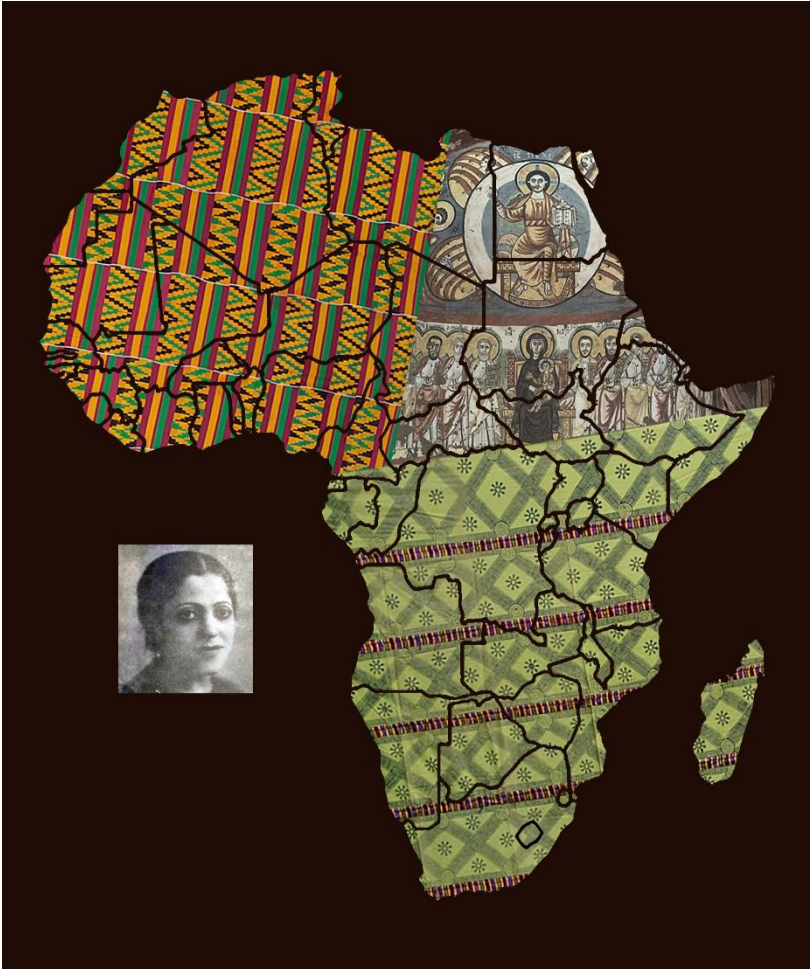


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CHRISTIAN
BIOGRAPHY

Vol. 11, No. 1 (Jan. 2026)

Focus: Biographies from the
Ghana Women's Stories
Workshop; Iris Habib el Masri



A publication of the *Dictionary of African Christian Biography*

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JOURNAL OF AFRICAN CHRISTIAN BIOGRAPHY

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Table of Contents

Foreword: Memory that Endures by Michele Sigg, Editor	3
Introduction: The Ghana Workshop for Writers of Women’s Stories by Ini Dorcas Dah, Guest Editor	5
Uneducated but Not Uninformed: The Journey of Rebecca Amissah (1920-2012) from The Twelve Apostles Church (Nackabah), Ghana by Stephen Obeng	10
Pioneer Educator, Advocate and Gardner: The Story of Alberta Akoley Adobea Ollenu (1918-2017) by Penuel Kpadenou Nkoulete	18
Faith, Education, and Leadership: The Life and Legacy of Christiana Aba Techie–Menson (1948-2022) by Isaac Woode	28
“Greater Love Has No Woman”: In Recognition of Mercy Yaa Dakwaa Yamoah (1912 – 2005) by Joyce Boham	35
Book Excerpt Dah, Ini Dorcas. <i>Women Do More Work than Men: Birifor Women as Change Agents in the Mission and Expansion of the Church in West Africa</i> . Wipf and Stock, 2018. P.188-204.....	42
The History Nun, Iris Habib el-Masry (1910-1994): A Biography by Mina Fouad Tawfike	54
Book Excerpt Iris, Habib el Masri. <i>The Story of the Copts: The true story of christianity in Egypt</i> . N. Pl.: Coptic Bishopric for African Affairs, 1987.	66
Recent Print and Digital Resources Related to Christianity in Africa compiled by Beth Restricks, Head, BU African Studies Library	71

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Foreword: Memory that Endures

By Michele Sigg, Editor

Just a few days ago, a few representatives of the DACB boards (Executive Committee, Editorial Board, Council of Elders) and DACB Friends (our fundraising and promotion nonprofit, www.dacbfriends.org) were gathered on zoom for an “All Boards Meeting” of the DACB. As those present talked about their interest and involvement in the work of the DACB and heard the stories of others, one could feel the excitement of the connections that were being made. We realized that, although there were few of us on screen, we had representatives from the full history of the DACB—from its conception with Founding Director Jonathan Bonk, to its incubation and early growth at the Overseas Ministries Study Center (Judy Stebbins and Aiyana Adams—OMSC staff, Kehinde Olabimtan—Project Luke scholar) including our earliest collaborators and mentors (Philomena Njeri Mwaura and Mary Getui—scholars, Beth Restrict-Executive Committee) and our newest partners, advocates, and fundraisers (Esther Mombo and Tekletsadik Belachew—Editorial Board, John Nwangwu, Ellendale Hoffmann, and Suzi Bonk, daughter of Jon and Jean—DACB Friends Board). What was most powerful in this gathering was the sense of historical continuity: in one literal snapshot (the zoom screen), we could see the living thread of the legacy that is being passed on from one generation to another both metaphorically and literally.

Memory that endures—the memory of a loved one, for example—requires more than one person and one generation to keep it alive. Preservation starts with the close relatives who guard the oral memories sometimes over several generations and later might pass them on to those who put them in writing. Even after that, memory lives on with the regular commemoration of that loved one’s life, often in the form of a formal or informal gathering on the occasion of an anniversary.

In the life of a Christian, it is the active remembering of Christ’s faithful life, death, and resurrection that informs our daily lives and fuels our hope for the future. In the same spirit, the memories of the faithful saints of the African church preserved in the DACB or the pages of the Journal, teach us and provide wisdom for our journey.

This issue of the Journal features several stories from the 2024 Biography Workshop for Writers of Women’s Stories. These stories are introduced below by guest editor Dr. Ini Dorcas Dah who was also my co-instructor.

Another rich addition to this issue is a biography of Iris Habib el Masri, the “History Nun,” by Mina Fouad Tawfike, co-instructor with me at the 2025 Biography Writers workshop at St. Athanasius Seminary in Cairo. The story of this extraordinary feminist pioneer who, in the words of her sister, wrote “with the blood of her heart, not with the ink of her pen” will amaze and delight you. Don’t miss the excerpt of her volume *The Story of the Copts* that follows.

Paul Balisky: In Memoriam



E. Paul Balisky died peacefully on Tuesday, February 10, 2026 in Grande Prairie, Alberta, with his beloved wife, Lila, at his side. Paul and Lila were pioneer advisors, supporters, mentors, and advocates in the work of the DACB as well as longtime friends of Founding Director Jonathan Bonk. In later years, Paul contributed several biographies from his own writing to the DACB. He was always ready to help and support the mission of the DACB in any way he could when Michele Sigg became director.

Together with Lila, Paul served with SIM (Serving in Mission) in Ethiopia from 1967 to 2005. Over nearly four decades, he was involved in church planting, supervised development projects in southwest Ethiopia during the 1974–1991 Marxist regime, and taught within the Ethiopian Kale Heywet Church’s theological schools. He later served on the faculty of the Ethiopian Graduate School of Theology in Addis Ababa, mentoring pastors and leaders. For seven years, he served as the Director of SIM Ethiopia.

Paul completed a PhD in Ethiopian church history at the University of Aberdeen. His scholarship culminated in the publication of *Wolaitta Evangelists: A Study of Religious Innovation in Southern Ethiopia, 1937–1975*, a significant contribution to the study of indigenous African Christianity. In retirement, he continued writing and authored *Thomas A. Lambie: Missionary Doctor and Entrepreneur*, reflecting his enduring interest in mission history and faithful service.

A more complete biography will follow in the DACB.

Sources:

Obituary for E. Paul Balisky,

<https://www.oliversfuneralhome.com/obituaries/e-paul-balisky/>.

Introduction: The Ghana Workshop for Writers of Women's Stories

By Ini Dorcas Dah, Guest Editor

Initially scheduled for March 2024 at Saint Nicolas Theological Seminary, Ghana, the DACB Workshop for Writers of Women's Stories was finally held in July 2024 at the Akrofi-Christaller Institute of Theology, Mission and Culture, Akropong-Akuapem, Ghana. Eleven young writers (five men and six women) participated from different denominations including: Anglican, Methodist, Church of Pentecost, Evangelical Church of Ghana, Global Evangelical Church, Perez Chapel International, Power of God Pentecostal Church, Tamale Interdenominational Church. The group included Anglican priests, missionaries and church planters, doctoral and Masters students, one university professor, seminary or non profit administrators, church workers. Two people could not participate due to last minute health issue and their academic timetable.

In this workshop, participants learned the skills they needed to research and write the stories of select women who have devoted their lives to serving the church. Participants learned about the key moments in the expansion of Christianity in Africa and the central role played by African Christians at each stage. At the same time, they learned research methods that would enable them to craft their own biographies. This workshop offered the opportunity for Ghanaian Christians to write a woman's biography for a shared publication. Participants and lecturers stayed together in one place and prayed, fellowshiped and also shared meals daily as one would do in a family context. By the end of the week, we had all begun a journey of friendship together.

Organized and sponsored by the *Dictionary of African Christian Biography*, the main rationale for this workshop was to empower and equip Africans, both scholars and lay historians, to write Christian history in Africa through the lives of the African ancestors of the faith, both men and women. By the end of the workshop the participants would be able to

- 1) Select a biographical subject, plan and begin research for a chapter-length biography of a Ghanaian Christian woman to be completed and published in an edited volume.
- 2) Situate the chosen biography within the historical context of the global Christian movement and the expansion of Christianity in Africa.
- 3) Understand the theological significance of memory and history within the global church.
- 4) Discover and access research data (archives, oral or written sources) needed for the project.
- 5) Read and critically analyze selected biographies to learn from examples of well-written stories and become familiar with historiographical issues in African church

history.

6) Master the use of the tools of oral history (interviewing techniques, recording, transcription) and hone skills for the writing of a biography.

7) Actively participate in a learning community by offering and receiving feedback from peers.

8) Eventually, become involved in historic preservation efforts in one's own context and encourage others to join in the work of writing and historical research.

In the spirit of community-based learning, the group would stay in touch for at least a year. The instructors would provide support in editing and finalizing the manuscripts for publication. The collective result would be a publication in English that highlights the little-known stories of women in the Ghanaian church which will be shared with a general audience inside and outside Africa. Four of these articles are now being published in the January 2026 volume of the *Journal of African Christian Biography*. Another biography from the workshop, written by Carine Amo-Nyampong, was published in last year's January 2025 journal issue.

The Contributions

Rev. Stephen Obeng wrote on Maame Ekuia Kobaaba, a remarkable woman and prophetess, whose life devoted to healing and guiding became a testament to the power of compassion, wisdom, and service. Next, Penuel Kpadenou Nkoulete documented the story of Alberta Akoley Adobea Ollennu, affectionately called "Mama." This trailblazing woman made history in Ghana by having her image featured on Ghanaian stamps in 2000 during the World Congress organized by the Home Economics Association, Ghana, in recognition of her outstanding contributions. Isaac Wood wrote the biography of Christiana Aba Techie–Menson who made significant contributions to her community and left a remarkable legacy which endures as an exceptional model of service, resilience, and commitment. Finally, Joyce Boham presents the life of Mercy Yaa Dakwaa Yamoah née Turkson, a woman who helped in the development of the church in Ghana by working with her husband and also pouring out her life for other women, focusing on salvation, friendship, empowerment, and the uplift of women.

Rationale for this Volume and Testimony: Why Document Women's Biography in West Africa and particularly in Ghana?

Culturally speaking, an African woman demonstrates her value and maintains her social status based on her ability to keep an orderly and well maintained home rather than on any personal qualities she may have or any "achievements of her own."¹ However, it would be unfair to talk about World Christianity today if we totally ignore the legacy of women—especially African women—in a continent where Christianity is the most vibrant globally and women make up at least 52% of church members, with a more

¹Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Hearing and Knowing: Theological Reflections on Christianity in Africa* (Accra: Sam-Woode LTD, 2000), p.122.

likely figure of over 70%.²

Although women dominate in the church, Philomena Njeri Mwaura sadly points out that there is lack of documentation in African Christian history concerning the vital role that women have played in the church either by converting to the Christian faith or by leading others to Christ across various denominations.³ In both church and society women are the ones who teach the first values in life to their children.⁴ Most of the time, they are not concerned about disputes over positions of leadership but quietly impact lives.⁵

Therefore, documenting women's stories and their contributions to Christian history is important because biographical writing is one of the major ways of giving credit to key agents in Christianity.⁶ Watson A. O. Omulokoli echoes Walls' view and argues that one of African Christianity's greatest needs today is to write its own history. He therefore proposes that one of the approaches suitable to make African Christian contributions to Christianity known is by writing African Christian biographies.⁷ Therefore, if women are the majority in the African chapter of world Christianity and if the Christian faith would not likely survive without them, there is an urgent need to make the writing of their biographies a priority. The present journal issue contributes to this urgent pursuit with this collection of African Christian women's biographies focused on West African women and particularly Ghanaian women.

The last part of this introduction is the personal testimony of one of the women writers of this volume, offering a window into how the workshop impacted the life and faith of one participant. Many others, both men and women, echoed similar sentiments. Although this might not be a reality for every woman in Africa or Ghana, it is worth noting how transforming this was for her life.

² Gina Zurlo, "Gender Gaps in World Christianity: Membership, Participation, and Leadership," *Review of Religious Research*, Religious Research Association (2024): 1-25. DOI: 10.1177/0034673X241279593

³ Philomena Njeri Mwaura, 'Gender and Power in African Christianity: African Instituted Churches and Pentecostal Churches,' in Ogbu U. Kalu (ed.), *African Christianity: An African Story* (Pretoria: Publication of the Department of Church History, 2005), pp. 410-445 (411-33).

⁴ J. A. Kayode Makinde, 'Women in Nation Building: A Biblical Approach,' in Protus O. Kemdirim and Mercy A. Oduyoye, *Women, Culture and Theological Education* (Nigeria: Snaap Press, 1998), pp. 66-85 (75).

⁵ Edith Deen, *Great Women of the Christian Faith* (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1959), p. xix.

⁶ Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, New York: T and Clark, Orbis Books, 2006), p. xiii.

⁷ Watson A. O. Omulokoli, 'Researching and Writing Christian Biography in Africa: A Challenge to Evangelical Studies in Global Context,' *Journal of African Christian Thought*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (June 2000), pp. 41-44 (41).

A personal report by Penuel Kpadenou Nkoulete⁸ on the DACB workshop

African women have played significant roles and made substantial contributions to the growth and expansion of Christianity, nurturing a Godly generation to enrich our world. However, these courageous, self-sacrificing, and virtuous women remain uncelebrated heroines, unlike their male counterparts. The DACB workshop, which took place from July 8-12, 2024 at the Akrofi-Christaller Institute in Akropong-Akuapem Ghana, saw the participation of eleven individuals.

The main objective of the workshop was to impart the skills necessary for writing about the influential church mothers who impacted their local communities and beyond, as well as to instill a culture of literature appreciation. Apostle Dr. Sylvia Owusu-Ansah had introduced me to the workshop. Initially I was hesitant to apply due to my lack of prior experience in African Christian history or biographies but I eventually decided to submit my application at the eleventh hour. Upon receiving my acceptance letter from Dr. Michele Sigg, Dr. Sylvia's encouragement confirmed my participation, a decision I am grateful for.

During the workshop, attendees were split into three teams. One team focused on studying Lydia Menguelune's life to develop a Sunday school lesson with a visually appealing PowerPoint presentation featuring vibrant images of Lydia's achievements, which were not available in the existing materials. This segment was very engaging and informative, especially for me as a Sunday school educator interested in integrating African Christian history into my teachings at the church.

The second team performed a humorous sketch depicting the story of Sarah Nakimu, effectively capturing the important moments in Nakimu's life. The use of comedy, particularly by reverends Frank and Stephen, added laughter to the presentation, making the audience enjoy it even more. Dr. Ernestina also deserves praise for her outstanding portrayal of Nakimu.

In my group, we composed a melodious tribute to Agnes Okoh. Being a Sunday school teacher, I understand the significance of including music in our teachings, and this made the session especially meaningful.

As a female writer and Sunday school teacher, this workshop equipped me with the tools to write Christian biographies of women and enriched my understanding of global Christian history, with Africa in focus. The most profound lesson I took away from the workshop was inspired by the video "I Will Be a Hummingbird – Wangari Maathai," which instilled in me a commitment to do the best I can.

This workshop was a great initiative and it was refreshing to be a

⁸ See her biography of Alberta Akoley Adobebe Ollennu in this issue.

partaker.

Concluding Remarks

I feel personally encouraged that the workshop was empowering for most of the participants as Penuel expressed it in her report. It is not always evident for women to benefit from such opportunities due to various limitations that society and church impose on them in the African context. I have been a woman researcher and can testify to how research can be challenging for women especially in Africa. I, therefore, commend the initiative to document exclusively African women in this volume because this is an empowering step and raises the status of Christian women in Africa and in other parts of the world who quite often are made to feel excluded.

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Uneducated but Not Uninformed: The Journey of Rebecca Amissah (1920-2012) from The Twelve Apostles Church (Nackabah), Ghana

By Stephen Obeng

The Twelve Apostles Church (TTAC) was established in Ghana in 1962 by John Nackabah and Grace Tani, both converts of Prophet William Harris. In his evangelistic ministry, Prophet Harris commonly appointed twelve apostles in each village he evangelized to provide leadership for new converts. This organizational model was later adopted by the church, which came to be known as the Twelve Apostles Church. Among African Indigenous Churches in Ghana, TTAC is often noted for having comparatively low levels of formal education among its membership.⁹ Drawing on the practices of Prophet Harris, the church incorporates the Holy Bible, the musical enmeshed calabash (*mfoba*), and the hourglass drum (*dondo*), together with singing, to invoke the presence of the Holy Spirit during healing rituals. These same instruments are also used in the exorcism of evil spirits. TTAC refers to its place of worship as a “garden,” a sacred space where all ritual activities, including healing, are conducted. From this religious tradition emerged a woman of remarkable character and unwavering dedication, popularly known as “Maame David”—a prophetess who devoted her life to healing, guiding, and nurturing her community, and who became a beacon of hope for many.

Birth and Early Life

Maame Ekuia Kobaaba was born in Elmina on May 20, 1920, to Opayin Kojo Amissah and Mina Akosua Nyaniba. She was baptized in the Methodist Church and christened Rebecca Amissah. Rebecca was a committed member of the Christ Little Band, a recognized church musical group known for singing indigenous songs, or *Ebibindwom* (*ebibi*—Africa; *ndwom*—songs), during worship services. From its establishment in the early 1830s, the Methodist Church in Ghana witnessed sustained efforts by indigenous converts to incorporate Akan musical styles into Christian liturgy.¹⁰ These efforts were motivated mainly by the fact that many Akan converts at the time were illiterate and could not understand European forms of worship, particularly hymn singing.

Rev. Joseph Rhodes Dunwell intentionally sought to integrate Ghanaian vernacular language and indigenous music into Methodist worship. Through the incorporation of *Ebibindwom*, rooted in Akan cultural traditions, the Methodist Church

⁹ Christian G. Baëta, *Prophetism in Ghana: A Study of Some “Spiritual” Churches* (London: SCM Press, 1962).

¹⁰ Agordoh AA. *A comparative study of musical traditions of the older mission churches and the new churches in Ghana*. (Legon: Institute of Akan Studies, 1997), 24.

successfully bridged the divide between literate and illiterate congregants. This musical innovation transformed worship into a more inclusive practice, enabling all members—regardless of literacy level—to participate fully and authentically in the church’s liturgical life.¹¹ Although Rebecca lacked the opportunity to pursue formal education, her passion for music found full expression through her involvement in the Christ Little Band. This experience not only refined her musical skills but also deepened her spiritual formation, fostering in her a strong sense of confidence and belonging.

