



EDITORIAL ESSAY

Retrieving Honey from the Hive

Resource Accessibility in Africa and the Caribbean

Joshua Robert BARRON

ORCID: 0000-0002-9503-6799
ACTEA, Enoomatasiani, Kenya
Joshua.Barron@ACTEAweb.org

Introduction

Africa is not poor. Depending on the data set being used, the annual GDP of the African continent, where I live, is between 2.8 and 3.7 trillion US dollars.¹ While the per capita GDP in Global North (minority world) nations remains impressively higher than those of Africa, the continent's GDP represents an amount of wealth that is unimaginably large for most of us. But obviously not all Africans have equal access to resources. Libya's oil wealth gives it a per capita GDP of USD \$ 7,091. Little Burundi's per capita GDP is only \$ 233. However, Burundi is home to a number of multimillionaires who take a lion's share of the annual income gained each year, distorting the average: Burundi's poor are, by global standards, very poor indeed. Statistics for the Caribbean tell a similar story. While many Caribbeans, like many Africans, suffer real and devastating poverty, the Caribbean itself is not poor.

Africa and the Black Caribbean are not poor. Whether in terms of natural resources or the potential of human work and creativity, they are wealthy. But it often seems as though the wealthy industrialized nations of the world — the former imperial colonizers from Europe, the new economic colonizers in both West (e.g., the USA, Canada, EU countries) and East (e.g., China) — are

¹ All of my calculations are based on figures reported by Pallavi Rao, "Mapped: Just Five Countries Make Up Half of Africa's GDP," *Visual Capitalist*, 5 October 2024, <https://www.visualcapitalist.com/mapped-just-five-countries-make-up-half-of-africas-gdp/>. By way of locating myself within this discussion, I was born and raised in the United States, but have lived with my family in Kenya for more than two decades, where I have served in various ministry capacities and currently as a theological educator and editor. While I am engaging both African and Caribbean realities in this essay, my primary context, and therefore the source of more of my statistics and examples, is the African continent.

Joshua Robert Barron, *managing co-editor*
**Editorial Essay: Retrieving Honey from the Hive:
Resource Accessibility in Africa and the Caribbean**

continuing to become wealthier at the expense of Africa and Africans, of the Caribbean and Caribbeans.

Africa and the Black Caribbean are not poor. When it comes to creativity, knowledge production, and sheer entrepreneurial invention, Africa and the Caribbean are wealthy beyond measure. In my home of Kenya, for example, seminomadic pastoralists who live far from access to paved roads or electricity (other than solar panels and small but expensive portable generators) have nonetheless had access to mobile money services, even without having a smart phone, since M-Pesa was launched by Safaricom in 2007. Its use was widespread across all economic levels before most people in North America were aware of the possibilities. When it comes to knowledge production, specifically in the areas of theology, biblical studies, and World Christianity, Africans and Caribbeans of African descent are regularly producing many new articles, chapters, monographs, and launching new journals each year to catalogue. However, accessibility remains very uneven.

Publishing and Resource Access in Africa and the Black Caribbean

Many African and Caribbean scholars publish their work with publishers in the Global North. As a result, even venerable senior scholars like Kenya's Jesse N. K. Mugambi cannot afford to buy a copy of a book in which they have a chapter, meaning it is most likely also unaffordable to their local faith and academic communities, whom we might otherwise expect to be a primary audience.² While theological education in the Global North / minority world seems to be rapidly plummeting — the theological world was recently stunned by the announcement that after 130 years, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School (TEDS), one of the largest and most influential seminaries in the world, would be shuttering its campus — theological education in Africa continues to rise. Every year, more theological institutions are applying to the Association for Christian Theological Education in Africa (ACTEA) for accreditation and the membership rolls of academic societies such as the Africa Society of Evangelical Theology (ASET) and the African Homiletics Society (AHS) continue to grow. Likewise, the Caribbean Evangelical Theological Association (CETA) continues to be active and participates in International Council for Evangelical Theological Education (ICETE) international conferences. The Conference on Theology in the Caribbean Today (CTCT) maintains robust activity.

