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## New Horizons in the Study of Early African Christianity

We can certainly affirm the presence of Christianity in Africa from its very beginning, from the flight to Egypt by Jesus with his parents some months after his birth (Matthew 2:14-15), from the role of Simon of Cyrene, forced to carry Jesus' cross on the way to Golgotha (Luke 23:36), and the presence of Egyptians and Libyans among those experiencing the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2:10). Earliest Christianity in the Maghreb (North Africa) is shrouded in mystery, but the martyrdom of the Scillitans (AD 180) witnesses to a strong Christian community by the late second century<sup>2</sup>. For the history of Christianity in Africa, however, Ethiopia and Coptic Egypt have a special role, for in those regions Christianity maintained an ongoing presence, albeit often under duress, right up to modern times. The same cannot be said for the Maghreb, although for that region, as for ancient kingdoms of Nubia, modern archaeological discoveries have done much to bring to light a glorious history featuring magnificent cathedrals; in fact, not many years ago the president

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<sup>2</sup> For oral tradition, classical and patristic scholarship tends to scepticism without strong evidence to the contrary; yet African Christian communities are themselves far more comfortable accepting stories of beginnings, like that of Mark or Frumentius, as these have been passed along orally through the centuries.

of Algeria himself organized a conference to celebrate *Augustinus Afer*, proudly claiming him “our Augustine”<sup>3</sup>.

After the seventh century Arab invasions, Christianity in North Africa would suffer an embattled history, as Islamic religious and political hegemony gradually made its impact<sup>4</sup>. Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the presence and/or growth of Christianity there suffered from a very different challenge of ‘diffusionist’ or Eurocentric assumptions on the nature of Christianity. Much of the African continent was carved up by the Berlin agreement of 1884/5, for respective European nations to establish their colonial rule<sup>5</sup>. With colonization came missionary presence, Catholic and Protestant. Whatever else we can say about that era, one thing is clear. The past century or more has witnessed Christianity taking deep roots on the continent. If it has been estimated that at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century about five percent of the African population was Christian, by the end of the century that number had gone to well beyond fifty percent. And growing. Initially much of the mission activity was carried out by Catholic orders and mainline Protestant denominations (Anglican, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist). Independence would mark a shift in growth, now coming largely from Pentecostal groups, the Assemblies of God, Deeper Life, United Church of Christ, and charismatic groups like Winners Chapel.

It has now been more than a half century since most of the colonial rulers were expelled, and countries like Nigeria have been relatively free to make political decisions for themselves. Those early years of independence were still characterized by a significant residue of anti-colonial Marxist ideology in politics and education. Such an approach certainly waned with the fall of communist governments in East Europe in the 1990s. Nonetheless, Christians continued to face the accusation that Christianity was no more

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<sup>3</sup> The conference, held at Alger-Annaba (April 2001), was organized by the *Haut Conseil Islamique Algérie* in collaboration with the Swiss University of Fribourg; for the subsequent publication, *Augustinus Afer* (in two volumes), see P.Y. Fux *et al.*, *Augustinus Afer: Saint Augustin: africanité et universalité*, Fribourg 2003.

<sup>4</sup> For an introductory historical survey of early Christianity in these North African regions, see W.E. Helleman – M.B. Gaiya, *Early Christianity: A Textbook for African Students*, Carlisle 2019, p. 145-173; on the particular issue of the almost complete eradication of Christianity in the Maghreb, see p. 158, 435-436 and 438.

<sup>5</sup> See O.U. Kalu, *Ethiopianism and the Roots of Modern African Christianity*, in: *The Cambridge History of Christianity*, v. 8: *World Christianities*, ed. S. Gilley – B. Stanley, Cambridge 2005, p. 576; for indigenous reaction to colonial presence coming to expression in the Ethiopian ideology, Kalu noted a decisive moment with this Berlin agreement.

than a Western implant, an accusation motivated either by residual influence of Marxist ideology or Islamic resistance in the post-colonial era. Those early years were also marked by the widespread expectation that Christianity in these newly minted African nations would not survive the departure of their colonial masters<sup>6</sup>. It would be some decades before it became clear that this was not happening. Still, the question remains: how can the Christian churches effectively shake themselves free of that (Western) identity? This question is all the more urgent, because the charismatic church groups that now predominantly characterize African Christianity are not noted for appreciation of history, nor the patient scholarly exploration of early Christianity in Africa needed for such appreciation.

African Christians can nonetheless take legitimate pride in the contribution made by their forebears for the development of Christianity in its earliest years. Even a cursory examination of outstanding leaders in those early centuries reveals the significant contribution of the North African Christian Church in the Roman Empire. We have only to think of the enormous influence exerted by the preaching and writings of Augustine of Hippo. There is absolutely no reason why African students of Christianity should consider Christianity a primarily white-man's religion, or an import from European colonizers and Western missionaries. Such was also the motivation for this author to work together with Nigerian colleague Musa Gaiya in publishing a textbook on early Christianity, geared to the needs of undergraduate students in Religious Studies<sup>7</sup>. These factors continue to pose a challenge, and also motivate the present discussion, originally prepared for the (virtual) conference, "New Horizons in Early Christian Studies: Challenges and Opportunities" (March 2021)<sup>8</sup>. The aim of the presentation was to develop and update two themes raised in the book, namely, the significance of archeological evidence, and the potential benefit of the project started by Thomas Oden in establishing the *Center for Early African Christianity*<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> On the 1975 conference held at the Nigerian University of Jos to discuss this issue, see further below, p. 152. The Jos university is a daughter university of Ibadan, Nigeria's premier university (established by the British before they left).

<sup>7</sup> W.E. Helleman – M.B. Gaiya, *Early Christianity: A Textbook for African Students*, Carlisle 2019.

<sup>8</sup> The conference, sponsored by the *Canadian Society of Patristic Studies*, the *North American Patristics Society* and the *Metropolitan Andrey Sheptytsky Institute of Eastern Christian Studies* in the University of St. Michael's College (Toronto), was originally planned for 2020, and took place 26-27 March 2021.

<sup>9</sup> On the historiography of African Christianity, see Helleman – Gaiya, *Early Christianity*, p. 429-441; on archeology, also p. 410-411.

However, once engaged in relevant research, this author came upon the surprising discovery of ‘Ethiopianism’ as a theme and movement in the history of African Christianity presenting an analogous argument for the significance of its early history<sup>10</sup>. The present study therefore will focus on three ways in which the significance of the patristic heritage is assuming new contours in contemporary African Christian communities:

- Ethiopianism of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century;
- Archeology, the material culture that is being unearthed, and its availability for study by African students; and
- Work of the *Center for Early African Christianity*, initiated by Thomas Oden.

### 1. Ethiopianism and Indigenous African Christianity (ca. 1880-1920)

The ongoing presence of Christianity in Egypt and Ethiopia, from its very beginning on the African continent, was very important in the 19<sup>th</sup> century for encouraging embattled black African Christians, both in Africa itself and the North American diaspora. While the movement typified as ‘Ethiopian’ has a clear geographical/historical aspect, we quickly find that it is also characterized by mythical idealization, taking its implications far beyond this primary geographical indication<sup>11</sup>; and its appeal is further rooted in the biblical prophecy concerning Ethiopia from Psalm 68:13, “Princes shall come out of Egypt; Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God”<sup>12</sup>. Of course, this text points to an important role for Egypt as well as Ethiopia. Is there an explanation why the name of the movement

<sup>10</sup> For initial acquaintance with this theme, we acknowledge the conversation with Retief Muller of the *Nagel Institute* of Grand Rapids MI (and with Shirley Roels of the *International Network for Christian Higher Education*), noting its role in the South African context in a (zoom) conversation of 17 February 2021.

<sup>11</sup> Such mythical idealization is clear from Blyden’s use of the term; see below, p. 132; on its symbolic value, see p. 135. Odamtten’s work on Edward Blyden is focused on the geographical/historical aspect of the Ethiopian theme. He cites four forms: Black American, Euro-American, Southern and Central African, and West African Ethiopianism; see H.N.K. Odamtten, *Edward W. Blyden’s Intellectual Transformations: Afropublicanism, Pan-Africanism, Islam, and the Indigenous West African Church*, East Lansing 2019, p. 44. In its varied forms, Ethiopianism reflects concerns about abolition of slavery and anticolonialism, but also the potential for evangelizing Africa through the return of freed slaves.

<sup>12</sup> See G.A. Duncan, *Ethiopianism in Pan-African perspective, 1880-1920*, “*Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae*” 41/2 (2015) p. 198-199. Kalu cites numerous texts representing

represents only Ethiopia? The answer to that question may involve the further myth of Prester John, a fabulously powerful and wealthy (priest-)king whom European legends originally connected with 'India'. Yet we know that even for imperial Rome, 'India' represented parts of Africa beyond the known province of Egypt<sup>13</sup>. While the connection of Prester John with an Ethiopian Christian kingdom is first mentioned in 14<sup>th</sup> century European church records, that profile was expanded by 15<sup>th</sup> century Portuguese explorers and envoys as they also sought to expand their colonial empire<sup>14</sup>. Contemporary scholarship realizes that the Ethiopians themselves knew nothing of this legend; African historians are also hesitant to acknowledge a historic role for Prester John in Ethiopia. Nonetheless, we recognize the possibility that 'Ethiopianism' was at least partly inspired by that legend as it was known in late medieval Europe, motivating explorers or missionaries in search of the wealthy Christian ruler.