In 1983, Ghana experienced a devastating famine—one of the most severe crises in its history, coupled with economic hardship and political instability. The drought drastically reduced crop production, leading to acute food shortages, widespread malnutrition, and hunger.¹² Compounding the crisis, extensive bushfires, intensified by dry conditions, destroyed vast areas of farmland and wiped out crops and livestock.¹³ The situation was further exacerbated by the return of over one million Ghanaians from Nigeria in 1983, placing immense pressure on already strained food supplies and leaving many families without enough to eat.¹⁴ As the nation struggled to cope with the ravages of the famine, Rebecca’s family was among those severely affected. Nevertheless, her quick thinking, adaptability, and entrepreneurial spirit enabled her to diversify her livelihood. She ventured into small-scale trading, beginning with the kenkey business. She then began producing and selling locally made soap, popularly known as “Don’t Touch Me,” as well as *pooloo*, a local snack. These ventures provided a crucial lifeline for her family during a period of unprecedented hardship.

Marriage and Family Life

As Rebecca matured into womanhood, she found love and companionship with Mr. Napoleon, who later became her husband. A devoted wife and mother of three sons, she nurtured her family with unwavering love and dedication. Although she did not give birth to daughters, she graciously embraced the role of mother to little Hannah Simons, the daughter of her firstborn son, A. K. Simons, who grew to become a cherished companion. As a wife, Rebecca accompanied her husband, a carpenter, to various places, including Dunkwa-on-Offin and Takoradi. Through these transitions, she demonstrated remarkable adaptability, resilience, and deep commitment to her

¹¹ J. K. Brewu, et al The Historical Development, Cultural and Aesthetic Significance of Akan Musical Art form (Ebibindwom) in the Liturgy of the Methodist Church Ghana,” *Asian Research Journal of Arts & Social Sciences*, 17(4), 2002: 15.

¹² Tan et al, “Famine in Ghana and its impact”, Handbook of Famine, Starvation, and Nutrient Deprivation: From Biology to Policy, (Cham: Springer International Publication 2019), 31-45 (Retrieved Nov. 23, 2024).

¹³ George J. S. Dei. Coping with the effects of the 1982-83 drought in Ghana, the view from the village. *Africa Development / Afrique et Development*, 13(1): 107-122. 1988 (Retrieved Dec. 2, 2024).

¹⁴ United State Agency for International Development. “Ghana Food Shortage (PDF) USAID, 1982 (Retrieved Oct. 30, 2024).

family. Sadly, two of her sons—Smith Abakah Simons and Anthony Kojo Simons—died before her. Samuel Simons remains her only surviving son.

Rebecca’s Call to Ministry

Rebecca’s life took a dramatic turn when she faced a series of trials and challenges. She struggled to find purpose and meaning, as her business ventures were trapped in a cycle of stagnation. Each sale barely covered her family’s daily expenses, leaving her with little to no profit. During this period, she drifted through life like a traveler without a map, searching for a destination that seemed perpetually out of reach.

At this critical moment, a friend, sensing her distress, encouraged her to seek spiritual wisdom and guidance from a renowned prophetess—Rebecca Essoun of the Twelve Apostles Church, popularly known as Nackabah of Effiekuma. Reluctantly, Rebecca eventually agreed to visit her.

After explaining the purpose of her visit, the prophetess expressed willingness to help but imposed a condition: Rebecca would have to sever her ties with the Methodist Church and join her congregation. This demand proved to be a deal breaker. Offended and angered, Rebecca rejected the offer and left the prophetess’s premises, resolved never to return. Rebecca’s refusal to abandon her church is believed to have stemmed from her deep-rooted connection to the Methodist community, especially her cherished membership in the Christ Little Band, where her beautiful singing voice was highly valued.

However, before she left, the prophetess had given her a special water, popularly known as *David nsu* (Water of David), to use in her business. Miraculously, the water appeared to have a transformative effect, leading to a noticeable improvement in her business. When the supply eventually ran out, Rebecca found herself in a dilemma. Despite her earlier determination never to return to the prophetess, she ultimately went back in search of more of the water that had brought her such success and had become highly valued to her. Beyond providing her with miraculous water, the encounter became a moment of profound revelation. Rebecca was declared to be destined for a sacred calling—as a prophetess who would serve the Lord with purpose. After careful contemplation and reflection, she embraced this divine vocation and became a disciple of the prophetess, who mentored her in the doctrines and practices of the Twelve Apostles Church.

As a mentee, Rebecca’s primary responsibility was distributing the sacred water (*David nsu*) to the prophetess’s many clients, a role that earned her the name *Maame David*. According to family accounts, it was during this period of devoted service that Rebecca fully discerned her divine calling, marking a decisive turning point in her spiritual and ministerial journey.¹⁵ Amid these developments, Rebecca’s husband struggled to accept her newfound calling and the reality of being married to a woman regarded as a vessel of the divine. Consequently, this tension between Rebecca’s

¹⁵ Hannah Simons (Granddaughter), interview by author, August 30, 2024, Cape Coast (Twelve Apostles Church, Abura), Digital Recording.

spiritual aspirations and her husband's refusal to accept them culminated in a heartbreaking divorce, leaving her to navigate her newfound calling alone.

Graduation and Commissioning

After three years of intense spiritual apprenticeship under the prophetess, her transformation was complete. She was formally ordained as a prophetess of God, marking a significant milestone in her spiritual journey. As a symbol of her graduation and new spiritual status, she was presented with a sacred cup—a powerful reminder of her divine calling and the responsibilities that accompanied it. Within TTAC, the cup holds profound significance. It serves as a conduit through which communication with the Holy Spirit is facilitated and the mysteries surrounding those seeking guidance are discerned. To seek revelation, the bearer would pour holy water into the cup, raise it heavenward, and enter into a state of communion with the divine realm. Through this ritual, the spirits would impart wisdom, revealing the purpose of a visitor's presence. This gift of discernment enabled the minister to offer tailored spiritual responses to the challenges presented.

Following her ordination, Rebecca returned to her hometown of Elmina, where she was formally commissioned to begin her ministry. Standing before the gathered community of believers, she was presented with a sacred staff, a potent emblem of her spiritual authority. Attuned to her unique gifts and calling, the staff became an extension of her prophetic ministry, guiding her as she navigated the complexities and demands of her vocation.

A New Spiritual Dawn in Abura, Cape Coast

Having witnessed Rebecca's growth and readiness, her mentor entrusted her with the significant responsibility of planting a TTAC branch in Abura, Cape Coast. This assignment marked the beginning of her pioneering ministry. Her early experiences in Cape Coast were fraught with hardship, particularly in her search for a stable residence and a place of worship. During this period, a Muslim man named Papa Ismanu approached her with an invitation to occupy his unfinished storey building. The structure had remained incomplete for years, and Papa Ismanu hoped that her presence would encourage its completion. Rebecca, however, received this gesture as a divine provision, embracing the challenge of transforming the unfinished building into both her temporary home and a place of worship.

After some time, the unfinished building—once a symbol of abandonment—was completed and transformed into a thriving center for healing and spiritual guidance. Rebecca's ministry was particularly distinguished by its success in healing cases considered incurable, including mental illness, epilepsy, and other debilitating conditions. Moreover, her reputed ability to heal barren wombs inspired wonder and awe, earning her recognition as a vessel of divine mercy and restoration. In addition to her healing ministry, Rebecca was a skilled traditional midwife who provided care to countless women throughout their pregnancies. Whether women sought her services

for prenatal consultations, healing, or spiritual guidance, her unique integration of traditional midwifery knowledge and spiritual authority made her a deeply respected and trusted figure within her community.

Despite her many achievements, Rebecca remained genuinely grateful to her spiritual mentor, who had selflessly trained and mentored her even after her graduation and commissioning. As a testament to her steadfast loyalty, she frequently visited her mentor, bringing gifts and provisions, often saying, “*Onam dua do, na ahoma hu sor*” (the rope is able to see the sky through the tree). In a world where it is easy to forget one’s roots and the people who nurtured one’s growth, Rebecca’s actions exemplify her deep commitment to honoring those who invested in her spiritual journey.

Permanent Residence and Mentorship

As Rebecca’s ministry continued to grow, the space provided by Papa Ismanu could no longer accommodate the growing congregation. Seeking a permanent solution, she petitioned the local authorities for a piece of land, envisioning a thriving spiritual community under her care. The land allocated to her, however, was far from ideal—a barren, neglected site that had long served as a dumping ground. Overgrown with weeds and littered with debris, it seemed an unlikely place for transformation. Yet Rebecca remained undeterred, seeing the hidden potential that lay beneath the surface.

With time, the desolate land was transformed into a vibrant spiritual oasis, thanks to the collective dedication of her church members and the individuals whose lives she had touched. A new place of worship and a residence were built, standing as a testament to the impact of her ministry and the community’s unwavering support. Many years after her death, this sacred site continues to serve as a hub for spiritual activities and a gathering place for Rebecca’s family and followers.

In keeping with the principles of TTAC, Rebecca assumed responsibility for identifying and nurturing emerging leaders. Among her mentees were Esi Aforba, Suzanna Akromon, Mary Acquah, Monica Abakah, and others. Her spiritual investment in these disciples bore remarkable fruit, as they grew not only into capable leaders but also steadfast supporters of her ministry. Under her guidance, they developed their gifts and abilities, eventually assuming key roles within TTAC. Today, some of her disciples have established branches in neighboring villages and towns, further extending her legacy and influence.

Benevolent Practices/Vessel of Peace

According to an oft-quoted aphorism by Winston Churchill, “We make a life by what we get but we make a living by what we give.” This profound truth is beautifully reflected in Rebecca’s unwavering commitment to serving the poor and the needy. One poignant example, shared by her granddaughter Hannah Simons, illustrates how she cared for clients who came for treatment but lacked even basic necessities, such as

food, often due to family neglect.¹⁶ While she charged for her services to cover essential items needed for healing and deliverance, she also showed remarkable compassion and generosity toward those unable to pay, whether due to poverty or abandonment. In doing so, she embodied the biblical principles of mercy and kindness. Her great-granddaughter, Esther Baidoo, recalls that, “Her compassionate heart and generous spirit were something else, as she would go out of her way to ensure the needs of people who crossed her path were met. Whether you are a family member, stranger, friend, or a visitor in need, her door was always open. Her philosophy was simple: if you are human, you are worthy of love, care, and support.”¹⁷

Furthermore, Rebecca was a consummate peacemaker, renowned for her ability to unite people in love and harmony. Her gift for mediating conflicts and resolving disputes healed countless relationships, fostering a spirit of mutual respect within her family, church, and community. By addressing the root causes of division, she empowered those she served to overcome differences and work toward a brighter, more harmonious future.

Challenges/Conflict with Dark Forces/Accusations of Witchcraft

The success of Prophetess Rebecca’s ministry in Cape Coast did not go unnoticed by her colleagues at TTAC, inspiring them to establish their own branches in and around the Cape Coast area. While they occasionally gathered for joint worship and celebrations, a spirit of jealousy and competition soon simmered beneath the surface. Some prophets and prophetesses—including a few of her former disciples—became envious of her well-established ministry and began spreading malicious rumors and falsehoods about her. This not only caused disaffection among her members but also created tension and conflict within the wider church community. People from the Abura community and beyond accused her of using witchcraft or other demonic powers to perform her healings and other miraculous activities in her garden.¹⁸ Yet those who truly knew her and had experienced her love, compassion, and kindness remained steadfast in their support and admiration.

According to family accounts, on one memorable occasion, a man believed to be mentally ill was brought to her. With unwavering faith, she laid her hands on his head and prayed to God for his healing. Immediately, the man was completely restored to sanity. However, this miracle did not go unnoticed by dark spiritual forces, which soon launched a fierce attack on her and her family. A large swarm of bees, driven by malevolent intent, descended upon her garden, threatening to harm all present. Yet, in a remarkable demonstration of God’s protective power, the bees, despite their

¹⁶ Smith Abakah, interview by author, September 15, 2024, Cape Coast (Twelve Apostles Church, Abura), Digital Recording.

¹⁷ Esther Baidoo (Great Granddaughter), interview by author, August 30, 2024, Cape Coast (Twelve Apostles Church, Abura), Digital Recording.

¹⁸ Mr. Frank Abakah (Grandson), interview by author, October 22, 2024, Cape Coast (Twelve Apostles Church, Abura), Digital Recording.

menacing presence, caused no harm to anyone. At various points in her life, she endured relentless spiritual attacks from a formidable array of malevolent entities, including ghosts, witches, and other dark forces. The primary aim of these attacks was to stop her healing ministry, which had earned her a reputation as a gifted healer.¹⁹

Later Life and Rebecca's Death

In her later years, Rebecca faced the inevitable challenges of old age. The charisma and dynamism that had long defined her ministerial life gradually gave way to the limitations of advancing years. Her struggles were compounded by hypertension and diabetes, which eventually made it difficult for her to attend church services and spiritual programs she had founded, activities that had been central to both her personal faith and her ministry. For years, people had sought her help, drawn by her extraordinary gift of healing and her compassionate heart. Yet, as her health declined, she could no longer actively carry out this vital work. In response, her disciples stepped in seamlessly to ensure the continuity of her ministry.

On May 11, 2012, while resting in her room, Rebecca expressed her deep satisfaction with the ongoing spiritual service, participating in it through her spiritual perception despite her physical absence. In a remarkable event, she instructed Prophetess Hannah to prepare for a multitude of visitors. She specifically asked Hannah to soak maize in water, intending to prepare a meal for guests who appeared dressed in white robes, though neither the visitors nor the maize were visible to others. Astonished, her family witnessed this extraordinary moment. After giving these instructions, she requested to take a nap, and it was during this rest that she died peacefully at the age of 92.²⁰

Rebecca Amissah was a woman of remarkable character and unwavering dedication. Her life stands as a testament to the power of compassion, wisdom, and service. Her extraordinary gift of healing, coupled with her unique blend of traditional midwifery knowledge and spiritual authority, earned her the trust and admiration of her community. Beyond her remarkable skills, she was a peacemaker and a unifying presence, fostering love and harmony wherever she went. Rebecca's legacy is one of selfless dedication, inspiring others to embrace empathy, service, and the nurturing of both body and spirit.

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Pioneer Educator, Advocate and Gardner: The Story of Alberta Akoley Adobebe Ollennu (1918-2017)

By Penuel Kpadenou Nkoulete

Alberta Akoley Adobebe Ollennu, affectionately known as “Mama” or “Madam,” was a pioneering educator, devoted Christian, and tireless advocate for women, children, and the elderly in Ghana. A trailblazer in Home Economics and girls’ education, she played a foundational role in shaping national educational policy, advancing professional training, and strengthening social development across church, state, and community institutions. Recognized nationally and internationally—including the honor of appearing on Ghanaian postage stamps—she left an enduring public legacy. Alberta’s life embodied a holistic vision of service that wove together faith, education, discipline, and social responsibility.

Childhood and Marriage

Alberta Ollennu, a teacher and a Home Economist by profession, was born on September 20, 1918, to Mr. Albert Amenya Kwabena Addo, also known as *Keetsa*,²¹ and Madam Lydia Kweiki Myles in Nsawam, in the Eastern Region of Ghana.²² She lived in Ghana and Sierra Leone and also travelled widely. Both her parents were of Ga²³ origin; her father hailed from Jamestown (British Accra) or Ngleshie²⁴ and her mother from Teshie, in the Greater Accra Region of Ghana. Both parents were Christians, but her mother worshipped at the Divine Heals Church (Bro Lawson Church), and her father was Methodist. She was the second of twelve children and a twin. She lived in several places, including Nsawam, Sekondi, Kumasi, and Accra in the Greater Accra Region. In Accra, she spent most of her adult life in Jamestown, Ridge, Cantonments, and La.

On April 9, 2010, Alberta settled at Awudome Estates in the Kaneshie neighborhood. She was fluent in English, Mfante, Ga, and the Krio language of Sierra Leone. On December 20, 1969, she married Justice Nii Amaa Ollennu, Speaker of Parliament in Ghana’s Second Republic (1969–1972). They both married late. He

²¹ Mr. Addo had an orchard in his house and many people, including children, would pluck fruits without his permission. He decided to require offenders to restore the fruit to the trees as punishment. Thus, he was nicknamed “Keetsa,” which means ‘fix it back into its place,’ in the Ga language.

²² Her parents were separated when she was in primary school.

²³ Ga is one of the major Ghanaian languages spoken by the Ga people in the Greater Accra Region of Ghana.

²⁴ Jamestown (British Accra) or *Ngleshie* is a community in the Greater Accra Region of Ghana, around the coast.

married only her but had had children with other women. She came into the marriage with her nieces and nephews, and he came with his children and together they raised them. She had good relations with the children's mothers. She never had her own biological children. At first, there were a lot of conflicts raising the children because she was strict and some of the children were not ready to submit to her authority. Eventually, she won all of them over and they called her "Mama." She raised not only her husband's children but also many others: those of siblings, relatives, schoolmates, colleagues, and acquaintances.²⁵

Numerous beneficiaries testified to Alberta's generosity in paying school fees from primary through tertiary education. But her legacy extended beyond financial support. She deeply shaped the moral and spiritual formation of their children. She encouraged their daughter, Amerley Anerkai, to approach life with a mindset that recognizes possibilities rather than impossibilities, opportunities rather than obstacles, and solutions rather than limitations. She urged her to faithfully pursue God's calling, regardless of circumstances, and to remain steadfast even when she earned little.²⁶ Through her example and counsel, Anerkai learned enduring values of faith, dedication, and service to God.

Education

Alberta attended primary school in both Ghana and Sierra Leone. She attended Accra Government Girls' School (located in the current Kinbu Senior High/Technical School), Sekondi (Sakune) Methodist School in the Western Region of Ghana and another Methodist school in Wilberforce in Sierra Leone. She earned her Middle School Leaving Certificate and later trained as a teacher at Kumasi Teachers' Training College (Mofatro), now known as Wesley College of the Methodist Church of Ghana.

The College (Mofatro) offered a comprehensive training curriculum for teachers, spanning preschool through teacher training, as well as courses in childcare, domestic science, and other educational specialties similar to those offered in today's universities. As part of their practical training, trainee teachers were assigned a group of young children to care for and nurture for three months under the close supervision of lecturers. Trainees who struggled with these practical responsibilities or did not perform well academically were counseled to consider alternative career paths. But Alberta Addo (as she was then known) successfully completed the four-year program, qualified as a teacher, and began her career as a classroom teacher.

Alberta was awarded a scholarship to pursue a specialist course in Home Economics at the University College of Technology (now Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST)). The program consisted of many practical courses, including one for spouses, prospective brides, and women with social responsibilities. She was also awarded a scholarship to pursue a Higher National

²⁵ Alberta was the ONLY wife of Justice Ollenu. They were both accomplished people when they married.

²⁶ Interview with Amerley Anekai Ollenu on August 14, 2024.

Diploma (HND) at the Attos Crescent College of Home Economics in Scotland²⁷ while she was working with the Ministry of Education in Ghana. She returned to Ghana in 1952 to work with the Ministry of Education as an inspector and examiner of Home Economics in schools. She held many positions and introduced numerous innovations in teaching, teacher training, and school management, retiring as a Principal Education Officer in 1971.

Remarkably, Alberta continued to work with the Home Economics and vocational schools, working with children, the elderly, and the church well into her nineties. She chaired and served on numerous boards and councils, including the University of Cape Coast, the National Council for Women and Development, and the Girl Guides, where she served as Commissioner. She was also the first Chair of the National Commission on Children, a founding member and first President of HelpAge Ghana, among many other roles. In recognition of Efua Sutherland's²⁸ remarkable contributions to children, the arts, and the advancement of women, Alberta championed the naming of Sutherland Park in her honor. Endlessly creative and forward-thinking, she was renowned for her practical ideas that made teaching and learning lively and accessible, while empowering the elderly to grow old gracefully.

Conversion

At that time, Episcopal Methodism was mainly concentrated in the Western and Central Regions and parts of the Ga Mashie areas of Accra in the Greater Accra Region of Ghana. Mrs. Edith Randall²⁹ was the first female Episcopal Methodist missionary (AME Zion) among other Sierra Leonean missionaries who came to Ghana for missions, education, and church planting. She was an itinerant missionary and Alberta often accompanied her on her missionary journeys, carrying her Bible and hymn book. Through her close association with Mrs. Randall, she learned to read, study, and memorize the Bible, and to have personal morning devotions or quiet time every day. Mrs. Randall, who had three children—two daughters and a son—engaged in missionary work together with her family.

