



Akiga Sai from the perspective of Dutch Reformed Church missionaries: The documents of the DRC Cape Synod's Sub-Commission for Foreign Missions

Lizelle Smit

Stellenbosch University, South Africa

lkattekatte@gmail.com

Abstract

Akiga Sai (1898-1959) is heralded as one of the few indigenous African anthropologists and historians of the early twentieth century. His work for the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa (DRCSA) as evangelist, teacher, and translator (1915-1945), however, is under-researched. Furthermore, despite the significance of Sai's life and work, no biography of his life has been published. This article illustrates that it is possible to extract valuable biographical and contextual data regarding Sai from the records of the DRCSA Sudan Mission, demonstrating the collection's value regarding early documentation of indigenous communities. By compiling a partial biographical profile of the Nigerian Tiv writer, politician, translator, and evangelist Akiga Sai as a case study, this article highlights the importance of the DRCSA's archival collections, specifically the documentation relating to the Cape Synod's Sub-Commission for Foreign Missions [*Buitelandse Sending Subkommissie*]. Part of the DRCSA's heritage is its archive: the rich and varied sources, available in a wide variety of languages, contains valuable information about aspects of (Southern) African history unavailable elsewhere.

Keywords

*Akiga Sai; History of Tiv; Dutch Reformed Church Archives;
Synod of the Western Cape; Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa;
Cape Synod's Sub-Commission for Foreign Missions*

Introduction

This article compiles a biographical profile of Akiga Sai (1898-1959) by employing the documents of the Cape Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) in South Africa's Sub-Commission for Foreign Missions. Sai was a Tiv (Nigerian) writer, anthropologist, historian, politician, and newspaper editor. He also worked for the DRC as an evangelist, teacher, and translator (1915-1945). For this special issue of the *Stellenbosch Theological Journal*, commemorating the bicentenary of the Cape Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church [*Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk in Suid-Afrika*] (DRCSA),¹ this article suggests that an integral part of the DRCSA's heritage is its archival holdings, especially as it relates to the records of, and concomitant research possibilities relating to, various indigenous African communities. Ken Chisa and Ruth Hoskins assert that “[t]he importance of church records cannot be underestimated as these are some of a nation's earliest records of identity as well as a source of local history” and are especially important in relation to “indigenous population[s]”.²

However, one of the problems relating to religious archives, in general, is that many of these holdings and records are “hidden”: thus, these records are inaccessible due to an archive's location, poor indexing, or language barriers, or archives may simply be unknown to the general public resulting from a lack of available data online regarding its collections.³ For example, the catalogue of the DRCSA Archives [*Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk in Suid-Afrika: Argief*] (DRCSAA) is not searchable by members of the public, finding aids are mostly in Afrikaans and thus, important collections remain hidden and underutilised.⁴

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- 1 The official name of the Western Cape Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church is the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa (DRCSA). I use DRCSA and its colloquial counterpart, Cape Synod, interchangeably in this article for style reasons; using DRCSA sometimes hampers the formulation and readability of sentences.
 - 2 Ken Chisa and Ruth Hoskins, “Managing Church Records Relating to Indigenous Communities,” *Mousaion* 34, no. 3 (2016): 24.
 - 3 Kim Eberhard, “Managing Non-government & Private Records in a National Framework,” (paper presented at the Australian Society of Archivists 2013 Conference, Canberra, 15-18 October), 5.
 - 4 The *NG Kerkargief* website (<https://www.kerkargief.co.za/>), however, lists the available collections in English and offers search guidelines. The DRC archive no longer makes use of conventional printed inventories and indexes. Data is captured (in Afrikaans) as

In light of the ‘hidden’ value of church archives, the aim of this article is threefold: Employing the underutilised records, unavailable elsewhere, of the DRC Cape Synod’s Sub-Commission for Foreign Missions and its personnel to shed light on lesser-known aspects of Akiga Sai’s life and work, serves the function of highlighting the importance of this particular collection as it relates to indigenous African communities, offers new biographical data regarding Akiga Sai and demonstrates the archival holdings as an integral part of the heritage of the Cape Synod.⁵

