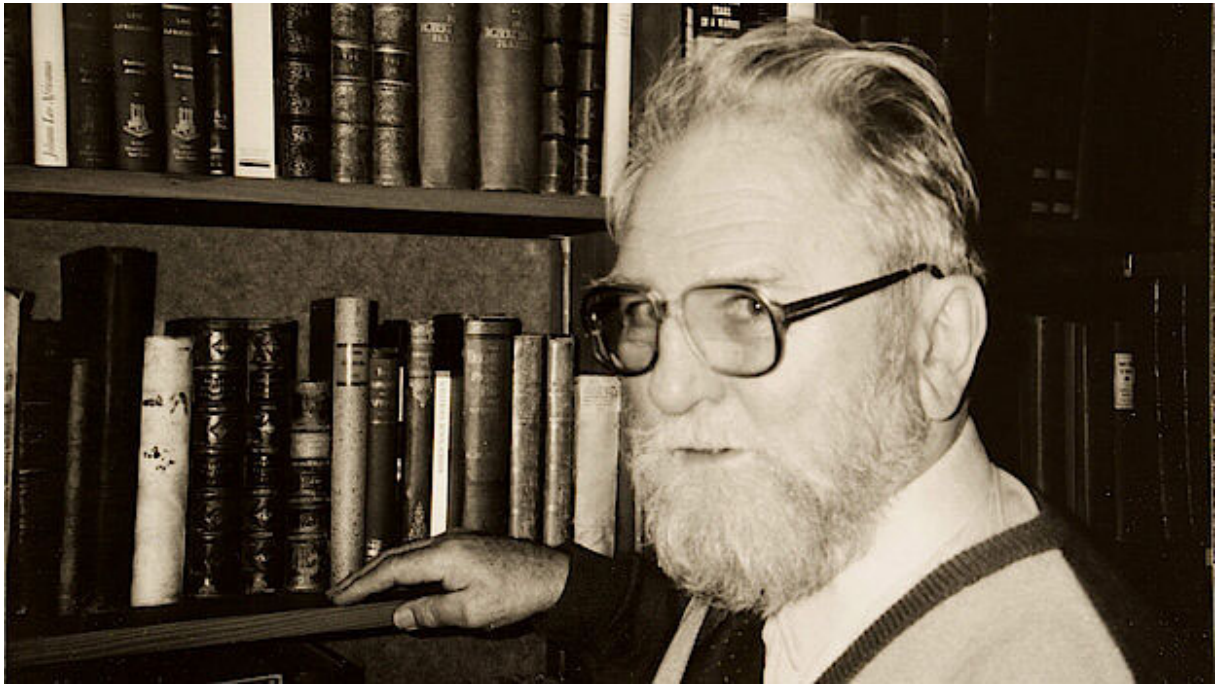




# Revisiting Histories and Cultures of African Diasporas, Religion and Belief



## Hans Werner Debrunner Symposium Programme

**Datum/Date:** 9 and 10 June 2023

**Tagungsort/Venue:** Basler Afrika Bibliographien, Klosterberg 23

[www.baslerafrika.ch](http://www.baslerafrika.ch)

With financial support from



**Freiwillige Akademische  
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**THURSDAY** 8 June 2023

Guided Tours

A. 14:00 Mission 21 Archive (formerly, Basel Mission Archive), by Patrick Moser  
Meeting point: Reception Hall, Missionsstrasse 21

B. 16:00 “Africa in Basel” city tour, by Veit Arlt, curated by ZASB.  
Meeting point: Basler Afrika Bibliographien, Klosterberg 23

**FRIDAY** 9 June 2023

8:30-9:30 Arrival | Registration | Coffee/Tea

9:30-9:40 Welcome | Introduction of Keynote Speaker, by Ernest Sewordor

9:40-10:30

- “Locating ‘Impartial History’ During the Era of Decolonisation: Debrunner’s Reflections on Science, Suffering, and Prejudice in Recollections of the African Past,” by *Cassandra Mark-Thiesen* (University of Bayreuth) Keynote Address