The date of Alberta's conversion is unknown.³⁰ Throughout her school and college years, Alberta lived with her aunt. She participated in evangelistic meetings,

²⁷ This college was affiliated with the University of Aberdeen in Scotland.

²⁸ Efua Theodora Sutherland was a Ghanaian playwright, dramatist, children's author, poet, child advocate, educationalist, researcher, and cultural activist. Her works include the plays *Foriwa*, *Edufa*, and *The Marriage of Anansewa*. She presided over Ghana's ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (the first country to do so) and chaired the National Commission on Children from 1983 to 1990, a period that marked the most vigorous and comprehensive child advocacy on a national scale in the history of Ghana.

²⁹ Mrs. Randall's sister, a Sierra Leonean, was married to Alberta's father, Mr. Addo. She was Alberta's step aunt. Mrs. Randall came to visit her sister and saw Alberta and liked her spirit of service. She asked permission from her father if she could take her along on her ministry trips. He agreed. She took Alberta to Sierra Leone, Sekondi and wherever she was doing ministry.

³⁰ Regarding her conversion: It is believed that through her missionary journeying with Mrs.

itinerant preaching, and one-on-one witnessing sessions with Mrs. Randall in Sierra Leone and in the Sekondi-Takoradi area and surrounding villages. She was also actively involved in the Methodist Church as a chorister and a participant in Bible study groups.

Mama Randall, as she was affectionately called, worked with other Sierra Leonian missionaries of the Methodist Episcopal Church and other denominations, their spouses, and some indigenous people to establish educational institutions, clinics, infirmaries, and other initiatives to put the Gospel into practice. They included people like Rev. Roberts, O'Reilly, Wade, Sawyerr, and others. These educators and ministers used their institutions, especially the schools, to advance the Gospel in Accra, Kumasi, Sekondi, Cape Coast, Angloga, and other towns along the coast.³¹

Alberta was a strict disciplinarian and perfectionist to a fault, trained by Mrs. Randall in the rigorous "Saalone" training for which Sierra Leoneans of the period were well known as well as in the ethos of the Basel Mission.³² From her husband's family, peers, workers, and the wider community, she earned the title "Madam" because she was very strict and stern. She insisted on godly discipline, cleanliness, and hard work from everyone around her, including her in-laws, demanding perfection to such a degree that she was often unpopular with people.

Alberta had a remarkable ability to help people recognize their mistakes and guide them toward correction.³³ She discouraged people from committing to tasks beyond their capacity. Yet she firmly believed that if someone chose to take on a responsibility, they should pursue it with great diligence. She did not tolerate mediocrity. At times she was choleric and was known to demote headmistresses and headmasters for not doing their work. She could appear unannounced at a school or workplace, and if you had not completed your duties or properly prepared your lesson notes, she would demote you.

Nevertheless, Alberta was humble and honest. She related freely with everyone and treated each person with genuine respect.³⁴ She lived by the principle "grow with

Randall, she came to believe and accept Jesus as her Lord and Savior. She learned how to evangelize from her, as an itinerant evangelist. This made her join the Methodist choir and several groups in the church. She knew all the Methodist hymns and she referred to the Bible in everything. She faithfully observed her devotion daily until her death. (Interview with Amerley Anekai Ollenu, daughter of Alberta on August 14, 2024.)

³¹ They established primary and secondary schools, including Accra High School (Rev. Roberts), O'Reilly Senior High School (Rev. O'Reilly), Odorgonno (OWASS) Senior High School (Rev. Roberts, Rev. O'Reilly), and Christian Methodist Secondary School (Rev. Gorden Nii Akwei Quaye, a Ghanaian), all in Accra, as well as Zion College in Anloga, among others. Mama Randall's son and a son of Rev. Roberts established Kumasi Medical Center in Kumasi, which is still operational today.

³² The term "Saalone" is a colloquial rendering of "Sierra Leone."

³³ For example, women's fellowship meetings were somewhat tense because if the women were chatting instead of focusing, she would sternly call them to order, saying, "We are here to worship God, and you people are sitting there misbehaving." Her words immediately commanded attention and everyone would become attentive and engaged.

³⁴ She did not tolerate men looking down on women and belittling them.

your friends,” faithfully nurturing relationships through regular visits and thoughtful calls. She believed that any sacrifice a person made so others might experience God’s love was true mission. She insisted that many possessions are unnecessary in themselves, yet they can become instruments of blessing when shared with others. Comfort, she cautioned, is not a right earned by qualification but a trust given so that we might help make others comfortable. Above all, she reminded people that status does not make one superior or better than others.

Church

Alberta was a devout Christian and a committed Methodist. She worshipped faithfully at Wesley Methodist Cathedral in Sekondi and later at Accra Ridge Church after relocating to Accra for work, as it was near her home on 6th Avenue in the Ridge area.³⁵ She served the church in many practical and spiritual ways. She cleaned the chalice, washed altar tablecloths, and served on the flower arrangement and church decoration team. In addition, she was a lay reader and chorister, and a member of the Ridge Hospital³⁶ ministry team where she engaged in prayer, evangelism, and pastoral ministry among patients and staff.

Alberta was a longtime member of the church and played a vital role in sustaining its physical infrastructure, worship life, and governance. She served on several church committees and was widely respected for her extensive knowledge of church history, including the Ridge Church, the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, and the broader Methodist tradition in Ghana. Alberta was instrumental in designing church anniversary attire, selecting hymns and biblical readings for services, and in organizing church bazaars, picnics, sponsored walks, and anniversary celebrations.

Alberta was a founding member of the Women’s Fellowship and played a pivotal role in the group’s name change from the “Ladies Group” to the “Women’s Fellowship”—a change that was not without controversy. The shift broadened membership by allowing all women to participate, regardless of age or marital status. She also contributed significantly to the selection of the fellowship’s uniforms, ensuring that members were visibly identifiable. During the Women’s Week celebration, the women led the entire church program, reading Scripture and preaching the gospel. As part of the week’s activities, they visited the school for the blind and the deaf and the psychiatric hospital once a month.³⁷

³⁵ The Accra Ridge Church is an international, inter-denominational, English-Speaking church started by working expatriates from the low Anglican, Presbyterian, and Methodist churches who met together once a week, for an hour for Bible Study, worship, and fellowship. They met on Sunday evenings for worship.

³⁶ The Ridge Hospital was formally called the European Hospital, established in 1928, for only European expatriates in Ghana.

³⁷ Alberta was always anxious as this time approached. She would say in her serious, insistent tone, “Let’s go. We are going there. We are taking something to them.” Everyone brought something to share with the patients, especially those in the men’s ward. Each month, she

Alberta possessed an intimate knowledge of the Bible and held its teachings in the highest regard. Whenever an event echoed a biblical narrative or moral lesson, she would readily recount the relevant story from the Bible. If she sensed that someone was heading in the wrong direction, she offered firm yet loving counsel, often saying, “Do this; don’t do that.”³⁸ She delighted in discussing Scripture with others, seeking to deepen their understanding and faith. Beyond this, she took time to explain church sermons to those who had not fully grasped them, encouraging listeners to reflect on the Scriptures and to examine their own lives in light of biblical teaching.

Alberta knew by heart the Methodist hymns and Anglican canticles in both English and Mfantse, as well as Highlife and patriotic songs. Even after losing her sight at ninety after multiple eye surgeries, she continued to sing Methodist and Anglican hymns and canticles effortlessly. In her time, the church in Ghana was united, with little emphasis on denominational divisions. In her home, it was a firm, non-negotiable rule that her children attend church every Sunday morning and participate faithfully in weekly family devotions until they came of age. She diligently guided her children in the ways of the Lord. Remarkably, even at ninety years old and with failing eyesight, she continued to attend church regularly and occasionally preached.

Professional Life and Achievements

Alberta was a home scientist and Home Science examiner who worked with the Ministry of Education and eventually became President of the Ghana Home Science Association. During her tenure, the University of Ghana collaborated closely with Cornell University in the U.S.A. to develop the Winneba Specialist Training School as a certified training platform. This initiative became one of Alberta’s key projects while she served as Director of Programs for Home Economics at the Ministry of Education before her marriage to Justice Nii Amaa Ollennu. Through this program, women such as Mrs. Jane Kwaku and Mrs. Edith Francois had the privilege of being mentored by Alberta.

Alberta was among the founding members of the Home Economics Association in 1965 and was part of the group that changed “Domestic Science” to “Home Economics.” She had an unwavering vision and advocated with a commanding voice. As an Education Officer, she served as a policy-guiding instructor, advising staff at Winneba on curriculum development and shaping the content of Home Economics education. She later became a school inspector, ensuring that teachers implemented the syllabus effectively and coordinating professional development for Home Economics educators. While Home Economics was primarily studied by women in her era, it is now embraced by students of all genders. During her time, she and other pioneering women challenged societal norms, advocating for the advancement of

reminded the women again and again of their responsibility to visit the psychiatric hospital. She insisted that this was the Women’s Fellowship’s concrete contribution to the church’s life and mission.

³⁸ Interview with Joyce Christiana Nana Oye Koranteng on November 3, 2024.

women's and children's work and championing initiatives such as immunization programs.³⁹ Through her mentorship, her students went on to establish the Home Economics department at Winneba Specialist Training College.

Alberta was an active member of the National Council of Women's Development. During her tenure, women from other African countries often came to learn from her and her team. They taught practical skills such as hairstyling and soapmaking and introduced women to shea butter, bringing this knowledge to communities in Kenya and Lesotho. The impact of their work was long-lasting. Alberta also established the Home Science and Science Resource Centers for schools. Whenever she sponsored someone for a course or training program abroad, she required that they return home to train others. Through her resource centers, countless women received training and opportunities that empowered them to transform their communities. In addition, she championed the establishment of the Chorkor Smokers, promoting techniques that reduced smoke exposure and minimized occupational hazards, thereby lowering the cancer risk associated with traditional fish smoking.

Through the National Commission on Women and Children, Alberta served extensively in churches, communities, and schools, championing women's advancement and education. She led the establishment of the Girl Child Unit to expand girls' access to schooling and founded the country's first residential and day children's camps, creating spaces for socialization and shared learning among children from local and distant communities. Following her participation in the 1970 Women's Conference in Addis Ababa, she launched additional initiatives to empower women nationwide. In recognition of her contributions, the Home Economics Association hosted a world congress in her honor in Ghana in 2000. Her legacy was also commemorated with her image on Ghanaian postage stamps, and she received a prestigious award from former President John Agyekum Kufuor.⁴⁰

Work after Retirement

When Alberta retired from active service, she accepted an invitation to serve as president of HelpAge Ghana, though she was not the organization's founder. HelpAge Ghana was registered on December 30, 1989, with the mission of supporting the

³⁹ One notable story recounts her encounter with a professor who questioned the value of introducing Home Economics at the university, asking, "Are they coming to cook in the university?" Alberta firmly clarified that Home Economics, later termed Home Science, was far more than cooking. She explained that it encompassed the whole of life: buildings, human ecology, health, and well-being, with cooking as just one aspect. Its scope included housewifery, laundry, housing, child and book development, psychology, personality, sociology, and family life.

⁴⁰ Former President John Agyekum Kuffour awarded her with Order of the Volta –Officer to Mrs. Alberta Ollenu, HelpAge Ghana, Contribution to Philanthropy on July 3, 2008.

aged.⁴¹ Using the Land Rover as their office, the team traveled from community to community, raising awareness of the challenges older people face, educating the public about HelpAge Ghana, and encouraging community members to support the elderly.

Alberta ensured the elderly were well cared for. She invited HelpAge Ghana to establish a day care center at Osu Commercial Bank, where the elderly were actively engaged in games such as Ludu, Oware, and bead-making. She sought support from all quarters, receiving assistance from friends and numerous churches, and always ensured the elderly felt comfortable at the HelpAge Ghana Day Center. One of her primary concerns was the sustainability of HelpAge Ghana.⁴² Alberta continued her work diligently until her health began to decline. She faced persistent eye problems and underwent multiple eye operations abroad, but her vision could not be restored.

In addition, Alberta co-authored two books and several papers focusing on women, the elderly, and home science. The books include *Recipes of Ghana* (co-authored with A.A. Addo, J. Asare, et al.) and *Single Parenting* (co-authored with Fenella Avokey), the latter of which remains in print today.

Death

Alberta had a strong premonition of her death. At nearly a hundred years old, she had grown frail and often lamented in Ga, “*e tor me; e tor me, sane ma ya*” (“I’m tired, I’m tired, I need to go”), expressing her readiness to depart. Two weeks before her death, she asked her family not to read her tributes or biography, believing that such accounts reflected only how others saw her. She had already written her wishes for the court, the Church, and her family. She requested to be buried two weeks after her death. Thoughtful to the very end, she baked fruitcakes to be served at her funeral and carefully selected the hymns to be sung. Fond of hymns and canticles, she specifically asked Mrs. Edith Francois to sing “New Jerusalem” at her funeral—a request that Mrs. Francois honored.⁴³

Alberta loved flowers and tended a beautiful garden filled with roses, orchids, and many other beautiful plants.⁴⁴ Before she died, Alberta left a note asking Joyce

⁴¹ Its first resources were a typewriter and a Land Rover donated by Rowdie Brownie, which initially served as the organization’s mobile office. Brownie remained involved for about two years.

⁴² Ebenezer Sossey (PhD) pledged his unwavering support, promising never to disassociate from or abandon the organization, regardless of circumstances. He was the former CEO of HelpAge Ghana following the retirement of Mama Alberta. The year 2025 marks thirty years since joining the organization in June 1995. He stepped down as Director in 2022, and now serves as a volunteer, a promise he made to Mama Alberta, who instilled in him the great life value that blessings or rewards are not always measured in financial term.

⁴³ Interview with Mrs. Edith Francois on January 14, 2025.

⁴⁴ Occasionally, Joyce Christina would bring her a bouquet of flowers. On one such occasion, Alberta said to Joyce, “I know it is beautiful, but I cannot see.” Joyce exclaimed, “Eii, Mama! It’s chrysanthemum.” (Interview with Joyce Christiana Nana Oye Koranteng on November 3, 2024.)

Christina to arrange her flowers after her death. She died peacefully on February 26, 2017, at the Social Security and National Insurance Trust (SSNIT) Hospital, where she had been admitted for two weeks, at the age of 99. She was laid to rest at Awudome Cemetery.

Conclusion

Alberta Ollennu's life stands as a compelling testament to disciplined service, principled leadership, and lived Christian faith. Through her pioneering work in Home Economics, her unwavering commitment to church and community, and her advocacy for women, children, and the elderly, she reshaped institutions and transformed countless lives. Even in old age and physical decline, she remained devoted to worship, mentorship, and practical compassion. Her legacy endures not only in the policies she established, the institutions she strengthened, and the honors she received, but also in the values she instilled: excellence, humility, generosity, and faith expressed through action. In every sense, Alberta lived her conviction that true mission is to make life more humane so that others may experience the love of God.

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This biography, received in February 2026, was written by Penuel Kpadenou Nkoulete who attended the 2024 Ghana Women's Biography workshop in Akropong, Ghana. She is an experienced Sunday School Educator with a solid foundation in Christian values and a strong commitment to fostering children's spiritual growth. With extensive experience in both education and ministry, she has developed expertise in working with children and educators and in creating environments that support learning and faith development.

Faith, Education, and Leadership: The Life and Legacy of Christiana Aba Techie–Menson (1948-2022)

By Isaac Woode

Christina Aba Techie-Menson's life and remarkable legacy stand as an exemplary model for young people. Her unwavering commitment to the growth of the Church left an indelible mark on the Anglican Church of Ghana, particularly within the Cape Coast Diocese. As a seasoned educationist, Christiana made significant contributions to her community. She profoundly influenced the lives of many young people, some of whom went on to become prominent figures in society.⁴⁵

Birth and Early Life

Christina was born on August 12, 1948, at Ajumako in Ghana's Central Region to Mr. and Mrs. Enos. Affectionately called *Kakraba* ("the little one") by her parents, she was the last-born of eight children. She was named after her father's aunt, Adjoa Akofoa, a woman remembered for her intelligence, respectfulness, and hard work—qualities her grandchildren sought to emulate. At the age of six, Christina was still breastfeeding, despite being physically well developed and having no disability or developmental challenges. This concerned her aunt, Agnes Ekuia Atta Seibu Abban, who decided to intervene. She offered to take Christina from her parents in Ejumako to Bobikuma, where she would raise her.

Ekuia cared for her exceptionally well and promised to support her education through secondary school and university. Christina enjoyed life so much with her aunt that whenever she visited her parents in Ejumako, she refused to stay with them even for a single night. She continued to live with Aunt Ekuia in Bobikuma until early 1960, when her aunt—who had trained as a teacher at Wesley College—married Mr. Amissah, also a teacher, and relocated to Bogoso in the Western Region to join him.

Unknown to Ekuia, her husband Amissah already had a wife in Bogoso. He had never mentioned this to her because she was supporting him financially through his university education. In January 1960, Ekuia became seriously ill and died in April. Christina was then left under the care of Amissah and his other wife, Oforiwaa, who treated her harshly. Oforiwaa was determined to prevent Christina from attending secondary school or university. When it came time to register for the common entrance examination, Mr. Amissah had travelled but left money for Oforiwaa to pay Christina's registration fees. However, she neither paid the fees nor informed Christina about the money. As a result, Christina had to use the proceeds from selling bread that Oforiwaa had baked and sent her to sell to cover her exam registration. This act got

⁴⁵ Peter Burnell, The Status of the Liberal Arts in *St. Augustine's Confessions*, *Augustinian Studies* 25, no. 1(1994):13-30, <https://doi.org/10.5840/augstudies19942512>

her into serious trouble because she was accused of taking the bread money.

After the Common Entrance Exams, Christina returned to Ejumako to await her results. When a long time passed without any news, her uncles began inquiring and discovered that her aunt Oforiwaa had chosen not to release the results. Although Christina had been offered admission to Mfantsiman Girls' School, no one had informed her, and the place had already been given to someone else. Acting quickly, her uncle Wilson secured her admission to Swedru Secondary School. Meanwhile, her mother and other family members hurriedly found some cloth to make her school uniforms and other clothes.

Education

Christina received her primary education from 1954 to 1959 at Lower Bobikuma Methodist School in Ghana, where she lived with her aunt, Agnes Seibu Abban. Christina completed primary school in five years instead of the usual six. She then continued her middle school education at Ajumako Methodist Middle School in the Central Region before transferring to Berekum Catholic Mixed Middle School, where she stayed with her aunt's husband.

In 1962, Christina sat for the Common Entrance Examination and gained admission to Swedru Secondary School on a full government scholarship. She distinguished herself both academically and in the leadership roles she held. She later transferred to Aggrey Memorial Senior High School, also in the Central Region. Despite the challenges she faced, she excelled academically, played hockey, and served as the girls' prefect. At Swedru Secondary School, she faced numerous health challenges. She fell ill so frequently that some people even accused her uncle Amissah of causing her sickness. She also suffered from eye problems, which required surgery. During this time, her uncle stopped paying her school fees, so her brother, Joseph Enos, stepped in to cover the costs for the remainder of her education until she reached university.

In 1962, Christina sat for the Common Entrance Examination and earned admission to Swedru Secondary School on a full government scholarship. She distinguished herself both academically and through her leadership roles. While at Swedru Secondary School, Christina encountered numerous health issues. She fell ill so frequently that some even suspected her uncle Amissah of causing her sickness. She also experienced eye problems that required surgery. During this period, her uncle ceased paying her school fees, prompting her brother, Joseph Enos, to cover the costs for the remainder of her education until she reached university. She later transferred to Aggrey Memorial Senior High School, also in the Central Region. Despite the challenges she faced, she excelled academically, played hockey, and served as the girls' prefect.

Christina pursued her university education at the University of Ghana, Legon, where she studied Religious Studies. She continued to demonstrate academic excellence and active participation in extracurricular activities. Notably, she was the first—and the only—one among her siblings to complete both secondary and

university education.

Marriage and Family Life

Christina married Joseph Ernest Techie-Menson on August 12, 1978, at Christ the King Anglican Church (now Christ Church Cathedral) in Cape Coast, Ghana. The couple had four children: Rebecca, Samuel, Joseph, and Josiah. In addition to raising her own children, Christina also cared for several nephews and nieces, as well as the children of some of her friends. Their firstborn, Rebecca, faced serious health challenges, which compelled Christina to move from one hospital to another over many years in search of medical care. After nearly two decades of uncertainty, Rebecca was finally diagnosed in 1994 at Korle Bu Teaching Hospital with a congenital heart defect—a hole in the heart—shortly after the establishment of the Cardiothoracic Centre.