Yet in both Africa and the Caribbean, teaching faculty and students alike are often unable to afford access to premier minority world journals and publishers. Subscription services such as Brill, EBSCO Host, JSTOR, Project Muse, Routledge, Sage Journals, and Wiley Online Journals are generally priced

² This is a complaint Prof. Jesse has shared with me on more than one occasion.

Joshua Robert Barron, *managing co-editor*
**Editorial Essay: Retrieving Honey from the Hive:
Resource Accessibility in Africa and the Caribbean**

for prestigious (wealthy) minority world academic libraries and are simply out-of-reach for most of us here in Africa and the Caribbean. The same is true of essential book series such as Bible and Theology in Africa (Peter Lang), African Theological Studies (Brill), and Studies of Religion in Africa (Brill). Some series are more reasonably priced — such as African Christian Studies Series (Pickwick Publications, an imprint of Wipf and Stock) and the ASET Series (Langham Global Library, an imprint of Langham Literature)³ — but international shipping and exorbitant local customs duties on imported books prove an obstacle that is difficult to overcome.⁴ Therefore, knowledge produced by scholars here in Africa (I am writing from Kenya) is frequently exported to the minority world and then imported back to Africa for minority world profit at rates that we here in Africa simply cannot afford to access. The situation is all too similar for Caribbean scholars.

As a grassroots theological educator, I have long been passionate about accessibility of materials for my students. During the Covid pandemic, my Bible Institute certificate level courses in rural areas of Kenya were canceled by government shutdowns. Unable to engage in my usual teaching activities, I turned to the opportunities offered by social media platforms and virtual venues to continue to engage with and mentor African pastors, students, and theological instructors. One result of that was that I co-founded, with my Zambian friend Wakahuholesanga Chisola, the African Christian Theology network as a private (closed) Facebook group (www.facebook.com/groups/AfricanChristianTheology). The group caters to both Africans on the continent and those of African descent in the Diaspora, including in the Caribbean; as well as to a diverse contingent of interested scholars. Two resources of this group include a small but growing curated digital library (we are careful to stay within the bounds of local and international copyright laws) for use by members; and a number of curated topical bibliographies to help members know what is available and where to find those resources. My involvement in this network led to some important, if unexpected, opportunities: my coming on staff with ACTEA, my being part of the founding of ACTEA's diamond open access academic journal⁵ (which you, dear reader, are now reading), and being invited to participate as a mentor in the Transatlantic Writing Project (TWP) — of which this special issue is one encouraging outcome.

³ For the sake of full disclosure, I will note that I am currently one of the series editors of African Christian Studies Series and I have contributed chapters to a number of volumes in the ASET Series. However, I do not receive any income from either of those series.

⁴ In francophone Africa, the many works published locally by Éditions du CITAF are more accessible.

⁵ Note well that the network group is not affiliated with ACTEA, in spite of its sharing a name with this journal.

Publishing and Resource Acquisition in the TWP

Working with my TWP mentees to help them hone the crafts of researching and writing has been both delightful and rewarding. I particularly enjoyed our face-to-face workshops in Cape Coast, Ghana and Kingston, Jamaica. I was glad to help one of the participants to connect with a publisher (the HippoBooks imprint of Langham) and am looking forward to seeing his monograph; he has also become a dear friend. For the TWP as a whole, I offered introductions to the wide theological wealth coming out of Africa (lists of book series, key minority world journals particularly pertinent to Africa and the Black Caribbean, and key journals published in Africa, with a focus on open access journals); production of Africana bibliographies; the process of submitting articles to journals; and how to write book reviews. I emphasized the importance of both taking advantage of existing Africana material and considering the accessibility of our own published work.



