930)* (Paris).
- Oakes, L. (1997), *Prophetic Charisma: The Psychology of Revolutionary Religious Personalities* (Syracuse, NY).
- Oyono, F. (1956), *Une vie de boy. Roman* (Paris).
- Paulme, D. (1975), 'Typologie des contes africains du Décepteur', *Cahiers d'études africaines*, vol. 15, 569–600.

- Pénel, J.D. (1993), 'Sept tentatives, entre 1949 et 1953, pour lever l'immunité parlementaire de B. Boganda, député du deuxième collège de l'Oubangui-Chari', *Civilisations*, vol. 41, 443–458.
- Pénel, J.D. (1995), *Barthélémy Boganda. Ecrits et discours. 1946–1951. La lutte décisive* (Paris).
- Radin, P., K. Kerényi and C. G. Jung (1956), *The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology* (London).
- Samarin, W.J. (1984), 'Bondjo Ethnicity and Colonial Imagination', *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, vol. 18, 345–365.
- Sanmarco, L. (1983), *Le colonisateur colonisé. Souvenirs d'un gouverneur de la France Outre-Mer* (Paris).
- Schatzberg, M.G. (2001), *Political Legitimacy in Middle Africa: Father, Family, Food* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN).
- Scott, J. (1985), *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, CT and London).
- Serre, J. (2007), *Biographie de David Dacko. Premier président de la république centrafricaine 1930–2003* (Paris).
- Sévy, G.V. (1960), 'Le wama des Ngbaka de la Lobaye', *Cahiers d'études africaines*, vol. 1, 103–128.
- Siango, B.B. (2004), *Barthélémy Boganda. Premier prêtre oubanguien. Fondateur de la république centrafricaine* (Pierrefitte-sur-Seine).
- Ter Haar, G. (1992), *Spirit of Africa: The Healing Ministry of Archbishop Milingo of Zambia* (London).
- Ter Haar, G. and S. Ellis (2009), 'The Occult Does not Exist: A Response to Terence Ranger', *Africa*, vol. 79, 399–412.
- Thomas, J.M.C. (1963), *Les Ngbaka de la Lobaye. Le dépeuplement rural chez une population forestière de la république centrafricaine* (Paris and The Hague).
- Thomas, J.M.C. (1970), *Contes Ngbaka-Ma'Bo (République centrafricaine): Proverbes, devinettes ou énigmes, chants et prière* (Paris).
- Tuquoï, J.P. (2017), *Oubangui-Chari. Le pays qui n'existait pas* (Paris).
- Vansina, J. (1990), *Paths in the Rainforests: Towards a History of Political Tradition in Equatorial Africa* (Madison, WI).
- Van Walraven, K. (2017), 'The Diaries of Barthélémy Boganda: Priest and Politician in French Equatorial Africa (1910–1959)', *History in Africa*, vol. 44, 237–264.
- Vergiat, A.M. (1936), *Les rites secrets des primitifs de l'Oubangui* (Paris).
- Vermeulen, A. (1938), *De Ingang der Hel. Episode uit het Afrikaansche Pioniersleven* (Amsterdam).
- Vidal, P. (1976), *Garçons et filles: Le passage à l'âge d'homme chez les Gbaya Kara* (Nanterre).

## A Road not Taken? The Biography of Laurent Kabila (1939–2001)

*Erik Kennes*

When Laurent Kabila took power in 1997, he was a long-forgotten former leader of the Simba rebellion in the 1960s who had continued to maintain a limited guerrilla movement in the mountains of South Kivu, until it disbanded around 1986. Initially perceived as a puppet of the Rwandans and Ugandans who helped him into power, he manoeuvred to get autonomous political leverage by appointing trusted comrades, including many former colleagues from one of the rebel movements Kabila had fought with. With the coming to power of Laurent Kabila, the forgotten history of the Congolese rebellions came centre stage again.

Remarkably, the new president developed a discourse about self-reliance and independence from imperialist powers, which was strangely at odds with the international neo-liberal climate at the time and seemed to come from another age. Still, Kabila's speeches touched upon the deeply seated mistrust by the Congolese people of foreign interference,<sup>1</sup> the result of a century of colonisation and postcolonial regimes perceived as neo-colonial enterprises following the murder of Patrice Lumumba, Congo's first and nationalist prime minister. Thus, Laurent Kabila became the embodiment of the dream of a real Congolese independence, even more so after his death in 2001 and subsequent quasi-sanctification in the official and private political discourse of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

With the death of Laurent Kabila and the rise to power of his son, Joseph, the political generation of independence disappeared from the scene. Laurent's rule can only be understood against the background of his personal struggle, experience, and antagonisms with members of his own generation. His reign ended the cycle of independence by once again putting to the fore those who had lost in the 1964–1966 rebellion and the politico-military movements that were active in East Congo during the 1970s and 1980s (see on this below). His lifecycle thus makes Kabila a persona who binds together the

---

1 See on this M. de Goede, "Mundele, It is Because of You": History, Identity and the Meaning of Democracy in the Congo, *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 53 (2015), 583–609.

entire history of resistance in the DRC, although he himself was never its most influential leader. In the end, Kabila remains a reference point for resistance despite never having had any decisive influence on events before joining the 'Alliance des forces démocratiques pour la libération du Congo-Zaïre' (AFDL) – the movement that toppled President Mobutu in 1997.

This historical sequence clearly calls into question the ideological history writing by the Mobutu regime: Mobutu dramatised his regime by presenting it as the culmination of a process of self-determination and the recovery of an authentic identity by the Congolese people. Kabila unmasked this ideology as a lie, and depicted it as a cover-up for foreign domination.<sup>2</sup> But it also problematises common DRC history writing about the almost inevitable return to an authoritarian regime in 1965 (the year Mobutu took over), after what was considered to be post-independence chaos.<sup>3</sup> Certainly, a strand of leftist or Lumumbist history writing has existed since the 1960s that considers the Mobutu regime as a manipulation by Western powers against the real will of the Congolese population.<sup>4</sup> This literature, however, does not provide a response to the question of whether the resistance movements of the 1960s (or other political movements for that matter) embodied a possible alternative for the political regime constructed by Mobutu. The coming to power of Laurent Kabila allows for a re-reading of DRC history from independence. The answer to the question of whether it provides an alternative history remains inconclusive.<sup>5</sup>

### Methodological Challenges

During the 1960s, the best-documented period of Congolese history, Laurent Kabila was a secretive and relatively second-rate political actor, written traces

2 As in L.D. Kabila, *Authenticité. Théorie révolutionnaire ou mystique politique ?* (no place and date), A5. This text was very probably used for ideological training within the PRP (see below) and dates from approximately 1974–1976.

3 F.e. Th. Callaghy, *The State-Society Struggle: Zaire in Comparative Perspective* (New York, 1984), 151–169.

4 See f.e. J. Chome, *Mobutu et la contre-révolution en Afrique* (Brussels, 1967); *ibid.*, *L'ascension de Mobutu. Du sergent Joseph Désiré au Général Sese Seko* (Brussels, 1974). More recently, G. Nzongola-Ntalaja, *Faillite de la gouvernance et crise de la construction nationale au Congo-Kinshasa* (Kinshasa [etc.], 2015); L. De Witte, *L'ascension de Mobutu. Comment la Belgique et les USA ont installé une dictature* (Brussels, 2017).

5 Much of this chapter is based on my biography of Kabila, published in 2003. See E. Kennes (with Munkana N'Ge), *Essai biographique sur Laurent Désiré Kabila* (Tervuren and Paris, 2003). Munkana N'Ge is an alias for Crispin Kalumba Nsanki, who assisted with a number of important local interviews and insights.



of whom are to be found in communist countries, which supported his armed movement, rather than in Western intelligence or diplomatic archives. The Mobutist cultural and scientific straightjacket and repression eliminated, directly or indirectly, most of the politically incorrect documentation and writing of the period. Kabila rarely gave interviews and his few writings were ideological. No autobiographical account of his life exists.<sup>6</sup> One useful study on Kabila's movement in the 1970s and 1980s has been published, however.<sup>7</sup>

In principle, new oral sources became accessible when Laurent Kabila took over power. From his emergence in October 1996 as the leader of the AFDL coalition that would topple the Mobutu regime, he recruited many of his former comrades and allies to be part of his new regime, which officially intended to start history anew, linking up with the 1960 Lumumba government. Many of the figures who re-emerged from obscurity were interviewed and yielded previously inaccessible or unknown oral data, which covered a long period, from 1940 until 1996, and included almost all of Congo's resistance movements, which had acquired new legitimacy.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, the still very conflictual situation and the ensuing war in 1998–2002 risked creating significant bias in these data, while also complicating access to sources (not least due to security risks). The present chapter aims to reconstruct the basic facts of Laurent Kabila's life before he assumed power, and to provide entry points for a new perspective on this hidden part of Congo's history.

### Kabila's Youth and Balubakat Resistance

The portrait of Laurent Kabila that emerges from the above sources is one of an individual whose personal itinerary made the link between almost all resistance movements against Western-dominated rule during the history of the DRC. However, prior to becoming president, he had never been a central or decisive actor in the country's history and acted rather as a reference point for an alternative to the existing systems of rule. Kabila was native to North

6 There are three private archives that are particularly useful. The archives of Luc Daniel Dupire, former secretary of a now defunct Belgian Maoist party that was in contact with Kabila, were sold by him for elevated prices. Daniel Mayele documented the entire resistance against Mobutu during the 1970s and 1980s and kindly allowed me to consult his archives. Michel Veys was very helpful with several documents from the 'Comité Zaire' archives. This committee was among the few who maintained contact with Kabila during his years in the bush. All are personal archives located in Brussels.