Rebecca required open-heart surgery, which at the time cost \$5,565.⁴⁶ This posed a significant financial burden for the family, as both parents were teachers with limited means. With no alternative, they appealed to various institutions, organizations, and individuals for financial assistance. The family reached a point where they had to move from church to church soliciting funds to support the surgery.⁴⁷ Through the generosity of several organizations, institutions, and individuals, the required funds were eventually raised. The surgery was successfully performed on June 25, 1995.

Church Affiliation

Christina was baptized into the Methodist Christian faith at Besease in Ghana's Central Region in July 1949 and was later confirmed in 1966. Christina made significant contributions to the Methodist Church during her years of active membership. Following her marriage in 1978, she joined the Anglican Church, where she remained for the rest of her life, faithfully supporting the Anglican Communion's vision. This vision, as articulated by the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, understands the Anglican Communion as a global family of churches, united in diversity and committed to sharing the love of Christ through worship, mission, and service to the world.⁴⁸

Seasoned Educationist

⁴⁶ In June 1995, USD 5,565 was equivalent to approximately 5,064,280 old Ghanaian cedis. The average exchange rate in 1995 was 1,449.28 old cedis (GHC) per US dollar.

⁴⁷ Rt.Rev. Victor Reginald Atta-Baffoe (Diocesan Bishop, Anglican Diocese of Cape Coast), interview by author, November 2024, Cape Coast, Digital Recording.

⁴⁸ Justin Welby, The Vision of the Anglican Communion News Service. March 15, 2020. <https://www.anglicannews.org>

Christina was widely known for her dedication and outstanding contribution to education in Cape Coast and beyond. A seasoned educationist, she began her teaching career after obtaining her first degree in 1973, when she was posted to Holy Child School to teach Religious Studies to both the junior and sixth forms.⁴⁹ She discharged her duties with distinction and ensured that her students found her lessons engaging and meaningful.

In recognition of her superb work, Christina was appointed House Mistress, a role in which she endeared herself to students while firmly upholding discipline. In 1985, she was further appointed Head of the General Arts Department, a position she held until her transfer to Adisadel College, also in Cape Coast. On September 1, 1986, she began teaching Religious Studies at Adisadel College, where she was noted for her punctuality, diligence, and integrity.⁵⁰

Through her hard work and unwavering commitment to education, Christina was appointed Headmistress of the Academy of Christ the King Senior High School in 1998. This appointment followed the Ghana Education Service's takeover of the school from the Anglican Church, which transformed it into a public secondary institution. She was consequently offered the position of the school's first head under its new public administration.

Christina joined the Academy of Christ the King on 15 January 1998 as headmistress. She was a consummate educationist—poised, disciplined, and widely respected—who served as an exemplary role model for both staff and students. Under her leadership, she introduced new academic programs and sporting activities that enabled the school to excel consistently. Drawing on her strong administrative, collaborative, and persuasive skills, she transformed the institution into one of the recognized schools in Cape Coast.

However, upon assuming leadership in 1998, she faced significant challenges. These included recruiting qualified teachers and support staff and securing the resources necessary to meet the expected standards. The school's location in the center of Cape Coast, its very limited space for expansion, and its lack of accommodation for both students and staff intensified these difficulties. Consequently, attracting high-quality students and teachers proved particularly demanding. Christina retired from the same school in 2008. Upon her retirement, she was invited by the then Dean, Victor Atta Baffoe, to join St. Nicholas Seminary in Cape Coast as the Registrar. Christina accepted the appointment and made herself available for the task. In a phone conversation with the Rt. Rev. Victor Reginald Atta Baffoe:

“Hello! Is that Auntie Christie?”

“Yes please”

“Dean Victor and I are calling you from Lambeth conference and

⁴⁹ H.O.A McWilliam and M.A. Kwamena-Poh, *The development of Education in Ghana* (London: Longman, 1975).

⁵⁰ National Education Association. “What makes a great teacher?” accessed October 2024, <https://www.nea.org>

wish to kindly request if you will consider taking up a part-time appointment as the registrar of the St. Nicholas Seminary”
“Oh! I was hoping to enjoy a quiet retirement but at this request, I will not even have to think about it. Please tell Dean Victor that I accept and I will serve.”⁵¹

Christina gladly accepted the position and became the first-ever registrar of St. Nicholas Seminary in October 2008. She served as a mother, teacher, and counsellor to all the clergy at the seminary.⁵² In an interview, Bishop Reginald Atta Baffoe stated that at times when some students and staff needed guidance, she stood in the gap to counsel them. According to Bishop Baffoe, Christina worked wholeheartedly and contributed significantly to the seminary’s growth. When she arrived, the seminary had about twenty-five students; by the time of her retirement, the student population had doubled to fifty. Aba Techie–Menson retired from the seminary on August 1, 2020, at the age of seventy-two.

Christina the Philanthropist

Christina was remarkable for her charitable spirit and humble lifestyle. Her family and many others shared stories that illustrated her generosity. Her daughter, Rebecca, noted that although Christina did not have much money, she shared everything she had with others. Even when she lacked resources, she sought help from those who could support the needy. She was a kind and compassionate woman, offering assistance not only financially but also physically and emotionally. She helped both individuals and churches. Family members and organizations alike described her as a cheerful giver, someone who could not bear to see others suffer and who wished for everyone’s prosperity.

Notably, at St. Nicholas Seminary, Christina sometimes received money from her children, which she used to provide food for the seminarians and pay the staff.⁵³ In an interview, Rev. Father Stephen Obeng testified that while he was still a seminary student, Christina regularly gave him monthly stipends—and continued to do so even after he graduated and was ordained as a priest.⁵⁴ According to her funeral brochure, the Anglican Diocese of Cape Coast testified that Christina faithfully served her neighbors at the Cathedral Church, Cape Coast, and supported the clergy’s pastoral ministry.

She championed significant donations to the church and cared deeply for the

⁵¹ Rt.Rev. Victor Reginald Atta–Baffoe (Diocesan Bishop, Anglican Diocese of Cape Coast), interview by author, November 2024, Cape Coast, Digital Recording.

⁵² Rt.Rev. Victor Reginald Atta–Baffoe (Diocesan Bishop, Anglican Diocese of Cape Coast), interviewed by Isaac Woode. November, 2024, Cape Coast, Digital Recording.

⁵³ Rt.Rev. Victor Reginald Atta–Baffoe (Diocesan Bishop, Anglican Diocese of Cape Coast), interview by author, November 2024, Cape Coast, Digital Recording.

⁵⁴ Rev. Fr. Stephen Obeng (Priest), interview by author, October 2024, Cape Coast. Digital Recording.

welfare of students and faculty at St. Nicholas Seminary. Her daughter recalled that Christina willingly offered her house to Loyalty House Chapel International, providing a place of worship and church services for over eight years when the congregation needed a venue. She continued to make substantial contributions, helping the church to grow. Christina herself affirmed, “I support anything concerning the growth of the church.”⁵⁵

While serving as headmistress at the Academy of Christ the King, Christina sought to retain all self-motivated national service personnel. She worked closely with the Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) to provide a modest stipend to newly recruited teachers whose salaries had not yet been formalized, aiming to motivate them to remain at their posts and ensure that the school’s students had a full complement of teachers.

Christina as a Counsellor

Christina was a devoted mother and a highly skilled counsellor, whose abilities seemed innate. As a mother, she guided her children, nurturing them into responsible and charitable members of their community. Her counselling extended beyond her family, positively impacting many lives. Nearly all those interviewed attested that, under Christina’s guidance, they were able to make sound, meaningful decisions in life.

One of Christina’s counselling beneficiaries, Bright Edem Droefenu, stated that Christina became his counsellor, guiding him on several matters. He recalled that when his father passed away, Christina showed him motherly care and helped him regain his footing. He said, “At a point in time when I experienced a difficult situation in my family life, Aunt Aba was instrumental in getting things settled, and I will always be grateful to you, Mommy.”⁵⁶

According to her funeral brochure, in the 1980s, while teaching at Adisadel College, she counseled students facing difficult issues, earning high praise from many parents. However, some parents questioned her counseling abilities.

Conclusion

On July 3, 2022, Christina collapsed during a church service and was rushed to Cape Coast Teaching Hospital. Her family fervently prayed for her recovery, but tragically, the unexpected occurred. On July 8, 2022, at the Bank Hospital in Accra, Ghana, Christiana Aba Techie–Menson died. She was later laid to rest in Cape Coast. Christina Aba Techie–Menson stands as a true inspiration to all who aspire to make a meaningful and lasting impact on the world. Through her tireless dedication and visionary leadership, she made significant contributions to her community, fostering growth, empowerment, and opportunities for those around her. Beyond her tangible

⁵⁵ Rebecca Techie – Menson (Daughter), interviewed by author, October 2024, Cape Coast, Digital Recording.

⁵⁶ Mr. Bright Edem Droefenu (Forster son), interview by author, November, 2024, Cape Coast, Digital Recording.

achievements, Christina profoundly influenced the lives of countless young people, mentoring and guiding them toward realizing their potential. Her remarkable legacy endures as an exemplary model of service, resilience, and commitment.

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This article, submitted in February 2025, was researched and written by Isaac Woode, a Master of Philosophy candidate in Arts Education at the University of Cape Coast, with research interests in Christian Ethics and the pedagogy of religious and moral education. He holds a Bachelor's degree in Religion and Human Values from the University of Cape Coast. Currently, he serves as a research and teaching assistant in the Department of Arts Education at the university.

“Greater Love Has No Woman”: In Recognition of Mercy Yaa Dakwaa Yamoah (1912 – 2005)

By Joyce Boham

Mercy Dakwaa Yamoah dedicated her life to the church and the nation’s service and growth, exemplifying a legacy of sacrifice, resilience, and faithful leadership. Through her work, she laid the foundation for the Methodist Ministers' Wives Association in Ghana, mentoring and guiding pastors’ wives to serve effectively in their communities. Coming from a context that overlooked women's enormous contributions to mission, she played an influential role in the development of Methodism in Ghana, ensuring that women’s contributions to church life were recognized and valued. Through her example, Mercy Dakwaa Yamoah inspired generations to embrace service, leadership, and dedication, leaving an enduring impact on the church that is still felt today.⁵⁷

Early life

Mercy Yaa Dakwaa Yamoah (née Turkson) was born on April 25, 1912, in Adua Akuraa near Asamankese in Ghana’s Eastern Region. She belonged to the royal Asenie Abusua of Amakom and Dompooase and was affectionately called “Mama” by her community and “Dakwaa” by her siblings. Dakwaa was baptized into the Presbyterian faith by Basel missionaries in Asamankese. At the time, new converts were often relocated to mission settlements like *Buronikrom*⁵⁸ to separate them from traditional religious influences. Her father, Kwesi Ampofo Amanano, was a rubber tapper who settled in Asamankese where he met and married her mother, Adwoa Fenyiwa.

Fenyiwa, lived in the mission settlement but was unable to persuade her husband Ampofo to convert. Ampofo remained devoted to his ancestral beliefs. Eventually, Ampofo moved to Abease with friends, where he later died following a tragic accident. Fenyiwa, left widowed, subsequently succumbed to the Spanish influenza. Their deaths left the children orphaned, with Dakwaa, as the youngest, being the most vulnerable. As a result, Dakwaa was raised by her maternal uncle, John Edmund Turkson (alias Kofi Abowonda), who gave her his surname to protect her identity. As a result of her uncle's adoption, she was officially named Mercy Yaa Dakwaa Turkson. She carried this

⁵⁷ Dakwaa’s story illuminates her biography, family life, missionary engagement, and commitment to community support, as recounted in a letter she wrote to her grandchildren and published in *Her-Stories: Hidden Histories of Women of Faith in Africa*, edited by Isabel Apawo Phiri, Betty Govinden, and Sarojini Nadar (Cluster Publications, South Africa, 2002), 409–426. This article builds upon that letter by incorporating interviews conducted with her daughter, niece, and grandchild.

⁵⁸ This literally translates to English as the “White people’s town.” It has the sense of a Salem that missionaries operated.

name for the first 20 years of her life.

Upbringing and Marriage life

Because her uncle John Edmund Turkson valued education, he sent her to Wesley Girls' School in Cape Coast. At a time when formal education for girls was still uncommon, Dakwaa belonged to the school's pioneering cohort and came under the care of Sister Evelyn Bellamy, a Wesleyan Deaconess. She completed Standard Seven and obtained the Junior Cambridge Certificate in 1930. Although Dakwaa aspired to become a teacher, her uncles prioritized marriage over further education. Consequently, she was encouraged to attend a finishing school⁵⁹ in Accra, run by Mrs. Delphena Quaye, where she was trained in sewing and homemaking skills to prepare her for marriage.

During Dakwaa's apprenticeship at the finishing school, Mr. Isaiah Yamoah sought her hand in marriage on behalf of his son, Charles Kwaw Yamoah (C. K. Yamoah), a teacher. Although her uncle initially objected, the matter was resolved following the intervention of a Methodist catechist, and the marriage was subsequently arranged. On December 31, 1932, Dakwaa married C. K. Yamoah under ordinance at the Presbyterian Church in Asamankese.⁶⁰ Her wedding was a grand event, marking her as one of the few daughters in her community to have a formal church wedding. She later moved with her husband to Agona Nyarkrom, accompanied by her young niece Cecilia Ama Tsiaba Ashmond who helped her settle into her new home.

Dakwaa's husband C. K. Yamoah had his primary education at Asamankese in 1914 but completed middle school (standard seven) at St. Mary's in Accra in 1923. In those days, there were very few middle schools, and only the best pupils could attend them. Many had to leave home to go to these few schools. After standard seven, his teaching career took him to Agona Nyakrom where he taught from 1924 to 1926. In 1927, Mr. Yamoah moved to Wesley College, Cape Coast for his four-year teacher training course. While working as a teacher, Yamoah drew on all his experiences to support the Methodist Church's Gold Coast (Ghana) ministry. As part of his work, Yamoah interpreted English sermons preached by missionaries into Mfantse, eventually receiving a call to full-time ministry. While he was in training, Dakwaa lived with her in-laws.

Dakwaa's eldest child, Mercy Amba Oduyoye, shares her mother's account of her birth. According to her, while her mother was heavily pregnant with her (their first

⁵⁹ In those days girls were sent to finishing school for life skills lessons. A place where you learn practical skills like sewing, baking, soap making etc.

⁶⁰ It was Dakwaa's uncle who insisted that she get married under the ordinance. However, the Methodist Church in Asamankese did not at the time have a minister in charge. Interestingly, the Methodist Church in Asamankese was established by Mr. Yamoah's parents. Since the Presbyterian Church was managed by the catechist, the wedding was organised by the Presbyterian Church to the joy of Turkson. Having her wedding gown sewn by Mrs. Quaye and being the only daughter to have been wedded, Dakwaa's wedding was the talk of town.

child), Mr. Isaiah Yamoah went to his farm with Dakwaa, refusing to leave her behind at home so that he would be close by if anything happened. True to her father-in-law's instincts, Dakwaa gave birth to Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Yamoah, on October 21, 1933, in a mud cottage on the cocoa farm at Adua Akuraa.

After Charles Yamoah's ordination, she joined him in ministry, balancing family life with the responsibilities of a minister's wife. Dakwaa accompanied her husband to Richmond College in London, where he pursued a Bachelor of Divinity at the University of London. During this time, she also attended Kingsmead College in Selly Oak, Birmingham, where she received training for her own ministry. Her journey reflected resilience, faith, and a commitment to both education and service, leaving a lasting impact on her family and community.

The Helper's Ministry

In 1941, Dakwaa began another phase of her working life as an Osofo Maame⁶¹ at Achinakrom and two years later, Effiduase in 1943. The couple arrived during the period when the government had begun a Mass Adult Education campaign in the Gold Coast. Dakwaa hit the ground running with the Mass Adult Education campaign, immersing herself in efforts to expand adult literacy in the region. At that time, she was pregnant with her fifth child and carrying her fourth on her back. Dakwaa went around establishing Women's Fellowship groups for the Methodist Church Gold Coast as part of her mandate as a minister's spouse in various towns, including Achinakrom, Effiduase, Asokore, Asianimpon, Kwadaso, Beposo, and Asuoho.⁶²

Dakwaa worked with the Wesleyan sister Irene Morrow, an Irish missionary, in the rural settlements around Lake Bosomtwe. Together with Mrs. Comfort Baiden and Sister Irene Morrow, they laid the groundwork that led to the establishment of the Women's Training Centre at Kwadaso. As an official of the Methodist Women Fellowship, Dakwaa participated in organizing and running training courses that included Bible lessons, catering, hospitality, and family life, for the young wives of church ministers and other laywomen. Irene provided her car and other logistical resources to support teaching in English, while Dakwaa devoted herself to the women with the Mfantse language.

Together, Dakwaa and Sister Irene formed a great team. The Methodist Church Ghana attested to this collaboration by recognizing the key role Dakwaa played in the acquisition of land for the building of the Kwadaso Methodist Women's Training

⁶¹ Osofo Maame is a minister's wife. Sometimes also called Mama. Being Osofo Maame meant being partners in ministry. While they were here Osofo C.K Yamoah, encouraged his wife Dakwaa to wear traditional Kaba and Slit in order fit in well or rather come to the level of the women in the village where they were. This she did.

⁶² For a new minister, transfers were to be expected until they progress to become a superintendent minister in charge of a district and are allowed to stay at a particular station for five years.

Center.⁶³ Their work on the Government-initiated Adult Education campaign, along with their achievements with various women's groups, motivated the district commissioner at the time, Samuel Anderson Aidoo, to allocate a building where the women hosted the trainees for their adult education lessons. Most of her missionary work was carried out in the Asante Region. While in Kumasi, Dakwaa started a women's fellowship in Suame, Pankrono, and other villages around Kumasi. Today, all these fellowships are vibrant in Kumasi.

On one of those "missionary journeys," she was afflicted with chickenpox. In those days, hospitals were uncommon so she was treated by a herbalist. Little did she know the treatment was not thorough. Many years later, she suffered from herpes, caused by a chickenpox virus that had lain hidden in her system all those years.

Dakwaa was a formidable presence and an indispensable partner to her husband. Although her contributions were largely behind the scenes, she played a crucial role in sustaining his work through consistent support, practical assistance, and personal encouragement. Her husband trusted her so much that he entrusted her with managing the family finances while he was away from home visiting out-stations. She sometimes worked side by side with her husband, accompanying him on visits to many Methodist centers in Ghana and abroad, including Achinakrom, Effiduase, Sunyani, Winneba, and the Sekondi-Takoradi Circuits, as well as institutions such as Trinity College in Kumasi and Osei Tutu Training College in Akropong, Ashanti. Nevertheless, she cherished her family above all things. On one of her planned trips abroad to the Holy Land with her husband, she had to abandon it to stay at the bedside of her second grandchild in the hospital.

When Dakwaa's husband was appointed President of the Conference of the Methodist Church Ghana from 1973 to 1977, Dakwaa took on the challenge of bringing all ministers' spouses together to equip them to support the Church's ministry. Her training in Christian Education and Family Life courses at Kingsmead College, Selly Oak, Birmingham, and the World Methodist Conference in Dublin enabled her to make an impact on women and society.

Missionary Work

While engaged in missionary work alongside her husband, Dakwaa carried her babies on her back, as most African women still do while working. Sometimes, she reluctantly accepted help from members of the fellowship because, to her, mothering was her first calling. She was responsible for teaching some of the Methodist missionaries and their wives about the customs, culture, and taboos of the Ashantis and other tribes, drawing on her vast experience. She was highly skilled in human relations and an effective teacher, taking time to explain and interpret issues whenever questions arose. She worked successfully in partnership with missionaries, particularly in their teaching work. Her exemplary character made her a respected role model for pastors' wives,

⁶³ Funeral Brochure of the burial and memorial service of the late, Mrs Mercy Dakwaa Yamoah, Compufin Ghana Ltd., 2005, p.16

and many ministers of the gospel requested her services to train their wives to emulate her example.

Dakwaa's husband's colleagues, who greatly admired her work with the deaconesses, proposed that her role as a "helper" be formalized as an established church position. Her husband, however, declined this suggestion. During the 1960s and 1970s, it was customary for a minister's wife to serve as president of the Women's Fellowship. Within this context, her ministry was expressed through supporting her husband and serving the church.