The noted Nigerian church historian Ogbu Kalu traced the inspiration for Ethiopianism to the *African Methodist Episcopal Church* founded in Philadelphia (in 1816)<sup>15</sup> by black Americans desiring to see Africa relive the glory of its past; that church was also instrumental in establishing the *American Colonization Society* to repatriate freed slaves to Liberia and Sierra Leone<sup>16</sup>. Ethiopianism was clearly influential as a theme in the development of West African Christianity, as can be noted from early cham-

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Ethiopia as a mythical entity that includes all of Africa in the hope of its redemption; see his *Ethiopianism*, p. 581-583.

<sup>13</sup> On this confusion of India with Ethiopia, see P. Mayerson, *A Confusion of Indias: Asian India and African India in the Byzantine Sources*, "Journal of the American Oriental Society" 113/2 (1993) p. 169-174.

<sup>14</sup> For the account of a Portuguese mission to Ethiopia given by Alvares, see the recently revised translation prepared by C. Beckingham and G.W.B. Huntingford (*The Prester John of the Indies: A True Relation of the Lands of the Prester John, being the narrative of the Portuguese Embassy to Ethiopia in 1520, written by Father Francisco Alvares*, London – New York 2017). On such accounts, see also R. Silverberg, *The Realm of Prester John*, Athens 1996.

<sup>15</sup> See Kalu, *Ethiopianism*, p. 583; he notes Henry McNeal Turner (1834-1915), its bishop, as "perhaps the greatest protagonist of the Ethiopian cause". Known for proclaiming that "God is a Negro", Turner became a key player both in emigration and the Ethiopian church movement. Kalu points to racial discrimination as basis for withdrawal of African Americans from the white Methodist Church already in 1787; see Duncan, *Ethiopianism*, p. 212, and *African Christianity: an African Story*, ed. O.U. Kalu, Pretoria 2005, p. 273.

<sup>16</sup> For the connection with the black American church, see Duncan, *Ethiopianism*, p. 201-202.

pions, like the Liberian educator Edward W. Blyden (1832-1912), the lawyer Joseph Ephraim Casely-Hayford (1866-1930)<sup>17</sup> of Ghana<sup>18</sup>, and Sierra Leonean James Johnson (1836-1917), first black Anglican bishop of the Niger Delta region in Nigeria, from 1900<sup>19</sup>. Of these, Blyden was the most articulate<sup>20</sup>. With his parents as freed slaves of Nigerian Igbo descent, Blyden grew up in the West Indies and received a basic education through a Dutch Reformed pastor, who eventually tried to register Blyden for further theological education in North America; more than once the attempt was frustrated because Blyden was black. As a result, he joined those being repatriated to Africa (1850)<sup>21</sup>, to become a noted journalist and teacher in Liberia and Sierra Leone.

Blyden himself was well ahead of his time in championing Zionism<sup>22</sup>, for in that movement to create a Jewish homeland in Palestine, he recognized an analogy for Ethiopianism as a movement to find in 'Ethiopia' (if symbolically) a home for Africans scattered through enforced enslavement. Indeed, the memory of ancient African Christian communities like Ethiopia helped to foster pride in the potential of a Christian state remaining independent of white colonial domination<sup>23</sup>. As a truly African Christian state, Ethiopia represented the hope that the African Christian church would be instrumental in leading all Africans to God. During this period, independent

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<sup>17</sup> On Casely-Hayford of the British Gold Coast (author of *Ethiopia Unbound*, 1911), see Kalu, *Ethiopianism*, p. 586. He was born into the Ghanaian Euro-African elite and educated in Freetown, Sierra Leone, where he became a follower of Blyden.

<sup>18</sup> Duncan also notes outstanding leaders of the *African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church* (established in Ghana, 1898), like Ata Osam Pinako, who supported nationalism with Christianity as key to the liberation of black people; see Duncan, *Ethiopianism*, p. 209.

<sup>19</sup> On Johnson's remarkable career, see Duncan, *Ethiopianism*, p. 205, and Kalu, *African Christianity*, p. 273; Johnson supported a single Christian church for Africa, characterized by a distinctive African personality, paralleled in the creation of one African state that embraced diaspora Africans. See also Kalu, *Ethiopianism*, p. 585, 587.

<sup>20</sup> Odamtten describes Blyden as leader of West African Ethiopianism and regards him the most influential black intellectual of the nineteenth and early twentieth century; see Odamtten, *Edward W. Blyden's Intellectual Transformations*, p. 166, 187.

<sup>21</sup> Emigration societies had been sending Afro-Americans to settle in Sierra Leone since 1787; see Duncan, *Ethiopianism*, p. 212, and Kalu, *African Christianity*, p. 273.

<sup>22</sup> Blyden remained a Christian, but his major work, *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race* (1887) raised considerable controversy for promoting Islam as more authentically African.

<sup>23</sup> D.A. Ogren, *The Coptic Church in South Africa: The Meeting of Mission and Migration*, "Hervormde Teologiese Studies" 70/1 (2014) p. 6.



African churches using the title ‘Ethiopian’ were established throughout West Africa: Nigeria, Ghana, Cameroon, and also in Kenya and Rhodesia<sup>24</sup>.

Blyden’s pan-African vision was inspired by the desire of the North American Marcus Garvey to promote the freedom and human dignity of black Africans by uniting them in a single nation. Garvey’s *Universal Negro Improvement Association* (UNIA) also inspired the move toward a single African Christian church for all Africans<sup>25</sup>, and the establishment of the *African Orthodox Church* (AOC), with its first bishop, the former Anglican priest, George MacGuire (in Boston, MA)<sup>26</sup>.

The ‘Ethiopian’ church communities of West Africa had very little immediate knowledge of Christianity as it was actually practiced in Ethiopia or Egypt at the time. For closer links with Orthodox church communities of those countries, we need to explore Ethiopianism in South Africa. Here the first intertribal *Ethiopian Church* was established in 1892 by Mangena Maake Mokone (1851- ca. 1936)<sup>27</sup>, to unite a number of South African pastors, including those of the *African Church* established by the evangelist Joseph Mathunye Kanyane Napo (ca. 1860-1925) in Pretoria (1888). For these churches Ethiopianism represented the theme of “Africa for Africans”, namely, an African Christianity independent of European masters<sup>28</sup>. The leaders of this movement were typically well-educated and capable evangelists who had developed some resentment for being systematically excluded from ordination and administrative decision-making.

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<sup>24</sup> On Ethiopian churches in Nigeria: Native Baptist (created in 1888), Native African Church (in 1892), Native Church (Bethel, in 1901) and Native Methodist Church (in 1917), see J.B. Webster, *The African Churches among the Yoruba 1888-1922*, Oxford 1964. For further identification of outstanding indigenous churches identified as ‘Ethiopian’, see the online Britannica article, *Ethiopianism*, in: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Ethiopianism> (accessed: 18.02.2021); also, Duncan, *Ethiopianism*, p. 203, noting significant discussion by B.G. Sundkler, *Bantu prophets in South Africa*, Oxford 1961, p. 38.

<sup>25</sup> See Duncan, *Ethiopianism*, p. 204.

<sup>26</sup> See S. Hayes, *Orthodox Mission in Tropical Africa*, (undated) in the section “Southern Africa” (3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> par.) in: <https://missions.hchc.edu/articles/articles/orthodox-mission-in-tropical-africa> (accessed: 26.02.2021). On the problematic nature of MacGuire’s ordination, see further below, p. 147-148.

<sup>27</sup> On Mokone as representative of a black elite educated in mission schools, see Duncan, *Ethiopianism*, p. 207.

<sup>28</sup> According to Stephen Hayes, Ethiopian ideology affirms particularly that African Christianity should not have to approach God through European mediators; see S. Hayes, *Orthodox Ecclesiology in Africa: A Study of the ‘Ethiopian’ Churches of South Africa*, “International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church” 8 (2008) p. 342-343.

Four years after establishing the South African *Ethiopian Church*, Mokone turned to the black African communities in the USA, to link his Christian community with the *African Methodist Episcopal Church* there<sup>29</sup>; the primary goal of the move was to address issues of legitimate ordination and allow candidates for ministry to receive an adequate education in the USA. As bishop of the *African Methodist Episcopal Church*, Turner visited South Africa in 1898<sup>30</sup>, and helped the church there to consolidate the 'Ethiopian' approach.