The Cape Synod’s Commission for Foreign Missions conducted missionary work in various locations in Southern Africa and in Tivland (Nigeria). The Cape Synod supported missionary endeavours in Bechuanaland (now Botswana) from 1877, in Nyasaland (now Malawi) from 1889, in Mashonaland (now Zimbabwe) from 1891, in Portuguese East Africa (now Mozambique) from 1908 and in Sudan (the Tivland region of Nigeria) from 1909.⁶ DRC missionaries were often the first white settlers amongst indigenous communities and opened the first mission-run schools and hospitals. DRC mission work during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries coalesced evangelical work with general social development, education, and the offering of medical services.⁷ The first DRC missionaries who settled in often unchartered territories were pioneers in developing indigenous African languages as written languages with the aid of trained indigenous

part of one catalogue with Inmagic DB/TextWorks 2015 software. Numerous attempts have been made to upgrade the software to enable the public to search the catalogue, but the all too familiar phrase in heritage institutions, ‘lack of funding’, hampered these efforts.

- 5 The Dutch Reformed Church of South Africa currently has ten regional synods. However, the DRC consisted of four regional synods during the demarcated period (1877-1961) covered by this article which discusses the missionary endeavours of the Cape Synod. During the nineteenth century four regional synods were formed. The Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa (colloquially referred to as the Cape Synod, Cape Church or *Kaapse Kerk*) was constituted in 1824, the Synod of the Free State in 1864, the Natal Synod in 1865 and the Transvaal Synod in 1866; P.B. van der Watt, *Die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk 1834-1866* (Pretoria: NG Kerkboekhandel, 1977), 121-138.
- 6 J.M. Cronjé, *Aan God die Dank: Geskiedenis van die Sending van die Ned. Geref. Kerk Deel II* (Pretoria: N.G.-Kerkboekhandel, 1981).
- 7 Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa: Archives (hereafter DRCSAA) [NG Kerk in SA: *Argief*], Stellenbosch, Pamphlet collection, PAM 5526, *Efata: Skool vir Blindes en Doves*, Umtata.

evangelists (as was the case with the Chikaranga, Shona, Chichewa and Tiv languages).⁸ Akiga Sai was involved with a variety of translations and texts written and printed by the missionaries in Tivland for which he received due credit in the documentation of the synod. However, I demonstrate that this information is not publicly available in the corpus of texts pertaining to his life and work.



Akiga Sai

Akiga Sai is heralded as one of the few indigenous African anthropologists and historians of the early twentieth century.⁹ He collected, recorded and then published the (oral) history of his people, providing explanations and interpretations of Tiv cultural practices, “philosophy, religion, language [and] ecology”.¹⁰ Significantly, Sai’s *History of the Tiv* (2015),¹¹ partially translated by Rupert East as *Akiga’s Story: The Tiv Tribe as seen by one of its Members* (1939),¹² was written in the Tiv language (completed by Sai in 1935 as *Histeri u Tiv*). The book is considered as “canonical”,¹³ “seminal”,¹⁴ and

“amazing”,¹⁵ described as a complex “many-genred text”¹⁶ that is “perhaps unrivalled among any traditional histories derived from the native

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- 8 Hendrik Frederik Johannes Mulder, “Die aandeel van Sendelinge van die NG Kerk aan Bybelvertaling” Universiteit van Pretoria, Nagraadse Diploma in Teologie. 18-119. Chikaranga (sometimes referred to as Vakaranga by DRC missionaries) is a dialect of Shona.
- 9 James Tar Tsaaior, “Those Days and These Days: Akiga’s Narrativization of the Tiv Nation in History of the Tiv,” *Africa* 85, no. 4 (2015): 599.
- 10 Tsaaior, “Those Days,” 599.
- 11 Benjamin Akiga Sai, *The History of the Tiv*, trans. Harold Bergsma & Martin Akiga et al (London and Ibadan: International African Institute and Bookcraft, 2015).
- 12 Akiga Sai, *Akiga’s Story: The Tiv Tribe as seen by one of its Members*, trans. Rupert East (London: Oxford University Press, 1939).
- 13 Tsaaior, “Those Days,” 599.
- 14 Son Gyoh, “Extrapolating History and Anthropology in Akiga’s ‘the History of Tiv,’” *Academia*. [Online]. Available: https://www.academia.edu/34338697/Extrapolating_History_and_Anthropology_in_Akigas_the_History_of_Tiv [Accessed: May 22, 2024].
- 15 Harold Bergsma, “Prologue: History of the Tiv,” *Africa* 85, no. 4 (2015): 617.
- 16 Richard Fardon, “Do you hear me? It is me, Akiga: Akiga’s Story and Akiga Sai’s History,” *Africa* 85, no. 4 (2015): 595.