7 C. Wilungula, *Fizi 1967–1986. Le maquis Kabila* (Tervuren and Paris, 1997).

8 Approximately 300 interviews with historical actors were conducted for my biography.

Katanga, which was and is a predominantly rural area and relatively marginal compared to the more industrialised south, which hosts the bulk of the country's mining industry. The only important mining centre in North Katanga were the tin mines in Manono. The rift between North and South Katanga was not merely economic but also cultural, pitting the patrilineal majority Luba of Katanga ('Balubakat')<sup>9</sup> in the northern part against the matrilineal peoples of South Katanga (Lunda, Bemba, Lamba, etc.). The secession of Katanga led by Moïse Tshombe (July 1960 – January 1963) was supported primarily by the south, while North Katanga chose to align with the central government and fight against the southern Katangese army with an improvised fighting force of Balubakat militias. This was led, successively, from the mining centre of Manono, Kabalo, and finally from Albertville (later Kalemie) in North Katanga. The Balubakat youth, facing a well-equipped and better-trained army led by Belgian military officers (who symbolised colonial domination), used raw violence and terror as weapons of combat. Engagement in this movement would be Laurent Kabila's first political experience.

Remarkably, Kabila was the son of a Lubakat father and a mother from South Katanga (from the Minungu people, who are close to the Lunda people). Ethnically he thus embodied the unity of Katanga. Politically, however, he was a staunch opponent of Tshombe and belonged to the left and Lumumbist wing of the Balubakat movement. This ethnically homogeneous movement,<sup>10</sup> included a majority moderate wing led by Jason Sendwe and had the support of the traditional chiefs. A minority radical wing was led by Mwamba Ilunga, supported by educated youths that included Laurent Kabila. Both tendencies considered Lumumba as their leader. Although a little more than twenty years old at the time, Kabila quickly became a leader of the Lumumbist Lubakat youth in the area, due to his (primary school) education and mastery of French, the colonial language.<sup>11</sup> During the months before and shortly after independence, he was working with his father, Désiré Taratibu, who was a convinced supporter of Tshombe and who, since September 1958, had been a rigid and

9 'Balubakat' is used both for the Luba from Katanga and their cultural association and political party.

10 The Balubakat movement was exclusively supported by Luba from Katanga, called Lubakat. Politically, its party was member of a coalition including Balubakat, Fedeka (Luba from Kasai), and Atcar (Tshokwe, people from South Katanga but in opposition to the Lunda, among them Moïse Tshombe). Certainly, the South Katanga coalition around Tshombe also included Hemba people from North Katanga and a section of Luba from Katanga – those living in the Kamina area.

11 Starting as vice-president of the local Balubakat militia in Ankoro in 1960, he seems to have climbed up the hierarchy until 1962.

uncompromising sector chief in the Belgian colonial administration in Ankororo. The political differences between father and son ended dramatically during a period of extreme tension. On 13 November 1960, Balubakat youth, manipulated by a traditional chief who felt disadvantaged by the colonial authorities, killed Kabila's father.<sup>12</sup> According to witnesses, Kabila did not react. They added that any reaction on his part would have caused his own killing by the (often drugged) Balubakat youth.<sup>13</sup>

From January 1961, the Lubakat movement and political party established a North Katanga government in Manono, in response to the southern Katangese secession of Tshombe. Kabila worked at its ephemeral Ministry of Information, very probably because of his fluency in French and several other languages. When Manono fell to the Tshombist army on 30 March 1961, Kabila went to Stanleyville (later Kisangani) in the north-east of Congo. Here, Antoine Gizenga, an ally of Lumumba (by then assassinated), had created his own government, which supported the Balubakat militarily. From Stanleyville, Kabila could participate in the World Youth Forum convened in Moscow in July 1961. It is likely that this stay in the Soviet Union triggered his interest in a radical alternative to what he perceived as neo-colonial rule in Leopoldville (Kinshasa), Congo's capital.

After his return from Moscow, there was a period of several months during which his activities are unknown.<sup>14</sup> He reappears in the record in Albertville, which succeeded Manono as capital of the anti-secessionist government of North Katanga. Again, he worked as cabinet director for the local Minister for Information and directed vociferous anti-Tshombist propaganda in the local media. On 30 November 1962, he became a member of the provincial assembly, replacing another MP, elected in 1960, who had been appointed as provincial minister. The period stretching from November 1962 – September 1963 was the only time when Kabila worked in a formal political institution, and not a very edifying one at that: the members of the provincial assembly were clearly not up to their task, and were lost in formalities or mired in conflicts between the

12 Kennes, *Essai biographique*, 63–65 (a witness account in *ibid.*, 342–345).

13 It is worth noting that the group responsible for killing his father was not his own group in Ankororo, but came from adjacent Manono. Kabila participated in some Balubakat attacks and appears never to have endorsed their sometimes meaningless violence. According to Pierre Kissiki, who escaped an attempt by the Balubakat to kill him during the same period, Kabila, now President, expressed his intention to erect a monument in Manono as a mark of his regret about the victims of the Balubakat. Interview with Pierre Kissiki, Lubumbashi, December 2000.

14 According to some witnesses, he studied for a short time in the USSR or in Belgrade. It was not possible to verify this information.

two main Balubakat leaders Jason Sendwe and Prosper Mwamba Ilunga. It seems that Kabila radicalised his leftist vision during this time, even trying to create some sort of radical Balubakat movement. When the provincial MP that he had replaced took up his seat again (20 September 1963), he joined the core of the future Mulelist rebellion in Brazzaville, capital of the former French Congo. From 1961, Kabila began to distance himself from the Balubakat, adopting radical Lumumbism before, in due course, embracing Marxism.

### The Simba Rebellion

After the assassination of Lumumba and the imprisonment of his deputy, Gizenga, the Congolese government tried to eliminate the remaining supporters of Lumumba from its ranks. On 29 September 1963, President Kasa Vubu closed parliament, ostensibly as a response to the parliamentary failure to elaborate a constitution for the country.<sup>15</sup> However, the Lumumbist forces interpreted the move as an effort to install a government around the increasingly influential 'group of Binza', which was perceived as being under the control of the West.<sup>16</sup> The Lumumbists started an armed struggle and launched a rebellion by way of two separate movements: the first in Kwilu under Pierre Mulele, followed by the second in East Congo under Christophe Gbenye and Gaston Soumialot.

Laurent Kabila went to Brazzaville to contact the 'Conseil National de Libération', established in October 1963 by a group of rebel leaders that included Gbenye and Soumialot. Kabila became the deputy of Soumialot and travelled to eastern Congo in January 1964 to launch operations. Kabila reportedly had to launch the rebellion in North Katanga. In fact, he did so in Albertville (Kalemie) on 27 May 1964 with the help of a core of his Lumumbist Katangese friends. To be sure, the group did not set up an armed group, but it did incite local youths belonging to the Lumumbist 'Mouvement National Congolais' (MNC/L) with promises of higher salaries for local members of the national army. During a mutiny they detained Jason Sendwe, the main Balubakat leader and president of the government of North Katanga. This incident symbolised Kabila's break with the Balubakat. The revolt barely lasted a day, as the military turned against the rebels when the promised salaries did not materialise. After

15 The president announced the creation of a constitutional commission that would take over this task from parliament.

16 This group included key political figures of the 1960s, including Joseph-Désiré Mobutu, Justin Bomboko, Victor Nendaka, Damien Kandolo, and Albert Ndele. Their name was derived from the Kinshasa neighbourhood where they lived.

the takeover of Albertville by the national army, fierce repression ensued, led by Sendwe and by the local army commander.<sup>17</sup>

The objective of the group around Kabila had been to trigger the intervention of the so-called Simba (or Mulelist) rebels, who were active more to the north, in the Fizi and Uvira regions. Some rebels fleeing Albertville succeeded in contacting the bulk of the Simba rebel troops when the latter were moving from Fizi in South Kivu to Kindu in Maniema. The Simba finally agreed to try and take over Albertville, which they did on 19 June 1964. The same day, Jason Sendwe was killed by some elements who had been the victim of the repression in Albertville.<sup>18</sup>

Laurent Kabila returned briefly to Albertville, but rose in the hierarchy of the Simba rebellion to become vice-president of the 'Gouvernement provisoire du C.N.L.-section de l'Est', in charge of external relations and foreign trade. This position allowed him to establish contacts at the regional and international level. He quickly became Secrétaire d'État aux Affaires Étrangères du gouvernement du C.N.L. et ministre plénipotentiaire en Tanzanie, Kenya et Ouganda. Between March and August 1964, the Simba rebels succeeded in gaining control of nearly two thirds of the country, as the national army fled the advancing insurgents. Just as in 1961 under Gizenga, Stanleyville (Kisangani) was taken over and now became the Simba capital. The speed of the movement's advance did not allow for the establishment of an organised administration, and in several areas chaos prevailed. The national army was reorganised with US and Belgian assistance, the former Katangese Gendarmes recalled from Angola and a counter-offensive was launched late August 1964.<sup>19</sup> Stanleyville was retaken on 24 November, and during the following months internal rivalries and conflicts prevented the Simba leaders from reorganising.