If the leaders of this movement hoped to establish a single united African church, they would be seriously disappointed. Its history is characterized rather by repeated secession and schism. One of the early leaders, James Mata Dwane (1848-1916), who had been appointed as general superintendent, rejoined the Anglican Church in 1900, while also maintaining leadership of a quasi-independent group, the *Order of Ethiopia* (mainly among the Xhosa)<sup>31</sup>. And in 1904 Samuel James Brander formed the *Ethiopian Catholic Church in Zion* (combining Methodist with Anglican traditions). Eventually even Joseph Napo left the merger and, together with Daniel William Alexander, revived the *African Church*.

In spite of these developments, the theme of Ethiopianism represents a significant movement among black South African Christians particularly from 1890-1920, as they sought to establish an identity separate from European and Western mission efforts<sup>32</sup>. It is significant that the theme represented a rejection of European domination and racist policies, but did not reject European education<sup>33</sup>. While staying close to the liturgy and teachings of the Anglican and Methodist churches of their origin, these

<sup>29</sup> See Duncan, *Ethiopianism*, p. 212, also referring to J.T. Campbell, *Songs of Zion: The African Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States and South Africa*, Oxford 1995.

<sup>30</sup> See Kalu, *Ethiopianism*, p. 589; on Turner, see also above, n. 15.

<sup>31</sup> Dwane looked to the regional Anglican Church for valid episcopal ordination for *Order of Ethiopia* leaders; see Hayes, *Orthodox Ecclesiology*, p. 347.

<sup>32</sup> Bengt Sundkler was the first to seriously study these African Independent churches, distinguishing Ethiopian from Zionist groups, with the former remaining closer to churches of origin in church structures and theology, while the latter are marked by apocalypticism; see B. Sundkler, *Bantu Prophets in South Africa* (1961). N.A. Etherington has challenged that distinction, pointing out that historically the Zionist churches come later, and are associated with Zululand, while the Ethiopian churches, characteristically intertribal, are connected with Natal; see N.A. Etherington, *The Historical Sociology of Independent Churches in South East Africa*, "Journal of Religion in Africa" 10/2 (1979) p. 109.

<sup>33</sup> According to Kalu, Ethiopianism would "preserve African culture, language and racial distinctives. Ironically it would do all these by absorbing the best in European cul-



Ethiopian Christian communities embraced a varied ethnic and cultural expression, but they cooperated as a flexible intertribal network well into the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

From this brief survey of its history, it is clear that the term ‘Ethiopian’ functioned primarily as a symbol; in these first years it was only minimally connected with East African Ethiopia as such, and even less with the *Ethiopian Orthodox Church*, also called *Tewahido*, which traces its beginning right back to the fourth century<sup>34</sup>. Like the ancient Greek term *Aithiops* which also represented all Africa beyond the known world, Ethiopia was used to represent the entire continent; it included even diaspora Africans. For them it functioned as a distinct mythical locale<sup>35</sup>, or an ‘enchanted’ focus of hope, to recreate the golden age of African civilization from ancient Meroe and Aksum, where Christianity flourished long before the Islamic occupation. Nineteenth century Christians had no more than vague knowledge of that glorious past<sup>36</sup>. But using the Ethiopian theme to recreate that Christian memory was critical as a counter move to pervasive denigration and humiliation of black Africans<sup>37</sup>. The theme was particularly significant after the 1884/85 Berlin agreements partitioning Africa among colonial powers without any consultation of the people affected. Especially among educated Africans, Ethiopianism as a theme expressed their resentment at white domination<sup>38</sup>. As an indigenous Christian nation, Ethiopia was ide-

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ture. There was no rejection of European culture in the programme” (Kalu, *Ethiopianism*, p. 585).

<sup>34</sup> Kalu notes that in antiquity ‘Ethiopia’ represented the African continent south of the known world, as it was also noted for black faces; see Kalu, *Ethiopianism*, p. 583.

<sup>35</sup> Among relevant aspects of this myth Kalu notes “the staggering achievements of ancient Egypt, the work of the early Christian apologists in Alexandria and Carthage, the gilded kingdoms of Nubian Meroe, the exploits of Aksum, and the endeavours of various Abyssinian kings who sustained the Christian kingdom in the face of Islamic onslaught until Yohannes and Menelik modernised it” (Kalu, *Ethiopianism*, p. 583).

<sup>36</sup> Aside from the achievements of Egypt in science, architecture and government, passed along through Greek civilization, Kalu notes that African contributions “to the consolidation of the theology and identity of early Christianity are equally immense” (Kalu, *Ethiopianism*, p. 582). Recognition of the special place of Africans in God’s plan for humanity meant “re-imagining the race in the face of white denigration” (Kalu, *Ethiopianism*, p. 585).

<sup>37</sup> On the key role of Christianity for ‘Ethiopianism’ in supporting African cultural and political nationalism, see Kalu, *Ethiopianism*, p. 592: “African church leaders drew inspiration from the biblical and political memory of Ethiopia and formed African Initiated Churches”.

<sup>38</sup> See Duncan, *Ethiopianism*, p. 202-203, referring also to Kalu, *African Christianity*, p. 260.

alized as a truly African Zion. Its profile was greatly enhanced in 1896, when the Ethiopian army managed to defeat Italian would-be colonizers at the battle of Adwa<sup>39</sup>. And in South Africa, departure from mainstream mission churches accelerated significantly after the *Treaty of Union* (1910) which institutionalized overt racism, affirming the inferior status of black Africans as it would characterize Apartheid for decades to come<sup>40</sup>.

Because the leaders of the Ethiopian movement were capable evangelists with critical experience in organization, administration and public speaking, they were in a strategic position to encourage and strengthen nationalist trends in these years<sup>41</sup>. For white South Africans, Ethiopianism was considered something of a threat, raising fears, particularly because of its perceived role in the Zulu uprising of 1906, and also the Nyasaland rebellion under Chilembwe in 1915<sup>42</sup>. After 1920, Ethiopianism came to be incorporated in political action for the independence for black Africans through trade unions and the rise of African National Congress (ANC), evident from founding documents of the ANC (1912)<sup>43</sup>. Ethiopianism can still

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<sup>39</sup> On this battle, showing Africans that the white forces could be beaten back, see Hayes, *Orthodox Ecclesiology*, p. 342; also, R. Rukuni – E. Oliver, *Africanism, Apocalypticism, Jihad and Jesuitism: Prelude to Ethiopianism*, “Hervormde Teologiese Studies” 75/3 (2019) p. 8.

<sup>40</sup> On the *Treaty of Union* (1910) affirming the inferiority of black Africans, see Duncan, *Ethiopianism*, p. 207-209 and 211. On this restructuring as an awakening of educated black Africans to political opposition, forming the *South African Native National Council* in 1912, and protesting the *South Africa Native Land Act* of 1913 in London, see also Kalu, *Ethiopianism*, p. 590.

<sup>41</sup> See Duncan, *Ethiopianism*, p. 211, quoting Afigbo, “Political awareness among the mass of the African population expressed itself in a religious form known as Ethiopianism. [...] Though the Ethiopian movement was on the surface religious, it had a strong political element since it was an expression of African resentment at European dominance”. See A.E. Afigbo, *South Africa after the Union*, in A.E. Ayandele – A.E. Afigbo – R.J. Gavin – J.D. Omer-Cooper, *The Growth of African Civilisation*, v. 2: *The late Nineteenth Century to the Present Day*, London 1971, p. 261. On nationalism arising within the Ethiopian churches, see Duncan, *Ethiopianism*, p. 215; he quotes Kalu, *African Christianity*, p. 267.

<sup>42</sup> According to N.A. Etherington, the multi-ethnic nature of Ethiopian churches argues against their role in the Zulu uprising, whereas Zionist churches were far more tribal in orientation; but the real cause for these troubles can be traced to “British annexation of the Transkei, and the steady erosion of chiefly independence in Natal [as] body-blows which defenders of the old order tried to parry with new religious weapons” (Etherington, *The Historical Sociology*, p. 120-125).

<sup>43</sup> Frustration with discrimination and paternalism led to the formation of the *South African Native National Congress* in 1912 as a secular parallel for the *African Initiated*

be noted in Nelson Mandela's address to the ANC, affirming "links between the Ethiopian church and the ANC" in "the struggle for national liberation going back to the 1870's"<sup>44</sup>. To complete this aspect of Ethiopianism, we note that it was no accident that Mandela traveled to Addis Ababa in 1962 at the invitation of the Ethiopian emperor<sup>45</sup>. In his address to the Pan-African Freedom Movement of East and Central Africa (before returning to South Africa to be arrested in July that year), he paid tribute to Ethiopia as a great country with "hundreds of years of colourful history" in which it has "paid the full price of freedom and independence". Mandela appreciated Ethiopian support for the cause of unity and progress in Africa, and particularly for South African struggles for freedom<sup>46</sup>.