language by members of their own societies”.¹⁷ Its academic use as a source text for Tiv linguists, historians and anthropologists cannot be overstated.¹⁸

Atah Pine describes Sai as person of firsts: “Akiga Sai was the first Tiv man to be baptized as a Christian, the first Tiv man to read and write, the first Tiv man to write a letter, first Tiv parliamentarian, first Tiv newspaper editor, and first Tiv man to write a book”.¹⁹ James Tar Tsaaior explains that “Akiga himself has acquired an enduring and widespread reputation. He is a household name, not only among his Shitile kith and kin, but also among Tiv and world scholars and researchers in the sociology and anthropology of African indigenous peoples”.²⁰ Despite the significance of Sai’s life and work “there is no full biography of the [...] writer” and Richard Fardon contends that this gap “deserves to be filled by someone able to research in both Tiv and Hausa”.²¹ Though in complete agreement with Fardon, this article illustrates that conducting research in Afrikaans is also imperative to realise the desire of completing a biography of Sai. The Afrikaans missionaries of the DRC from South Africa who worked in Nigeria amongst the Tiv are integral to Sai’s story: they taught him to read, trained him as an evangelist and teacher and worked closely with him. They encouraged Sai to collect and record Tiv oral history and employed him as a translator. Missionaries’ Afrikaans personal diaries, letters, reports, mission diaries and minutes of meetings and official correspondence with the Mission’s Synodal Commission frequently mention Sai’s varied activities at the different mission stations. Though these texts and descriptions of Sai are coloured by the missionaries’ own biases, beliefs, and culture, and are embedded in complicated colonial discourses, they shed invaluable light on the fragments of Sai’s life unavailable in any other archive. To write the ‘full biography’ of Sai, consulting these sources is essential.

17 Bergsma, “Prologue,” 617.

18 Tsaaior, “Those Days,” 599-601.

19 Atah Pine, “Akiga Sai: Anthropologist or Historian? Notes Towards and Epistemological Identity,” *Academia*. [Online]. Available: https://www.academia.edu/2973665/AKIGA_SAI_ANTHROPOLOGIST_OR_HISTORIAN_NOTES_TOWARDS_AN_EPISTEMOLOGICAL_IDENTITY [Accessed: May 22, 2024].

20 Tsaaior, “Those Days,” 600.

21 Fardon, “Do you,” 573.

Language, however, poses a “barrier”²² to access these documents (and ‘hides’ the collection, to paraphrase Kim Eberhard). Apart from the Afrikaans DRC missionaries who worked in Tivland decades ago, there would be few individuals able to read Tiv, Hausa and Afrikaans, effectively “render[ing]” this archive “inaccessible”²³ to Tiv researchers. Isabel S. Schellnack-Kelly states that “[a]rchival institutions can only be regarded as worthwhile if they are able to provide access to their collections” by traversing the language barriers created by their collections. By compiling a partial biography of aspects of Sai’s life and work in the academic lingua franca, English, a form of access is provided to this specific collection of the DRC Archives. The main focus of this biographical profile pertains to Sai’s work as an evangelist, teacher, and translator.

Background to the *Soedan sending* [Sudan Mission] collection

The first mission commission of the DRCSA was constituted by the Synod of 1857 as the *Zending Commissie*, responsible for both internal and foreign missions. In 1873, this commission officially split into two separate commissions, formally known as the *De Binnenlandsche Zending Commissie* (Commission for Internal Missions) and *De Buitelandsche Zending Commissie* (Commission for Foreign Missions).²⁴ In 1903, a Commission for General Mission work (officially called the *Algemene Sendingkommissie*) was appointed by the synod to oversee mission work. Mission work was again divided into two sub-commissions, called the *Binnelandse Sending Subkommissie* (Sub-Commission for Internal Missions) and the *Buitelandse Sending Subkommissie* (Sub-Commission for Foreign Missions).²⁵ The Sudan mission’s records form part of the larger collection of the latter commission.

22 Isabel S. Schellnack-Kelly, “Decolonising the Archives: Languages as Enablers and Barriers to Accessing Public Archives in South Africa,” *Archives and Manuscripts* 48, no. 3 (2020): 291.