Kabila avoided these rivalries and focused on the organisation of his rebel front in Fizi territory (South Kivu), which borders North Katanga. When, with US and Belgian assistance, the Congolese government mounted a further

17 A detailed account of the events and the ensuing repression can be found in E. Lejeune, 'Il y a un an. Le Katanga entrain dans la "rébellion"', *Remarques Africaines*, no. 245 (June 1965), 7–11; *Idem*, 'Il y a un an. Quand l'armée populaire entrain à Albertville', *Remarques Africaines*, no. 247 (August 1965), 12–16; *Idem*, 'Les leçons d'Albertville', *Remarques Africaines*, no. 248 (September 1965), 19–22.

18 Laurent Kabila was sometimes accused organising the killing of Sendwe. Our extensive research on this matter, based on numerous witness interviews, does not confirm this accusation. However, because of this murder, the majority of the Balubakat members refused to join the Simba rebellion.

19 Among the vast literature on this period, the 'Congo' series published by CRISP remains the most systematic source. See J. Gérard-Libois and J. Van Lierde, *Congo 1964* (Brussels and Leopoldville, 1965).



PHOTO 10.1 At the Kigoma base. Laurent Kabila is in the centre in the middle row, right above the little boy

counter-attack in 1965, the Simba movement's external supply routes were gradually closed off. The rebel area controlled by Kabila was one of the few remaining sources for the supply of money and arms. Kabila, indeed, was established in Kigoma in Tanzania, opposite the mountainous area in South Kivu where he had organised his rebel group with its local headquarters being a huge base called 'the base of Kibamba'. The Kigoma location allowed the supply of arms from China through Dar es Salaam. During this period, Kabila developed gradually from a Lumumbist into a Marxist leader who was inspired by the Chinese example.

His responsibility at the regional and international level enabled him to welcome, with his boss Gaston Soumialot, Che Guevara when the latter passed through Dar es Salaam in February 1965. As is well known, Che led a Cuban mission to Kabila's maquis to fight together with the rebels (19 April – 20 November 1965).<sup>20</sup> The intellectual, ideologically trained, and articulate

<sup>20</sup> This period is well documented. See e.g. E. Che Guevara, *Pasajes de la guerra revolucionaria. Congo* (Barcelona, 1999); W. Galvez, *Le rêve africain du Che* (Antwerp, 1998); De Witte, *L'ascension de Mobutu*.

Kabila appealed more to the Argentinian than the less sophisticated Soumi-alot. At the time, Kabila had acquired the profile of an educator and ideologue with radical leftist and Maoist ideas. He was highly praised and simultaneously envied as an 'intellectual'. Che did not know that Kabila's talents as a guerrilla leader were still underdeveloped.

Che Guevara's stay in the Congo with the Simba militants, formally led by Kabila, is perhaps the best documented period of Kabila's pre-presidential life, thanks to the many books published by or through Cuban sources.<sup>21</sup> However, as the latter almost inevitably looked down on the Simba's lack of organisational skills and ideological training, one cannot entirely rely on these sources to provide an objective assessment of the movement. In all extant accounts, however, the young and inexperienced Kabila was negatively portrayed as an absent leader who gave priority to his ties with Tanzanian officials in Kigoma and preferred spending time with women and drinking over the austere sacrifices of a guerrilla life in the Congolese bush. At the same time, Che Guevara also recognised Kabila's potential as a genuine and capable leader, if circumstance permitted. Moreover, the endemic factionalism within the Simba rebellion made it very difficult for him to emerge as an independent leader. The lack of organisation following the tremendous speed with which the rebels had conquered Congolese territory, as well as the endemic factionalism, international pressures, and Kabila's junior position in the rebel movement all militated against the development of a strong leadership profile. Nevertheless, the size and importance of the base of Kibamba must not be underestimated. A Belgian military report at the time described how two battalions needed eight full days to dismantle the base and remove the base's 600 tonnes of materials and documents.<sup>22</sup> It is hard to imagine that this result was only to be ascribed to Cuban action alone.

### Kabila and the Maoist PRP

After the end of the Simba rebellion, Kabila underwent some sort of transformation as a result of six months of ideological and some military training in Nanjing, China (March – October 1966).<sup>23</sup> He developed a critique of the

21 See previous note.

22 R. Hardenne, 'Les opérations anti-guérillas dans l'Est du Congo en 1965–1966', *Contact: Revue de l'École de Guerre* (Brussels), February 1969, 5–6.

23 Interview with his companion Jeanson Umba, Kinshasa, 7 April 2001. Letter from Anselme Nyembo to Arnold Hauwaert, 3 January 1967 (author's archives).

Lumumbist rebellion, summarised in a document called ‘The Seven Errors’, which all members of his future movement knew by heart. By the end of 1967, he decided to create a Maoist politico-military movement in the mountains of Lulenge, in South Kivu. Although he was Katangese, Kabila succeeded in convincing remnants of the rebellion in South Kivu, mostly members of the Bembe people from the Fizi region, to join his new movement. This was much more organised, building on the lessons of the failed Simba rebellion. This ‘Parti de la Révolution Populaire’ (PRP) was structured as a classical Maoist politico-military movement, which, during the first years of its existence, heavily emphasised the aspect of ideological training. It involved mainly Bembe people from South Kivu’s Fizi region, more specifically from the Lulenge area that was known to be most marginalised in comparison with the two Bembe urban centres Fizi and Baraka. Kabila’s own Lubakat people were much less represented, mainly because of the demobilisation of Lubakat in the wake of Sendwe’s death.

Estimates of PRP combatants are difficult to give. One Lumumbist leader, who was not present himself in the PRP area, estimated their strength at the time at ca. 1,500.<sup>24</sup> Cosma Wilungula, whose uncle was a PRP member, writes that the movement was subdivided into four zones with 360 combatants each.<sup>25</sup> The PRP aimed not only at the overthrow of what it considered as a regime dominated by Western interests, but also at the creation of a new society in line with Maoist projects elsewhere in the world. In order to do this, a new type of organisation was created, heavily militarised, and dominated by the teachings of Kabila that went much further than the ideas of the earlier Lumumbist rebellions. Predominantly made up of Bembe people, Kabila created a new identity for them by providing them with a purpose, an organisation and ethos, and, above all, a sense of dignity. However, living conditions in the PRP operating area, compounded by pressure from the Zairean army, were harsh, and food scarce. PRP members later recalled how they were, at times, forced to eat the mud from river beds in order to stifle the pain of hunger. The PRP maintained strict military discipline and cultivated a personality cult around Laurent Kabila that mirrored Maoist movements in other parts of the world.

Although much more coherent and efficient than the Simba rebellion, the PRP’s operations were limited to a relatively small area. They were more a territorially circumscribed refusal of Mobutu’s authority than a genuine threat to the regime. With the visit of President Mobutu to Mao Ze Dong on 10 January

<sup>24</sup> Letter from Benoît Lukunku to Jean Van Lierde, 15 March 1971 (archives Jean Van Lierde).

<sup>25</sup> Wilungula, *Fizi 1967 – 1986*, 85.



1973, the little support that the Chinese gave to the rebels dried up, forcing them to engage in the local gold trade for funds. From 1967 to 1975, the PRP managed to withstand the Congolese army, whose inefficient forces only undertook intermittent attacks. All this changed after the PRP kidnapped three US and one Dutch student from Jane Goodall's chimpanzee research project in Tanzania (19 May 1975) and transferred them to the DRC. The ensuing ransom provided the PRP some financial clout, but a humiliated President Mobutu launched systematic attacks to neutralise the movement. By 1977, it was militarily defeated and Laurent Kabila's children, including the future president Joseph, were sent into hiding to Dar es Salaam, followed later by Laurent Kabila himself and his wife.<sup>26</sup>

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, Kabila usually stayed with the members of his movement at his base, where he maintained a tight grip. The small political core group with whom Kabila created the PRP in 1967, and which was enlarged during the following year, was progressively reduced following targeted killings or arrests by the Zairean military and by Mobutu's security services active in Tanzania. Kabila, by circumstance or intentionally, grew increasingly isolated. Over the years, he became more and more authoritarian and did not tolerate any rivals. During the 1970s, he travelled more frequently to Tanzania and Uganda to establish external contacts, including with the leader of the MPLA,<sup>27</sup> Agostinho Neto. The latter favoured cooperation between Kabila and the ex-Katangese gendarmes, then present in Angola (known as 'Tigres' or FLNC – 'Front de Libération Nationale Congolaise'). In 1977, he seems to have wanted Kabila to take over the Tigres' leadership when they planned their first attack on Zaire. However, in 1977, the PRP was militarily no longer capable of launching attacks of any importance in eastern Congo. Moreover, the Tigres' military leader Nathanaël Mbumba rejected Kabila's leadership and the PRP was not associated with any of the actions of the Katangese gendarmes.<sup>28</sup> Kabila briefly stayed in Luanda in 1977, and a formal agreement was even signed between the Tigres' FLNC and Kabila's PRP but never implemented. The March – April 1977 military attack in Shaba province (Katanga) by Mbumba's Tigres took place without any contribution from the PRP.

26 Much information about this period was provided by Bienvenu Mwilambwe, PRP representative in Dar es Salaam during the 1970s and 1980s. He hosted and protected the future president Joseph Kabila and his sister Jaynet.

27 'Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola', the left-leaning liberation movement in Angola.

28 See Kennes, *Essai biographique*, 240–245; E. Kennes and M. Larmer, *The Katangese Gendarmes and War in Central Africa: Fighting their Way Home* (Bloomington, IN, 2016), 117 and 129–130.