In later years the *African Independent Churches* did establish actual contact with the Orthodox churches of East Africa. By that time these Orthodox communities were themselves waking up to the advantage they held, representing a branch of Christianity with an unbroken apostolic succession, linking them directly with truly African origins in Africa itself, free of any connection with white colonial powers. Initially Daniel William Alexander, who had joined Joseph Napo in returning to the *African Church* (after involvement in Mokone's *Ethiopian Church*), took up contact with the *African Orthodox Church* recently established in the USA under George MacGuire (of Boston MA). In order to be ordained as bishop of "an independent black ethnic jurisdiction", MacGuire had finally been consecrated by an *episcopus vagans*, René Joseph Vilatte<sup>47</sup>. Alexander traveled to the USA to have MacGuire ordain him as bishop of the *African Orthodox*

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*Church* (AIC); see Duncan, *Ethiopianism*, p. 207-208. See also indications of Ethiopianism in the ANC address of 1923 by Pixely Isaka Ka Seme as he called for unity and co-operation of African people defending civil and political rights, rejecting racism and tribalism; see Duncan, *Ethiopianism*, p. 204-205.

<sup>44</sup> See *Articles about Africa's cultural, philosophical and religious roots: The Meaning of Africa Month* on the website of the Kara Heritage Institute, in <https://www.kara.co.za/kara-articles.php?id=24> (accessed: 8.02.2022).

<sup>45</sup> Mandela went to receive three months of training essential to establishing a paramilitary wing of ANC; see *From the Archive/ Mandela in Addis Ababa, 1962*, in: <https://www.newframe.com/from-the-archive-mandela-in-addis-ababa-1962/> (accessed: 8.02.2022).

<sup>46</sup> Among other goals, Mandela sought support for the boycott of South African goods, and impositions of sanctions to undermine its government; see the report, *From the Archive/ Mandela in Addis Ababa, 1962*.

<sup>47</sup> On MacGuire's ordination as bishop by Vilatte, himself consecrated by a Syrian Jacobite bishop in India, see Hayes, *Orthodox Mission in Tropical Africa*, in the section

*Church of South Africa* (in Beaconsville). His ordination would eventually be regarded as irregular, because MacGuire's own consecration was non-canonical. Even so, Alexander's *African Orthodox Church* was one of few independent churches to achieve government approval and, as such, was able to attract other groups like the *Ethiopian Catholic Church in Zion* to incorporate with him<sup>48</sup>.

In his prominent role as bishop, Alexander was also influential in the development of the *African Orthodox Church* in Uganda and Kenya. In the late 1920s, he received an invitation to work with two Ugandan Anglicans. The first, Reuben Ssey Mukasa (later known as Fr. Reuben Spartas)<sup>49</sup>, had grown to resent the paternalism of Anglican missionaries, and was attracted to the North American Garvey's pan-African movement<sup>50</sup>. The second, Obadiah Basaajakitalo, had actually come to Orthodoxy through his reading of church history and a subsequent search for a church affiliation not subject to colonial power structures<sup>51</sup>. Alexander ordained these men in 1930/31 to establish the *African Orthodox Church of Uganda*, and encouraged them to take up contact with the *Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria*. At this point we note that the *Alexandria Patriarchate* held jurisdiction for all African Orthodox dioceses, not just those of North Africa and Ethiopia, and Alexander's ordination of the two Ugandans would raise the potential problem of overlapping jurisdiction<sup>52</sup>. To complicate the situation further,

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*Southern Africa* (3<sup>rd</sup> par.), noting that this ordination was declared void in 1935; see also Hayes, *Orthodox Ecclesiology*, p. 345.

<sup>48</sup> See Hayes, *Orthodox Mission in Tropical Africa* in the section *Southern Africa* (4<sup>th</sup> par.), noting an interview with Rev. Johannes Motau of the *African Orthodox Church* in Atteridgeville, Pretoria.

<sup>49</sup> See Hayes, *Orthodox Mission in Tropical Africa*, mentioning that Fr. Reuben Spartas was finally consecrated as Bishop Christopherous of Nilopolis in 1973; see the section *Uganda and Kenya* (1<sup>st</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> par.).

<sup>50</sup> See Duncan, *Ethiopianism*, p. 213.

<sup>51</sup> On Obadiah Basaajakitalo, see Hayes, *Orthodox Mission in Tropical Africa* in the section *Uganda and Kenya* (7<sup>th</sup> par.).

<sup>52</sup> On these issues, see G.P. Makris, *The Greek Orthodox Church and Africa: Missions between the Light of Universalism and the Shadow of Nationalism*, "Studies in World Christianity" 16/3 (2010) p. 245-267. Makris notes that historically both the Constantinople and Alexandria Patriarchates were ethnically Greek (252); on this, see also Hayes, *Orthodox Mission in Tropical Africa* in the section *Uganda and Kenya* (1<sup>st</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> par.). Makris also notes the challenges posed for the essentially helleno-centric ethnic orientation of the Greek Orthodox Church as state church of Greece (p. 246, 262-263). Still, he recognizes the appeal of a church tradition with roots in earliest Christianity, especially as the African context shows the scars of capitalism and modernization under white rule (p. 263).

Fr. Nicodemus Sarikas<sup>53</sup>, a missionary of the *Greek Orthodox Church* in Tanzania, visited them a year later (1932). And this visit resulted in Spartas joining the *Greek Orthodox Church*.

Alexander returned to the area in 1935 to establish a seminary and ordain more priests<sup>54</sup>; at the same time the Ugandan group continued their interaction with the *Alexandria Patriarchate*, and also encouraged a newly established Kenyan Orthodox group to submit to that patriarchate. They wrote a formal letter of request to be received as a canonical Orthodox Church in 1946. And Fr. Sarikas would continue his work for the Orthodox Church under that umbrella in Tanzania. These moves received further encouragement from Archbishop Makarios of Cyprus when he was returning from exile in the Seychelles in 1957, for he traveled via Kenya and used the opportunity to encourage the independence movement when he preached in the Orthodox cathedral church in Nairobi. When he was invited back in later years, he was able to baptize thousands of Orthodox in locations where bishop Alexander had worked and taught. Finally, in 1958 the Patriarchate of Alexandria assigned a Metropolitan of Irinoupolis (Dar es Salaam) to care for Orthodox Christians in Tanzania, Kenya and Uganda.

Spartas was instrumental in the considerable growth of the Orthodox Church in Uganda and Kenya, also by facilitating scholarships for Ugandans to study in Alexandria and Athens<sup>55</sup>. For our account of Ethiopianism we note that, in this context, Ugandan students of church history had recognized the significance of the Orthodox Church of East Africa having historically unbroken links with the origins of Christianity in North Africa, and that without any submission to colonial powers<sup>56</sup>. For later years we know of another breakaway group from Dwane's *Order of Ethiopia*<sup>57</sup>, the

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<sup>53</sup> From 1908 Sarikas had worked in Johannesburg among the Greek Orthodox of South Africa, before transferring to Tanzania as missionary for the *Greek Orthodox Church*. See S. Hayes, *Orthodox Diaspora and Mission in South Africa*, "Studies in World Christianity" 16/3 (2010) p. 289, and 295.

<sup>54</sup> Hayes, *Orthodox Mission in Tropical Africa* in the section *Uganda and Kenya* (4<sup>th</sup> par.).

<sup>55</sup> See Duncan, *Ethiopianism*, p. 213.

<sup>56</sup> Hayes, *Orthodox Ecclesiology*, p. 338, 345. It appears that particularly after WW II, as colonial powers were losing their grip, the Coptic and Ethiopian Orthodox churches were more alert to the appeal of a tradition in the Christian church going back to its very beginning, without any intervening connection with western colonial powers or the missionaries who would all too often do their bidding.

<sup>57</sup> The *Order of Ethiopia* was actually a denomination that had joined forces with the Anglican Church for the sake of regularizing its priesthood. They had asked for a bish-

*Ethiopian Orthodox Church of South Africa*<sup>58</sup>, actually being introduced as a local congregation within the *Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church* (in 1990)<sup>59</sup>. Over the years the Tewahido Church had established congregations in South Africa, but mainly to serve the thousands of Ethiopians who were fleeing poverty and unemployment, and had migrated there as refugees and asylum seekers<sup>60</sup>.

The problematic aspects of these moves in terms of jurisdiction for Orthodox ecclesiology would only gradually come to light. The *Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church* had become autocephalous by 1959, after centuries of integration with the Coptic Church<sup>61</sup>. Moreover, the *Coptic Orthodox Church* had also assigned its own bishop for South Africa by 1992, and in the following year received some of the bishops and clergy of the *Orthodox Church of South Africa* as members of the *Coptic Patriarchate of Alexandria*, to establish the *African Coptic Orthodox Church*<sup>62</sup>. In fact, when the Ethiopian Abuna (Patriarch) visited South Africa in 2001 to consecrate a new church for the community in Johannesburg, representatives

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op of their own, but this was in conflict with Anglican ecclesiology for effectively endorsing 'schism'; see Hayes, *Orthodox Ecclesiology*, p. 349.

<sup>58</sup> See Hayes, *Orthodox Ecclesiology*, p. 347-350, reporting that this group, when it joined, was still using the Anglican liturgy, although it had adopted Ethiopian liturgy and dress for the consecration of the Johannesburg church in 2001.