10:30-10:50 Coffee/Tea Break

10:50-11:40

- “The Impetus Hans Debrunner Gave to Post-colonial Readings of Presbyterian/Basel Mission History in Ghana,” by *Paul Jenkins* (affiliate of the University of Basel/Mission 21)

11:40-12:15 Moderated Discussion

12:15-13:00 Light Lunch

13:00-14:00 Guided tour of Hans Werner Debrunner’s Collections at the BAB,  
with Albert M. Debrunner (BAB), and Susanne Hubler Baier (BAB)

14:00-15:30 Panel 1: Religion and Ethnicity in Ghana and Togo

- “‘He came to his own’: Hans Debrunner on Indigenous Reception and African Initiatives in Mission History,” by *Nana Opare Kwakye* (University of Ghana)
- “Hans Werner Debrunner and the Conception of ‘Religion’ and ‘Ethnicity’ in Ewe Studies: A Critical Reappraisal,” by *Meera Venkatachalam* (University of Mumbai), *Malika Kraamer* (Ghana National Museum), and *Ablavi M. Amegnonka* (University of Kara, Togo)

Q&A

15:30-16:00 Coffee/Tea Break

16:00-17:00 “Transcultural Archival Inventory of the Intellectual Legacy of John S. Mbiti,  
Theologian and Philosopher of Religions”, by *Maria Mbiti* (Art College, Berne)

Q&A

17:30-18:30 Reception

19:00 Dinner by invitation from the Debrunner family





**SATURDAY** 10 June 2023

9:30-9:40 Welcome | Coffee/Tea

9:40-11:10 Panel 2: Presence and Prestige

- “Black Names Matter: Debrunner on African Presence and Prestige,” by *Paul Grant* (University of Wisconsin-Madison)
- “Lyrics, Spirits and Awakened Temporalities: Rethinking Presence and Disruption in the African Diaspora,” by *Angelantonio Grossi* (Saint Mary’s College of California)

Q&A

11:10-12:00 Coffee/Tea Break

12:00-13:00 Closing Session with AfroBasel, on What does Debrunner’s Research Mean to Afro-Diasporic Communities in Basel Today?

Moderated Discussion

13:00 Light Lunch





## ABSTRACTS

### **“Locating ‘Impartial History’ During the Era of Decolonisation: Debrunner’s Reflections on Science, Suffering, and Prejudice in Recollections of the African Past”**

While the current decolonization debate has tended to sideline scholarship, often dismissing it as just another product of the West, historical decolonization of the 1960s and 1970s saw more meaningful questions being raised about how scholarship, and especially historiography, could be improved. As a self-proclaimed “impartial historian”, Hans W. Debrunner was deeply concerned with the past, present and future of African historiography during this period, incl. how church and mission would assist knowledge production and understanding moving forward (94). Contemporary producers of new histories of Africa suddenly wielded new intellectual weapons, such as history journals published in Africa or at least under the guidance of Africans and members of the African diaspora. As a witness to this movement, Debrunner keenly understood it as “a conscious and intelligible reaction against the tendency of European colonizers to present Africa as a continent of savages without a history”; and “in this matter the Mission and the church in Togo [are] not quite innocent” (301), he explained in *A Church between Colonial Powers* (1967). At the same time, he was also critical of certain strands of this new historiography that glorified the African past. This paper is concerned with Debrunner’s challenging search for “an impartial, honest, scholarly study of the history of...Africa.” In doing so it explores some of the African historians of Ghana and Togo whom he admired such as Reindorf, Hazoume, and Kwakume, for their approach to the work. Finally, it investigates Debrunner’s own scholarly trajectory for what it may reveal about his personal engagement with history as a discipline over time.