If the PRP's military clout was politically negligible it was probably one of the more coherent groups in the opposition against Mobutu.<sup>29</sup> The few surviving PRP members still know and advocate the doctrines they learned to memorise during guerrilla days, which indicates the importance of their political training. Significantly, until today, former PRP guerrillas are among the least corrupt of all political and military figures in the DRC.<sup>30</sup>

After Kabila's final departure to Tanzania, probably around 1978, the PRP continued to be active but established a *modus vivendi* with the Zairean army, exchanging gold for ammunition, uniforms, and manufactured goods. For the army, the existence of a guerrilla movement in an area labelled as 'red' or high risk provided opportunities to inflate the budget and initiate costly, but invariably ineffective anti-guerrilla operations. However, under the impulse of the local administration and the governor of Kivu, Mwando Nsimba, negotiations were started (ca. 1982) to persuade members of the various armed groups in the area to lay down their arms. This led to the demobilisation of some remaining Lumumbists in South Kivu,<sup>31</sup> in addition to a number of PRP fighters who became sceptical about the movement's chances of toppling the central government in Kinshasa.<sup>32</sup> They suspected that Kabila was using the organisation for his personal benefit.

When the demobilisation of fighters started threatening the existence of the PRP and isolating Kabila, he decided to move to Katanga, where Alphonse Kalabe, a former territorial administrator under the Katangese secession, wanted to take control of the town of Moba in North Katanga and begin operations against the Mobutu regime. The PRP joined Kalabe for training and provided experienced fighters. Moba was briefly occupied (13–15 November 1984).<sup>33</sup>

29 Although, as Kabuya Lumuna rightly noted, their ideology was abstract and not rooted in the country's history. See C.K. Lumuna Sando, *Zaire quel changement pour quelles structures? Misère de l'opposition et faillite de l'Etat* (Brussels, 1980), 142.

30 This is a striking contrast with the type of actors preferred by the current president, Joseph Kabila. Former PRP guerrillas are now all living in dire poverty and lack support for their most basic needs.

31 Under leaders such as Zabuloni and Shabani Ndalo.

32 Philippe Borel, member of the Belgian anti-Mobutu committee 'Comité Zaire' was among the few to have visited the maquis in 1980. He noted that the PRP no longer had any strategy to extend the territory it occupied at the time or to capture power in Kinshasa. Ph. Borel, 'Divisions et faiblesses d'une opposition privée de stratégie politique', *Le Monde Diplomatique*, September 1981.

33 On the Moba attacks see also S. Zaidi Kisenge and G. Kimambwe Nyoka, 'Maquis Mulele et maquis Kabila. Essai d'une étude comparative', *Likundoli* (Lubumbashi), 25 (2016), 157–164.



PHOTO 10.2  
Laurent Kabila speaking (1982)

Kalabe was eventually arrested, but Kabila nevertheless wanted to move his area of operations back to Moba to fulfil his old dream: relaunching the rebellion from North Katanga. To this end a second, a more limited operation against Moba was mounted on 17 June 1985 but it was quickly neutralised. The majority of PRP militants refused to follow Kabila on his Katangese path, exhausted as they were from their fruitless years in the bush. Many moved to refugee camps in Tanzania before returning to their home areas. Admittedly, many PRP members lost confidence in their leader, who now lived abroad and reaped the benefits of the gold trade. Kabila's obsessive womanising,<sup>34</sup> which also involved the spouses of PRP members, had created deep resentment. On the other hand, Kabila never gave up political action, and while Mobutu never considered him a threat, he held on to his convictions, even if his business ventures seemed to have taken the upper hand.<sup>35</sup>

34 All witness accounts are consistent on this aspect of Kabila's personality.

35 It has not been possible to make an accurate assessment of these activities. Although he and his family had some sort of middle-class standard, he never seemed to be particularly rich.

## The Road to the Presidency

A small group of PRP fighters around the future General Luecha remained in the bush. In ca. 1987, they left for Tanzania or their home areas. Kabila stayed with his family in Dar es Salaam and Kampala and continued his political activities, together with his close friend Kazadi Nyembwe.<sup>36</sup> Both were active in business and seem to have set up a series of fraudulent operations using Zairean companies as cover. In November 1995, Kabila travelled to Kigali with a few trusted PRP members to confer with the Rwandan authorities on the possibility of operations against Mobutu.<sup>37</sup> In sum, the most likely version of Kabila's involvement in the war that then engulfed Zaire states that President Nyerere, who was acquainted with Kabila when the latter lived in Dar es Salaam, contacted his friend Museveni, president of Uganda, to present Kabila as the Congolese figurehead of Rwanda- and Uganda-led operations against Mobutu. Museveni, in turn, presented Kabila to Rwandan President Paul Kagame. Kabila was a logical choice for this because he was known to be one of the few political figures in Congo never to have taken Mobutu's bribes.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, in contrast to his more independent-minded colleague Kisase Ngandu, Kabila had no significant military force left, was politically all but forgotten, and was therefore thought to be easy to manipulate.

Subsequent events are well known. President Museveni contacted some remaining Congolese resistance groups, organised and trained them, and prepared military operations together with President Kagame that involved troops from both countries. A political coalition between Kabila's PRP and three other obscure political groupings was set up as a cover, the AFDL,<sup>39</sup> of which Kabila became spokesman. When eastern Congo was taken over by these forces, supplemented by thousands of newly recruited child soldiers, Angola decided to join the operations and organised the return of the Katangese Tigres, which

36 In 1991–1992, Kabila's men made efforts to join and reinforce an armed movement in the Ruwenzori area on the Congolese-Ugandan border.

37 J. M'Molelwa, Laurent-Désiré Kabila et l'un de ses compagnons de lutte dans la guerre de la libération de la R.D.C/Congo-Kinshasa: Du rêve naît le chemin. L'idéal de vérité, (ms.), 7–8.

38 It has been confirmed by several members of the Mobutu elite, however, that Kabila was used a few times as a middleman between Mobutu and John Garang during the second half of the 1980s. This would mean that Kabila, after the second Moba attack, would have acquiesced in some sort of *modus vivendi* with Mobutu.

39 An in-depth study of this period is Ph. Roessler and H. Verhoeven, *Why Comrades Go To War* (Oxford, 2016).

had been staying in Angola ever since 1967, in anticipation of a chance to topple Mobutu.<sup>40</sup>

### Kabila's Reign

Kabila, seemingly loyal to the AFDL coalition, held his cards close to his chest. On 17 May 1997, to the surprise of his foreign backers, he proclaimed himself president of Congo in Lubumbashi. This was before the AFDL had taken Kinshasa. Kabila's rise was thus more a question of luck and clever manoeuvring than the result of an armed or political struggle. The popular support that he initially enjoyed was the flipside of his refusal to compromise with Mobutu – the source of his almost forgotten moral and political credit.<sup>41</sup>

It became quickly apparent that Kabila brought his historical weight back to the centre of Congolese politics, together with a generation of marginalised figures from groups repressed under the previous regime combined with some former Mobutist elements. Curiously, and probably for reasons of competence and education, he privileged his former comrades from the Simba rebellion over the less educated PRP guerrillas. In the military realm, Kabila reintroduced his own PRP militias and sections of the Katangese 'Tigres', who had returned from exile in Angola and gave the decisive push in toppling Mobutu. Kabila thus restored a hidden part of Congolese history that had opposed the domination of Mobutu, Western influence, and such external actors as the United Nations and foreign business interests. He took a radical nationalist stance mixed with Marxism-Leninist doctrines derived from Tanzanian socialism. The key message Kabila wanted to convey was one of self-reliance and a message aimed at restoring self-confidence and self-organisation of the Congolese people. Even if this idea was at odds with the authoritarian top-down practice of his regime, it remains Kabila's historical legacy.<sup>42</sup>

Unfortunately, Kabila totally disregarded the struggle for democracy that had been waged by political parties and civil society groups before he took power, between 1990 and 1996. He dismissed this as a simple ploy by the

40 For the history of this movement see Kennes and Larmer, *The Katangese Gendarmes*.

41 For the period 1996–1998 see G. de Villers *et al.*, *République Démocratique du Congo: Chronique politique d'un entre-deux-guerres (octobre 1996 – juillet 1998)* (Tervuren and Paris, 1998); for the period 1998–2001 see G. de Villers *et al.*, *République Démocratique du Congo/ Guerre et politique. Les trente derniers mois de L. D. Kabila (août 1998-janvier 2001)* (Tervuren and Paris, 2001). I contributed to both volumes.

42 Kabila's ideas were put in sharp relief through the contrast with his son's rule, which seems to go in the opposite direction.

Mobutist elite to remain in power, including the 1991–1992 sovereign national conference, which actually represented a formidable process in the raising of public awareness.<sup>43</sup> The former revolutionary aimed at a radical transformation of the country's entire power structure and never seemed to realise that he did not have the means and instruments for such an ambitious programme, be it financial, organisational, or human. His hubris stood in the way of a realistic conception of this daunting task.<sup>44</sup>

During his short rule, he did not have many opportunities to introduce the reforms he wanted, as a devastating war broke out in the second year of his regime. However, almost all reforms he introduced were inspired by his PRP. The AFDL, which had toppled Mobutu, initially organised some sort of ideological re-education training with the help of former PRP documents about the 'seven errors'. Kabila's disregard for legal formalities<sup>45</sup> stemmed directly from his authoritarian control of the PRP. The names of his security forces<sup>46</sup> were copied from the PRP as well. The centralised economy that he wanted to introduce around a state-controlled raw materials exchange was a Marxist-inspired PRP idea, as were the 'Comités de Pouvoir Populaire' intended to replace parliamentary democracy and the appointed 'Assemblée Constituante et Législative – Parlement de Transition' that was, in fact, some sort of central committee. The 'chembe chembe' structure,<sup>47</sup> as well as the idea of 'national service'<sup>48</sup> were inspired by Tanzania.

