

# Expressions and Encounters: Experiencing the Histories and Theologies of African Christianity in the Collections of Pitts Theology Library

## An Essay on Curatorial Challenges and Responsibilities

by Jennifer L. Aycock

Former Margaret A. Pitts Professor Emeritus of Theological Bibliography of the Pitts Theology Library Channing Jeschke's cursive scrawls across the lined sheets of legal paper. The copied letter addressed to Reverend Jerisdan Jehu-Appiah, pastor of an independent Ghanaian church Musama Disco Christo Church meeting in London, reads no less poignant than the drama of Jeschke's penmanship. In the letter, he invites Appiah to consider archiving the church's materials in an international computer database.<sup>1</sup> Jeschke reasoned, "What the African churches are doing in Britain and elsewhere is a story that needs to be more broadly known and preserved for future generations of persons yet unborn to learn."<sup>2</sup> Jeschke spent significant time and energy tracking down published and obscure African church periodicals and records both in continental and diaspora communities in efforts to increase Pitts' holdings in African sources. He also envisioned a bibliography of African Christian periodicals that could be accessed and used collaboratively between research institutions.

Jeschke's development of the Sub-Saharan African Collection was one initiative among many that positioned Pitts as a premier theological research library during his tenure. Jeschke's correspondence and personal notes convey a strategic collecting vision to build Pitts as a competitor with the "Harvards and the Yales," as he wrote it.<sup>3</sup> However, weightier theological matters beyond the limited impetus of institutional competition motivated him to recognize this effort as an ecclesiological concern that required international institutional partnership.<sup>4</sup> He observed that beyond North American and European Christianity, "new linguistic and ethnic differences" could have the adverse effect of perpetuating ecclesial fragmentation rather than promoting the "realization of a universal church of one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Saviour to us all."<sup>5</sup> He understood his collecting responsibility as developing a means to serve this changing ecclesial landscape in concert with other institutions.<sup>6</sup>

### HISTORY OF THE COLLECTION

<sup>1</sup> Jerisdan Jehu-Appiah was the grandson of Musama Disco Christo Church's founder Joseph William Egyanka Appiah (1893-1948) in Ghana, Africa.

<sup>2</sup> Jeschke hand-written copy of letter to Appiah, August 10, 1984, Pitts Theology Library Records 1914-2016, Box 5, African Serials Project Correspondence 1982-1985 (Pitts Special Collections).

<sup>3</sup> Jeschke's handwritten notes, Pitts Theology Library Records 1914-2016, Box 5, African Serials Project Correspondence 1982-1985 (Pitts Special Collections).

<sup>4</sup> Channing R. Jeschke, "Acquisitions and the African Project at the Pitts Theology Library: A Reflection" (presentation, American Theological Library Association, 1986), 86.

<sup>5</sup> Channing R. Jeschke, "Acquisitions and the African Project at the Pitts Theology Library: A Reflection," 86.

<sup>6</sup> Channing R. Jeschke, "Acquisitions and the African Project at the Pitts Theology Library: A Reflection", 87. Jeschke called for "a model of cooperation and coordination of efforts on an international scale that can make a difference in the total resources available to scholars in the future and one in which all institutions can share responsibility."

Jeschke's efforts to develop Pitts Theology Library's holdings in African religious monographs, periodicals, and archival materials began in 1975.<sup>7</sup> Jeschke's conversations with visiting scholar of world religions Harold Turner between 1971 and 1972 seem to have sparked initial attention to Christian communities and perspectives developing outside Western purview. Reading the United Methodist Church of Rhodesia's (today Zimbabwe) publication *Umbowo* additionally prompted Jeschke to turn the library's collecting attentions to the global south. He commented, "The resources and concerns of African churches are quite unlike those of European and North American Christians." Accordingly, Jeschke argued that theological librarians needed to "anticipate the emerging needs of the scholarly community in the future."<sup>8</sup> Such emerging needs correlated with developing a collection of sources under-utilized within theological education/scholarship.