**Mentors and participants enjoying the TWP bookshop and resources
— St Nicholas Seminary, Cape Coast, Ghana**

One aspect of this, and a delightful part of our in-person workshops, was the opportunity to run “conference book shops” where we were able to provide

Joshua Robert Barron, *managing co-editor*
**Editorial Essay: Retrieving Honey from the Hive:
Resource Accessibility in Africa and the Caribbean**

relevant materials at low or no cost due to the generosity of several publishers, as well as USPG (United Society Partners for the Gospel), who helped to make this vision a reality. Wipf & Stock provided us with at-cost titles from their African Christian Studies Series; SCM Press offered a discount on selected new publications; and Brill provided a variety of materials — free, low-cost, and full-cost — for our participants. Colleagues from Akrofi-Christaller Institute (Akropong-Akuapem, Ghana) helpfully brought us a wide-ranging selection of issues of their *Journal of African Christian Thought* and selected Regnum publications for re-sale. Though these materials from Akrofi are already affordably priced for the continent, they are only available in print and so not always readily accessible to a wide readership. So, we were delighted to make these treasures available to our participants at our two in-person conferences (in Cape Coast, Ghana, and Kingston, Jamaica).

Of Honey and Knowledge

Several years ago, I read Psalm 119:11 in the Maa (the language of the Maasai people, sometimes known in East Africa as *kiMaasai*) translation. As a boy, I had memorized this verse in KJV and NIV-1984: “Thy word have I hid in mine heart, that I might not sin against thee” and “I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you.” The Maa Bible, however, does not use the usual verb for ‘hide,’ *aisudoó*. Instead, it uses *ashum*, which means ‘to put something of value in a safe place so as to have access to it when it is needed.’ This verb is much closer in meaning to the Hebrew verb (*šāpanētí*) used in that verse. I translate the Maa, *atashuma nanu ororei lino to ltau lai pee maas ng’oki tialo iyie*, into English as ‘I have stored up your word in my heart as a valuable resource so that I might not sin before you.’⁶ The whole point of storing up God’s word as a valuable resource is not simply so that it will be kept safe from being stolen or damaged but more specifically so that it will be readily accessible when one has need of it.

I tend to have Psalm 119:11 in the back of my mind whenever I read or hear Matthew 13:52 — “Now [Jesus] said to them, “Therefore every knowledge professional who has been made a disciple of the kingdom of heaven is similar to a person who manages a household who brings out from his or her treasury what is new as well as what is old” (my translation). As a knowledge professional — or a *scribe*, as *grammateus* is traditionally translated — and theological educator, it is not my job to hide away knowledge as a hoarder. It is rather my vocation to store up knowledge so that I can bring out treasured

⁶ I have explored this previously, and with more technical detail, in my article, “My God is enkAi: A Reflection of Vernacular African Theology,” *Journal of Language, Culture, and Religion* 2, no. 1 (2021): 1–20, pp. 14–15.

Joshua Robert Barron, *managing co-editor*
**Editorial Essay: Retrieving Honey from the Hive:
Resource Accessibility in Africa and the Caribbean**

resources both new and old to share with my students (and with my colleagues) for the benefit of the community . . . and to equip them to do the same.

In Maasai culture, honey is very important, even more so than in the ancient Israelite culture of the Old Testament. But honey is fiercely protected by bees. There are some people who know the way of safely retrieving honey from the wild bee hives. I was once on a foot safari, in 2007 or 2008, accompanying a group of Christian Maasai elders visiting remote homesteads to share the good news about Jesus. We chanced upon some young men who knew the ways of bees. They were harvesting some honeycomb from a wild hive. Cultural assumptions about community and hospitality dictated that we each be given a taste of the honey. Under the fierce equatorial sun, the honey brightened our eyes. I have also seen my students' eyes brighten from the sweetness of unexpected access to important resources.

Too often, published materials are like honey in a comb — too well protected by the sting of pricing that is too much for scholars from African and Caribbean economies to bear. It is critical that those of us who know the ways not of bees but of publishing intervene to make the 'eye-brightening honey' of resources as widely accessible as possible to those seeking it.