The implementation of this radical reform programme, however, became mired in Congolese disorganisation and the implosion of state structures. The new people that Kabila had recruited had neither the talents, nor instruments

---

43 Kabila was meant to participate, but fearing for his security he did not come to Kinshasa. Interview with Delphin Kapaya, Kinshasa, 2014.

44 Ambassador Albert Kisonga, comrade of Kabila during the 1960s, confirmed to the author the impossibility of changing Kabila's mind once he was convinced of something. Interview, Kinshasa, 3 October 2016.

45 The constitutional decree organising the country's political, judicial, and military institutions included not more than fifteen articles, while an official publication of laws and rulings was never undertaken.

46 Such as 'Détection Militaire des Activités Anti-Patrie' (DEMIAP) and 'Groupe Spécial pour la Sécurité Présidentielle' (GSSP).

47 A grid of basic cells organising the population at the local level. The idea was also applied in the PRP maquis.

48 The 'service national' wanted to organise and re-educate Congolese youths through productive agricultural labour organised by a military structure. Although many abroad were convinced this equated to the creation of a Marxist party militia, with the benefit of hindsight it seems it could have been an adequate solution for problems of youth employment, demobilisation, and the organisation of food production, provided the structure was not be geared to serving political purposes.

to implement the reforms that were quickly hijacked by opportunistic elements.<sup>49</sup> The president himself had no experience of statesmanship. Catapulted from obscurity to the presidency of an extraordinarily complex country, he was unable to master the reforms he introduced. Kabila also had to give in to realpolitik and accept working with people who could guarantee his security. While there are no indications that he ever favoured his own Lubakat people in the PRP movement, he began to rely increasingly on Balubakat during his reign, especially after he fell out with his Rwandan and Uganda protectors.

The result was that the historical opposition between North and South Katanga was projected into the centre of state power, which became an internal battlefield between people of both regions. Through his ascendancy, Kabila symbolised the synthesis between north and south, even though he was most often considered as Lubakat. But his coming to power tilted the balance in Katanga in favour of the previously marginalised north, whose sons and daughters now took over provincial and national institutions, but which were (as in 1960–1963) closely linked to the central government. Remarkably, the imagery of the Katangese secession was used to articulate contemporary tensions between north and south. This imagery underwent another transformation with the rise of Moïse Katumbi, governor of Katanga since 2007 (six years after Kabila's death), who symbolised a new version of Tshombe and returned South Katanga to centre stage.

### The Road not Taken?

Giacomo Macola, in his biography of Harry Nkumbula, justifies his research as a re-reading of the government version of Zambian history, which was marked by an explicit teleological presentation privileging the rise of President Kenneth Kaunda.<sup>50</sup> Going back to the pre-Kaunda era, it is thus possible to discern 'the road not taken' in Zambian history and possible alternative political projects that could have been implemented had Kaunda not reigned supreme. Could a similar case be made for Laurent Kabila? The Simba rebels of the 1960s, beyond their anti-colonial and anti-Western attitudes, did not have much of a political programme, nor did they have the time to develop one. During the early 1970s, the Mobutu regime absorbed the majority of their leaders. However,

49 On the people's power committees see D. Watchiba and M. Hashimu, *Les CPP ou l'Etat Kabila aux enchères* (Kinshasa, 2002).

50 G. Macola, *Liberal Nationalism in Central Africa. A Biography of Harry Mwaanga Nkumbula* (New York, 2010), 1–8.

this did nothing to lessen popular frustration with a regime widely seen as having been installed by the West.

Some intellectuals eventually became advocates and spokesmen of the Simba and Mulelist rebellions and developed leftist or Marxist-Leninist ideas. Kabila was one of the few, if not the only one, to put these ideas in practice within his relatively small PRP movement. His presidency made clear the limitations of the practical solutions found to respond to the resistance movement's basic challenges. In a sense, it constituted the truth of the rebellions of the 1960s and 1970s and showed that viable alternatives had hardly developed over the years. Moreover, Kabila had little tolerance for independent initiative, relied on his own judgement, and refused to communicate with opposition and civil society movements waging a struggle against Mobutu,<sup>51</sup> especially when confronted with threats to his regime.<sup>52</sup>

This criticism can be taken one step further. Mobutu's regime was all-encompassing and integrated ideas from diverse ideological backgrounds. Back from his visit to North Korea and China in January 1973, Mobutu played with the idea of some sort of communist revolution that could serve as a formal political (and propaganda) framework for what remained an essentially liberal – and predatory – economy. Friend of the US, willing to provide military support to UNITA on America's behalf,<sup>53</sup> Mobutu thus established a central committee, formulated the ideology of 'authenticité', and developed a system of pervasive control by the security services. He also created a political persona around himself that integrated all previous leadership figures in the Congo – from King Leopold II, the colonial Governor General, the customary chief, and the leader who acted as a 'good father' during the day and a dangerous sorcerer at night, to the leftist and economically liberal head of state. To this end, he created a powerful combination of symbols in which all Congolese could find something to their taste. It conveyed an image of a cumulative integration of

51 Kabila's lack of tolerance of (constructive) criticism is well documented. The 'intellectual' component of the AFDL, which saw the toppling of Mobutu as a possibility to create a new dispensation, became marginalised. Initially, it formed one of the driving forces behind the revolt against Kabila by the 'Rassemblement Congolais pour la Démocratie'.

52 Differently, L. Martens, *Kabila et la révolution congolaise*, vol. 1: *Panafricanisme ou néocolonialisme* (Antwerp, 2002), which depicts Kabila as the revolutionary leader the DRC had been waiting for, but who was ultimately crushed by imperialist forces. To some extent, there might be some political reasons to support this point of view, given the current state of the DRC.

53 The 'União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola' was a former liberation movement that fought against the central MPLA-led government with the help of apartheid South Africa.



historical figures of power into the all-encompassing Mobutu, with little concern for internal contradictions.<sup>54</sup>

Against this background, then, could Kabila have created an alternative conception of rule? Before the creation of the Mobutist system, Kabila was a Lumumbist, and then became a Maoist who embodied the desire of an alternative to governments dominated by the West. But from the 1970s, the contrasting lines were much less clear. When Mobutu met Mao Ze Dong (1973), PRP writings betrayed confusion over the president-turned-friend of the Great Helmsman. Moreover, the structure of the PRP maquis bore many similarities to the Mobutist one-party state. The personality cult around Kabila was not unlike Mobutu's, while both leaders claimed 'legitimate' rights to the women of their subordinates. Any refusal to obey Kabila's decisions was met with death. Between the lines, Kabila's 1993 Open Letter reveals a kind of envy for Mobutu's power.<sup>55</sup> Rhetorically overestimating his own importance and pitting his defunct PRP against the process of political opening launched by Mobutu in 1990, he stated:

My perceptiveness finding itself gratified by the events parading under your tearful eyes reinforces my love for humanity, but also my determination facing the waning diadem ... But Mr. Mobutu, on 24 April 1990, you did not bother to make an appeal to the PRP, surprising for the courageous man you are: you did not render it the prophetic truth to which it was entitled. To the contrary, you tried to drown this first anti-dictatorial party of the country in jumble, the tussle of former agents of your regime were invited to regroup in political parties with the intention to submit to your legalization criteria. For the PRP that was impossible as long as justice would not have been restored.<sup>56</sup>

54 Many thanks to Filip de Boeck for this essential insight.

55 I am thankful to Ernest Wamba dia Wamba, who made this remark to me in July 1998. See L. Kabila, *Lettre ouverte de Laurent Désiré Kabila à Joseph Désiré Mobutu*, Makanga-Tubaone (Sud Kivu), 6 décembre 1993.

56 *Ibid.*, 13. Translation EK. ('Ma perspicacité se trouvant gratifiée par les événements qui défilent sous tes yeux larmoyants renforce mon amour de l'humanité, mais aussi ma détermination devant le diadème en instance de déchoir.(...) Mais Monsieur Mobutu, le 24 04 90, tu ne daignas pas faire appel au P.R.P., surprenant pour un homme courageux comme tu es : tu ne lui rendais pas la vérité prophétique qui lui revenait, au contraire tu tentas de noyer ce premier parti anti-dictatorial du pays dans les mélis-mélos, et la mêlée d'anciens agents de ton régime invités à se regrouper en formation politique avec intention de le soumettre à tes critères de légalisation. Ce fut pour le P.R.P. chose impossible tant que l'injustice ne sera jamais réparée').

Indeed, Kabila's maquis provoked an aggressive reaction from Mobutu at the time of the students' abduction from Tanzania and during the two Moba attacks. However, a *modus vivendi* with the Zairean army was found after 1977, and, according to some military intelligence sources at the time, Mobutu never really sought to annihilate Kabila, as his position as a rebel had some advantages for contacts and trade. The existence of this rebel economy at the margins of the Mobutist system made it appear as if it was another side of the same coin, the one feeding into the other. Unfortunately, this type of rebel economy became predominant in the DRC after 1998.