Matching his vision and words with actions, Jeschke committed several research trips to work tediously through bibliographies held at various university and mission studies libraries in the United Kingdom. He generated correspondence in the hundreds with notable African religion scholars, ecclesial organizations, national councils of churches, schools of theology, study centers, and individual pastors, bishops, priests, and missionaries in order to request periodicals, member church lists, and addresses for additional contacts. Along with Pitts staff members, most notably Cindy Runyon, Jeschke led Pitts Theology Library to acquire over eight hundred periodicals from over forty African countries. Pitts' Cataloger Fesseha Nega determined that as of 2018, Pitts is the only North American theological institution to hold 209 of these periodicals. Within the fiscal year of 2017, Pitts continued to receive sixty-four issues of African periodicals. The collection cuts across languages, including Afrikaans, Arabic, Chichewa (Malawi), Dutch, English, Ewe (Ghana), French, Hausa (northern Nigeria), Kinyarwanda (Uganda/Rwanda), Malagasy, Portuguese, Shona, Siswati (Swaziland), Swahili, Twi (Togo/Ghana), and Yoruba (Nigeria), to name a few. In addition to periodicals, Jeschke increased Pitts' acquisition of monographs not simply about African Christianity but *by* African historians and theologians.

As he developed the "African project," as he referred to it, Jeschke admitted the "more subtle limitations of cultural and racial boundaries" that prevented him and others from hearing voices beyond Western Christianity. He wrote, "The voice of the Third World is rarely heard in the First, in part because the First World is not convinced that the peoples of the Third World have anything important to say to us. Our cultural arrogance has limited our capacities to hear. The effect is to silence the voice."<sup>9</sup> Jeschke intended that the African periodicals would demonstrate that "Emory shares in the cultural responsibility of preserving the literary remains of the past for future generations" of communities previously relegated to margins. To this end, he reasoned, the collection "is not a museum or exhibit collection but the stuff of serious, scholarly research."<sup>10</sup> He estimated that the Pitts collection could augment future research by providing accessible and preserved resources in coordinated efforts with other institutions to reflect a more complete set of histories and theological sources in the contemporary emergence of a global church. Jeschke's appeal to his school's administration noted that this effort went far beyond the library: "This decision—for or against the status quo—is a policy decision for which the administration is responsible. [The implications for the future shape of the library's resources] are too important for the librarian to make on her/his own."

## CURATING THE EXHIBITION

Jeschke did not intend for the African periodicals, missionary postcards, and archives to be turned into items viewed behind glass. These were and are living documents from living communities that invite scholarly

<sup>7</sup> Jeschke, "Acquisitions and the African Project at the Pitts Theology Library: A Reflection," 75. In Jeschke's 1986 address he notes "over the past decade," thus I roughly calculate to late mid-1970s.

<sup>8</sup> Jeschke, "Acquisitions and the African Project at the Pitts Theology Library: A Reflection," 75.

<sup>9</sup> Jeschke, 1986, 86.

<sup>10</sup> Jeschke's handwritten notes, Pitts Theology Library Records 1914-2016, Box 5, African Serials Project Correspondence 1982-1985 (Pitts Special Collections).

use. In this spirit, I was invited to curate a library exhibition in order to publicize more broadly the resources held at Pitts for the study of global south theologies and histories. The exhibition would also reintroduce a collection seemingly forgotten and little used. I oriented myself to the collection first through scouring finding aids and second through reading Jeschke's administrative files and letters. In so doing, I determined that the exhibition needed to reflect Jeschke's ecclesiological vision across vast but also uneven and, at times, scattered materials. Additionally, I began to see my work as designing an exhibition that served as an introduction for visitors to African Christianity post-1400 CE. I decided that the exhibition materials would need to illustrate important themes in the study of African theologies and histories, but would also invite visitors to make their own connections across time and regions. I took seriously Jeschke's injunction that, in the end, this collection was not intended merely to be exhibited, but rather it is a collection that is to be circulated and utilized for serious research by faculty, students, and visiting scholars, in service of a global and ever-changing church.