<sup>59</sup> See Ch. Chaillot *The Ethiopian Orthodox Church*, in: *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to African Religions*, ed. E. Kifon Bongmba – J.K. Olupona, Malden 2012, p. 240, where she reports: "In 1990, the Ethiopian Orthodox Bishop Yesehaq ordained four priests and twelve deacons and baptized thousands of people in South Africa, all of Protestant origin. In 2001, 33 parishes with their priests and faithful of Protestant origin joined the Ethiopian Orthodox patriarchate. When black Christians discover the existence of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, they regarded it as a Church developed with an indigenous African Christian tradition, that of the oldest black African Christianity, having a unique culture; and then some become eager to be part of that tradition".

<sup>60</sup> See the report, *Migration corridors: Ethiopia – South Africa*, in: <https://www.mideq.org/en/migration-corridors/ethiopia-south-africa/> (accessed: 18.02.2021).

<sup>61</sup> See Chaillot, *The Ethiopian Orthodox Church*, p. 234.

<sup>62</sup> See Hayes, *Orthodox Mission in Tropical Africa* in the section *Southern Africa* (par. 4), referring to personal memory of the occasion. Ogren mentions the work of Coptic bishop Markos initiating missions in South Africa by the 1970s, primarily to go where "Coptic migrants had travelled and to expand the influence of the Church in non-Coptic areas". This resulted in the *African Orthodox Church* group joining the Coptic patriarchate of Alexandria; see Ogren, *The Coptic Church*, p. 4.



of both the Greek and Coptic Orthodox Patriarchates of Alexandria attend the ceremony<sup>63</sup>.

At present, the Orthodox Church in Africa is represented in three main branches: the *Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria* (Chalcedonian); the *Coptic Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria* and the *Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church* (both non-Chalcedonian)<sup>64</sup>. Significant credit for amicable relationships among these Orthodox groups since the 1980s must go to the *World Council of Churches* (WCC), which has actively supported cooperation and mutual understanding. The *Ethiopian Tewahido Church* was a member of the WCC from its beginning in 1948, and also a founding member of the *All-Africa Conference of Churches* (AACC) since 1963<sup>65</sup>. Pan-Orthodox conferences have also helped to diminish the animosity and distrust from centuries of anathemas pronounced between Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian communities<sup>66</sup>.

To sum up, we note the role of *Ethiopianism* as a biblically/theologically rooted movement expressing African nationalist impatience with western domination and paternalism in the church groups, for educating black Africans without allowing them to take their rightful place in leadership. Kalu acknowledges that these “‘Ethiopians’ were ahead of their time and [...] started a process of reflection that perceived Christianity

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<sup>63</sup> On this occasion, see Hayes, *Orthodox Ecclesiology*, p. 350. On the presence of Greek Orthodox in South Africa, Hayes explains that, as elsewhere in Africa, clergy were initially sent to immigrant communities by the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Constantinople, which had responsibility for Orthodox Christians outside a specific Orthodox jurisdiction. “Eventually, however, all such communities in Africa were transferred to the jurisdiction of the Patriarchate of Alexandria” (Hayes, *Orthodox Mission in Tropical Africa* in the section *Immigrant Greek Communities*). Locally these communities formed themselves into *koinotites* focused on their own cultural and religious needs as immigrants. When Fr. Sarikas came to Johannesburg in 1908, he was interested in a mission to the black African population, but the local community wanted him to focus exclusively on immigrants; this was an important reason for his move to Tanzania. See also Hayes, *Orthodox Mission in Tropical Africa* in the section *Southern Africa* (par. 1).

<sup>64</sup> See Hayes, *Orthodox Ecclesiology*, p. 340-350; and Ogren, *The Coptic Church*, p. 4.

<sup>65</sup> See Chaillot, *The Ethiopian Orthodox Church*, p. 234 and 240.

<sup>66</sup> Chaillot also notes dialogue between the Ethiopian Orthodox, Eastern Orthodox and Catholic Churches, and the release (in 1996) by the Ethiopian Patriarch Paulos of a document softening their stance toward Chalcedonian Churches on the Christological issue; see Chaillot, *The Ethiopian Orthodox Church*, p. 236.

as a non-Western religion”<sup>67</sup>. “They voiced a new form of Christianity in Africa”<sup>68</sup>. Although its origins in 19<sup>th</sup> century black African freedom movements did not reflect a concrete and clear understanding of the actual life of the Orthodox Church in Egypt and Ethiopia, the last 100 years have witnessed a gradual appreciation of real links with earliest Christianity there, especially in terms of apostolic succession, and even the actual integration of the *African Orthodox Church* with Coptic and Tewahido Ethiopian Orthodoxy.

## 2. Archeology and Material Culture

A second important link that is being forged for African Christians to connect them with their roots in the ancient world comes through archeology. Since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century archeological discoveries have contributed significantly to our understanding of early African Christianity, expanding our horizons beyond what the literature can tell us, and challenging interdisciplinary study of the wealth of materials uncovered: ecclesiastical architecture, wall decorations, floor mosaics, papyri, or inscriptions. The information provided has also stimulated renewed attention for difficult issues like the disappearance of Christianity from North Africa, the Maghreb, between the seventh and twelfth centuries<sup>69</sup>. In the past such archeological work was best carried on by the colonial powers who had both the resources and a major interest in what could be uncovered: the French in Algeria and Tunisia, the English in Egypt and Nubia, the Germans and French in Ethiopia.

For students of early Christianity, we note William Frend’s outstanding archeological work from the early post WW II years in the Maghreb, again as director of Nubian excavation with the *Egyptian Exploration Society* at Q’asr Ibrim in the 1960s (1963-1964), and then back at Carthage in 1980s<sup>70</sup>.

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<sup>67</sup> Kalu, *African Christianity*, 259.

<sup>68</sup> Kalu, *African Christianity*, p. 273.

<sup>69</sup> On this question, see also above, n. 4.

<sup>70</sup> For some of the major publications of W.H.C. Frend, we note: *The Donatist Church: A Movement of Protest in Roman North Africa*, 1952; *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church*, 1965; *The Rise of the Monophysite Movement*, 1972; *Town and Country in the Early Christian Centuries*, 1980; *Archaeology and History in the Study of Early Christianity*, 1988; *The Archaeology of Early Christianity: A History*, 1996; *Orthodoxy, Paganism and Dissent in the Early Christian Centuries*, 2002.

Digging in the ancient villages of Numidia (Algeria) led to his distinctive insight on Donatism as a movement of indigenous revolt, a position that has not been lost on African church historians, even though Frend's conclusion was not unchallenged<sup>71</sup>.

On the significance of archeological, architectural, or epigraphic studies for understanding Christianity in the Maghreb, we note the recent work of Burns and Jensen, *Christianity in Roman Africa: The Development of Its Practices and Beliefs* (2014)<sup>72</sup>, with its focus on liturgical aspects, baptism, penitence and the Eucharist, with specific attention for architectural features of churches, shrines and cemeteries. More recently, we note a survey of archeological work in this area in Stevens' contribution to *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Archeology* (2019), "Incorporating Christian Communities in North Africa", a study significant for localized case studies of churches and monuments, in which Stevens accents unity and continuity in the midst of conflict, whether with Donatists, Arian Vandals, Byzantines or Arabs<sup>73</sup>.

In recent years, impressive results for new understanding of early African Christianity have come from Egypt, and we think first of the accidental discovery of the Nag Hammadi documents (1945), providing new indications of the complexity of early Christianity. Equally impressive is recovery of the ancient Christian kingdom of Nubia, where archeological work has been carried out since the 1960s by international teams, in anticipation of flooding from the Aswan dam on the Nile. With the support and coordination of UNESCO, numerous expeditions have uncovered well-preserved ruins of the ancient Christian culture of Nubia, providing a wealth of material for scholarly study<sup>74</sup>. Aside from architectural features, the work

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<sup>71</sup> Frend recognized Donatists through inscriptions from their watchword, *Deo Laudes*; see W.H.C. Frend, *Archeology and Patristic Studies*, "Studia Patristica" 18 (1985) p. 14. To explain the tenacity of Donatism in late antiquity, Frend interpreted archeological evidence as an indication of difficult socio-economic conditions, explaining also martyr cults as part of Donatist defiance of Roman authorities. On Frend's assessment of the Donatists, see also Helleman – Gaiya, *Early Christianity*, p. 152 and 155.

<sup>72</sup> J. Patout Burns, R.M. Jensen *et al.*, *Christianity in Roman Africa: The Development of Its Practices and Beliefs*, Grand Rapids 2014 focused on Christian Roman Africa (ancient Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco), providing a survey of Christianity in Roman Africa from the second century to the Arab conquests.

<sup>73</sup> S.T. Stevens, *Incorporating Christian communities in North Africa: Churches as bodies of communal history*, in: *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Archeology*, ed. D.K. Pettegrew – W.R. Caraher – T.W. Davis, Oxford 2019, p. 645-664.