23 Schellnack-Kelly, “Decolonising,” 291.

24 Andries Dreyer, *Historisch Album van De Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk in Zuid Afrika* (Cape Town: Cape Times Beperkt, 1910), 20-21.

25 P.B. van der Watt, *Die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk 1905-1975* (Pretoria: NG Kerkboekhandel, 1987), 231.

The work conducted amongst the Tiv people of *Nigeria* by the DRC is referred to throughout this article by the misnomer the *Sudan* mission (also inventoried and described as the Sudan mission in the archives) and requires clarification. This area, *Sudan*, does not refer to the country, but to a region of land stretching from West Africa to East Africa or, from the country Senegal to what is today known as the Republic of the Sudan, and covers an area South of the Sahara Desert to approximately 10 degrees north of the equator (see figure 1).²⁶ This geographical location was identified by the Sudan United Missions (S.U.M.) as requiring the intervention of Christian evangelical endeavours to halt the Southward spread of Islam.²⁷ On the invitation of Rev. Andrew Murray, Dr Karl Kumm, the founder of the multi-denominational S.U.M. working in the region, visited South Africa in 1907 to discuss the urgent need for mission work in the area.²⁸ A branch of the S.U.M. was founded in South Africa and Rev. Johan George Botha²⁹ was the first to travel to Sudan in 1908.³⁰ In 1916, the organisation of missionary work in the whole of the Tivland region of the Colony and Protectorate of Nigeria was transferred by the S.U.M. to the Commission for General Missions of the Cape Synod and fell under the auspices of the Sub-Commission for Foreign Missions.³¹

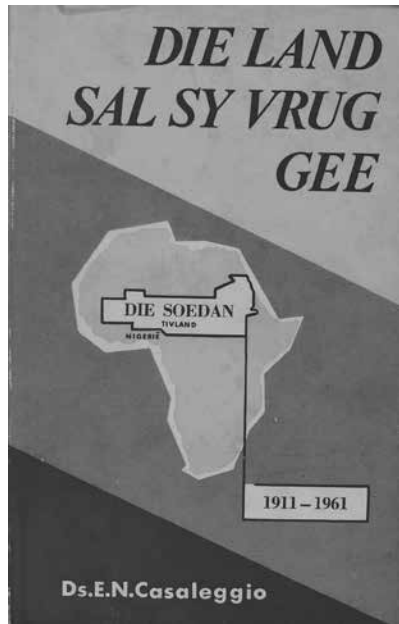


Figure 1

26 E.N. Casaleggio, *Die Land sal sy Vrug Gee: Vyftig Jaar van Sendingwerk in die Soedan* (Cape Town: Nasionale Handelsdrukkery Beperk, 1965), 12.

27 Casaleggio, *Die Land*, 12.

28 Cronjé, *Aan God*, 237.

29 Botha worked as a missionary in Sudan from 1908-1935 (Casaleggio, *Die Land*, 235).

30 Casaleggio, *Die Land*, 20-22.

31 Cronjé, *Aan God*, 246.

The first mission station was founded in Salatu in 1911 by Carl Zimmerman.³² Salatu was the village of the headman, Sai Dekpe, the father of Akiga. The DRC mission expanded, and other stations were founded in the following decades: Zaki Biam (1913), Sevav (1922), Mkar (1923), Adikpo (1923), Turan (1926), Kunav (1927), Makurdi (1931), Apir (1932), Shangev (1935) and Uavande (1957).³³ Similar to the other mission fields of the DRCSA, the missionaries focused on providing both education and medical care as part of their evangelical work. Bible schools, and the training of Bible school teachers, was integral to the work of the mission. By 1960, a year before the DRCSA transferred their mission work to the Christian Reformed Church of America, 509 Bible schools had been established.³⁴ The indigenous *Nongo u Kristu u i Ser u sha Tar* (Universal Reformed Christian Church) in Nigeria grew from these endeavours and was formally constituted on 9 January 1957.³⁵

It is important to note that DRC mission policy from 1935 onwards has been critiqued as embedded within the “cultural ideology of apartheid”³⁶ that eventually aided the “Nationalist government to ascend to power in 1948”.³⁷ This political agenda is absent in the official mission policy for *external missions* of the early twentieth century, as evidenced by consulting the relevant *Kerkwetten* (church laws).³⁸ However, it is important to note that irrespective of the dictates of mission policy, the writing of some DRC missionaries exhibit individual beliefs of “cultural superiority”;³⁹ and thus perceptions of indigenous communities are

32 Zimmerman worked as a missionary in Sudan from 1909-1912 (Casaleggio, *Die Land*, 235).

33 Cronjé, *Aan God*, 242-249.

34 Cronjé, *Aan God*, 255.

35 Casaleggio, *Die Land*, 205.

36 Thias Kgatla and Anderson Magwira, “The Defining Moments for the Dutch Reformed Church Mission Policy of 1935 and 1947,” *Missionalia* 43, no. 3 (2015): 377.