As I sifted through the mainstays of the collection—periodicals, missionary postcards, and United Methodist missionary archives—I also began searching for particular items buried in Special Collections and amongst circulating items. Specific searches turned up early orthographies and grammars used in the translation of biblical texts, along with hymn books and pamphlets generated out of 19<sup>th</sup>- and 20<sup>th</sup>-century African Christian encounters, such as in Gold Coast (Ghana) and Igboland (Nigeria). The materials coalesced to support an exhibition that familiarized visitors with important themes in the study of African Christianity: cultural exchange and encounter, independence, African agency and initiative, translation, lived theology, resistance, ritual, and hymnody as historical and theological resources.

For example, *encounters* between Ethiopian monks and European Catholic priests beginning in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century initiated what scholar Matteo Salvatore calls “the Ethiopianist library, the first body of European knowledge dedicated to a specific African society south of the Sahara.”<sup>11</sup> Such texts printed and translated in Europe incorporated the new type Amharic. Pitts Cataloger Fesseha Nega identified several held in Pitts Special Collections that provided intellectual insights into early iterations of cultural and religious exchange between Africans and Europeans in this often-overlooked era. Including these texts symbolized a longer history of Christian encounters driven by Ethiopian agents on both European and African continents. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church dates to Christianity's adoption as an imperial religion in the fourth century and enjoys an enduring history as one of the first national churches.<sup>12</sup> Such symbolic emphases within the exhibition complicate the common assumption that Christianity's emergence as an African religion is an imposition of the colonial period.<sup>13</sup> Moving forward in time, African American missions and African religious movements such as Ethiopianism often drew theological and symbolic inspiration from Psalm 68:31 in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The text “Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands to God” (Psalm 68:31, KJV) functioned as a motif to indicate divine providence and inclusion of Africa within redemptive history.<sup>14</sup>

I also highlighted *African initiative and agency* throughout the exhibition. An example was highlighted in the legacy and memory of Samuel Ajayi Crowther (1807-1891), born in today's western Nigeria. Crowther led the Church Missionary Society's Niger Mission, and became the first African Anglican bishop consecrated in 1864. Periodicals and photographic records from the Congolese Kimbanguist Movement, initiated in 1921 by Simon Kimbangu (1887-1951), illustrated the threat African religious movements posed to colonial

<sup>11</sup> Matteo Salvatore, *The African Prester John and the Birth of Ethiopian-European Relations, 1402-1555* (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017), 4.

<sup>12</sup> Kenneth R. Ross, J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, and Todd M. Johnson, *Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa*, Edinburgh Companions to Global Christianity (Edinburgh, Scotland: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 144-151.

<sup>13</sup> On Christianity as an African religion see Ogbu Kalu, *African Christianity: An African Story* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2007); and Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995).

<sup>14</sup> Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of African Americans*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998), 2; J. Mutero Chirenje, *Ethiopianism and Afro-Americans in Southern Africa, 1883-1916* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1987).

regimes and missionary control. Kimbangu's healing and preaching ministry drew the ire of Catholic and Baptist missionaries who prodded Belgian colonial officers to intervene, prompting Kimbangu's arrest and imprisonment until his death in 1951. Nevertheless, his wife Mama Mwilu Kiawanga Nzitani Marie (d. 1959) persisted as the spiritual leader of the movement until her death in 1959. The church known today as *L'Église de Jésus Christ sur la Terre par la prophète Simon Kimbangu* (EJCSK) spans the globe from the Democratic Republic of Congo to Angola, Congo-Brazzaville, France, Germany, Portugal, and Atlanta, Georgia. Highlighting African initiatives counters widely held assumptions that Christianity only grew on the continent due to forced baptisms within the transatlantic slave trade and at the hands of Western missionary intervention. Forced baptisms did occur, and the Western missionary movement is indeed an important episode within world Christianity writ large. However, centering external agents within African histories does the unfortunate disservice of denying Africans their agency and ingenuity in Africanizing Christianity. Thus, the cultural work of fashioning Christianity in African garments relevant to shared communal concerns oriented my framework for selecting material in general.