Dakwaa also hosted various politicians on the campaign trail in the 1950s due to her involvement in social work within the communities. She served the young and old, women and men, strangers, wayfarers, and sojourners as an important aspect of their service to the Lord. Mrs. Yamoah ran her non-paying guest house with her own children and her many wards as staff. During Rev. Yamoah's ministry, Dakwaa stood by him as wisdom was beside God from the beginning.⁶⁴

Dakwaa believed that marriage had ordained her for missionary work, so her children called her "The Collaborator." In fact, she believed she was a collaborator who worked in the background, whether introducing headscarves to a culture where they did not exist or teaching women who had no opportunity for schooling to read. Dakwaa did what she believed was right. Throughout her teaching life, Dakwaa stood firmly by her Akan lifestyle, ensuring that no missionary woman made her go against it or condemned her culture.

In 1953, Dakwaa experienced one of the most difficult seasons of her family life. She and her husband had to travel to England, leaving their children behind. In their absence, the children were divided among relatives for care. Amba, the eldest, who had just begun her first teaching post, took four of her younger sisters with her. The fifth and sixth children, Yaw Addo and Essie Forwa, went to live with Dakwaa's husband's elder brother, Papa John, in Akroso. Meanwhile, Essie Panyin, Effuah Kakraba, and Kweku remained in Asamankese under the care of Dakwaa's sister-in-law, the wife of Yamoah's brother, Uncle Benjamin.

Dakwaa the Home-Maker

As a minister's wife, Dakwaa had to be industrious to support her family. She earned money as a caterer, baking bread, kenkey, and pastries such as atsumo, donuts, rock buns, epetsi, ofam, boodoo, and tatre. She also knitted clothes, made toys to sell, and benefited from income from cocoa farms inherited from her family. However, Methodist Church regulations prohibited ministers' wives from engaging in paid work, restricting them to household duties and unpaid management of mission houses that also served as guesthouses for church members. To manage her responsibilities effectively, Dakwaa always kept a team of girls living with her, training them in housekeeping, homemaking, and literacy. Many of these girls, including her niece Ama

⁶⁴ Funeral Brochure of the burial and memorial service of the late, Mrs Mercy Dakwaa Yamoah, Compufin Ghana Ltd., 2005, p.16

Yeboah and church members such as Ama Konadu and Rebecca Asamoah, later became industrious women, with some excelling in trades like bread-making. She also mentored boys who grew into responsible men, teachers, and ministers. Dakwaa instilled discipline in everyone under her care and ensured a fair rotation of household duties so no one felt overburdened or privileged.

Dakwaa the Abrewa (The old woman)

After her husband retired from ministry in 1977, Dakwaa and her family settled in Asamankese, where they took up farming and cultivated various crops. Despite retirement, they remained devoted members of the Methodist Church, always attending services punctually. Her husband preached his final sermon in 1986 and died in 1987. Though she had nine children of her own, Dakwaa nurtured many more, building a large extended family. She remained close to her elder sister, Maame Akosua Esua, and instilled in her descendants a love for God's work.

In her later years, Dakwaa struggled with post-chickenpox herpes, which caused headaches and eye pain, yet her sharp mind and speech remained intact. At eighty-nine, she shared her life story at the 10th anniversary of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, which her daughter, Mercy Amba Oduyoye, founded. Although she never became a Bible teacher as she had hoped, she found fulfillment mentoring women's fellowships and girls' clubs. Living to ninety-four, she became a pillar of wisdom, deeply cherished by her grandchildren, who fondly called themselves her favorites. At her funeral, they testified, "There is no greater love than what Grandma showed every one of us."

Mercy Dakwaa Yamoah died on April 14, 2005. The life of Mercy Dakwaa Yamoah (née Turkson) epitomizes the words of Jesus in John 15:13: "Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friend." A narration that resonates with many women who helped develop the church. Her life is an example of pure, sacrificial love that intentionally seeks the highest good of others. The world often promotes selfish love, but like Jesus, who loved selflessly and taught His disciples to do the same, Dakwaa poured her life out for her fellow women. Her focus was on salvation, friendship, empowerment, and the development of women's worth.

Conclusion

Mercy Dakwaa Yamoah's ministry was expressed through supporting her husband and serving the church, including leadership within the Women's Fellowship. Her story reflects both the strength of women's agency in church life and the structural limitations that shaped their recognition. Her character and competence established her as a model for pastors' wives, leading many ministers to seek her guidance in preparing their spouses for ministry. Her service, devotion, and resilience remain vital in inspiring future generations. Her life thus reflects both the strength of women's agency in church life and the structural limitations that constrained formal recognition of their work.

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Lilian Norman (grandniece and caregiver). Interview by author, August 19, 2024, Abease Asamankese. Digital recording.

Mercy Amba Oduoye. Interview by author, August 25, 2024, East Airport, Accra. Digital recording.

This biography, received in February 2026, was written by Joyce Boham who took part in the Ghana Women's Biography workshop in Akropong in July 2024. Joyce served as the first Liaison Officer for the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians from 1999-2004 and was the immediate past coordinator of West Africa Chapter. Holding degrees in Development Policy and Ministry, she currently directs the Institute of Women in Religion and Culture at Trinity Theological Seminary, Accra. She is married with four children.

Book Excerpt

Dah, Ini Dorcas. *Women Do More Work than Men: Birifor Women as Change Agents in the Mission and Expansion of the Church in West Africa*. Wipf and Stock, 2018. P.188-204

6.3. Suzanna Chiportey Yirilo and her Impact on the Apostolic Church of Ghana

Suzanna Chiportey Yirilo, commonly known as Susie or Yirilo, is a Birifor woman living in Sawla, Northern Ghana. According to Afia,⁶⁵ Yirilo's senior sister, their father converted to Christianity in the Evangelical Church of Ghana (ECG) after their mother's death, because he did not have another wife to brew his *dāa* whenever he needed it to perform his rituals. As a result all the children converted along with him.⁶⁶ Afia recounts that among the siblings, Yirilo was very charismatic at a young age and they felt God was going to use her in His service.⁶⁷

Yirilo was born, in Kpangri, in 1977.⁶⁸ After she completed school in 1995 she married Mr. Chiportey in 1996 in Sawla and was working in a clinic. In 1998 the Apostolic Church posted Mathias Pelmetey to Sawla to open a new mission station there. When Pelmetey went to Sawla, he met with Yirilo and asked her to help him in the ministry, because "he noticed that Yirilo loved God and could work for Him."⁶⁹ Pelmetey invited Yirilo who agreed and joined him in the work to open a new mission station in Sawla. They started going around preaching the Good News to people until they "got a few converts" and started worshiping, in a classroom, in one of the schools.⁷⁰ Then, they organized "a crusade" and the Apostolic Church from Accra and Tamale sent some people to the North to support them. Pelmetey and Yirilo baptized the "new converts" and continued working.⁷¹ From Sawla town, Yirilo and Pelmetey worked together to open five other branches in the neighboring villages of Sawla. After that the church moved Pelmetey to Wa. Yirilo remained in Sawla still working for the Apostolic Church of Ghana. In 2013, she opened another branch in Kpangri.⁷² In all, she has been involved in opening seven Apostolic Churches in Northern Ghana. On 20 November 2013, Yirilo assisted the pastor of Kalba branch, Frank Kofi, to baptise thirty converts

⁶⁵ Madam Afia, interview, 7 November 2013, Tuna.

⁶⁶ Suzanna Chiportey Yirilo does not remember the year of her conversion, but she explains that she was not in class one when they all converted in the family with their father. However, she still remembers that she went to school at the age of seven, meaning she might have converted before she was seven.

⁶⁷ Afia, interview, 7 November 2013.

⁶⁸ Yirilo, interview, 8 November 2013, Sawla.

⁶⁹ Yirilo, interview, 8 November 2013.

⁷⁰ Yirilo, interview, 8 November 2013.

⁷¹ Yirilo notes that she was the only woman in the beginning, then five women converted after her. Today the number has grown to 30 women plus 15 men.

⁷² Yirilo goes from Sawla to Kpangri every Sunday to have church services and nurture her new church members.

(see Appendix Seven) in Kpangri and among them, was Tingan, a famous traditional priest, his two wives, eighteen of his children and other people from the same village (see photo 37 and 38).⁷³ Egbunu writes that, “At the point of conversion, the lifelong journey of discipleship begins with baptism as the initiatory rite.”⁷⁴ This statement is not true in all cases as some who have not been baptised for various reasons show their journey of discipleship. The significant point in Egbunu’s statement is related to the baptism as an initiatory rite. In Birifor thinking, baptism is very much an initiatory rite for Birifor who convert to Christianity. They relate Christian baptism with the *kvɔ-sofɔ* (bathing) in the Black Volta River during the *sɔr-ɪfɔ* initiation rite for it is an act of purification which affirms the completeness of the initiated Birifor.⁷⁵ This confers on the initiate a true Birifor identity and helps him embrace life as a Birifor. In the Ghana Birifor New Testament baptism is translated by “*so Nāaŋmɪn kvɔ*” (take the bath of God). Hence the importance for Yirilo to baptise the newly converted Christians in Kpangri to affirm their allegiance to Christ in joining the Christian community.

What emerges from Yirilo’s story, is that, first, she functions as an itinerant missionary to the people in Northern Ghana. As a woman, she is not restricted by how, traditionally, Birifor women are centered around home keeping and other minor activities. She rather took the opportunity that she thought God gave her. She joined Pelmetey to reach out not only to people around her who had not heard about Christ, but as an itinerant missionary, she walks considerable distances “to proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom.”⁷⁶ For instance, Kpangri, the branch she just opened in 2013, is around 45 kilometers from Sawla, where she lives.⁷⁷

A second aspect of her mission is related to the power to heal. In 2008, Yirilo related how Jesus appeared to her in a vision,

One day I had a call, and it was like a vision and I saw Christ coming and he called me Susie, this is the time for me to use you! When I came out to meet Christ I saw him coming down to meet me and he said: “I will use you to heal my people!” From there I started praying for people and they were getting healing. When I pray for cripples, the cripples will get up and start walking, and when I pray for the blind they will see. And from there I started the work. One day I prayed and God revealed to me that I should have a place and people will come and I will pray for them...⁷⁸

As a result, she opened a prayer camp that year, in obedience to God’s call. Pastor Frank Kofi ordained her as a Prophetess, the same year, to carry on with her special call. Yirilo described how she prayed for a number of people to help them with

⁷³ Observation, Kpangri, 20 November 2013.

⁷⁴ Egbunu, ‘To Teach, Baptise, and Nurture New Believers,’ p. 29.

⁷⁵ Kambou, *Histoire d’un Rite de passage*, pp. 364-367.

⁷⁶ Ross, ‘Introduction,’ p. iv.

⁷⁷ Sometimes, she walks to some villages where there is no access by public transport, to share the Good News with the people.

⁷⁸ Yirilo, interview, 8 November 2013.

various problems in their lives (see photo 39). For instance, Paul was a cripple boy for eight years and could not walk. His mother, who was tired⁷⁹ of caring for him, abandoned him to Yirilo and travelled down south to stay with her sister. Yirilo prayed for Paul, who started walking and now he goes to school (see photo 40).⁸⁰

In another case, Aramata Adams claimed that she was pregnant for two years and could not deliver. A friend advised her to go and see Yirilo for prayers. She went, and after Yirilo prayed for her, she delivered a healthy child.⁸¹ Janet Dabuoh also testified that she was first married in Kpéré (a village in Burkina Faso), but “could not get any child for four years.” Her marriage broke down, because of her inability to have a child. She remarried in Sawla, Northern Ghana, but after five years there was no child from that second marriage either. One day, a friend told her that Yirilo could pray for her and she would have children. So she went for prayers and became pregnant within less than a year. She gave birth to a child and was pregnant for a second time, while her first born was less than two years (see photo 41).⁸²

Mabel Sombuor from Nandom was bleeding during her pregnancy and went to the hospital several times, but they could not stop the bleeding. According to Sombuor, she met Yirilo one day in the hospital in Bole and told her about her situation. Yirilo laid her hand on her on the spot and prayed. Sombuor claimed that she stopped bleeding from that day and she delivered safely. Therefore, she went to introduce her child to Yirilo on 30 May 2015 (see photo 42).⁸³

Yirilo functions like Miliás Chimbalanga, J. P. Banda and W. J. Valera of the Apostolic Faith of Malawi whom Matthew Schoffeleers describes as having the powers of faith-healing and thus attracted many people in the 1980s, the majority being women.⁸⁴ Schoffeleers indicates that, “Those seeking to be cured, must however, be

⁷⁹ When Birifor say they are tired of caring for a sick person it means that they have taken the person through various sources of treatment, including visiting shrines to look for the spiritual cause behind the sickness.

⁸⁰ Paul and his mother, interview, 14 November 2013, Yirilo’s prayer camp. According to Paul’s mother when she abandoned him to Yirilo and went to the south, she decided after a long stay to go to the North and visit him. On the way to Yirilo’s house she saw Paul running to meet her. She turned her back to him, because she thought it was his ghost. But Paul called her ‘Mama’ and told her he was her son. She asked Paul what medicine Yirilo had applied on him to get him walking? Paul replied, “nothing, but calling God’s name on me.”

⁸¹ Aramata Adams, interview, 8 November 2013, Sawla.

⁸² Janet Dabuoh, interview, 14 November 2013, Sawla. I personally met Dabuoh carrying her baby on the back while she was expecting a second child. According to all these people who came to Yirilo and found help for their various problems, they would advise any of their friends they will meet with any difficulty to go to Yirilo for prayers, because they believe God can meet their needs.

⁸³ Observation at Yirilo’s home in Sawla, 30 May 2015.

⁸⁴ Matthew Schoffeleers, ‘Pentecostalism and Neo-Traditionalism: The Religious Polarization of a Rural District in Southern Malawi,’ in David Maxwell with Ingrid Lawrie (Eds.), *Christianity and African Imagination, Essays in Honour of Adrian Hastings* (Leiden, Boston and Koln: Koninklijke Brill, 2002), p. 238.

church members or persons seriously intending to join” the Apostolic Faith Church of Malawi.⁸⁵ However, Yirilo conducts healing services for everyone regardless of their religious background. Furthermore, although Yirilo emphasises healing through prayer like the Church of the Lord (*Aladura*) in Nigeria and Ghana, she does not reject Western medical treatment as it is with the *Aladura*.⁸⁶ She indicated that sometime she prays for people and advises them to go to the hospital for treatment when she discerns that the person’s case needs medical attention rather than only prayer.

Joyce Suventey also gave an account of how she had serious problems with her father who sent her out of the family. She approached several people to plead with him, but he refused to re-admit her back into the family. One day a friend told her to go and see Yirilo who would pray for her. She accepted her friend’s advice and went to see Yirilo. Soon after Yirilo had prayed for her, her father accepted her back home.⁸⁷ The restoration of Suventey into her father’s home is significant and makes Yirilo a full participant in Christian mission, through this loving concern. The fact that Suventey had been out of her father’s home meant that she was regarded as evil. As Haami Chapman notes, others in society, the church and even the person themselves can constantly raise a charge against those whom they classify as the “worst” of their society.⁸⁸

Talking about the rapid growth of the COP due to healing power, Leonard writes that, though popularity was not the primary aim of the Church, “it is bound to have an effect when a life-long cripple runs home to his village...”⁸⁹ There will, in the same way, be an effect when a cripple Paul runs to meet his mother and a barren Dabuoh walks on the streets of Sawla with a child on her back, while expecting a second one.

The third aspect of Yirilo’s mission relates to her faith and prayerfulness. From her childhood⁹⁰ to the beginning of her ministry, even before the special call from God, she gave importance to prayer. For instance, Afia and Pastor Sansah Samson⁹¹ said Yirilo liked praying from the time she was very young. Yirilo herself explained that “when the people converted, she and Pelmetey sent them every Friday to the bush for fasting and prayer.”⁹² Yirilo not only valued prayer by practicing it herself, she also encouraged her church members to practice prayer in their lives. She believed that only by fasting and praying one can overcome the devil and all his plans. She expressed in an interview,

Some people abandoned school. When I prayed for them, they went back

⁸⁵ Schoffeleers, ‘Pentecostalism and Neo-Traditionalism,’ p. 238.

⁸⁶ H. W. Turner, *African Independent Churches II, The Life and Faith of the Church of the Lord (Aladura)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), pp. 142-143.

⁸⁷ Joyce Suventey, interview, 8 November 2013, Sawla.

⁸⁸ Chapman, ‘To Respond to Human Need by Loving Service,’ p. 60.

⁸⁹ Leonard, *A Giant in Ghana*, p. 37.

⁹⁰ When Afia, Yirilo’s senior sister was talking about how Yirilo was very charismatic from childhood, she explained that sometimes, while the children in the compound were busy playing in the evening times, Yirilo would be somewhere else praying.

⁹¹ Sansah Samson, conversation about Yirilo’s life, 7 November 2013, Tuna.

⁹² Yirilo, interview, 8 November 2013.

to school and wrote their exams and passed. All those situations were because of some spiritual influence. There are certain things you cannot find solution to, unless you pray for the people and ask them to also fast and pray.⁹³

Yirilo emphasises the prayer and fasting because this is what she understood Jesus spoke to His disciples about in Mark 9:29. Yirilo's thinking and actions relating to overcoming the devil with prayer and fasting are reminiscent of Antony in the early church in North Africa who combated the devil through fortifying his body "with faith, prayer and fasting."⁹⁴

A fourth aspect of Yirilo's mission relates to personal sacrifice. Yirilo had been working in a clinic alongside her prayer ministry. According to her, God gave her a warning,

One day, we went there, I was at the worksite; I also did some work in the clinic, the health centre. It is through this prayer one day that God spoke to me that one servant cannot serve two masters. People will come to the house and they are plenty waiting for me to pray for them. And I will also go there taking care of the sick people. So, if I want to follow Him, I have to come and then serve the people in the camp. So, when I even wrote a letter to stop they were not happy. But I exchanged my position and gave it to one lady who was not having a supporter. I gave my chance to her and now she is working and collecting her salary and I am praying for the people. You see that it is not easy. And the people, when they come, I will feed them, I give them food, I give them water and also pray for them.⁹⁵

Through this encounter with God in prayer, Yirilo gave up her position in the clinic. She dedicated her time to God because, as she related, "...I do not joke with it at all! I have taken it upon myself!" She therefore had to find more flexible ways of earning a living while still having enough time for her prayer camp. Currently, she has a second hand clothing shop in Sawla. She also produces shea butter which is exchanged for corn, which contributes to the feeding of her family and also to the needy who come to her. Yirilo's story bears some similarities with that of Lady Huntingdon, a wealthy woman who relied on God and contributed to the revival of the church in the eighteenth century in England by sacrificing for the sake of the Gospel and selling her jewels to build a chapel. She not only did that, but she also moved to live in humble quarters for the sake of the Gospel and intervened in the church to contribute to its revival.⁹⁶ Yirilo did not have any wealth behind her when she left her job for her ministry in the prayer camp. It was a costly sacrifice. In a context where women have

⁹³ Yirilo, interview, 8 November 2013.

⁹⁴ Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Eds.), *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of Christian Church, Second Series, Volume IV, St. Athanasius: Select Works and Letters* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991 (c1891)), p. 197.

⁹⁵ Yirilo, interview, 8 November 2013.

⁹⁶ Deen, *Great Women of the Christian Faith*, p. 150.

little opportunities for employment, her action was one of deep conviction and faith in God as a provider for her in providing for her needs.

A further aspect of Christian mission for Yirilo and her contribution to the church is related to withstanding spiritual attack. According to her, after opening the camp, she had a serious test at the site, which she described in this manner,

One day God told me to go and pray in the night at the prayer camp. I went with my husband and our daughter. When we were praying I saw something like fire coming towards us. I continued praying. When my husband saw it he took his moto and wanted to run away, but I told him to come back to the camp and we will continue praying. My husband came back and as we were praying the thing disappeared.⁹⁷

For her, running away was not an option. She saw the fact that they prayed until the fire died off as “a victory over Satan.” The place Yirilo is now using for her prayer camp was, according to her, “the former marketplace of witches in the community.” Therefore, God has purposely sent her there to pray so that through divine activity people would believe in Him. Among the Birifor, people believe that there are dangerous places that witches in the community use as their marketplace. People are often afraid to identify such places, let alone walk there. Therefore, for Yirilo to establish a prayer camp on that space since 2008 and even dare going there to pray shows to others that God’s power is greater and people are attracted to come and give their lives to Christ. In his novel set among the Igbo of Nigeria, Chinua Achebe told a similar story. When the missionaries first arrived at Mbanta, the people gave them “the evil forest.”⁹⁸ Though the population of Sawla did not impose Yirilo’s land on her, both cases have the idea of the presence of evil spirits who would cause harm to them and drive them away. In the case of the missionaries at Mbanta, people started converting to Christianity when they saw that nothing bad happened to the missionaries after four days of their settlement.