The real alternative for Mobutu's rule may have resided in Kabila's practice as a president. Much more than Mobutu, for whom it was merely rhetoric, Kabila pursued real independence for his country and introduced an imperfect, but relatively efficient system of sanctions. Many Congolese citizens today favourably contrast the discipline under Kabila with the impunity reigning under his son. However, it is often forgotten that the father's poor statesmanship and hostility to criticism and dialogue jeopardised his most laudable objectives.

Thus, if Laurent Kabila embodied an alternative, it was in its initial and rudimentary phase. He pointed to the path that the country should take, but was only able to take a few steps in that direction. Are there, then, alternative roads-not-taken for the DRC? In a study written with Miles Larmer, I followed the footsteps of the 'Tigres', who, after the Katangese secession, went to Angola only to return in 1997 to topple Mobutu. They embodied the vivid subnationalism in the DRC. Their ideal of an independent Katanga was based on the dream of autonomous regional development in the political, economic, and cultural sphere, and opposed that of the central government. The debate between federalist and unitarist solutions for the country's constitutional predicaments has been the most persistent debate since the 1960s. Ever since independence, there has been no clear-cut solution for the challenges that both systems present. But there is more, and it is relevant for the future of the DRC.

### **What it Teaches us about DRC History**

The DRC is again at a crossroads that will determine the direction the country will take in the coming decades. On the one hand, the 2006 constitution introduced a semi-presidential regime with an extended protection of basic rights and an administrative system labelled 'decentralised regionalism', giving autonomy to the provinces and legal safeguards for political pluralism and against a return to personal rule. Inspiration for this constitution reportedly came

from France. While political practice is often contrary to the constitutional rules, the constitution remains a signpost and is still supported by a majority of the population. Critics say, reminiscent of arguments from Mobutu's time, that this constitution was a political compromise imposed by the West and was not adapted to the country's social and cultural realities. They advocate a return to authoritarian rule by the current head of state. The political practice of the latter, indeed, indicates that he wants to return the country to a political dispensation without legal and administrative constraints.

So, is there nothing better? Must we choose between a constitution inspired by European models and a lawless form of personal rule? The shallowness of the alternative that was embodied by Laurent Kabila and the rebel movements that he incarnated in his personal trajectory, demonstrates the need for the DRC to take its fate into its own hands. At the same time, it points to the poor state of political thought in the country. Few efforts have been made to develop a political system more adapted to the country's social realities, apart from rather romantic efforts to reconstruct the state on the basis of ethnic groups.<sup>57</sup>

It might be worthwhile, therefore, pursuing efforts in biographical research on the DRC to systematise political thought as it existed in the past, so as to discover whether there were 'roads not taken' that could possibly provide inspiration for the future. Biographical research privileges personal ideas, actions, and objectives in a country where a pervasive cynicism ignores the merits of individual initiative and practice. Comparative biographical research could, in this respect, put the influence and meaning of the country's political generations into perspective. This would require systematic research of published and non-published manuscripts from political and civil society actors.

In another register, systematic and comparative study of life histories of members of rebel movements could yield interesting insights into the creation and durability of these groups. Life histories of members of the political elite could yield relevant information about the process of elite creation, its transformation over time, and its links with the evolving economic, social, and political environment, be it on a regional or national level.<sup>58</sup>

57 C.K. Lumuna Sando, *Nationalisme? Tribalisme? La question tribale au Congo (Zaire)* (Brussels, 1979); *Idem, Idéologies zaïroises et tribalisme* (Louvain-la-Neuve, 1986); M. Tshiyembe, *Etat multinational et démocratie africaine* (Paris, 2002). A more realistic analysis, starting not from ethnic groups but communities, is H. Abangapakwa Nzeke, *Appliquer la démocratie en Afrique. Essai prospectif sur la RD Congo* (Paris, 2017).

58 Preface by E. Kennes to E. Ponea Tekpibebe Masudi, *Armes, Pouvoir et Affairisme en RD Congo 1997–2003. Guerre et circulation des élites politiques en Province Orientale. Une sociologie élitare en temps de guerre* (no place, 2012), 4–6.

## References

- Abangapakwa Nzeke, H. (2017), *Appliquer la démocratie en Afrique. Essai prospectif sur la RDCongo* (Paris).
- Borel, Ph. (1981), 'Divisions et faiblesses d'une opposition privée de stratégie politique', *Le Monde Diplomatique*, September 1981.
- Callaghy, Th. (1984), *The State-Society Struggle: Zaire in Comparative Perspective* (New York).
- Che Guevara, E. (1999), *Pasajes de la guerra revolucionaria. Congo* (Barcelona).
- Chome, J. (1967), *Mobutu et la contre-révolution en Afrique* (Brussels).
- Chome, J. (1974), *L'ascension de Mobutu. Du sergent Joseph Désiré au Général Sese Seko* (Brussels).
- De Goede, M. (2015), "'Mundele, It is Because of You': History, Identity and the Meaning of Democracy in the Congo", *Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol. 53, 583–609.
- De Villers, G. et al. (1998), *République Démocratique du Congo: Chronique politique d'un entre-deux-guerres (octobre 1996 – juillet 1998)* (Tervuren and Paris).
- De Villers, G. (2001) et al., *République Démocratique du Congo/Guerre et politique. Les trente derniers mois de L. D. Kabila (août 1998-janivier 2001)* (Tervuren and Paris).
- De Witte, L. (2017), *L'ascension de Mobutu. Comment la Belgique et les USA ont installé une dictature* (Brussels).
- Galvez, W. (1998), *Le rêve africain du Che* (Antwerp).
- Gérard-Libois, J. and J. Van Lierde (1965), *Congo 1964* (Brussels and Leopoldville).
- Hardenne, R. (1969), 'Les opérations anti-guérillas dans l'Est du Congo en 1965–1966', *Contact: Revue de l'École de Guerre* (Brussels), February 1969, 5–6.
- Kabila, L.D. (n.d.), *Authenticité. Théorie révolutionnaire ou mystique politique ?* (no place).
- Kennes, E. (with Munkana N'Ge) (2003), *Essai biographique sur Laurent Désiré Kabila* (Tervuren and Paris).
- Kennes, E. and M. Larmer (2016), *The Katangese Gendarmes and War in Central Africa: Fighting their Way Home* (Bloomington, IN).
- Lejeune, E. (1965), 'Il y a un an. Le Katanga entrainé dans la "rébellion"', *Remarques Africaines*, no. 245 (June 1965), 7–11.
- Lejeune, E. (1965), 'Il y a un an. Quand l'armée populaire entrainé à Albertville', *Remarques Africaines*, no. 247 (August 1965), 12–16.
- Lejeune, E. (1965), 'Les leçons d'Albertville', *Remarques Africaines*, no. 248 (September 1965), 19–22.
- Lumuna Sando, C.K. (1979), *Nationalisme? Tribalisme? La question tribale au Congo (Zaire)* (Brussels).

- Lumuna Sando, C.K. (1980), *Zaire quel changement pour quelles structures? Misère de l'opposition et faillite de l'Etat* (Brussels).
- Lumuna Sando, C.K. (1986), *Idéologies zaïroises et tribalisme* (Louvain-la-Neuve).
- Macola, G. (2010), *Liberal Nationalism in Central Africa. A Biography of Harry Mwaanga Nkumbula* (New York).
- Nzongola-Ntalaja, G. (2015), *Faillite de la gouvernance et crise de la construction nationale au Congo-Kinshasa* (Kinshasa etc.).
- Ponea Tekpibele Masudi, E. (2012), *Armes, Pouvoir et Affairisme en RD Congo 1997–2003. Guerre et circulation des élites politiques en Province Orientale. Une sociologie élitaire en temps de guerre* (no place).
- Roessler, Ph. and H. Verhoeven (2016), *Why Comrades Go To War* (Oxford).
- Tshiyembe, M. (2002), *Etat multinational et démocratie africaine* (Paris).
- Watchiba, D. and M. Hashimu (2002), *Les CPP ou l'Etat Kabila aux enchères* (Kinshasa).
- Wilungula, C. (1997), *Fizi 1967–1986. Le maquis Kabila* (Tervuren and Paris).
- Zaidi Kisenge, S. and G. Kimambwe Nyoka (2016), 'Maquis Mulele et maquis Kabila. Essai d'une étude comparative', *Likundoli* (Lubumbashi), vol. 25, 157–164.