<sup>74</sup> Viera Pawliková-Vilhanová gives a useful summary of the project: "In the early 1960s, when the construction of the new Aswan Dam threatened to submerge the northern

has provided unprecedented contact with the material culture, including artifacts, icons, manuscripts and papyri, now available for African students to study at first hand. Had these discoveries been made a century earlier, they would certainly have further inspired the imagination of Ethiopianist Africans.

Such new understanding of earliest Christianity in North Africa, east and west, is reflected in Neil Finneran's *The Archaeology of Christianity in Africa* (2002)<sup>75</sup>, with special attention for ancient Nubia, featuring the discovery of the Faras cathedral, its walls richly decorated with regal figures, biblical characters and saints<sup>76</sup>. For a recent comprehensive survey of archaeological work in these regions we also note Hedstrom's chapter on Coptic Egypt in the *Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Archeology* (2019)<sup>77</sup>, with its focus on significant early (4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> century) church architecture<sup>78</sup>, but also evidence from codices, ostraca and papyri, or textiles, crosses and

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part of ancient Nubia or Lower Nubia, in the newly created Lake, an international rescue or salvage archaeological operation started. The combined effort of the world community, coordinated by UNESCO and shared by fifty-nine archaeological expeditions working in Nubia in the period 1959–1969, uncovered an ancient Christian culture of Nubia, in ruins, yet sufficiently well-preserved to imagine the extraordinary riches of the ancient Nubian Church and Christian Nubia at the height of its civilisation. Since the 1960s an impressive number of authoritative and comprehensive studies on Christian Nubia drawing on recent discoveries and research has been published" (V. Pawliková-Vilhanová, *The Archeology of Ancient Christianity in Nubia and its Encounter with Islam*, in: *Eastern Christianity, Judaism and Islam between the Death of Muhammad and Tamerlane (632-1405)*, ed. M. Galik – M. Slobodnik, Bratislava 2011, p. 99-119, esp. 3. See also F.A. Hassan, *The Aswan High Dam and the International Rescue Nubia Campaign*, "The African Archaeological Review" 24/3-4 (2007) p. 73-94.

<sup>75</sup> N. Finneran, *The Archaeology of Christianity in Africa*, Stroud 2002. Finneran's work focuses on North African evidence, particularly from the Donatist struggle and martyrdom, to the Vandal invasion; Egyptian churches and monasteries; as well as Nubian monasteries and cathedrals.

<sup>76</sup> See also K. Bowes, *Early Christian Archeology: A State of the Field*, "Religion Compass" 2/4 (2008) p. 575-619; the article relates archaeological evidence (from churches, including house churches, urban topography, monasticism, pilgrimage, temples, and rural Christianity) to the relevant literary sources.

<sup>77</sup> See D.L. Brooks Hedstrom, *Archeology of Early Christianity in Egypt*, in: *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Archeology*, p. 665-680.

<sup>78</sup> Hedstrom focuses attention on both urban settlement (as in Alexandria), and rural monastic or pilgrimage-related establishments (like Abu Mena); she is particularly sensitive to the complexity of Christian history indicated by discoveries like the Judeo-Christian-Gnostic texts of Nag Hammadi, 1945.

combs; Hedstrom notes archeology for useful correctives on both the pace and early distribution of Christianity, acknowledging that archeological search for Christian Egypt has often taken second place to work on the pharaonic centuries. Aside from scholarly studies, we note online reports on early Axumite Christianity archeology, as at the Beta Samati (or 'house of audience') settlement in the Tigray region, uncovering the oldest known church, dated to the early 4<sup>th</sup> century, the time of Constantine<sup>79</sup>.

It is clear that, even now, this work is carried out for the most part by Western scholars, and under the auspices of Western foundations and excavation societies or universities. What about the involvement of African scholars, whether in excavation as such, or study of evidence which has come to light? This question was raised in a doctoral dissertation of Gideon Tambiyi, defended in 2017 at the University of Jos (Nigeria), as part of a text-critical study of Greek and Coptic fragmentary witnesses (papyri, vellum, and parchment) supporting the Matthean account of the flight of the holy family to Egypt (Matthew 2:11-16)<sup>80</sup>. Tambiyi laments the fact that study of an event so significant for Egyptian (African) Christian identity is carried on almost exclusively outside of Africa; indeed, the particular parchment witness examined, P. Aslan 112, was discovered in a monastery in Egypt, but is now owned and housed by a private collector in California. The complexity of the situation led Tambiyi to plead for indigenous African scholarship to address issues of textual reconstruction from material evidence discovered on the African continent. All the more because we know that fragments studied and published to date represent but a small proportion of what is available.

Such work faces significant challenges, since it demands expertise in a wide range of scholarly endeavours. For proper analysis and evaluation

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<sup>79</sup> On archeological evidence from beads and pottery, associating the site with commercial enterprise along international trade routes, see A. Lawler, *Church Unearthed in Ethiopia Rewrites the History of Christianity in Africa* (10 Dec. 2019), in: <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/church-unearthed-ethiopia-rewrites-history-christianity-africa-180973740/> (accessed: 8.02.2022). On this site see also A. Earls (16 Dec. 2019), in: <https://www.lifewayresearch.com/2019/12/16/unearthed-ancient-church-confirms-christianitys-rapid-spread-to-africa/> (accessed: 8.02.2022). On archeological evidence from Aksumite churches and rock-hewn churches (as at Lalibela) of a later dynasty, and distinctive items discovered (icons, liturgical cross, and gospels), see E.G. Ross, *African Christianity in Ethiopia, Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*, New York 2000), in: [http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/acet/hd\\_acet.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/acet/hd_acet.htm) (October 2002; (accessed: 8.02.2022)).

<sup>80</sup> G.Y. Tambiyi, *Recovering Matthean Text of the Holy Family in Africa: a Greek and Coptic Textual Analysis*, Jos 2017.

of the documentary evidence, students need instruction in codicology and paleography, fields of study addressing questions of acquisition, preserving, transcribing, dating, collating and further analysis of documents. Aside from the need for a stable environment of learning, the challenges of preparatory study for paleography cannot be underestimated. Tambiyi realized the demands placed on himself by his doctoral work, particularly the need for extensive travel to universities in South Africa, Europe and North America (with requisite demand on financial resources) to acquire the carefully supervised introduction to manuscript research, with subsidiary study of topics like transcription, collation, conjectural emendation, evaluation, translation and reconstruction.

Tambiyi's interest was first stimulated by an exhibit in Kaduna, Nigeria (in 2011) to celebrate the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the King James Version of the Bible. That exhibit, arranged with the support of the West Africa Theological School, had brought Scott Carroll to Nigeria, taking with him a significant collection of scrolls and manuscripts related to the history of the Bible. These included a Hebrew Torah scroll and a Bible in ancient Armenian script, on loan from the Green family collection (owners of the successful Hobby Lobby stores, based in Oklahoma, Tulsa). At the time Carroll was helping them acquire documents and artifacts for the Museum of the Bible in Washington.

When Scott was no longer working for the Greens<sup>81</sup>, Danny McCain, Prof. of NT at the University of Jos, encouraged him to come and establish an Academic Centre at the university, as an extension of Carroll's *Manuscript Research Group* (based in Grand Haven, MI); the purpose was "to help train scholars and expand the discipline to a part of the world where most of these documents originate or were found"<sup>82</sup>. With the support of the uni-

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<sup>81</sup> Carroll ran into trouble over efforts to acquire an early, first century fragment of Mark, supposedly found in Egypt, but actually part of the Oxyrhynchus Papyri collection, of which only a small percentage has been analyzed and published to date. Articles in *Christianity Today* (J. Pattengale, *The 'First-Century Mark' Saga from Inside the Room: My reflections after eight years of silence*, "Christianity Today E-magazine" 28 June 2019), and the *Atlantic Monthly* (A. Sabar, *A Biblical Mystery at Oxford: A renowned scholar claimed that he found a first century Gospel fragment. Now he's facing allegations of Antiquities theft, cover-up, and fraud*, "The Atlantic" May 2020) have exposed the connection with renowned papyrologist Dirk Obbink of the University of Oxford in the UK, the University of Michigan, and Baylor University (Waco, Texas), now subject to criminal investigation on the matter.

<sup>82</sup> Citing McCain, in a *Memo for the Vice Chancellor* of the University of Jos, "Introduction to Proposed Programme for the Study of Textual Criticism and Ancient Religious Documents" (dated 20 Nov. 2012).



versity's Vice Chancellor, McCain set up a sub-section of the *Department of Religion and Philosophy* in 2013<sup>83</sup>, and arranged for Carroll to come to Jos four times per year to provide basic hands-on instruction, as part of the regular university curriculum. Introducing students to unpublished, uncatalogued papyri and scrolls, as well as medieval Latin manuscripts and Coptic documents, the program focuses on identification, dating, transcription, and collating of manuscripts. Workshops at the University of Jos have actually involved a coalition with the Nasarawa State University, and three area seminaries<sup>84</sup>. Since its beginning, workshops have also been given in Kenya<sup>85</sup>. Aside from Tambiyi, who has completed his thesis, the University of Jos now has four students (two doctoral, and two at the master's level) doing serious work on ancient manuscripts.