In Yirilo’s context, the fact that nothing bad happened to her either, after her settlement on what people regarded as “an evil place,”⁹⁹ was evidence for people to believe that she could have an influence on their life. This has contributed to people coming to the camp for prayers, from various religious backgrounds. These people end

⁹⁷ Yirilo, Interview, 8 November 2013.

⁹⁸ Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart, With Introduction and Notes by Aigboje Higo* (Essex: Heinemann, 1986), pp. 107-111.

⁹⁹ The location of Yirilo’s prayer camp also resembles the account of Bede about Cedd in England in A.D. 659 who purposely chose land for his monastery on “Remote hills,” where people would not want to live “So that the fruits of good works might spring up where formerly lived only wild beasts, or men who lived like the beasts.” This also brings to mind the story of Cuthbert, a hermit in England who in A.D. 685 built his dwelling place on an island described as having “No water, corn, or trees, and being the haunt of evil spirits” and “was ill-suited to human habitation. But when the man of God came, he ordered the evil spirits to withdraw, and the Island became habitable.” Bede, *A History of the English Church and People, Translated by Leo Sherley-Price* (Great Britain: Leo Sherley-Price, 1968 (c1955), pp. 180-181 and 261.

up joining the church and also encourage others to come for prayers.

Perseverance in prayer and in the work she is doing in Northern Ghana is also one of Yirilo's best ways of showing her Christian faith. For instance, in the case of Paul, the crippled boy described previously, Yirilo did not give up, though his own mother abandoned him. She prayed until Paul started walking. Thus, the young boy and his mother, who formerly abandoned him, returned to the camp to praise God with Yirilo. Yirilo's perseverance and Paul's healing drew his mother to Christ, after she saw the evidence of Yirilo's message in her own son's case.

Another example of Yirilo's perseverance can be seen from her opening of a new branch of the Apostolic Church in Kpangri. Among the new converts is a famous traditional priest named Tingan. Afia, Yirilo's sister, related that in the particular case of Tingan, many evangelists went to Kpangri to share the Gospel with him in vain.¹⁰⁰ They all became discouraged, at some point, and left him alone. Yirilo, however, did not give up. She continued travelling from Sawla to Kpangri to witness to Tingan until one day he decided, after having trouble with his divinities, to turn to Christ. Like the missionaries in Achebe's novel,¹⁰¹ Yirilo's perseverance in the ministry illustrated her commitment in sharing the Good News with people. Yirilo's determination led to Tingan's conversion, including his family and other people from other families in Kpangri who joined the Apostolic Church, in November 2013.¹⁰²

Yirilo's contribution to the Apostolic Church of Ghana is further seen in her leadership and training of others. Yirilo worked as the first leader of the Apostolic Women's Movement in Sawla area from 1998 to 2012.¹⁰³ As the first leader of the Apostolic Women's Movement, she trained other women and handed her position over to one of them in 2012, though she still provides supervision. Yirilo even taught her non-literate husband to read by using the Bible as her teaching tool. She related the story during an interview,

When I started it, you know I said my husband was in the Catholic Church and when he saw the way the work was going, he saw that it would be good to join me. And now he is the presiding elder in the church. He was not educated, but I started with him, teaching him in the Bible and I will read from part to part and he will follow. Now he can preach from Genesis to Revelation. He can speak English orally.

¹⁰⁰ Afia, interview, 7 November 2013.

¹⁰¹ Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, p. 107.

¹⁰² I was able to interview Tingan about the change in his life, on 20 November 2013. Tingan indicated that he would never go back to his old way after meeting Christ in his life, because his *ɛtɛ* became too demanding and no longer helpful to him. Tingan's conversion story resembles the story of king Edwin and Coifi, his Chief Priest in A.D. 627, in England who also accepted Christ because Coifi realised that even though he was zealous in the gods' service those gods did not favour him (Bede, *A History of the English Church and People*, pp. 126-127).

¹⁰³ I have already given the details of the Apostolic Women Movement's activities in chapter V. Yirilo actively organised women in Sawla area to take part in these activities when she was the leader.

So now he is the presiding elder in the church. Today he can preach papapapa! Seriously! When he stands to preach, you will not know that he has not been to school.¹⁰⁴

Yirilo has also trained her children who have joined her in the ministry. For instance, her first daughter is always at the prayer camp and accompanies her in evangelism, interceding and in the deliverance of people (see photo 39 and 43). Her son is an elder of one of the branches and goes there to preach on Sundays. Yirilo's impact on her family has certain similarities to the story Gregory of Nyssa told of his sister Macrina¹⁰⁵ in the fourth century. Through her influence, her mother and brothers became a part of the Christian community, living an ascetic life, and leaving their worldly fame behind.¹⁰⁶

Another aspect of Yirilo's contribution to the church in West Africa is through music. Both Yirilo and her senior sister Afia are singers and both of them compose songs. They have produced two recordings so far. The second one contains five of Yirilo's songs among which one goes as follows:

Ref. <i>FV ml sog ma,</i>	Help me
<i>Nāaŋmtn fV ml sog ma</i>	God help me
<i>FV ml sog ma</i>	Help me
<i>ĩ sāa Nāaŋmtn FV ml sog ma</i>	My father God help me
<i>Ka ĩ yi</i>	Flourish
1. <i>A sđ nya nt ta</i>	This time that has come
<i>A sđ tara na</i>	The time is near
<i>A sđ nya nt ta</i>	This time that has come
<i>Yesu wa sđ ta nt baar</i>	The coming of Jesus is near
<i>Sog ma</i>	Help me
2. <i>ĩ dt nt nokart</i>	In order that I work in truth
<i>ĩ tV nt fV a tWmɔ</i>	I work for you
<i>ĩ dt nt nokart</i>	I work in the truth
<i>Yesu fV ml sog</i>	Jesus you help me
<i>Ka yi</i>	Flourish
3. <i>Ma ml na ja</i>	Me too, sitting here

¹⁰⁴ On the 14th of November 2013, I went personally to witness Mr. Chiportey preached at Yirilo's prayer camp, and he read from the Bible exactly as Yirilo said. Anyone who had never heard Chiportey's story would never believe from his sermon that he had never been to school.

¹⁰⁵ For Macrina's influence on her family, see Joan M. Petersen, *Handmaids of the Lord, Contemporary Descriptions of Feminine Asceticism in the First Six Christian Centuries* (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistern Publications, Inc., 1996), pp. 56-59.

¹⁰⁶ Martha Posambu testified that Yirilo's husband was very famous in the past. She noted that he was very rich owning a lot of material wealth. Today, as we saw in Yirilo's story her husband left the Catholic Church to join her in the Apostolic Church, because of her ministry. Not only that, he uses some of his time to help in the ministry, though he does not get any pay from doing it as he would get from his own business.

<i>N ba tara ntrɛ jaa</i>	I have no one
<i>Ma ml na ja</i>	Me too, sitting here
<i>Yesu n ba tara ntrɛ jaa ɛ</i>	Jesus, I have no one
<i>Sog ma</i>	Help me
<i>FV tɛ ɿ tɛɛ</i>	I have you alone
4. <i>Sɔ̃ tara</i>	The time is near
<i>Yesu wa sɔ̃ tara na</i>	Jesus' coming time is near
<i>FV yuo ma pan</i>	Open the door for me
<i>Yesu fV yuo ma pan</i>	Jesus, open the door for me
<i>Yuo ma pan Yesu</i>	Open the door for me
<i>FV ml yuo ma pan</i>	You open the door for me
<i>Ka ɿ yi</i>	That I can flourish
5. <i>Nāw lɛ n tɛɛ</i>	I am poor
<i>Yesu a nāw ba l ɛ</i>	Jesus poverty is not good
<i>Nāw lɛ n tuo</i>	I am burdened by poverty
<i>Yesu a nāw ba l ɛ</i>	Jesus, poverty is not good
<i>Ml sog ma</i>	You help me
6. <i>A nāw gar a kuu</i>	Poverty is worse than death
<i>Yesu a nāw ba l ɛ</i>	Jesus, poverty is not good
<i>Nāw gar a kuu</i>	Poverty is worse than death
<i>Yesu fV ba sog ma ɛ</i>	Jesus if you do not help me
<i>ɿ ka tVɔ tV ɛ</i>	I cannot serve you ¹⁰⁷

The refrain of this song is a prayer from Yirilo asking God to help her *yi* (come out or go out). When a Birifor says someone's name has *yi*, it means the person is well-known. In the first verse, the focus is on Jesus coming soon. This creates for Yirilo a sense of urgency and she asks God to help her work in the truth (v.2). Yirilo sings that she has only Jesus and no one else who can help her (v.3). And so she pleads with Jesus to open the door for her to *yi* (v4). Verses five and six express how poverty is a hindrance for her in her mission. During an interview with Yirilo about the prayer camp, she sang this song and related how this was her prayer for the Birifor and other marginalised tribes in Northern Ghana. She stated,

This is the prayer camp. This is where we are. God has started doing wonderful things here. My prayer is that God will do more so that people will not have to leave here and go all the way to other places or to Nigeria for healing. If God can do it there, he can also do it here. What of the Birifor? What of the Lobi? The Safalbe? What of all the other marginalised tribes in Northern Ghana? That is why I sang '*fV ml sog ma.*' You will find the song in

¹⁰⁷ Free translation, by researcher.

our new tape.¹⁰⁸

Walls refers to the “shift in the centre of gravity of the Christian world,”¹⁰⁹ making Africa one of the heartlands of the Christian Faith in the 21st century. Although Yirilo’s mission is part of it, she has a yearning to see another shift inside Africa itself. The implication of Yirilo’s statement is that people will go to places they would never have previously considered related to spiritual and physical issues in their lives. Yirilo has a yearning to see herself working in such a way that more people will come and experience God’s power in Sawla and find help in a place one would hardly have thought of seeing a large gathering of people, because of Christian Mission. There is another point which emerges from this statement. Yirilo acknowledges that people can go to other places such as Nigeria for healing. She is thus aware of an influence that this has come out from the Nigerian context.

Yirilo and her sister Afia’s song compositions are part of a wider contribution of Birifor Christian women to the life of the church through songs. Pastor Dakoriviela of ECG, Tuna claimed, “Birifor women have contributed a lot to the life of the church through songs, because most of the songs used during church services are composed by women.”¹¹⁰ Yirilo and her sister Afia’s songs were sung in a number of Birifor and Lobi churches in Burkina Faso for years, without people knowing their composers. This indicates how they are contributing to the life of the church even beyond the borders of their own country.

Yirilo’s mission and ministry intertwine with the context in which she lives. In the account of her call, she talked of a personal encounter with Christ Himself calling her by her name and giving her a healing ministry. Most Birifor can easily understand Yirilo’s call, because among the Birifor regulations for becoming a *ju-bvvrɔ* (diviner) is an encounter with a “*kɔ̃lɔn*” (spirit). The one who has an encounter with “*kɔ̃lɔn*” can then have a shrine where people will be going for consultations and healing.¹¹¹ Yirilo’s story exhibits similarities to experiences that William Wade Harris had, whom David Shank described as having a “trance-visitation from Angel Gabriel, who called him to be a prophet, to preach a Gospel of repentance, to destroy “fetish” worship, and to baptise those who obeyed.”¹¹²

According to Elizabeth Amoah and Mercy Amba Oduyoye,

The Christ whom African women worship, honor, and depend on is the victorious Christ, knowing that evil is a reality. Death and life-denying forces are the experience of women, and so Christ, who countered these forces and who gave back her child to the widow of Nain, is the African woman’s Christ.¹¹³

¹⁰⁸ Yirilo, interview 8 November 2013.

¹⁰⁹ Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History* p. 85.

¹¹⁰ Dakoriviela, interview, 11 November 2013.

¹¹¹ Dah, ‘A Theological Interpretation of the Birifor Practice of Funerals,’ p. 21.

¹¹² David Shank, Prophet Harris, *The ‘Black Elijah’ of West Africa, Abridged by Jocelyn Murray* (Leiden, New York: E.J. Brill, 1994), p. 4.

¹¹³ Elizabeth Amoah and Mercy Amba Oduyoye, ‘The Christ of African Women,’ in Virginia

(...) Another aspect of Yirilo's mission is reconciliation. She is a peace-maker in the community. Through her work in Sawla, she has brought family members together. As noted in Suventey's story, she was re-admitted back into her father's home and is now in a good relationship with her father, because of Yirilo's prayers.¹¹⁴ In the case of Paul who had been crippled and was estranged from his mother, Yirilo brought peace of mind to the mother, who then took her son back home.

We also saw the case where Yirilo brought peace in Dabuoh's family during her time of infertility. As noted in Chapter Two, Birifor communities typically blame the woman for infertility problems, without any diagnosis as to whether it is the woman or the man who is infertile. Any Birifor who had heard Dabuoh's story would automatically blame her for being barren, because she married twice but did not conceive for many years. Life can also be very difficult for "barren women" among Birifor, because for the Birifor one of the main purposes for marriage is procreation. Some in-laws can be very unkind to their relatives' wives, if they do not bear children, because they view them as putting an end to their family line.¹¹⁵

Through Yirilo's prayer, Jesus, therefore, became the Birifor ultimate clan ally through whom every transgression is forgiven and harmony is restored in the Birifor community. Then in the context of the barren women who found solutions to their infertility, it is a great symbol of peace, because of Birifor understanding of the marriage contract. Anything that distorts the relationship between a couple also affects the two families and the whole community can be affected.¹¹⁶ Yirilo's own family has also experienced this peace, as her husband testified. Since he married Yirilo, he and his children experience healing from his wife's prayer and he is grateful to the Lord for giving him such a wife.¹¹⁷

Yirilo's ministry also meets the longings of Ghanaians by appropriating "the inherited Christian message and spirituality to suit the Ghanaian primal worldview."¹¹⁸ She is able to draw more people to the churches in Northern Ghana and particularly to the Apostolic Church.

Cephas N. Omenyo explains that "mainline churches" in Ghana until the 1970s,

Fabella and Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *With Passion and Compassion, Third World Women Doing Theology* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1990 (c 1988)), pp. 35-46 (43).

¹¹⁴ Suventey, interview, 8 November 2013.

¹¹⁵ Dah, 'A Comparative study of the Biblical Ideas of Marriage and the Lobi/Birifor Ideas of Marriage,' pp. 42-46.

¹¹⁶ Looking at the Birifor concept of family, it can turn up to be a whole community that gets involved in one couple's matter. Extended families do not stay aside in nuclear families matters.

¹¹⁷ Though we saw that Yirilo's husband is no longer enjoying the material wealth that he had, he says that he is thankful to God for his wife's ministry, because he had experienced life with another woman before. He said the kind of peace he has now cannot be compared to his first marriage (Elder Chiportey, interview, 14 November 2013, Sawla).

¹¹⁸ Cephas N. Omenyo, 'Charismatization of the Mainline Churches in Ghana,' in Mika Vähäkangas and Andrew A. Kyomo (Eds.), *Charismatic Renewal in Africa* (Nairobi, Kenya: Acton Publishers, 2003), pp. 5-26 (23).

had been suspicious of “Charismatic renewal groups”¹¹⁹ and those among them who prophesied and claimed they had visions. I think the suspicions, however, are not limited only to mainline churches and have not completely changed in the 21st century, because I have heard some leaders both in the Historic Mission and Pentecostal Churches say that they do not do “pray for me,”¹²⁰ referring to prophets and their type of ministry.

Whether Yirilo is seen with suspicion or not, she has contributed to the growth of the Apostolic Church in Ghana. She established churches in Northern Ghana. She is also contributing to the growth of the church through her prayer ministry.¹²¹ Spiritually, Yirilo’s perseverance, faith and prayer are drawing people to know that only Jesus’ name can bring a change into their lives. Yirilo has also contributed to the life and worship of the church with her songs. She shows love and concern for people by not only using her own resources to spread the Gospel in Northern Ghana and also caring for people’s physical needs.

¹¹⁹ Omenyo, “Charismatization of the Mainline Churches in Ghana,” p. 19.

¹²⁰ Anonymous. I heard this statement in both the Evangelical Church of Ghana and the Apostolic Church of Ghana.

¹²¹ People like Adams, Dabuoh, Suventey and many others told me they came to Yirilo for prayer upon friends’ advice and they in their turn would advise any person they meet with a difficult situation to join them for prayers.

The History Nun, Iris Habib el-Masry (1910-1994): A Biography

By Mina Fouad Tawfike

Prologue

On Saturday, July 2, 1994,
She passed into blessed eternity,
dressed in white and holding a lamp in her hand. A cross was sealed
on her forehead
as she joined the ranks of the singing angels
before the divine throne.¹²²

These were the words of Dora Habib El-Masry in her eulogy for her sister Iris Habib El-Masry. This was a woman who—in Dora’s words—wrote the history of her church “with the blood of her heart, not with the ink of her pen.”¹²³ In Greek mythology, Iris (Ἴρις) is the daughter of the gods, their messenger, and the personification of the rainbow, known for her golden wings and swift feet. Like her mythological namesake, Iris served as a messenger, bridging the ancient heritage of the Coptic Church with contemporary understanding and conveying its narrative to both its adherents and the wider world. This is the story of Iris Habib El-Masry’s life.

Birth and Formative Years

Iris was born on May 10, 1910, into a wealthy Coptic family. Her father, Habib Hanin El-Masry (*Pasha*), was the first Egyptian to be privy to the February 28, 1922, declaration, which was the initial step towards Egypt’s independence from British occupation and the beginning of parliamentary life in Egypt. He is also considered the founder of the modern tax system in Egypt and the creator of the Egyptian Tax Authority.¹²⁴ One of El-Masry’s most significant contributions to the Coptic Church and its community was his remarkable legal advocacy, which spanned seventeen years, to ensure that the church could own property known now as *Anba Roweis*. This land would later become the site of the prominent St. Mark Cathedral in Cairo, inaugurated

¹²² Dora el-Masry, ed., *A Historian of the Coptic Church [Irīs Ḥabīb al-Maṣrī: Mu’arrikha Qiṣṣat al-Kanīsa al-Qibṭiyya]* (Victor Kirolos, 1996), 3.

¹²³ el-Masry, *A Historian of the Coptic Church [Irīs Ḥabīb al-Maṣrī: Mu’arrikha Qiṣṣat al-Kanīsa al-Qibṭiyya]*, 3.

¹²⁴ See: John H. Watson, “Habib El-Masry and the Role of Laymen in the Coptic and National Renaissance,” *Watani* (Cairo), October 5, 2003; Michael Saad, “Habib El-Masry: A Legend to Remember,” *Watani International* (Cairo), October 5, 2003; Mina Abd-el-Malek, “Habib El-Masry: Imbued with Love for Church and Country,” *Watani International* (Cairo), October 5, 2003.

in 1968.¹²⁵ Iris's mother, Salima Mina Mankarious, spoke English, played the piano, and enjoyed reading at a time when women's education was extremely limited. This progressive environment must have fostered Iris's intellectual curiosity and provided a model of female erudition that was uncommon for the period.

The combination of her father's nationalist engagement and her mother's intellectual pursuits created fertile ground for Iris's intellectual development, providing a solid foundation for her future contributions. Her later work on Coptic history and identity was not merely an academic exercise but was deeply informed by a sense of national belonging and a desire to articulate the Coptic role in a modernizing Egypt.

Iris was described as a woman of short stature with a brown complexion, wide, expressive eyes, and black hair that had turned white with age. Despite her modest physical presence, she exuded an air of prestige and dignity. Her sharp intellect was one of her most defining qualities.¹²⁶ She received her education at the *American College for Girls* (now *Ramses College for Girls*), which provided her with an excellent opportunity to master the English language. In her youth, she became acquainted with the prominent scholar Professor Yassa Abdel Massih (1898-1959). Due to his work as the curator of the Coptic Museum library, he was fluent in reading and writing the Coptic language, and she studied under him until she achieved complete mastery of the language.¹²⁷

After her graduation from the *American College for Girls*, the Ministry of Education sent her on a three-year scholarship to London to study psychology and child education, where she earned a BSc in Psychology and Education from the University of London with a major in Education, from Maria Grey College, University of London, in 1932.