37 Kgatla and Magwira, “Defining Moments,” 375.

38 NG Kerk in Suid-Afrika, *Wetten en Bepalingen voor het bestuur van de Nederduitsche Gereformeerde Kerk in Zuid-Afrika, Gerevideerd in de Synode, gehouden te Kaapstad, den 15de October en volgende dagen vanhet jaar 1903. Met de veranderingen gemaakt in de Synoden gehouden in de jaren 1847, 1852, 1857, 1862, 1863, 1870, 1873, 1876, 1880, 1883, 1886, 1890, 1894, 1897, 1903, 1906 en 1909*, (Cape Town: DRCSA, 1909).

39 Kgatla and Magwira, “Defining Moments,” 374

coloured by contemporary biases and prejudice. This article does not consistently reflect on this important issue, but it is necessary to remain cognisant of these potential biases when constructing a profile of Sai by primarily relying on the documentation written by missionaries.

The life and work of Akiga Sai: Corroborations and Confusions

This section provides an introduction to Sai's life and work by corroborating or challenging elements of published accounts which detail aspects of his life. Certain omissions and confusions regarding biographical details and his published book are briefly addressed. Sai started working for Carl Zimmerman as a 'houseboy' when he was approximately 13 years of age.⁴⁰ According to E.N. Casaleggio,⁴¹ the Tiv considered working for white people as "shameful" and women "threatened to leave their husbands if they sent their children to school" because they thought this meant that the men "sold" their children to the missionaries.⁴² Zimmerman asked the headman, Sai Adekpo, "to give him one of his children to come and work for him in his house. Saai [*sic*] considered the matter wanting to get out of the predicament with the least possible loss to himself. To give a child of his to the missionaries was as good as reckoning him as lost".⁴³ Akiga Sai is described by Casaleggio as a neglected child because his mother had left his father, and he was mostly left to fend for himself. He also suffered from some disabilities: "One of his eyes was blind, and part of his foot was eaten away by ulcers".⁴⁴ Fardon complicates this often-cited account by highlighting

40 Atah Pine, "Akiga Sai, 1898-1959: A Tiv Historiographer and His Craft," *Academia*. [Online]. Available: https://www.academia.edu/879829/Akiga_Sai_1898_1959_A_Tiv_Historiographer_and_His_Craft [Accessed: May 23, 2024].

41 E.N. Casaleggio was a missionary in Sudan from 1951-1962. He wrote (by reworking earlier drafts written by W.A. Malherbe and Attie Brink) a very thorough history of the DRCSA's mission work in Sudan.

42 Casaleggio, *Die Land*, 58. Unfortunately, Casaleggio does not provide a clarification for the Tiv's initial attitude towards working for the missionaries and their aversion to sending their children to school.

43 Casaleggio, *The Land Will Yield Its Fruit*, trans. J. Orffer (DRCSAA, Book collection, B 10222): 19. A copy of this translation was published and is often referenced in relation to Sai. The version cited in this article is the manuscript of the translation, not the published version. Page numbers might thus vary from the published book.

44 Casaleggio, *The Land*, 19.

that Sai describes himself as his father’s “favourite child” and mentions that their “relationship appears in a benign light”⁴⁵ in *History of Tiv*. In Sai’s yearly report written to the Sudan Mission Board (*Die Sendingraad*) about his evangelical work, he writes the following in 1943:

The death of my father Sai

In these days I mourn the death of my father. He died on 15.4.1943. [...] My father was not a confessed Christian, but he was a good man. I name the good things he has done. He was the first in Tivland to welcome the Mission and he helped them regarding the building of the station and he did not allow anyone to bother them, he tried to accommodate them in all aspects. He took me, his beloved son, and gave me to the missionaries, this was something new in the eyes of the Tiv because no other Tiv has done anything similar before. [...] Every time I was dissatisfied and wanted to leave the Mission he encouraged me and said: My child, look I am your father and I am old, it is me who gave you to the Mission, to me you do not fall short in anything, and I do not desire the capabilities of any other person’s child, do not intentionally leave the work, the Lord himself will let the day break over you and it will be well with you.⁴⁶

Casaleggio’s account casts Sai’s father’s actions as “hard-hearted”,⁴⁷ as getting rid of an encumbrance, but Sai’s own perception challenges this portrayal. The excerpt quoted above conveys a loving relationship between father and son. Sai, in his own words, expresses love for his father and it does not appear as if he harboured resentment towards his father for offering him to work with the missionaries.