### **“The impetus Hans Debrunner gave to post-colonial readings of Presbyterian/Basel Mission history in Ghana”**

This paper examines the implicit tensions between Hans Debrunner’s two big but very different contributions to African church history in Ghana. On the one hand is his *History of Christianity in Ghana* (1967) with its idiosyncratic construction, and, on the other, his “Abstracts”—the research format he developed for transmitting, in English, the German MSS in the Basel Mission Archive’s Ghana collection, spanning 1828-c.50. The contrast between Debrunner’s *History* and his Abstracts raises important questions about resources and methodology. How valuable are the MS sources closest to the missionaries’ experience compared with edited versions appearing later in BM publications? Is there a *prima facie* case for arguing that the interests of the supporters “at home” influenced the way that events were described either in original MSS, or in the published versions or both, and thus obscuring what was really going on? The Abstracts and what they indicated about the MS archive in Basel were the basis for some decisions there about how to frame research on Ghana—influenced by independent academic research in the 1990s in Basel and Freiburg. These research works are crucial to the current project to publish edited versions of the English reports of the Ghanaian pastor Theophil Opoku 1868-1908 (which I am editing together with Michelle Gilbert, and an anthropologist whose specialisation is the Akuapem kingdom in Ghana). Altogether, Debrunner was like a distant ancestor encouraging his intellectual descendants to avoid being tied down to a too simple missionary narrative, and to be open, when it came, to the most radical and perhaps unexpected extension of the range of church and mission history in Ghana.





**“He came to his own’: Hans Debrunner on Indigenous Reception and African Initiatives in Mission History”**

Global Christian influence has swung from the global north to the south with sub-Saharan Africa becoming a major centre. Some scholars have argued that in the twenty-first century, Africa shall be the representative face of world Christianity. This phenomenon totally contrasts the nationalists’ prediction that with the fall of colonialism, Christianity in Africa would be decimated if not completely obliterated. Such a nationalist feeling was predicated on the assumption that Christianity in Africa was a foreign imposition on African communities. Employing a historical approach, this paper argues that the Christian gospel in Africa has survived in Africa because, as Hans Debrunner wrote, it has found its way back to its native home. The paper demonstrates that even the 19th-century missionary success was not the result of only what the Europeans did but also what African chiefs and their people did. It affirms the position that mission history must neither be viewed from a Eurocentric perspective nor a nationalist perspective but must take an ecumenical approach that recognizes all the players on the field.

**“Hans Werner Debrunner and the Conception of ‘Religion’ and ‘Ethnicity’ in Ewe Studies: A Critical Reappraisal.”**

Hans W. Debrunner authored three seminal works on religion in Ghana, in 1959, 1965, and 1967. These writings contained discussions of themes such as “witchcraft”, “heathenism” and Christian “conversion”, which became keenly studied (separately or in conjunction) in the works of future scholars of the Ewe. Debrunner discussed these concepts in relation to key social changes which were taking place against the backdrop of “modernity.” In addition, Debrunner’s ethnographic accounts—which drew from his predecessors, the Bremen missionaries who documented that region from the 1860s—were instrumental in cementing the idea that the Ewe-speaking peoples were a single ethnolinguistic/ national bloc with a shared history, culture, and destiny. This idea had longstanding ramifications for anti-colonial agitations and for internal politics in the burgeoning postcolonial nations of Ghana and Togo. This contribution to the Hans Werner Debrunner Symposium is styled as a discussion between two non-African scholars of Ewe religion and history (Meera and Malika), and a “native” Ewe scholar (Ablavi). We discuss how religion and ethnicity were conceived and portrayed in the works of Debrunner, and how these ideas have since reverberated in Ewecentric scholarship for over six decades.

**“Transcultural archival inventory of the intellectual legacy of John S. Mbiti, theologian and philosopher of religions”**

The intellectual legacy of John S. Mbiti (1931-2019) is extremely rich and unique: it is a testimony of more than half a century of Swiss-Kenyan history with global reach. John S. Mbiti’s interdisciplinary work centers on the significance and role of religions and their transformation in society throughout history. His particular focus is on Christianity and on interreligious and intercultural dialogue. John S. Mbiti is considered the «father of modern African theology» because his research laid the foundation for overcoming established Eurocentric misconceptions about African religions. Equally important is his role as a pioneer of a specifically African Christian theology.