After earning her diploma, she returned to Egypt and began working as a teacher at the Institute of Education, which was affiliated with the Ministry of Education. During this period, she also participated in the founding of the *Coptic Ladies Association for Childhood Education* (also called the *Coptic Women's Charity for Children's Education*) in 1940.¹²⁸ This association assisted in establishing dozens of Coptic schools throughout the Republic. This initiative was not merely an act of charity but a strategic response to the critical need within the Coptic community for structured Christian education. During this period, Iris joined a group of young Christian women who embarked on an educational mission among peasants in Upper Egypt through the *Oeuvre des Écoles Gratuites des Villages de Haute-Egypte*.¹²⁹

¹²⁵ Saad, "Habib El-Masri: A Legend to Remember," 2.

¹²⁶ Bushra Kazem Odeh and Aseel Abdul Majeed Rajeh, "Iris Habib Al-Masry and Her Role in Ecumenical Work," *Migration Letters* 20, no. S8 (2023): 696.

¹²⁷ Magued Kamel, "Iris Habib Al-Masry: The Great Church Historian Who Wrote the Story of the Coptic Church Encyclopedia in Nine Volumes (1910-1994)," *Watani* (Cairo), July 2, 2023.

¹²⁸ Kamel, "Iris Habib Al-Masry: The Great Church Historian Who Wrote the Story of the Coptic Church Encyclopedia in Nine Volumes (1910-1994)."

¹²⁹ Margot Badran, *Feminists, Islam, and Nation: Gender and the Making of Modern Egypt* (Princeton University Press, 1995), 121.

This era witnessed the Coptic Revival, a movement beginning in the late 19th century and extending into the 20th century, which sought to strengthen Coptic identity and resist the influences of Western missionaries. This revival aimed to establish a distinct “Egyptian form of Christianity.” The presence of the *Majlis al-Milli*, an elected lay council that managed Coptic community affairs and sometimes experienced tension with the clergy, also characterized the Coptic landscape before 1952. Iris grew up in an era in which Coptic identity was actively redefined within the context of burgeoning Egyptian nationalism.

Witnesses later recalled that she was “very humble” and often walked into impoverished neighborhoods to serve and educate needy children and their families.¹³⁰ In all this, she combined pedagogy with piety: she lectured on education, childcare, and pedagogy, always emphasizing that service to the church and the faithful was a sacred vocation.¹³¹

In 1953, she was offered another fellowship, this time to study Coptic studies at Dropsie University in Philadelphia under the tutelage of the renowned American Professor Cyrus Gordon. During her time in the United States, she delivered a series of public lectures on Egypt and the Coptic Church on American radio and television, as well as at various chapters of the American Association of University Women (AAUW).¹³² Her research at Dropsie College spanned from 1952 to 1954, and she was listed as a notable alumna of the institution.¹³³ Iris declined to finish the doctorate she had begun at Dropsie. In a 1956 article, she explained that she refused to alter her thesis project just to earn the title, because “writing history... in my view is more important than that.”¹³⁴

Scholarship and Historical Works

Iris Habib El-Masry’s legacy rests chiefly on her scholarship as a historian of the Coptic Orthodox Church. From 1955 to 1985, she lectured on Coptic history at the Coptic Theological Seminary (in Cairo and Alexandria) and the Institute of Coptic Studies. During the 1950s, she also lectured abroad, giving talks on Egyptian history and the Coptic Church on American radio and television and to chapters of the American Association of University Women. In 1954, Pope Yousab II appointed her as the Coptic Church’s female delegate to the Second Assembly of the World Council of Churches (Evanston, USA), and later, in 1966, Pope Kyrillos VI made her an official counselor to young Coptic women (1966).

¹³⁰ Odeh and Rajeh, “Iris Habib Al-Masry and Her Role in Ecumenical Work,” 298.

¹³¹ Odeh and Rajeh, “Iris Habib Al-Masry and Her Role in Ecumenical Work,” 298.

¹³² Kamel, “Iris Habib Al-Masry: The Great Church Historian Who Wrote the Story of the Coptic Church Encyclopedia in Nine Volumes (1910-1994).”

¹³³ *Wikipedia*, “Dropsie College Alumni,” September 1, 2023,

https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Category:Dropsie_College_alumni&oldid=1173308237.

¹³⁴ Odeh and Rajeh, “Iris Habib Al-Masry and Her Role in Ecumenical Work,” 297.

Iris's *magnum opus* was her multi-volume *History of the Coptic Church* (Arabic: *Tarikh Al Kanisa Al Qibtiyya*), often known in English as *The Story of the Copts*. This monumental work, nine volumes in all, began in 1948 and continued into the 1980s. Iris meticulously documented every era from St. Mark's evangelization to the modern patriarchs. For example, Volume VII (covering 1959–1971) warmly chronicles the papacy of Pope Cyril VI, reflecting her deep admiration for the pontiff. According to Iris, the call to write the history of the Coptic Church came to her during this period from an American woman, who challenged her by asking, "If you do not write about your church in a language we can read, why do you blame us for being ignorant of it?!" Taking this as a personal challenge, Iris resolved to focus her efforts on writing a comprehensive history of the Coptic Church in English upon her return to Egypt.¹³⁵ However, her relatives later reproached her, asking, "Why do you write for foreigners and not similarly for your fellow Egyptians?" Prompted by this critique, she decided to rewrite the entire work she had completed in English, but this time in Arabic.

When she sent the manuscript for the first volume to Father Matta El-Meskeen (1919–2006) for review, he offered her a crucial piece of advice. He recommended that she publish all her direct quotations from foreign sources in their original language in footnotes, immediately followed by the Arabic translation. He reasoned that this would preemptively address any doubts or skepticism regarding the accuracy or fidelity of her translations. She adopted this rigorous scholarly methodology and implemented it in all her subsequent works.¹³⁶ In the same article, she asserted that the primary objective of writing *The Story of the Coptic Church* was to provide tangible, physical proof to the Western world of the Coptic woman's ability to write in a language they could understand, thereby teaching them the glories of the Coptic Church. The second goal—as the great historian mentioned in the same article—was to show the Egyptian citizen, both Muslim and Copt, the great national role the Coptic Church has played throughout the ages by remaining steadfast in Orthodox faith.¹³⁷

In her introductions, Iris often credited her spiritual mentors – writing, for instance, that she regarded Abouna Matta El-Meskeen of the Nitrian Desert monasteries as her "spiritual father," and likewise honoring Father Bishoy Kamel of Alexandria – for guiding her in faith and research. In all her historical writing, she strove for detail and accuracy utilizing large number of sources.

A critical, modern academic assessment of her work, particularly Michael Saad's 2009 article, "Iris Habib el-Masry: A Pioneer of Coptic Feminine Theology," reveals a dimension of her contributions that extends beyond historical narration into the realm of theological reflection. This designation suggests that her work, particularly her book *Women in the Church*, offers a framework for understanding the role of women within

¹³⁵ Iris Habib el-Masry, "The Trajectory of the Coptic Church," *Sunday School Magazine*, August 1980, 23.

¹³⁶ Kamel, "Iris Habib Al-Masry: The Great Church Historian Who Wrote the Story of the Coptic Church Encyclopedia in Nine Volumes (1910-1994)"; el-Masry, "The Trajectory of the Coptic Church," 23–24.

¹³⁷ el-Masry, "The Trajectory of the Coptic Church," 24–25.

the Coptic Church from a theological perspective.

The academic recognition of Iris Habib el-Masry as a “Pioneer of Coptic Feminine Theology” unveils a crucial yet potentially underappreciated dimension of her intellectual legacy.¹³⁸ This designation, supported by her publication *Women in the Church*, indicates that her scholarship extended beyond historical narration into critical theological inquiry concerning gender roles and women’s spiritual agency within the Coptic tradition. This pioneering work, likely informed by her extensive experience as an educator, psychologist, and counselor for young women, represents a deliberate effort to articulate a theological framework that affirms and elevates the contributions of Coptic women. Her engagement in this area positions her as a significant, perhaps proto-feminist, voice within a historically conservative religious institution, demonstrating her capacity to innovate and challenge traditional perspectives through rigorous scholarship and lived commitment to the subject.

In 1980, former President Mohamed Anwar Sadat appointed her as a member of the el-*Shura* (consultative) Council, as he was highly impressed with her book on the history of the Coptic Church.¹³⁹ He explicitly expressed his profound admiration for her work on three separate occasions: The first occasion was when he went to offer condolences on the passing of His Holiness Pope Cyril VI. He told the assembled clergy that he was keen to restore the glories of the Church of Alexandria, whose history he had learned from the books of Professor Iris Habib El-Masry. The second occasion was in a speech he delivered to Muslim and Christian religious leaders on February 9, 1977, where he praised her book and the introduction written for it by a Muslim scholar. The third and final occasion on which he lauded her writing was on December 25, 1980, when he met with Coptic members of the People’s Assembly and the Shura Council during a period of significant sectarian tension. When she asked him to make a gesture towards the church, he lowered his head for a moment and then said in front of all the Coptic attendees, “I am greatly indebted to you and I have been a student of your books and your works.”¹⁴⁰ In that latter occasion, she played “an instrumental role in the parliamentary delegation of 25 December 1980, which met with President Sadat to discuss escalating Coptic-Muslim crisis.”¹⁴¹

Activism and Social Contributions

Beyond academia, El-Masry was a tireless church activist and a reformer. As a Coptic intellectual, she advocated ecumenical outreach and women’s advancement in the Church. Indeed, scholarly studies note that she was “one of the most prominent advocates” of the Coptic Orthodox Church, joining the World Council of Churches.

¹³⁸ See: Michael Saad, “Iris Habib El-Masry: A Pioneer of Coptic Feminine Theology,” *Coptic Church Review* 30, no. 2 (2009): 51–56.

¹³⁹ Saad, “Iris Habib El-Masry,” 51.

¹⁴⁰ Kamel, “Iris Habib Al-Masry: The Great Church Historian Who Wrote the Story of the Coptic Church Encyclopedia in Nine Volumes (1910-1994).”

¹⁴¹ Saad, “Iris Habib El-Masry,” 52.

Iris frequently lectured (at seminars, conferences, and to students) on the status of women in the Church, religious education, and orthodoxy. Beginning in the 1950s, she joined Coptic women's associations and feminist circles within the Church, encouraging women's participation in church life and leadership.

Her activism is grounded in hands-on charity work. Contemporaries recall that despite her patrician background (descended from a "Pasha" family), Iris was remarkably humble and unassuming. Testimonies revealed that she often walked through Cairo's poorest neighborhoods on foot, teaching poor children and tending to their families' needs.¹⁴²

In charity as in scholarship, Iris was seen as a role model for Egyptian Christian women – described by one historian as "an authentic Egyptian Christian who was deeply and consciously associated with the Orthodox Church" and "an example of strength and a role model for the ladies and girls of Egypt."¹⁴³

As mentioned earlier, in 1966, Pope Kyrillos VI, the 116th Pope (1959–1971), appointed her as a counselor to young Coptic girls.¹⁴⁴ This role was a direct extension of her earlier work in child education and psychology, foreshadowing her later recognition as a pioneer of Coptic feminine theology.¹⁴⁵ This appointment by the highest authority in the Church demonstrates a consistent, lifelong commitment to the spiritual and intellectual development of Coptic women, indicating a deliberate effort to empower them in the Church and society. This highlights the value placed on her unique ability to guide and empower the next generation of Coptic women. She continued her dedicated service as a lecturer in Coptic History at the Seminary in Cairo and Alexandria and the Institute of Coptic Studies until 1985.

Religious Devotion and Faith

Iris defined herself in these words:

I am Egyptian before I am an Egyptian, yet I have used my Egyptian identity to elevate my humanity, and I have dedicated my humanity to dignifying my Egyptian identity. I consider the world to be my homeland. I did not venture into the world to share hatred or resentment, but rather to sow love and understanding.¹⁴⁶

Those who lived with and chronicled Iris described her as someone who could not be understood except in conjunction with a specific set of Christian virtues. These include

¹⁴² Odeh and Rajeh, "Iris Habib Al-Masry and Her Role in Ecumenical Work," 698.

¹⁴³ Odeh and Rajeh, "Iris Habib Al-Masry and Her Role in Ecumenical Work," 698.

¹⁴⁴ Dora el-Masry, "Portrait of a Historian: Iris Habib El-Masry (1910–1994)," *Coptic Church Review* 22, no. 3 (2001): 88.

¹⁴⁵ Saad, "Iris Habib El-Masry," 52.

¹⁴⁶ el-Masry, *A Historian of the Coptic Church [Iris Ḥabīb al-Maṣrī: Mu'arrikha Qiṣṣat al-Kanīsa al-Qibṭiyya]*, 10.

detachment from worldly appearances, being a silent example, a deep love for scholarship and knowledge, sincerity of faith, and complete submission to the work of grace.¹⁴⁷ Or, as Suleiman Nassim describes her: “She is the Mary who chose the good portion, counting all things as rubbish in order to gain Christ.”¹⁴⁸

Iris Habib El-Masry’s personal life was marked by profound piety. She was known for her daily prayers, simple living, and devotion to the church’s liturgical life. Colleagues observed that she “was a strong believer in her church and Orthodoxy,” and that her faith animated all her endeavors.¹⁴⁹ She maintained close friendships with monastic and clerical figures and received their blessings for her work. At home, her family placed icons on the walls, and friends recalled that Iris spoke movingly of mystical experiences. Her spiritual daughters’ convent, St. Mary’s (Tekla Hemanot), in Cairo – where she often visited – remembered her as a “church mother,” someone who treated the nuns as spiritual daughters and constantly encouraged them. As one study notes, Iris’s writings (both historical and reflective) exhibit unique features that contribute to women’s theological perspectives in the Coptic tradition.¹⁵⁰

By emphasizing love, community, and the lived faith of ordinary believers, she opened doors for later Coptic women’s scholarship. Iris never married or had children and regarded her flock as her family. She reportedly told her colleagues that completing her Church history was more important than any academic degree. Throughout her life, she credited God for all her achievements and always gave a share of her honor to the monastic mentors who guided her.

H. G. Bishop Moussa, Bishop of Youth, in a recorded interview with Iris in 1987, started by saying: “Today we are guests of our able professor Iris. Many people have read with admiration her magnificent historical volumes written about the Coptic Church, beginning from the first century to the present. We are happy that we have seen her and that we have heard her.”¹⁵¹

Her sister Dora quoted from her memoirs, which, unfortunately, were never published:

I am holding steadfastly to the true Coptic Orthodox faith, which is based firmly on the continuity of both the Old and the New Testaments. I have been brought up and nourished by reading all the books of the Holy Bible. I read them gradually, consecutively, and continuously, and thought deeply about their contents. In the many books which I have written, and which God Almighty has given me the power to accomplish, I have relied faithfully on verses from the Bible. To me, the Holy Bible, beginning with the book of

¹⁴⁷ el-Masry, *A Historian of the Coptic Church [Irīs Ḥabīb al-Maṣrī: Mu’arrikha Qiṣṣat al-Kanīsa al-Qibṭiyya]*, 9.

¹⁴⁸ el-Masry, *A Historian of the Coptic Church [Irīs Ḥabīb al-Maṣrī: Mu’arrikha Qiṣṣat al-Kanīsa al-Qibṭiyya]*, 9.

¹⁴⁹ el-Masry, *A Historian of the Coptic Church [Irīs Ḥabīb al-Maṣrī: Mu’arrikha Qiṣṣat al-Kanīsa al-Qibṭiyya]*, 9.

¹⁵⁰ See: Saad, “Iris Habib El-Masry.”

¹⁵¹ el-Masry, “Portrait of a Historian: Iris Habib El-Masry (1910–1994),” 90.

Genesis and ending with the book of Revelation, was the pure source from which I drank and the highest reference for me in my books. Every time I read it, the teachings I found in it became clearer. The Holy Spirit, with its perpetual intercession, aided me and, with its power, illuminated my mind. This enhanced my understanding of the meaning of the words which I read, and I always discovered new things for my spiritual needs.¹⁵²

These passages from Iris Habib El-Masry's memoir reveals a woman of deep faith, intellectual discipline, and profound spiritual sensitivity. Her unwavering commitment to the Coptic Orthodox tradition was rooted in her lifelong, methodical engagement with Scripture, which she read not only for knowledge but also as a source of personal transformation. She saw the Bible as both her spiritual sustenance and the authoritative foundation for her historical writings, crediting the Holy Spirit's illumination for her insights. Her scholarly work was shaped by a strong sense of divine vocation, and she approached authorship as a sacred task in which faith and intellect operated in harmony. Iris's words reflect a soul in which history, theology, and personal piety were inseparably intertwined.

Legacy and Impact

In her final days, Iris was afflicted with bone cancer. She was admitted to El Salam Hospital in Mohandessin on February 3, 1994, for treatment. Pope Shenouda III visited her, prayed for her, and anointed her with oil. She remained in the hospital for a period, unaware of the true nature of her illness, having been admitted after falling on her back. She suffered intensely from the disease, for which there was no cure, only painkillers. She was discharged from the hospital and continued to force herself to go to church with the help of those close to her until the end of March 1994.¹⁵³

She was confined to her home until her death on July 2, 1994. Her funeral was attended by bishops, scholars, and hundreds of lay people who remembered her as a saintly figure. In the decades since her death, Iris has been celebrated as the foremost historian of the Coptic Church in the 20th century. All nine volumes of her Church history remain in print and are still being cited by historians worldwide. Her other books on the Virgin Mary, Fr. Bishoy Kamel, on Coptic women – continue to influence Coptic theology and education.

In 2014, Coptic historians noted that her "Arabic language publications are among the most widely quoted in the historical literature of the Coptic Church' and that her multifaceted work as an educator, psychologist, and philanthropist has inspired a new generation of Coptic women scholars.¹⁵⁴ Today, her name is often spoken alongside other 20th-century Coptic reformers: a teacher "authentic to her Egyptian

¹⁵² el-Masry, "Portrait of a Historian: Iris Habib El-Masry (1910–1994)," 87.

¹⁵³ Ezzat Amira, "The History's Nun: Iris Habib, Who Dedicated Her Life to the Story of the Coptic Church," *Watani* (Cairo), November 15, 2020.

¹⁵⁴ Saad, "Iris Habib El-Masry."

heritage,” deeply Orthodox in faith, and an educator who wrote the story of her church for posterity.

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Table 1: Chronology of Iris Habib el-Masry's Life and Career Milestones

Year	Event/Milestone
1910	Born on May 10.
1922	Her father, Habib Hanin El-Masry, was privy to the February 28 declaration, a step towards Egypt's independence.
1932	Received a Bachelor of Arts degree, majoring in Education, from Maria Grey College, University of London.