From Inaccessible to Un-accessed Resources

While I have briefly outlined some of the many challenges relating to the inaccessibility of critical scholarly resources in Africa and the Caribbean, there is also a separate question of those resources which remain un-accessed. On that foot safari, we were offered both types of comb — pieces of sweet, dripping honeycomb and pieces of comb housing *inkera oo lotorok* ('bee larvae'). For pastoralists tending livestock all day under a blazing equatorial sun, the bee larvae, composed of approximately 50% protein and 50% fat, are a nutritional powerhouse. I have been told that a little *enaisho oo lotorok* ('honey') and a little *inkera oo lotorok* can keep a man on his feet all day. But as an American then still new to Maasai culture, I confess that the very thought of eating bee larvae made me feel a bit squeamish. But it turns out that not all Maasai like to eat *inkera oo lotorok*. While some of us partook of this rich source of nutrients, a couple of my Maasai peers in line before me refrained. "We don't eat the baby bees," they told me. So, I was able to gratefully accept the honey yet politely decline the larvae without cultural offense. Nevertheless, I am sure some of those with us were puzzled by our refusal of such a revitalizing offering.

Similarly, while reflecting on the outcomes of the TWP conferences with other TWP leaders, one point of ongoing pondering brought this second half of my anecdote to mind. We certainly saw 'brightened eyes' as participants went in and out of our 'book shops.' Indeed, some of the best conference photos were those capturing the expression of delight on the faces of those who were finally

Joshua Robert Barron, *managing co-editor*
**Editorial Essay: Retrieving Honey from the Hive:
Resource Accessibility in Africa and the Caribbean**

able to hold in their hands a published, physical copy of their own work, or that of a new-found colleague in the TWP, or a long-sought, seemingly inaccessible treasure finally procured — not to mention those whose eyes were brightened with the unexpected discovery of past African-Caribbean theological conversations in older publications. But another helpful offering, and a small way to address the imbalances discussed above, was a generous offer from Brill to provide free access, where possible, to selected online resources (otherwise behind paywalls), with TWP participants invited to contact Brill's representative with requests for specific titles relevant for their research/writing. Two of us project leaders (interestingly, one in Africa and one in the Caribbean), made glad use of this offer, but — puzzlingly for us — none of the approximately 25 participants did. We remain uncertain as to why this free offer was not enthusiastically taken up — perhaps in the same way that those on my foot safari who appreciated the taste and nutritional bounty of the 'baby bees' might have wondered why others of us declined such a rich source of sustenance.

It remains a point for our ongoing consideration: on the one hand, the realities of the 'hiddenness' and inaccessibility of many academic materials remain true; but perhaps there are other factors we have not identified which made partaking, on this occasion, somehow unpalatable, just as the idea of eating 'baby bees' is unpalatable to me. Was the offer not understood by participants? Or, was the online aspect of these resources somehow off-putting, or was further support needed in conducting literature searches with Brill? Or something else?

Another Maasai cultural reference might be pertinent here. The Maa word *erutore* means "collecting / collection-of wild-honey." Curiously, even though honey is a highly valued commodity that is necessary for many traditional cultural practices (including formal marriage engagements), traditionally the practice of *erutore* was despised as 'non-Maasai' work. The honey is recognized as immensely valuable, but the act of harvesting of honey has traditionally been scorned within Maasai culture. It seems as if the work of gathering academic resources is sometimes similarly devalued.

Conclusion

Africa and the Black Caribbean may be poor by the standards of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. Certainly, there are individuals in those regions who are afflicted with material poverty. But Africa and the Black Caribbean are not poor theologically or academically. In both cases, what is needed is more equitable access — *equitable* being not just in terms of cost, but accessible in ways that meet the needs and preferences of scholars — to existing wealth. The TWP leadership and mentors have been blessed with access to treasures of knowledge and experience.

Joshua Robert Barron, *managing co-editor*
**Editorial Essay: Retrieving Honey from the Hive:
Resource Accessibility in Africa and the Caribbean**

We have endeavored — successfully, I think — to “bring out treasures both new and old” for the project participants, likewise benefitting as leaders and mentors. This has included skill development in how to *find* treasures new and old in the research process and how to *share* this knowledge and wisdom in their own writing and publication, making these treasures more widely accessible for academy, classroom, and congregation. The treasures found in this special issue, in addition to the extensive bibliography of project publications, speak for themselves.