In these workshops, students examine and analyse facsimile copies of fragments coming from private collections, prepared by Carroll. The

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<sup>83</sup> In the November 2012 *Memo for the Vice Chancellor*, McCain describes the program: "Textual Criticism is the science of reconstructing the texts of ancient documents. Textual scholars take the ancient documents discovered or identified by archaeologists and date them, collate them (which means that they identify any variation from standard texts), attempt to trace their origins and place them within textual 'families'. This research is then used to help ensure that Bible translators and scholars have a text that is as close to the original as possible. Textual criticism exists in all religions having ancient texts and even non-religious literature that predates printing. However, it is Biblical textual criticism that is most well developed".

<sup>84</sup> See McCain's *Opening Remarks* for the initial *Ancient Documents Workshop* in 2013, introducing Scott Carroll, "During the several trips he made to Nigeria and other countries in West Africa, he developed a desire and a vision to help Africans get involved in the academic discipline of the study of ancient documents and textual criticism. Through what I believe to be a God-ordained process, Prof. Carroll has been able to link up with the University of Jos, the Nasarawa State University and three seminaries [cooperating institutions, including Nasarawa State University, in Keffi, West Africa Theological Seminary in Lagos, Jos ECWA Theological Seminary and St. Augustine's Major Seminary, both in Jos] to re-introduce Africa to some of her ancient manuscripts and to start the process of re-building interest and expertise into the study of ancient documents, particularly ancient religious documents". These remarks were shared in a personal email from McCain, 27 Jan. 2021.

<sup>85</sup> The *Ancient Manuscript Workshop* held in November 2016 at the Kenyatta University Conference Centre had a program much like that at the University of Jos, with an introduction to the *Manuscript Research Group* and overview of research in West Africa; working with scrolls, papyri, and other ancient documents; establishing a research agenda; and creating a research committee with representatives from all participating universities. Based on an email note from McCain, 15 November 2016, shared in a personal email of 27 Jan. 2021.

intentions are noble enough, to give students an opportunity for hands-on work with such documents, and at university centres other than the ivy league universities of Europe and North America. Students experience working with authentic roots of the Scriptures and Christian history, as they examine fragments of texts not already published or well known. The goal is for these students to receive academic credit as they acquire the necessary expertise in manuscript studies, eventually enabling them to share their findings at conferences and in scholarly journals<sup>86</sup>.

Reaching these goals is easier said than done. Textual criticism cannot stand alone at the university; it relies on adequate preparation, particularly in language study to acquire facility in the biblical languages (Greek and Hebrew), as well as Latin, Aramaic or Coptic. And for African students, more at home in an oral culture, study of what are primarily literary or 'dead' languages, is more difficult. Yet facility in the relevant languages is critical in equipping them for serious work on textual variants and the textual tradition. The current program in 'manuscript research' focuses on orthography in the identification of manuscripts. To go further, students need more than the rudimentary knowledge of Greek or Hebrew allowed by the university curriculum in NT; Carroll himself has promised to give instruction, as needed, in Sahidic Coptic and Latin. But aside from such academic challenges, it is also important that manuscripts be maintained in optimum condition, not only in a secure facility (in a politically volatile context), but also with the necessary climate control to prevent deterioration (in a tropical climate).

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<sup>86</sup> After the first seminar to introduce manuscript studies, analysis of an early modern Hebrew Torah scroll, and examination of a medieval Latin codex, the second seminar introduces the student to papyrology, giving an introduction to Greek transcription and text identification, and study of a Greek classical papyrus, as well as Coptic and Greek biblical papyri. The course ends with presentations and seminars for a broader audience. However, students are warned that: "MRG projects are not intended for MA theses or doctoral dissertations; research is far too specific for a thesis or a dissertation. By design, these projects are intended to be collaborative and result in annual publications accessible to scholars. This is not to say, however, that material cannot be referenced or used as a case study in a thesis or a dissertation". Based on documents, "Project Description: Manuscript Research Initiative, Mentoring Scholars with Manuscripts"; and "Memorandum of Understanding: Manuscript Research Group and the University of Jos" (2013), shared in personal email of McCain, 27 Jan. 2021.

### 3. The Center for Early African Christianity (at Yale University)

In 2007 Thomas Oden (1931-2016) published *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind: Rediscovering the African Seedbed of Western Christianity*, as a relatively small work on early Christianity, to argue for Africa as the true ‘cradle’ of Christianity and ultimate source of significant theological discussion for Europe and beyond<sup>87</sup>. Intellectual history, Christian teaching and spiritual practice, particularly in the monastic context, flowed from the southern reaches of the Roman Empire to the north; lack of recognition of that African contribution has to be attributed to deep-seated racist attitudes and prejudices which still interfere with proper evaluation of the contribution of leaders like Tertullian or Athanasius as first and foremost African, not just Europeans in disguise. Neglect of the specific African contribution can also be understood in terms of the influence of 19<sup>th</sup> century Hegelian Idealism or Eurocentrism, assuming that anything of importance from the ancient Mediterranean cultural context would be assessed in terms of its contribution to the European tradition<sup>88</sup>. Oden’s work recognized original African approaches in liturgy, exegesis, monastic organization and decision-making. In the final chapters, Oden revealed concrete plans for ongoing research so that Africans could reclaim their own spiritual heritage, and particularly, rediscover the lost history of earliest African Christianity as the heart of a new syllabus of church fathers and mothers<sup>89</sup>. Because such a project would demand disciplined research on relevant textual and archaeological data, and knowledge of ancient languages and literature, Oden envisioned an international team of academics, linked by modern computer technology and the internet<sup>90</sup>. While scholarly reviews have pointed out weaknesses in the argument, for the present discussion we can appreciate Oden’s initiatives in motivating serious research on the history of early African Christianity.

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<sup>87</sup> T.C. Oden, *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind: The African Seedbed of European Christianity*, Downers Grove 2007. Oden implements this vision by challenging contemporary African Christians to take ownership of that legacy, inspiring them to make their own contribution in the context of global Christianity. He encourages them to recover the treasures of Christianity that were lost with the Arab conquests, and to use new historical insight to reshape the relationship between Christianity and Islam. See Oden, *How Africa Shaped*, p. 134.

<sup>88</sup> See Oden, *How Africa Shaped*, p. 9-18.

<sup>89</sup> Oden, *How Africa Shaped*, p. 135-153.

<sup>90</sup> Oden, *How Africa Shaped*, p. 148, 150.

Before publishing *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind*, Oden had invited outstanding African scholars of the history of Christianity to an exploratory meeting in Addis Abbaba, asking for their evaluation of his thesis on early African Christianity, and for advice on establishing the necessary research centres. Almost unanimously they advised him to begin with a centre in the USA. *The Center for Early African Christianity* (CEAC) resulted from that discussion; initially it was anchored at Drew University (Madison, NJ), but later it was move to Yale University (New Haven, CT), the academic home of Lamin Sanneh (1942-2019), president of CEAC after the death of Oden<sup>91</sup>. A sizable grant allowed the group to establish the website (<http://www.earlyafricanchristianity.com>), bringing together an invaluable resource of maps, photos, illustrations, and publication notes; it also provided access to relevant seminars and podcasts, as well as links to authors and to collections of important texts like the *Patrologia Latina*, *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*, *Perseus Project*, and *Dictionary of African Christian Biography*, to name a few.

As founding director of the centre, Thomas Oden initiated publication of the multi-volume *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* (completed in 2010, and already translated into eight languages, including Arabic), and *Ancient Christian Texts*<sup>92</sup>. He worked closely with Michael Glerup and Joel Elowsky in editing and publishing significant supplementary works like *Early*

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<sup>91</sup> Before his death, Lamin Sanneh was Professor of History and also Professor of Missions and World Christianity at Yale University; important publications by Sanneh include: *West African Christianity: The Religious Impact* (1983); *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (1989); *Piety and Power: Muslims and Christians in West Africa* (1996); *The Crown and the Turban: Muslims and West African Pluralism* (1997); *Faith and Power: Christianity and Islam in "Secular" Britain* (1998); *Whose Religion is Christianity? The Gospel Beyond the West* (2004); and *The Changing Face of Christianity: Africa, the West, and the World* (2005).

<sup>92</sup> Thomas Oden is the general editor for this multi-volume ecumenical project of commentaries on Bible books, culled from early Christian writers; the series has been published by InterVarsity Press (Downer's Grove, IL) since 1998. Full-length commentaries from various patristic authors on books of the Bible are now available through the *Ancient Christian Texts* series, in: <https://www.ivpress.com/ancient-christian-texts> (accessed: 8.02.2022). Featuring commentaries on the Psalms and Romans, the relevant website, in: <https://www.ivpress.com/subjects/commentaries> (accessed: 8.02.2022), also mentions patristic commentary on the Nicene Creed (in five vols.) as part of the *Ancient Christian Doctrine* series. The website further cites Oden as general editor of the *Ancient Christian Doctrine* series and the *Ancient Christian Devotionals*, and consulting editor for the *Encyclopedia of Ancient Christianity*.