1940	Participated in the founding of the “Coptic Women Charity for Children's Education.”
1948	Published the first volume of her nine-volume work, <i>Story of the Coptic Church</i> . ²
1952-1954	Pursued research in Coptic studies at Dropsie University, Philadelphia, under Professor Cyrus Gordon. ¹
1952-1953	Delivered 58 public lectures on Egypt and the Coptic Church in the United States. ⁴
1954	Appointed female delegate of the Coptic Church to the Second Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Evanston, Illinois, USA. ¹
1954	Appointed secretary for correspondence with the World Council of Churches by Pope Youssab II.
1955	Began lecturing in Coptic History at the Seminary in Cairo and Alexandria, and the Institute of Coptic Studies.
1966	Appointed Counselor to young Coptic women by Pope Kyrillos VI.
1970	Publication of <i>The Blessed Virgin</i> .
1971	Publication of <i>Habib Pascha El Masry</i> .
1972	Pope Shenouda of Alexandria testifies to her 30 years of service as a deaconess. ⁴
1974	Bishop Gregorios certifies her as a professor of Coptic Church History since 1954. ⁴
1975	<i>The Story of the Copts</i> was first published by the Middle East Council of Churches.
1977	Publication of <i>Introduction to the Coptic Church</i> (English). ²
1978	Publication of <i>The Story of the Copts</i> . ⁶

1979	Publication of <i>Women in the Church and The Story of Father Pishoy Kamel Magnetic Radiation</i> . ²
1980	Publication of <i>The Pharaonic Influence on Modern Coptic Life</i> .
1983	Publication of <i>Bishop Samuel</i> .
1985	Concluded her tenure as a lecturer in Coptic History.
1987	<i>The Story of the Copts - Book 1</i> (4th Edition). ⁶
1994	Passed into blessed eternity on July 2. ¹

Table 2: Key Publications of Iris Habib el-Masry

Title	Year of First Publication	Number of Volumes (if applicable)	Key Themes/Subject Matter
<i>Story of the Coptic Church</i>	1948	9 volumes	Comprehensive history of the Coptic Orthodox Church from its foundation to modern times. ²
<i>The Blessed Virgin</i>	1970	N/A	Theological and historical perspectives on the Virgin Mary.
<i>Habib Pascha El Masry</i>	1971	N/A	Biography or study related to her father, Habib Hanin El-Masry.
<i>The Story of the Copts</i>	1975 (first published by the Middle East Council of	N/A (often published as a single volume or abridged	A more accessible overview of Coptic history and identity. ²

	Churches), also 1978, 1987 editions	version of the larger history)	
<i>Introduction to the Coptic Church</i>	1977	N/A	Overview of the Coptic Church, including its history, ritual, sacramental, and doctrinal aspects. ²
<i>Women in the Church</i>	1979	N/A	Exploration of the role and status of women within the Coptic Church.
<i>The Pharaonic Influence on Modern Coptic Life</i>	1980	N/A	Analysis of the continuity of ancient Egyptian culture and its impact on contemporary Coptic life.
<i>Bishop Samuel</i>	1983	N/A	Biography or study of Bishop Samuel.
<i>The Story of Father Pishoy Kamel Magnetic Radiation</i>	1979	N/A	Focus on the life or teachings of Father Pishoy Kamel. ⁶

This article, received in November 2025, was written by Mina Fouad Tawfike, who was co-instructor at the January 2025 DACB Biography Workshop at St. Athanasius School of Theology in Cairo, Egypt. He holds a Master of Arts in Early African Christianity, a Master of Theology in Easter Theology, and a Master of Arts in Coptic Studies. He is a researcher at the Institute of Coptic Studies and Research at Alexandria University as well as a lecturer, an author, and the publishing director at the Alexandria School of Theology.

Book Excerpt

Iris, Habib el Masri. *The Story of the Copts: The true story of christianity in Egypt*. N. Pl.: Coptic Bishopric for African Affairs, 1987.¹⁵⁵

St. Paul and St. Antoni (p. 58-62).

61. While Abba Dionysius was so engaged in encouraging the people to face the fierce tempest of persecution raging about them, a solitary figure detached himself and turned his face toward the desert, trudging on and on toward the fastnesses of its inner depth in search of peace through prayer and fasting in its vast solitude. It was St. Paul [230-341 CE], who became the first Egyptian hermit. When he first set out into the desert, no one knew about his intentions, not even the man who sat on the Chair of St. Mark. At the outset of the persecutions of the Emperor Decius, he was a young man of twenty, very wealthy and well-educated in both the Coptic and the Greek literatures. He was of a gentle spirit and a strong lover of God. He had an only sister who was married. Her husband, coveting his wealth, went to the authorities and denounced his wife's beloved brother as a Christian. Hearing of it, Paul's sister went weeping to him, and entreated him to go into hiding. Thereupon, he fled into the desert. His idea at first was to hide temporarily, but the life of solitude both attracted him and appealed to him, and what had been his necessity became his free choice. He journeyed on, further and further, into that vast ocean of desert solitude, until he came to a cave beyond which were a fount of clear water and some palm trees. There he made his abode, from the time of his arrival, at the age of twenty, and there did he abide till he died, ninety years later, at the age of a hundred and ten. All these long years he spent in utter solitariness, unknown and unheard of by man, but in complete communion with God.

Then, in the fullness of time, it pleased God to disclose the secret of this sacred life of his servant Paul – that it may be a sweet smelling incense and an incentive to others. It was disclosed to Antoni (St. Anthony of Egypt) who is known in ecclesiastical history as the “Father of Monks.” The manner whereby Antoni found out about St. Paul was strange indeed. Having himself become a desert dweller for many years, a vain thought assailed and disturbed this holy man. He entertained a sort of pride to think that he was the first desert dweller. But, at night he saw a vision. The Angel of the Lord appeared to him, and told him of yet another desert dweller who had hallowed the desert with his continuous prayers for all humanity, many years before he even set foot therein. Antoni forthwith exclaimed: “As the Lord liveth I must see this man of God”.

¹⁵⁵ Full reference: Iris, Habib el Masri. **The Story of the Copts: The True Story of Christianity in Egypt**. Newberry Springs, CA: St Anthony Monastery, n.d. (2 volumes). Book 1, “**From the Foundation of the Church by Saint Mark to the Arab Conquest**” URL: <https://ukmidcopts.org/kotob/STRCOPT1.pdf>; Book 2, “**From the Arab Conquest to Present Time**” URL: <https://ukmidcopts.org/kotob/STRCOPT2.pdf>

Early the next morning, he started out on his search. For two days he walked from morning till night. At the end of the second day he felt lost and disheartened, so he knelt down and prayed in great earnestness that he might be deemed worthy to find out the whereabouts of him about whom the Angel had spoken. Starting his search again on the morning of the third day, he came to a cave with a big stone closing its entrance.[7] Standing beside it, he heard a voice praying and chanting inside. He stood listening, then knocked on the stone, realising in his heart that he had found him whom he was seeking. Receiving no answer, he cried aloud: "I have asked and I was given; I sought and I have found; I knock, and I trust that it shall be opened unto me". At these words, the stone was rolled from the cave's entrance, and behold, St. Paul stood there. The two saints looked at one another and were overwhelmed with great joy. They fell on each other's necks, crying and praising God for such a union. They spent the day praying and talking together of God's wondrous ways. Near sunset, as they were getting ready for the evening prayer, a crow came to them with a whole loaf of bread in his beak. St. Paul reverently took the bread in his hands, and turning to St. Antoni said: "You see how our Heavenly Father cares for us. In His Mercy He sends me half a loaf of bread every day, but today that you are with me, He has sent us a whole loaf. Blessed be His Holy Name; He Who never slumbers nor sleeps watches over the least of His children". They gave thanks, broke the bread and ate.

For two days Antoni remained with Paul, and they enjoyed each other's companionship. The third day, Paul asked Antoni if he would go back and bring him the cloak that had been given him by St. Athanasius. St. Antoni marvelled in his heart that the hermit, who had been living in such complete solitariness away from the world for nearly a century, could know of this cloak. But out of reverence he dared not question the holy Father. He kissed his hands and his eyes, and immediately set out to do as he was bid. Now, St. Paul did not really want the cloak. He just wanted gently to send his guest away; so that he may not be present with him at the moment of his death, for it had been revealed to him by the Spirit that his hour was at hand.

St. Antoni lost no time. Exhausted and panting he reached his dwelling. Two of his disciples, who for a long time had ministered unto him ran out to meet him, asking: "Where hast thou tarried so long, master?" "Woe is me," he answered, "that do falsely bear the name of monk. I have seen Elias, I have seen John in the desert, yes, I have seen Paul in paradise". And so, with tight-pressed lips and his hand beating his breast, he carried the cloak from his cell. To his disciples, who were eager to know more, he answered, "There is a time to speak and a time to be silent". And leaving the cell, and not even taking with him some small provision for the journey, he again took to the roads.[8] He journeyed for a whole day. As the dawn of the second day illumined the sky, he started walking again, when behold, afar off he saw a wondrous sight: St. Paul was climbing the steps of Heaven, apparelled in light, and surrounded by an Angelic host, singing and praising God. Whereupon Antoni exclaimed: "Verily this is the Spirit of my father the blessed Paul, being carried up to Heaven". He accelerated his steps to the cave.

Upon arriving there he found that St. Paul had already gone to his rest, and his body was lying, with hands outstretched in the form of the cross. St. Antoni wrapped

his body, knelt beside it and chanted the Diptych (or prayer for the dead). Wanting to bury him, he felt at a loss as he had no tools with which to dig the grave. While wondering what to do, he saw two lions coming towards him. They came into the cave and stood beside the body, bowing their heads as though kissing it: Then they looked up at St. Antoni, as though offering their help. Antoni outlined with his finger the plot to be dug for the grave. The two beasts immediately set themselves to the task. When they finished, Antoni, with the help of the lions, interred St. Paul. This done, the lions bowed their heads over the grave, as if in silent prayer for a moment, then they turned back to where they had come. St. Antoni watched them go, then raised his hands in praise to the Almighty, whose command even the wild beasts obey.[9]

Notes (p. 67):

7. Up to the present a monastery bearing the name of St. Paul still exists within the vicinity of this cave. When, in 1884, A. J. Butler published his book "Ancient Coptic Churches of Egypt" he said on p. 346, v. I, "This far convent has scarcely ever been visited by a European traveller, and its beauties and its treasures must be left to their ancient silence". This is no more the case, however, for the monastery. Cars and desert routes have made the monastery accessible now.

8. "Desert Fathers" transl from Latin and Greek mss. by Helen Waddell, London, 1936, p. 50.

9. Arabic ms. No. 49 Hist. dated 1380 AM (1664 AD) pp. 1r-78r. kept at the Papal Library Cairo. It may be noted that one of the wonders connected with the saints is their power over wild beasts, a power similar to that which Adam had before his fall. Having attained saintliness, God bestows on them this power in recompense for their struggle toward spiritual perfection. Cf. R. P. Cheneau d'Orleans, vol. II, p. 518.

The Theban legion (p. 93-95).

Since Egypt was being ruled by the Romans, the latter exercised their right to mobilise Egyptian youth to serve in their army. One of the Egyptian legions that had won high repute in the armed service was known as the Theban legion – so-called because its members were natives of Thebes, capital of Pharaonic Egypt (and site of the present day town of Luxor). Unknown to the Romans, the soldiers of the Theban legion had all been converted to Christianity.

When, in the course of the history of the Roman Empire, the province of Gaul [present-day France] rumbled with signs of rebelliousness, Emperor Diocletian [284-305 CE] commissioned Maximian – an old comrade and loyal friend of his whom he had appointed as his second in command and given the title of Caesars [8] to quell their rebellion. Maximian having heard of the valour of the Theban legion requested Diocletian to send it over to him that it might participate in the action. When they arrived, Maximian divided them into two groups: one was to encamp on the border of Gaul, and the other, in present day Switzerland, in preparation for the attack. On the eve of the battle, Maximian, as was his habit, decided to go to the pagan temple to pay homage to his gods, and he ordered the men of the Theban legion to go with him. But he was both surprised and infuriated when they unanimously refused to obey his order and declared they were Christians. He therefore, ordered them to stand in file and had them decimated (ie., every tenth man killed), hoping thereby to intimidate them.

But the rest assembled together and wrote him a letter which they all signed. In it they said: "Great Caesar-we are your soldiers, and at the same time we are God's slaves. We owe you our military service, but our prime allegiance we owe to God. From you we receive our daily wages; from Him our eternal reward. Great Caesar, we cannot obey any order if it runs counter to God's commands. If your orders coincide with God's commands we will certainly obey them; if not, "we ought to obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29), for our loyalty to Him surpasses all other loyalties. We are not rebels; if we were, we would defend ourselves for we have our weapons. But we prefer to die upright than to live stained. As Christians we will serve you. But we will not relinquish our Faith in our Lord, and this we openly declare".[9]

When Maximian read this letter the very steadfastness it portrayed angered him all the more. Again he ordered a second decimation, and once more asked the remnant to accompany him to the temple. Fearlessly they said: "We are Christians". Thereupon Maximian ordered his Roman soldiers to wipe out the whole Legion. Pere Cheneau describes this saga in the following terms:

Thus were they martyred: some in Agaune, others in Soleure, in Ventimiglia, in Bergamo, and in Treves. It was a mighty holocaust; an unparalleled massacre, the plains were drunk with blood and the bodies strewn to the winds. But by being willing to make the supreme sacrifice, the men of the Theban Legion proved that their faithfulness to their Heavenly Lord and King surpassed their valour as soldiers in the army of the temporal ruler.[10]

Notes (p. 109):

8. *Cambridge Ancient History*. Vol. 12, p. 327.

9. Pere Cheneau d'Orleans. *Les Saints d'Egypte*, 240.

10. *Ibid.* vol.-2, pp. 241-8; 357-8.

St. Dimiana and the forty virgins (p. 99-101) :

110. Since persecutions and martyrdom were not confined to men, the next 'witness' to be considered here is a woman saint and martyr. Her name is Saint Dimiana, and she is, perhaps, the most widely known and most popular heroine in Coptic sacred history. Her icon in many a Coptic church depicts her in the centre with forty virgins around her. The reason will be known as her story unfolds. Dimiana was the only child of Marcus, Governor of Burullus [18] during the rule of Emperor Diocletian. Marcus and his wife were Christians and had brought up their daughter in the fear of the Lord. She had been taught the Scriptures from her early childhood and had become so captivated by them that their study occupied most of her time and interest. As she grew up, Dimiana became a beautiful young lady, and her parents – like all others – aspired to have her well married. When she was approached on the subject, however, Dimiana refused to consider it and revealed to her parents that her sole wish was to dedicate her life to the service of the Christ. Disappointed; but complying with her wish, her parents built for that a special mansion in Za'afaran [19] where she and forty virgins decided to

live and plan their Christian activities. In this abode Dimiana and her companions lived harmoniously together, worshipping God and serving the surrounding community. The happiness and peace they enjoyed was not destined to last, however. One day Diocletian, who had already begun his persecution of the Christians, asked the Egyptian princes and noblemen, of whom Marcus was one, to accompany him to the pagan temple to offer incense to the Roman gods. Fearing the loss of prestige and perhaps of life itself, Marcus joined the ranks of the worshippers, and did not publicly declare that he was a Christian. A few days later, the news of her father's frailty reached Dimiana in her seclusion.

Immediately she left her abode and went to meet him in his capital. As she entered his mansion, her father sensed her sorrow and hurried forward to greet her. But as she responded to his paternal solicitude, her whole frame shook and her tears gathered and fell. Finally when she collected herself, she told her father how disappointed she had felt when she heard that he had not had the courage of his faith, and that she could have borne with greater fortitude the burden of his loss than the shame and treachery of his survival. Her words and her sobs moved her father so deeply that he regretted what he had done, and told her he was going to redress it. In a mood of resurgent courage and resolution, he went back to see the Emperor.

Firmly, proudly but quietly he declared before him and his retinue his fealty to the Christ. Diocletian, infuriated by the change of heart Marcus had, and the calm defiance he showed, ordered him to be beheaded at once. Then, when he learned that it was his daughter, Dimiana, who was the instigator of her father's repentance, Diocletian sent one of his officers at the head of his regiment, with the orders to do his utmost to dissuade her from her faith. If neither promises nor threats availed, she was to be tortured; and this failing, be put to death.

The officer obeyed his orders. He tried persuasion at first, but Dimiana and her forty companions refused to denounce their faith. Forthwith they were tortured outrageously and inhumanely, but despite that, never wavered. Amid their pains and suffering, they kept praying and praising God. Finally they were all put to death and received the crown of martyrdom. Before Dimiana's head was cut off, she prayed, then proclaimed: "The Lord Christ I confess, on Him I rely, in His Name I die, and through Him I live forever".

A large crowd of people stood by and watched, and when they beheld her courage and steadfastness, and the patience with which she accepted torture, in a surge of miraculous exaltation many of them confessed the Christ, and were massacred on the spot.[20]

Notes (p. 110):

18. The sea-coast province, lying between the Rosetta and Damietta Nile branches, right on the Mediterranean.

19. A town twenty kilometers south of the coast and about forty kilometres southwest of the city of Damietta which is at the mouth of the Eastern branch of the Nile.

20. *Coptic Synaxarium*. 1969 ed: vol. 2, pp. 139-142 (under the 12th day of the Coptic month Bashans).

Recent Print and Digital Resources Related to Christianity in Africa

Compiled by Beth Restrick, Head, BU African Studies Library

Coptic Culture and Community: Daily Lives, Changing Times. Mariam F. Ayad (Editor). American University in Cairo Press, 2024. [Amazon](#). \$33.90 Hbk. ISBN-10: 1649031823, ISBN-13: 978-1649031822.

Summary: This volume brings together leading experts from a range of disciplines to examine aspects of the daily lived experiences of Egypt's Coptic Christian minority from late Antiquity to the present. In doing so, it serves as a supplement and a corrective to institutional or theological narratives, which are generally rooted in studying the wielders of historical power and control.

Coptic Culture and Community reveals the humanity of the Coptic tradition, giving granular depth to how Copts have lived their lives through and because of their faith for two thousand years. The first three sections consider in turn the breadth of the daily life approach, perspectives on poverty and power in a variety of different contexts and matters of identity and persecution. The final section reflects on the global Coptic diaspora, bringing themes studied for the early Coptic Church into dialog with Coptic experiences today. These broad categories help to link fundamental questions of socio-religious history with unique aspects of Coptic culture and its vibrant communities of individuals.

Dah, Ini Dorcas. **Gender and Holistic Mission: A Christian Response to the Lobi/Birifor Marriage for an Effective Transformational Development in West Africa (Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana).** Self-published. 2025. [Amazon](#). \$20.00 pbk. ISBN: 9798287616182.

Summary: Gender and Holistic Mission by Dr. Ini Dorcas Dah explores the intersection of gender, culture, and Christian mission, focusing on the Lobi/Birifor people of Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, and Ghana. It presents a detailed theological and socio-cultural analysis of marriage practices in the Lobi/Birifor society and their implications for women's empowerment and holistic development.

The book critically examines traditional Lobi/Birifor marriage customs and their impact on women, arguing that despite their vital roles in society, women face systemic oppression in both cultural and church contexts. It seeks to propose a Christian interpretation of marriage that supports gender equity, justice, and sustainable community transformation. [Amazon](#).

Fumanti, Mattia. **Religion and transnational citizenship in the African diaspora: Akan London.** Routledge, Abingdon, Oxon, 2023. [Routledge](#) \$54.99. Pbk. ISBN: 9781032422084

Summary: "This book focuses on Akan speaking Ghanaians in London and explores in detail the experience of African migrants living in Britain, investigating how

they construct their British citizenship through their membership of the church. Building on extensive ethnographic research in London and Ghana, the author explores the relationship between religion and citizenship, the emergence of transnational subjectivities, and the making of diaspora aesthetics among African migrants. Starting from the understanding that citizenship is dialogical, a status mediated by a subject's multiple and intersecting identities, the author highlights the limitations of existing conceptualizations of migrant citizenship. Anchored in a case study of the British/Ghanaian Methodist church as a transnational religious organization and cultural polity, the book explores diasporic religious subjectivities as both cosmopolitan and transnational, while being configured in emotionally and morally significant ways by the Methodist church, as well as family, ethnicity, and nation. Interdisciplinary by nature, this book will be of interest to a wide range researchers and scholars across the social sciences and humanities working in the fields of anthropology, religion, sociology, postcolonial studies, and African studies, and additionally policy makers interested in diaspora and migration studies"-- Provided by publisher.

Open Access Resources

Conduah, Emmanuel Nanabanyin, **Women's Leadership in Ghana's Catholic Colleges of Education Lived Experience and Catholic Identity.** (2024). Dissertation, Graduate School of Education, Fordham University. AAI31292868. URL: <https://research.library.fordham.edu/dissertations/AAI31292868>

Summary: This qualitative phenomenological study delves into the product of women's leadership in Catholic colleges of education in four regions of Ghana. Using the synergistic leadership and organizational culture theories as the conceptual frameworks, the study examined the essence of the lived experiences of women in leadership positions of these Catholic institutions and the Catholic identity. With a focus on Ghana, where the Church and the State Partnership manage Catholic colleges, the study sought to understand how women's leadership navigates some of the challenges that such affiliation poses to the Catholic identity of the colleges. To understand this phenomenon and answer the research questions, data was collected through semi-structured interviews with 12 women leaders and document analysis. The data revealed four significant themes: balanced leadership, relational leadership, Catholic identity, and Catholic education. Additionally, the sub themes included mentoring and women's empowerment, democratic leadership, collaboration and consensus, leadership for learning, holistic education, Catholic culture on campus, church-state partnership, and a majority non-Catholic student population. In conclusion, critical to women's leadership is an intentional leadership formation by stakeholders in Catholic education to enhance their skills and to keep the pipeline of women's leadership secured.

See Iris Habib el Masri reference in Book Excerpt note, p. 72.