Church history students working with the documents of Sai in the archive have frequently expressed their puzzlement at sources’ descriptions

45 Fardon “Do you,” 574.

46 DRCSAA, Stellenbosch, Cape Synod Collection, Reports by B. Akiga, “Soedan Sending: Raport van B. Akiga, 1942-1943,” 1-2. The file contains the original reports written in Tiv by Sai and is accompanied by and is accompanied by an Afrikaans translation. The translator’s name is not mentioned. The above extract is thus a translation of a translation. All translations of books and archival materials cited in this article were provided by the author, unless otherwise indicated.

47 Fardon, “Do you,” 574.

of Sai's physical impairments: they noticed he has two 'healthy' eyes in photographs.⁴⁸ Although "there is agreement that Akiga suffered from minor disabilities", their origin and the scope of these disabilities are questioned by scholars.⁴⁹ W.A. Malherbe⁵⁰ sheds light on at least one of these aspects. In a profile he wrote on Sai, he relates the following story:

[...] I told Akiga that the doctors in South Africa sometimes puts in a glass eye if a person loses one eye. A few months following this conversation, in which he showed a particular interest, he jubilantly stormed into my office one morning with the words: "I va vo, I va vo!" (it has come). When he later calmed down, I learned that it was the eye that came! After our conversation, Akiga went to our doctor requesting that he order him an eye. And now it has come! [...] The Tiv wholeheartedly believed that Akiga could see just as well with this eye as the other! And what a to-do it caused when the Tiv heard that the mission "could put in eyes" for blind people! The glass eye definitely improved his appearance.⁵¹

Unfortunately, I have been unable to find archival references to what ailed Sai's foot.

Scholar Atah Pine has conducted extensive biographical research concerning Sai and has filled many gaps in the available literature concerning Sai's life. He mentions Sai's marriage to Dina Yangana, "a returnee slave girl of Kanuri extraction" and their "nine children: four girls and five boys".⁵² Sai left the mission in 1945⁵³ and became a polygamist. Pine determined that

48 From 2021-2024, the DRC archive has worked closely with Dr Lisel Joubert in the Department the Systematic Theology & Ecclesiology of Stellenbosch University. As part of their training in Church History, the students consult archival documents collated by archival personnel to compile written biographies of various DRC personnel who worked for the church during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Akiga Sai was selected as one of these figures and this article was birthed by this project.

49 Fardon, "Do you," 574.

50 Reverend W.A. Malherbe worked in the Sudan from 1915-1934 (Casaleggio, *Die Land*, 235). He wrote, with Sai's help, the first Tiv Grammar book and dictionary and translated much of the New Testament of the Bible in Tiv.

51 DRCSAA, Stellenbosch, Cape Synod Collection, KS 1247, "Akiga van die Soedan" by W.A. Malherbe.

52 Pine, "Akiga Sai", 8.

53 Casalegion, *The Land*, 56.

Sai married two other women, Jato Akiga and Zaiyol and that the latter bore him two more children.⁵⁴ However, documents in the archive mention a daughter born to Sai and Yangana not mentioned by the same name by Pine. Malherbe writes their daughter named Dioshima⁵⁵ (meaning love) was born with a “double helm”, that she could not breathe, and that he then proceeded to pull it off.⁵⁶ In the Sevav Station Diary, the birth is recorded on 31 May 1928 as: “Thursday morning on 12:15 am Akiga’s daughter Doishima [*sic*] was born. Everything well”.⁵⁷ Cross-referencing the dates of birth with Pine’s list of Sai’s children does not shed light on this omission. However, Fardon mentions that Pine informed him of Lydia Dooshima Emberga’s (1929–96) existence.⁵⁸ Consulting the documentation in the DRC Archives might shed partial light on the exact birthdates and names of Sai’s children and could be useful to scholars in the future. For example, Rev. J.G. Strydom records the birth of Sai’s first child on 12 May 1919 in his diary.⁵⁹ If the DRC records of the Sudan Mission are carefully scrutinised, more biographical details, unavailable elsewhere, regarding Sai and his family can be obtained.