# Index

- Accra 117, 120, 122, 132–134, 136  
African National Congress (ANC – South Africa) 42, 170  
African religion 247, 252–255, 261  
Afrikaner nationalism 53, 60  
Afrikaners 57, 59  
Agency 13, 14, 21, 37, 92, 95, 109, 144  
Albertville (Kalemie, Congo-Kinshasa) 278–281  
*Alltagsgeschichte* (also see daily life [history], *la quotidienne*) 3, 33  
*Annales* (School) 1, 2, 4, 5, 13, 33, 34  
Antiquity (and biography) 3, 5, 28, 37  
Apartheid 26, 31, 33, 40, 53, 56–60, 63, 65, 66, 70–72, 76n, 80, 81n, 82, 85  
apartheid atrocities 61, 62, 70, 71  
Asante 28, 30, 122, 130, 133  
Autobiographies/y/autobiographical (account, writing) 5–10, 16, 19, 20, 20n, 32, 35, 39, 39n, 42, 43, 148, 150, 171n, 172n, 277  
autobiographical self-positioning 206  
*Baba of Karo* (Mary Smith) 24  
Balubakat (political group Congo-Kinshasa) 278 (+n), 279 (+n), 280, 281n, 291  
Bamenda (Grassfields, Cameroon) 149, 152, 153, 156, 157, 161  
Banda (ethnic group & region Oubangui-Chari/Central African Republic) 257, 258, 260n, 268, 269  
Bangui 252n, 259, 260, 263, 266n, 267, 271  
Basel 124, 128, 129  
Basel mission(aries/y) 120, 123, 124, 127, 129, 131, 132 (+n), 133, 135, 138, 139, 141, 143, 157  
Behaviourism/t 6, 21  
Berberati (town, Oubangui-Chari/Central African Republic) 262, 271  
Bernault, Florence 22, 118  
Bétou (town, Oubangui-Chari/Central African Republic) 248  
Biographical fallacy 12  
Biographical turn 1, 32  
Blyden, Edward W. 143n  
Body (human) 21, 22, 65, 118, 254–257  
Boswell, James 6  
Bourdieu, Pierre 16, 17, 20, 38, 44  
Braudel, Fernand 2, 13  
Brazzaville 252n, 263 (+n), 280  
Büttner, Richard 117, 121, 123n, 130, 131, 136–138(+n), 139, 140  
Calabar 120, 131, 140  
Cannibalism 209, 257n, 264  
(Cape) Malay 225, 233  
Cape Muslim 226, 234n, 235  
Cape Provincial Council(lor) 219, 236  
Carnegie Commission 175  
Catechism (Catholic, Protestant) 155 (+n), 166, 253  
Catholic(ism) 43, 99, 126, 154–159, 165, 167, 168, 227, 235, 246, 247, 257, 269, 270, 272  
Celibacy 247, 270  
Charismatic leadership 265, 266  
Che Guevara 282, 283  
Chilembwe, John 25, 26  
Chrischona, St (Pilgrim Mission, Switzerland) 124, 126–131  
Christianity 19, 21, 43, 108, 120, 130, 131, 142, 143 (+n), 154, 156, 167, 200 (+n), 201, 206, 214, 215, 217, 229, 231, 233, 234, 253–255, 261, 267, 271  
Church Missionary Society 127, 198n  
Cliometrics 2, 33  
Clothing 100, 103, 104, 135, 155, 165 (+n)  
Colonialism 3, 29, 119, 131, 247, 268, 271  
Colour bar 82, 185, 189–191, 235  
Coloured (people) 33, 43, 70–76, 78 (+n), 81, 82, 84, 85, 220 (+n), 227–229 (+n), 230, 235, 240, 242 (+n)  
Communism/t 177, 181, 184, 186, 188, 191, 277, 292  
communist party of South Africa (CPSA) 173, 177, 188–190  
Congo Free State 139  
Congregationalists (American, active in South Africa) 226, 227, 230  
Consumption 34, 41, 102–105, 198n, 256, 257

- Contextualized biography 10, 11, 32n
- Conversion 19, 21, 42, 43, 200–202, 205–210, 213n, 214–217, 255
- Convert(s) 5, 135, 143, 155, 156, 158, 164–166, 201n, 206 (+n), 249
- Copperbelt 91, 99, 100, 103, 107, 108, 173, 178–183, 185, 186, 188–191
- Cosmologies/y 42, 44, 246–248, 250, 252–256, 261, 270–272
- Cultural turn (in social sciences) 15n, 39
- Daily life (history) (also see *Alltagsgeschichte*, *la quotidienne*) 3, 9, 34, 74, 92, 95, 97, 110, 129, 154, 212
- Dar es Salaam 198, 199, 282, 285 (+n), 288
- Decolonisation 25, 252, 261
- De Gaulle, Charles 271
- De Klerk, F.W. 57, 66
- De Kock, Eugene 40, 61–66
- De la Rey, Koos 58
- Democratic Republic of Congo 44, 275
- Desert Rats (British North Africa regiment) 187
- Determinism/t 2, 6, 15, 21, 27, 32, 103
- De Wet, Christiaan 58
- Dlamini, Jacob 54, 60, 62, 63, 65
- Du Preez, Max 62
- Dutch Reformed Church (South Africa) 43, 53, 226–228, 229n, 230
- Education 39, 41, 53, 84, 99, 118, 119, 122, 124, 126, 127, 129, 130, 165, 168, 220, 223–228, 230–235, 239, 240 (+n), 241, 248, 251, 252, 266, 278, 290
- Effendi, Abu Bakr 223–225 (+n), 226, 229, 234, 236
- Eichmann, Adolf 61
- Elmina 120–123, 130, 131
- Eminent Victorians* (L. Strachey) 3, 7
- Exemplars (of character types) 5, 6, 37
- Fayida (freed slave girl, missionary convert) 202, 204, 205, 210, 212–214 (+n)
- Feminism/t (also see women's history) 24, 26, 31
- Fernando Po 148n, 153 (+n), 154, 158
- First World War/World War I 6, 42, 148n, 152, 153n, 168
- Fischer, Bram 58–60
- Fon Ngam (Cameroon) 152, 153, 157, 158, 161, 164, 167, 168
- Fon Yuh (Cameroon) 151, 152, 168
- Forced removals (apartheid South Africa) 70
- Foxley, Alice (missionary teacher) 203, 204, 213, 214 (+n)
- Franschhoek Literary Festival 64–66
- Free will (of human beings) 14, 21, 159
- French Enlightenment (and biography) 6
- Front de Libération Nationale Congolaise/FLNC ('Katangese Tigres') 285, 288, 289, 294
- Fulmai, William (Christian in Kom, Cameroon) 162
- Gender 55, 72, 168, 213n, 231n
- Gbenye, Christophe 280
- Ghandi, Mahatma 56
- Ginzburg, Carlo 34, 37
- Gobodo-Madikizela, Pumla 62–64
- Grimari region (Oubangui-Chari/Central African Republic) 257, 258
- Group Areas Act (South Africa) 75, 82, 84
- Habitus (Bourdieu) 20, 44
- Hagiographic/ies/y 5, 6, 37
- Heroe(s) (as biographical concept) 3, 7, 21, 26, 37, 57, 58, 60
- Herz Jesu* missionaries (Germany) 153
- Histoire nouvelle* 2, 33
- Hobsbawm, Eric 3, 11, 97
- Hofmeyr, Steve 54
- Holy Ghost Fathers (see Spiritans)
- Huguenots (South Africa) 220, 226, 230n
- Huguenot seminary/missionary Sunday school 227, 228
- Illusion (of 'life' notion) 8, 19
- Ilunga, (Prosper) Mwamba 278, 280
- Imperialism 41, 117
- Independence 19, 25, 26, 168, 246, 252, 271, 275, 276, 278, 294
- Independent African* (Shepperon & Price) 25
- Indirect Rule 156
- Internment camps 153, 154



- Islam/ic 5, 43, 73, 143 (+n), 214 (+n), 215,  
224–227, 231, 233, 234
- Jansen, Anemari 63 (+n), 64–66
- Johannesburg 58, 103, 176, 182, 186, 188, 189,  
191
- Jourdain, Michèle 266
- Kabila, Joseph 275, 285 (+n), 286n
- Kagame, Paul 288
- Kalabe, Alphonse 286, 287
- Karnou (rebel leader Oubangui-Chari) 261,  
262
- Kasa Vubu, President  
(Congo-Kinshasa) 280
- Katanga (Shaba) 278–281, 285–287, 291,  
294
- Kibamba (rebel base Congo-Kinshasa) 282,  
283
- Kichelwe (mission post near Dar-es-  
Salaam) 198, 216
- Kilimani (mission post Zanzibar) 212
- Kinshasa 138, 139, 279, 280n, 286 (+n), 289,  
290n
- Kiungani (mission school Zanzibar) 198n,  
205, 207n, 208, 212
- Kivu, South (Congo-Kinshasa) 275, 281, 282,  
284, 286
- Koevoet (military unit – South Africa) 65
- Kom (precolonial kingdom –  
Cameroon) 42, 148, 149, 152, 153,  
155–159, 161, 162, 164, 166–168
- Krog, Antjie 62
- Kruger, Paul 58
- Kwango River (Congo-Kinshasa) 138
- Kwifoy*n (secret society, Kom,  
Cameroon) 149, 151, 152n, 155, 158, 163,  
164
- Labour(er) 41, 55, 99, 107, 122, 127, 129, 139,  
153, 157, 162, 163, 166, 175, 176, 178, 185,  
212, 290n  
labour migrant, labour migration 91, 92,  
98–110  
labour movement (also see trade  
unions) 172, 186, 188, 190
- La quotidienne* (also see *Alltagsgeschichte*,  
daily-life history) 3
- Le Roy Ladurie, Emmanuel 2, 5
- Life histories/y 10, 16, 19–21, 23, 24, 26,  
29–32, 35, 36, 39–41, 87, 88, 92–98, 100,  
102, 103, 105, 107–110, 172, 295  
life-history approach/method 9, 24, 27,  
28, 70, 95, 96  
life-history research 1, 9, 29, 33, 34, 37, 41
- Lifestyle 100, 103, 154, 165, 168, 186
- Lichtenburg (town, South Africa) 175, 177
- Linearity (of time, history) 18, 38, 42, 172
- Literacy 35, 154, 166
- Lubumbashi (Elisabethville) 91, 289
- Luecha, General 288
- Lumumba, Patrice 275, 277–280
- Luthuli, Albert 58
- Mabrook Nyasa (freed slave girl, missionary  
convert) 201
- Macrohistory 97
- Magila (German East Africa) 199, 205 (+n)
- Maitron-Afrique* (France) 29
- Makhanya, Mondli 54
- Malan, D.F. 40, 53–55
- Manchester School 14
- Mandela, Nelson 57–59, 188
- Marist Brothers 43, 220, 226–227, 234–236
- Marxism/t 14, 42, 280, 282, 290 (+n)  
Marxist analysis 1, 27  
Marxist-Leninist 289, 292
- Maybank, Frank 183, 185, 186, 188, 189
- Mbaïki (town, Oubangui-Chari/Central  
African Republic) 248, 265
- Mbanza-Kongo (Angola) 140
- Mbweni (mission post Zanzibar) 212
- Memory 20, 43, 70, 85, 87–88, 94
- Merchant(s) (also see traders) 39n, 136
- Messiness (of lives, historical change) 38,  
101
- Microhistory 3, 9, 11, 30, 33, 34, 37, 93, 96, 97
- Migration (see labour migration)
- Missionaries/y 5, 19, 23, 30, 41, 43, 108, 121,  
123, 127, 129, 131–136, 139, 141, 143, 144,  
153, 154, 156–158, 164, 168, 197, 198, 200,  
201, 206, 208, 211, 213n, 246, 248, 249,  
251, 253, 255, 257, 258, 260, 266, 270, 272  
missionary education/teachers/  
upbringing 99, 130, 199, 207, 212, 227,  
228, 230, 247, 248, 251, 252, 262, 271
- Mkunazini (Zanzibar) 204, 212
- Morudu, Palesa 65