The collection of archival material is privately owned by the family in Burgdorf, Switzerland. With this project, the family seeks to secure the material in a publicly accessible archive to make it available for future generations, and thus contribute to individual and collective memory. Prior to securing the collection, a pilot study is conducted by Prof. Dr. Andreas Heuser (Professorship of Non-European Christianity) and Maria Mbiti (daughter of John S. Mbiti) with students from the







Faculty of Theology at the University of Basel. The aim of this study is to create a first exemplary archival inventory of the largely complete documentation of John S. Mbiti's parish ministry in Burgdorf (1981-1996). Furthermore, the study attempts to make an initial assessment of the content of the material, focusing on intercultural issues and different representations of religious traditions.

This experimentally designed course was perceived by the students to be groundbreaking for further evaluations of the archival material; in particular, the practical introduction to methodological questions of archival indexing was considered very valuable. For the first time, a vivid impression of the intercultural impact of this important African theologian could be gained. It was possible to get insights into the transcultural translation of African themes into a local Swiss context (Burgdorf, 1980s). The results show that the archival material offers the rare opportunity to reveal complex cultural interweaving processes that encompass both the micro-level of biography and global history. The intellectual estate of John S. Mbiti is therefore of scholarly and public interest, as it opens a wide spectrum of research fields for the academic world of social sciences, humanities, and philosophy, as well as for international research collaborations.

#### **“Black Names Matter: Debrunner on African Presence and Prestige”**

In the last forty years, nearly every history of Africans in Europe has cited Debrunner's *Presence and Prestige* (1979). Most notable for its several dozen “bio-bibliographies”—short vitae of individual and generally unknown Africans—this book leaves the reader impressed by the scale of African presence in Europe, but also hungry for more. By naming otherwise nameless people, Debrunner invites scholars to develop these Africans' lives into three-dimensional biographies. These black lives matter less for their exotic accomplishments than for their individuality—by being named they become real people. While *Presence and Prestige* cover much of the continent over nearly a millennium, this paper explores Debrunner's motivation through a narrow selection of his named subjects: those who lived in Basel in the 1860s. A few, such as David Asante of the Basel Mission, are well known, but less-prestigious men and women were also present, including Susanna Anjama, who lived at Chrischona and dedicated her short life to serving Basel's poor. Anjama was perhaps the first African missionary to Switzerland, but there was also a tragic quality to her life, uncovered ever so delicately in Debrunner's research. Anjama's story points toward a profound, but never explicitly stated, theological argument latent in Debrunner's work: that Europe is neither the creator nor the proprietor of Christianity, and therefore that the vectors of global Christianity are reciprocal: Europeans may receive gifts from Africans.

#### **“Lyrics, Spirits and Awakened Temporalities: Rethinking Presence and Disruption in the African Diaspora”**

Indigenous ways of knowing lexicalized around the historically constructed images of *Vodu* and *Akom* live through the work of spiritualists and their shrines in today's Southern Ghana. In the last decade, they have also found new articulations through digital infrastructures. Responding to the hegemony of Christianity in the region, the figures of the *hunor*, *bokor*, *mamisi*, and *okomfo* — together with the spirits they work with — inhabit social media and other instances of the Internet, speaking to a search for power and actualization that is transnational in nature. Thematising the temporalities awakened by initiations into ancestral worshipping, this paper centers around an ethnographic account of the work of a musician and Mami priestess that operates on both coasts of the Atlantic. Moving with her lyrics across recording studios, shrines, and home altars in the US and in Ghana,





it reflects on the longing for intimacy of the diaspora and how the presence of spirits sublimates into visual and aural forms, raising questions concerning the status of technical reproduction.