In addition, historian and director of the Marcus Garvey Papers Project at University of California Los Angeles Robert A. Hill described Jeschke's acquisition of the African Orthodox Church of Africa's archive in 1981 as "[what] will probably prove the single most important collection of original manuscripts in the annals of African church independency."<sup>15</sup> To provide some context in grasping the import of the archive, consider that in 1924, South African Daniel William Alexander (1882-1970) read about Antiguan George McGuire's African Orthodox Church, U.S.A., in a sermon circulated through Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association's *Negro World*. Alexander then convened councils in South Africa to discuss affiliating with the U.S.A.-based church, and the decision was eventually approved. Through an exchange of letters, Alexander and McGuire, along with additional Ugandan and Kenyan clergy, forged a transnational expression of black church doctrine, order, liturgy, and leadership succession independent of white oversight in an era of increasing apartheid and Jim Crow terror. The exhibition offered a fraction of the archive for viewing so visitors could engage themes of *independence, exchange, and encounter* in histories of black Atlantic Christianity.

Lastly, liturgies, hymns, prayers, and songs provide some of the most incisive and vibrant sources of *embodied, sung, and lived* theological insights into religious communities across the African continent. However, such sources cannot be accessed apart from the local vernacular and cultural categories that give them resonance within specific communities. I included Pitts' circulating item *Jesus of the Deep Forest: Prayers and Praises of Akua Kuma*, Akan-Twi prayers composed by female Afua Kuma (1900-1987) of Obo-Kwahu, Ghana.<sup>16</sup> This work introduced visitors to the local cosmologies that inflect the contextual nature of theologizing. One of the only known theological works recorded by an African woman in a local language, Afua's prayers personify Christ in such Twi motifs as the chief of farmers, lightning, mother, deep forest, moon, the hard-working farmer, and incomparable Diviner. The work of women especially draws attention to the holistic, communal, and vernacular impulses that ground processes in which Christian concepts are translated and made meaningful at local levels.<sup>17</sup>

Attention to thematic elements in the study of African Christianity, however, did not necessitate synthesizing a grand or coherent narrative out of disparate materials. We would not expect this in an exhibition entitled "European Christianity!" Rather, the exhibition suggested that library collections function similarly to archives

<sup>15</sup> Robert A. Hill, September 23, 1981, African Orthodox Church Correspondence and Notes, 1979-1983 (Sub-Saharan African Collection, Pitts Special Collections).

<sup>16</sup> Afua Kuma, *Jesus of the Deep Forest* (Accra: Asempa Publisher, 1981).

<sup>17</sup> See Lamin O. Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009) on the "translation principle."

in part as an “instituting imaginary.”<sup>18</sup> Collections provide “fragments of life to be placed in order, one after the other . . . a montage of fragments thus [creating] an illusion of totality and continuity” that scholars tame through interpretation.<sup>19</sup> I intended in some ways to tame critically the collection for visitors to the exhibition while also puncturing any sense of a homogenizing illusion of totality across African Christian histories. At the same time, I wanted to make a subtle argument that to understand Christianity in Africa, it must be understood on its own terms—in the vernacular, through ritual and dance, in oral traditions and hymnody, in the intellectual and religious histories traced across bodies, texts, and communities. Visitors would only be able to access or understand these fragments in part just as I, the curator, did so in part.