*Libyan Christianity*<sup>93</sup>, and the *Egyptian Memory of Mark* (both published in 2011)<sup>94</sup>.

The centre's advisory board includes outstanding contemporary African scholars<sup>95</sup>. Its mission statement closely reflects the goals affirmed in Oden's 2007 publication (noted above): "To educate African leadership in the depth of African intellectual literary achievements, especially those from the Christian tradition of the first millennium [...] using classic African sources. [...] The resources are already there, waiting to be discovered [...] in Africa. The wisdom is in the texts of Africa. The matrix is the soil of Africa. We desire to make these classic sources available in order to equip 21<sup>st</sup> century Africans to become the leaders of 21<sup>st</sup> century Christianity, even as they were leaders of early Christianity [...]. The implications of that provenance for 21<sup>st</sup> century global Christianity have not been adequately explored or appreciated".

Recent developments include the establishment of a *Centre for Early African Christianity* at the Akrofi-Christaller Institute of Theology, Mission and Culture in Ghana (February 2020)<sup>96</sup>; that centre is also the fortunate recipient of a substantial part of Andrew Walls' library, promised on the occasion of its launch. Andrew Walls (1928-2021) began his university career in Sierra Leone (1957-1962), and at the federal University of Nigeria in Nsukka (1962-1965)<sup>97</sup>, where a decade later Africa's outstanding con-

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<sup>93</sup> *Early Libyan Christianity: Uncovering a North African Tradition*, emerged from a series of lectures in 2008 given at the Da'wa Islamic University (Tripoli). The work discusses six centuries of early Christianity in ancient Tripolitania and Cyrenaica (modern Libya), regions all but neglected in historical study of early Christianity to date. This was the home of important early Christians, Simon of Cyrene, Arius and Bishop Synesius of Cyrene. While some of the conclusions are necessarily speculative, Oden provides substantive analysis of relevant literature. He also features archeological remains, mosaics, baptisteries, and the impressive architectural structures of imperial Leptis Magna.

<sup>94</sup> With *The African Memory of Mark: Reassessing Early Church Tradition*, Oden provides a new look at the gospel writer and close associate of the apostles, Mark, known and respected in African tradition. The book brings together stories based on hagiographical and oral legends, historical documents, archeological evidence and liturgical practice in the ancient churches, with a focus on traditions of the Coptic Church.

<sup>95</sup> These include early advisers Tite Tiénou, Thomas Oduro, and John A. Azumah.

<sup>96</sup> See the report, *CEAC Maiden Lecture & Launch* (dated 16 March 2020), at <https://www.aci.edu.gh/updates/aci-news/ceac-maiden-lecture-launch> (accessed: 8.02.2022).

<sup>97</sup> Andrew Finlay Walls later taught at the Univ. of Aberdeen (1966-1986), Edinburgh (1986-) and Liverpool; at the time of his death, he was still Research Professor at the Center for World Christianity of the Africa International University (Nairobi), and Professor Emeritus at the Akrofi-Christaller Institute of Theology, Mission and Culture

temporary church historian Ogbu Kalu (1942-2009)<sup>98</sup> would be teaching in the Dept. of Religious Studies (1974-2001); for Kalu, we note a Canadian connection, for he did undergraduate and doctoral work in history at the University of Toronto<sup>99</sup>. For our discussion, one of the more significant events of those early post-independence years took place at the University of Jos (recognized as the Jos campus of the University of Ibadan at that time). This was the conference on “Christianity in Independent Africa” (September 1975), the culmination of a two-year research project involving a series of seminars, with significant input from African scholars in widely scattered centres<sup>100</sup>. While the project focused on issues of church/state relations and the impact of traditional religion (i.e. enculturation or Africanization) on the development of Christianity in the African context, the burning question was the ongoing role of Christianity for postcolonial Africa; there was widespread expectation that Christianity would have a greatly diminished profile in the autonomous nations<sup>101</sup>.

Musa Gaiya, church historian at the University of Jos, notes<sup>102</sup> that, since the 1975 conference, a seminar on African Historiography was held in Nairobi (1986); and the important Pretoria “Conference on Currents in

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(Ghana). Publications include *The Missionary Movement in Christian History* (1996); *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission and Appropriation of Faith* (2002); and shorter pieces like, *An Anthropology of Hope: Africa, Slavery, and Civilization in Nineteenth-Century Mission Thinking*, “International Bulletin of Missionary Research” 39/4 (2015) p. 225-230; *The Cost of Discipleship: the Witness of the African Church*, “Word & World” 25/4 (2005) p. 433-443; and *The Transmission of Christian Faith: A Reflection*, in: *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to World Christianity*, ed. L. Sanneh – M.J. McClymond, Wiley-Blackwell 2016, p. 685-698.

<sup>98</sup> In a tribute to Kalu after his untimely death (2009), C.R. Clarke speaks of him being “at the forefront of scholarly research in African Christianity for almost thirty years and he was probably the most accomplished African Christian scholar in North America today”. See C.R. Clarke, *Ogbu Kalu and Africa’s Christianity: A Tribute*, “Pneuma” 32 (2010) p. 107-120.

<sup>99</sup> Born in what is now Abia State, Kalu received his early education in Calabar, going on to complete a bachelor’s degree and doctorate at the University of Toronto (1967, 1972). Aside from his editing *African Christianity; an African Story* (2007), we note his major work, *African Pentecostalism, An Introduction* (2008).

<sup>100</sup> More than half of those contributing were African, a remarkable feat for the time. See the report of Adrian Hastings, who was instrumental in organizing and planning these seminars (A. Hastings, *Christianity in Independent Africa*, “African Affairs” 73 (1974) p. 229-232).

<sup>101</sup> Proceedings were published as *Christianity in Independent Africa*, ed. E. Fasholé-Luke – R. Gray – A. Hastings – G. Tasie, Bloomington – London 1978.

<sup>102</sup> In a personal email of 22 Feb. 2021.



World Christianity” (2001) produced the work, *African Christianity: An African Story*, edited by Ogbu U. Kalu. Andrew Walls was instrumental in establishing a “Society for African Church History”, which did not survive the departure of Western scholars after Nigeria’s independence. However, in 2019 a *Nigerian Association of Church Historians and Missiologists* was initiated at the University of Ibadan, with Walls as distinguished guest.

In the USA, the *Center for Early African Christianity* was hard hit by the death of both Thomas Oden in 2016, and its next President, Lamin Sanneh, in 2019. Michael Glerup is the current executive director, responsible for ongoing research publications, like Angelo di Berardino’s *Ancient Christianity: The Development of its Institutions and Practices*, all but ready for publication in 2021; and Desta Heliso’s *Hope for Africa*, also ready for imminent release. In March 2020, Glerup helped launch the *Centre for Early African Christianity and Ethiopian Studies*, at the *Ethiopian Graduate School of Theology* (in Addis Abbaba) to encourage patristic studies, including ancient languages like the Ethiopian liturgical Ge’ez.

So, we bring this story back to its beginning. As an offshoot of the North American “Black Lives Matter” movement, Michael Glerup recently noted<sup>103</sup> its impact in modifying an outlook, especially among African Americans in the USA, to be more inclusive, i.e. in widening their perspective on Christianity to include attention for early Christianity in Africa itself as a source of pride. Here we may well discover an updated version of 19<sup>th</sup> century Ethiopianism, as it were. To conclude this contribution to the current discussion of ‘new horizons’ in the study of early Christianity, it is our hope that, as the present wave of charismatic Christianity in Africa matures, it will begin to appreciate its own role as part of a much longer history of the faith, and will also join in the kind of work envisioned by Oden, to establish more centres focused on early African Christianity, inspiring a new generation of scholarship to recognize that early history as a legitimate source of pride for African Christians.

### **New Horizons in the Study of Early African Christianity**

(summary)

Teaching early Christianity in Nigeria and elsewhere in Africa since 2002, has convinced this author how important it is for African Christians to know of the deep roots of Christianity in Africa, and recognize important early African theologians, Tertullian,

<sup>103</sup> In a personal conversation of 4 March 2021.

Origen, Athanasius and Augustine, just to name a few. This argument has a significant precedent among 19th century African Christians encouraged by the unbroken presence of Christianity from antiquity in Ethiopia. In the US, Thomas Oden promoted the study of pre-Islamic Christian Africa through the *Center for Early African Christianity*, and publications like the series, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*. This Center has also encouraged universities in Africa to get involved in deciphering archeological materials and documents from North African sites as evidence for Christianity from its earliest days; the study of such documents has recently been established at the University of Jos (Plateau State, Nigeria). These initiatives are doubly significant because Christianity is growing phenomenally throughout Africa and is often accused of being a “mile wide and an inch deep”.

**Keywords:** archeology; black; centre; colonial; Ethiopia; history; Nubia; Orthodox; university; Africa; Christianity

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