- Mouvement d'Evolution Sociale de l'Afrique Noire (MESAN – Oubangui-Chari/Central African Republic) 262
- Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola (MPLA – Angola) 285 (+n), 292n
- Mulele, Pierre 280
- Mungo* (Ngbaka supreme being) 252–255, 271
- Muntu* 22
- Museveni, Yoweri 288
- Mwinilunga district (Zambia) 91, 92, 98–103, 105–109
- Myth(ical)/ological 26, 250n, 253, 259, 263  
mythologies/y 44, 119, 220n, 250n, 252, 253
- Narrative turn (in historiography) 13, 92
- National Party (NP – South Africa) 58
- Naudé, Beyers 58
- Ngandu, Kisase 288
- Ngbaka(-Mabo) (ethnic group Oubangui-Chari/Central African Republic) 250, 252, 253 (+n), 254–257, 259, 260, 263 (+n), 264, 268n, 269, 270, 272
- Ngong, Johnny (royal advisor, Kom, Cameroon) 159, 163, 165
- Ngonkoulele (palace official, Kom, Cameroon) 163, 165
- Nisa* (Marjorie Shostak) 24, 31
- Nkrumah, Kwame 252
- Nkumbula, Harry 291
- Nouveau roman* 4, 16
- Nsimba, Mwando 286
- Nusora Mubwara (freed slave girl, missionary convert) 202
- Nyerere, Julius 288
- Nyembwe, Kazadi 288
- Oral Documentation Project (South Africa) 29, 31, 36
- Oral history 9, 20, 34, 92–94
- Oral tradition 20, 44, 256
- Orania (Afrikaner enclave – South Africa) 56
- Orphan(s) 43, 191, 249, 250n  
orphanage 44, 174, 186, 191, 248, 250
- Orthodox Church 270
- Palm Tree Mosque (Cape Town) 231, 232
- Pan Africanist Congress (PAC – South Africa) 61
- Panya (freed slave girl, missionary convert) 202–205, 212–214
- Parti de la Révolution Populaire (PRP – Congo-Kinshasa) 284
- Personhood 21, 39, 103, 120, 231
- Pietism/t 41, 121, 124, 126, 127, 130–132, 135, 141–144
- Plaatje, Sol 8, 25, 43
- Plymouth Brethren 108
- Polygamy 143, 257, 258, 270
- Post-modernism/t 1, 4, 12, 15, 17–19, 21, 32, 38
- Proletarianisation 106
- Prosopography 28
- Protestant(ism) 124, 157
- Psychiatry 7, 247, 270  
psychiatric 266
- Psychoanalyst/psychoanalysis/  
psychoanalytical 6–8
- Psychology 6–9, 20, 21, 44, 65, 221, 247  
psychological 266  
psychologist(s) 10, 62, 231
- Racism/t 36, 41, 53, 56, 71, 87, 88, 138, 144, 177, 251, 252, 260, 266, 269, 271
- Rand Revolt 174, 180, 191
- Religion 43, 44, 53, 129, 143, 156, 165, 200n, 205, 206, 215, 231, 237, 250n
- Representativity (of biography) 24, 26, 37, 38, 59
- Resistance 25, 40, 42, 44, 73, 74, 82, 84–88, 172, 241n, 277n, 288  
resistance movement 276, 277, 292
- Rhodes, Cecil John 55 (+n), 56 (+n), 57, 219
- Rhodes Livingstone Institute 98
- #RhodesMustFall 55n, 56, 57n, 58
- Rural-urban (connections, divide, other; also see urbanisation) 30, 101, 104–109
- São Salvador (see Mbanza-Kongo)
- Schutztruppe* 152, 153, 155
- Scramble for Africa 41, 117, 121, 136, 144
- Second World War/World War II 24, 186–188
- Secret societies/y 149, 151, 166, 254

- Sedibe, Glory 60
- Self-fashioning (autobiographical) 16, 17,  
19–21, 31, 42, 43
- Sendwe, Jason 278, 280, 281 (+n), 284
- Seyiti, Denys 197, 198 (+n), 207, 216
- Simba rebellion (Congo-Kinshasa) 275,  
280–284, 286, 289, 291, 292
- Sisulu, Walter 58
- Slavery 30, 122, 132, 198, 201, 210  
slave trade (Atlantic) 120  
slave trade (East Africa) 197, 201, 207  
slave trade (other) 149
- Social change (explanations, narratives,  
theories of) 14, 92–96, 98, 101, 102,  
105, 106, 109, 110
- Social history (including theories/writing  
of) 1, 3, 33, 39, 41, 92–98, 105, 108–110
- Socialisation 29n, 234, 272
- Social mobility 28, 154
- Social rebirth 21, 42, 200–202, 204, 205, 207,  
209, 210 (+n), 211–214, 216
- Sorcerer 254–256, 258, 259n, 260n, 261, 265,  
271, 292
- Sorcery 260n
- Soumialot, Gaston 280, 282, 283
- South African College School 220, 227, 237,  
239
- Spanish Guinea 148n, 152, 153
- Spiritans 247, 248, 270
- Spiritual confusion 270
- Springbok Legion (South Africa) 189–191
- Stanleyville (Kisangani, Congo-  
Kinshasa) 279, 281
- Statues (and biographical personas) 55–57
- Steyn, Marthinus Theunis 58
- Strikes 137, 140, 174, 183, 184, 188, 191
- Structuralism 3, 4, 27  
structuralist approaches/historians/  
paradigms/questions 1, 6, 13, 27
- Swart, C.R. 57
- Syncretism/t 43, 44, 131, 231, 247
- Tambo, Oliver 58, 170
- Tana Baru (Cape Town cemetery) 236, 237
- Tarabitu, Désiré 278
- Tax 165, 166
- The Seed is Mine* (Charles van Onselen) 36
- Thompson, Edward 18, 32
- Trade unions (unionism; also see labour  
movement) 175, 182, 188–191
- Traders (also see merchants) 41, 100, 101, 178
- Transcendentalism/t 43, 230, 231, 240
- Trauma(tic) 38, 44, 61, 62, 88, 120, 198, 213,  
247, 269, 270  
traumatic childhood (as biographical  
trope) 269  
traumatic childhood (other) 270
- Trickster (figure, myth) 253, 254n, 259, 265,  
268
- Truth and Reconciliation Commission  
(TRC) 61, 62, 70
- Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK – South  
Africa) 60, 61, 170, 171n, 173, 174, 177n,  
191
- Universities' Mission to Central Africa  
(UMCA) 198 (+n), 200 (+n), 202, 203,  
206 (+n), 207, 208, 210, 214 (+n)
- University of Cape Town 55, 56, 222
- Urbanisation (also see rural-urban) 91,  
98–100, 105, 106, 184
- Vansina, Jan 20, 27, 38, 93, 262n
- Verwoerd, Hendrik 58
- Violence, apartheid 72, 88  
colonial 249, 269, 270  
other 70, 71, 73, 80, 82, 86, 137, 157, 278,  
279n  
political 40, 71, 74, 75, 85, 87  
racial 40, 73, 78, 79, 83–86, 88  
street [violence] 81  
structural/systemic 40, 72, 191
- Vlakplaas (death squad – South Africa) 61,  
65
- Von Ranke, Leopold/'Rankean' 2, 6, 13
- Voortrekker Monument (South Africa) 56
- Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society  
(Gold Coast) 136
- Witch doctor 256
- Wolff, Willy 118, 119, 130, 137, 138, 142n, 143  
(+n)
- Women's history (also see  
feminism/t) 29–31

- Yohana Hamisi (freed slave girl, missionary  
convert) 202, 205, 215
- Young Man Luther* (E.H. Erikson) 7
- Youlou, Fulbert 270
- Zanzibar 21, 38, 39n, 43, 197, 198 (+n), 199,  
202–206, 207 (+n), 209, 211, 212, 213 (+n)
- Zo kwe zo* (doctrine – Oubangui-Chari/  
Central African Republic) 262