In addition to providing a thematic introduction to African Christianity, I became increasingly committed to creating a conversation between the exhibition hall and the library’s holdings. Realistically, I wanted the exhibition to serve as perhaps the only primer in African Christianity visitors might read. For the curious and initiated, however, I sought to invite continued learning from and thinking about multiple African Christian pasts, the indigenous resourcing of African theologies, and how a more geographically and temporally complete collection of historical sources bears upon our imaginations for the future of Christianity. The exhibition hall’s materials intervened in strands of multiple histories and sources that provided limited entry points into a much longer set of conversations between communities across a vast and varied continent. It was my sincere hope that the exhibition’s intentionally disparate and fragmentary display of periodicals, monographs, sacred texts, missionary correspondence, and church archives prompted students, researchers, and faculty deeper into the resources held by Pitts. I wanted the exhibition hall to encourage moving into the stacks and periodicals themselves to begin a conversation between researcher and text in the very way in which the periodicals were themselves part of a living conversation with a previous community of readers.<sup>20</sup> In doing so, I hoped to reflect Jeschke’s vision not only for the collection but for the church, that the church’s future depends upon critical analysis of its global past.

### THE LIMITATIONS OF CURATION

Working with specific materials cataloged broadly brought challenges and limitations unique to the subject matter, issues relevant to the larger issue of cataloging. First, I curated an exhibition from a collection vaguely entitled the “Sub-Saharan African Collection.” A myriad of finding aids, periodical listings, and postcards are catalogued under this heading, but dated binders detailing the periodicals’ origins and languages were the most useful tool for my initial searching.<sup>21</sup> Cataloger Fesseha Nega supported my work in the collection by searching items particular to nation, language, and historical period.

In the end, the exhibition drew on materials ranging beyond the “Sub-Saharan African Collection” for two reasons. Selecting from the uniquely catalogued items limited the ways in which one could explore more extensive holdings relevant to histories and theologies of African initiative across the library. More importantly, “Sub-Saharan” and “African” prove difficult and somewhat problematic as collection categories in that they bifurcate a continent and elide linguistic and cultural plurality. They are placeholders at best. We generated subject searches within the broadly cataloged items in order to search out select sources—such

<sup>18</sup> Achille Mbembe, “The Power of the Archive and Its Limits,” in *Refiguring the Archive*, ed. Verne Harris, Carolyn Hamilton, Jane Taylor, Michele Pickover, Graeme Reid, and Razia Saleh (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002), 19.

<sup>19</sup> Achille Mbembe, “The Power of the Archive and Its Limits,” 21.

<sup>20</sup> Derek Peterson, *Creative Writing: Translation, Bookkeeping, and the Work of Imagination in Colonial Kenya* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2004), xi. “Texts do not belong on library shelves, tucked away from the sweat, blood, emotion, and idealism of human life. Readers and writers are participants in a much wider body of composition that goes on off the written page. Texts are part of the real, human world of imagination and action.”

<sup>21</sup> See <http://www.pitts.emory.edu/collections/selectholdings/subsaharan.cfm>.

as “Congo,” “Kimbanguism,” and “Catholic”—yet there remains a large selection of periodicals I simply did not have the margin to uncover or were not located in the “Sub-Saharan African Collection.” For instance, ethnomusicology journals that included such gems as the music and lyrics for the first *Messe Katangaise* by a Congolese composer from the Katanga region, or Shona Methodist hymnody from Zimbabwe, along with Swahili hymn books, are not cataloged as held within the specific collection. The issue at stake then was not one of what Pitts holds, but the more epistemically complex problem of how North American libraries organize data and set the perimeters of collections.

Second, in the work of curating African content within a North American space, how does one recognize and navigate the double white gaze—a collection generated under white eyes and curated according to my white analysis? Racialized positionality and histories continue to inflect the ways in which we see and know, and who and how we know. Since troubling the white gaze is an enduring epistemic and social process, curating this project felt initially problematic to me. In my quiet discomfort, I turned to comparative voices writing or speaking on “Africa” within global frameworks. I wanted to augment my gaze and trouble the epistemological waters of visitors, even if only fractionally. To do so, we adopted several strategies such as using the physical display to draw attention to race as a structuring and aesthetic category or to how “Africa” is conceived from within and outside of the continent. Within drawers under display cases, for example, we inserted panels with quotes and excerpts contrasting the ways in which African scholars and white, Western scholars and politicians speak of “Africa” within a global consciousness. Hegel’s “Unhistorical” Africa fades as agency and cultural plurality animates the intellectual resources of communities and countries, such as Nigerian philosopher Olúfẹ̀mi Táíwo underscores in his discussion on African knowledge production.<sup>22</sup> While highlighting voices such as Táíwo and others does not remove or alter the white gaze(s), it can bring into focus the ways structurally, historically constructed whiteness erases, dehumanizes, and diminishes African histories as possessing global and local import.

Third, numerous periodicals were printed in languages that require either native fluency or sustained study and use by non-native speakers. I was able to work in English and French sources, as well as skim Portuguese for relevance to selected themes. Africanist colleague in Emory’s History Department Madelyn Stone provided translations of Afrikaans, and a friend of the library provided translations of Amharic. The shortcomings and losses of local insights and contributions due to inability to work in the array of languages in the collection should not be underestimated. Yet, this limitation of the exhibition does not necessarily inhibit use of the collection. Instead, it invites a more significant set of questions requiring sustained reflection and response: What is the role of the theological library in North American seminaries in widening and deepening reflection and analysis beyond global north sources? How does a theological library make resources held in a North American institution, possessing power, prestige, and financial resources to relocate knowledge away from its community of creation, available to those for whom these materials are living documents? Who become the custodians of knowledge and how does this inform the politics and economics of theological and historical knowledge production?

## CONCLUSION

Strategic initiatives directed toward keeping theological institutions viable within a competitive marketplace of options, wherein the church and religion appear as disappearing and inutile consumables, undermine perceiving questions about collection accessibility and utilization as first theological questions. I would suggest, however, that the Sub-Saharan African Collection at Pitts presses us to recognize that access to and use of a library’s resources is connected to the flourishing of human communities who live with remnants

<sup>22</sup> See Olúfẹ̀mi Táíwo, “Why Africa Must Become a Center of Knowledge Again,” TEDGlobal, August 2017, [https://www.ted.com/talks/oluf\\_mi\\_taiwo\\_why\\_africa\\_must\\_become\\_a\\_center\\_of\\_knowledge\\_again](https://www.ted.com/talks/oluf_mi_taiwo_why_africa_must_become_a_center_of_knowledge_again).

of texts as lived and performed in their midst.<sup>23</sup> Pitts' collection is interwoven with the religious, political, and social lives of ecclesial communities, and thus they are theological, not only in content but in function. Jeschke grasped this point well. He described the changing global reality of the church as "a world made small and fragile," foreseeing tenuous diversifications and social changes to which today's theological educators and ecclesial leaders struggle to adapt.<sup>24</sup> He perceptively identified texts that would with time leave traces of Christianity reconceived and practiced as a global faith comprised of multiple centers of belonging.<sup>25</sup> So, he bent his strategic attention to theological purposes, prioritizing a future and unknown church nascent within African and African diaspora communities as one of the rudders steering his course.

Excavating the collection in order to curate the exhibition revealed the tenacity and extent of efforts made by Jeschke, his staff, and an international network of scholars, librarians, and ecclesial leaders to collect, catalogue, and generate bibliographies of sources otherwise lost or forgotten. The further labor of publicizing the collection, developing funding that supports visiting scholars to work in the publication's languages, as well as partnering with researchers and institutions in the communities where these documents originate, remains to be undertaken in order to fulfill Jeschke's vision.

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<sup>23</sup> I am indebted on this point to the work of Derek Peterson and Emily Callaci whose African intellectual historical scholarship influenced (and influences) my reflections on the exhibition and collection. See Derek Peterson, *Creative Writing*; Emily Callaci, *Street Archives and City Life: Popular Intellectuals in Postcolonial Tanzania* (Duke University Press: Durham, NC, 2017).

<sup>24</sup> Jeschke, 1986, 86.

<sup>25</sup> Klaus Koschorke, "Transcontinental Links, Enlarged Maps, and Polycentric Structures in the History of World Christianity," *Journal of World Christianity* 6, no. 1 (2016): 34.

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