An important part of Sai’s life was the publication of his book, but relevant facts (and omissions) regarding his original Tiv manuscript requires clarification. Harold Bergsma, the editor of the revised *History of Tiv* (2015) which contains a complete translation of Sai’s original text (*Histeri u Tiv*), relates the tale of how he came across the Tiv manuscript in 1964 and its journey to be archived at the University of Ibadan in Nigeria. He mentions that the cover of *Histeri u Tiv* “was being eaten by termites” at the time of its discovery.⁶⁰ The new edition of Sai’s translated book, *History of Tiv*, was based on this manuscript. From my understanding of Bergsma’s story and an exhaustive search conducted on the internet, it appears as though

54 Pine, “Akiga Sai”, 8.

55 The name interchangeably appears as Dioshima or Doishima in the documents.

56 W.A. Malherbe, “Akiga Benjamin Sai,” *Die Koningsbode*, Augustus, 1959, 5.

57 DRCSAA, Stellenbosch, Cape Synod Collection, KS 1232, Sevav Station Diary 1922-1948.

58 Fardon, “Do you,” 529.

59 DRCSAA, Stellenbosch, Private Collections, PPV 481/1, Strydom diaries, translated by Du Toit van der Merwe, 12 May 1919.

60 Bergsma, “Prologue,” 612.

this is the only known original Tiv copy of Sai’s manuscript.⁶¹ However, the Dutch Reformed Church Archive has two different typed and bound copies of the original unpublished Tiv manuscript as part of its holdings. One was sent to the Cape Synodal offices by Sai himself and is bound as two separate documents, Part I and Part II.⁶² The *Kerkbode*, a church magazine of the DRCSA, reports on 28 August 1940 that “Akiga” wrote a “hefty” history of his people and that he sent a copy to the General Committee for Missions to express his gratitude.⁶³ The other copy, a beautifully bound manuscript with gold lettering on the side,⁶⁴ was dispatched to the General Secretary for Mission in 1965 by Reverend Ishilibo Sai, Akiga’s half-brother. A letter sent in return to acknowledges Sai’s gift reads as follows: “I again want to thank you very much for your help to make it possible for us to have a copy. We hand over the manuscript to the church archive where it will be safely kept for the future”.⁶⁵

The existence of these two different copies is important for several reasons. Tsaaior mentions that he confirmed an “original Tiv version actually existed before it went out of print”.⁶⁶ It might be that one of the above-mentioned manuscripts could be an example of an informal kind of publication of this seminal text in its original Tiv, and the contents of these two manuscripts might differ from one another, which is of scholarly interest to individuals interested in Tiv literature. The manuscript bound in two parts could potentially be the original typed manuscript used by Rupert East for his translation. Malherbe claims that “the mission made every effort to get the original manuscript” back from Dr East and that

61 I have been unable to locate any reference to any other version of the original Tiv manuscript. This might be attributed to language barriers (there are various Nigerian languages and information might be available online if one uses the correct search terms); the item might be ‘hidden’ in an archival collection, or, importantly, no other Tiv manuscript of the book is stored elsewhere.

62 DRCSAA, Stellenbosch, Cape Synod Collection, KS 2941, *History of Tiv* by Akiga Part I and Part II.

63 G.L. van Heerde, “Soedan”, *Die Kerkbode*, August 28, 1940, 353.

64 DRCSAA, Stellenbosch, Cape Synod Collection, KS 1247, *History of Tiv* by Akiga.

65 DRCSAA, Stellenbosch, Cape Synod Collection, KS 1210, Letter from the General Secretary to Pastor J.F.I. Sai, March 8, 1965.

66 Tsaaior, “Those Days,” 600.

their attempts were successful, and that the manuscript was stored in the DRC archives.⁶⁷

Of further note is that Sai's book is called *History of Tiv*, not *Akiga's Story*, in all the documentation related to this text in the collection of the Cape Synod. Malherbe, echoing the sentiment of other Sai scholars,⁶⁸ contends that East's translation of *History of Tiv's* title as *Akiga's Story* in 1939 was "demeaning"⁶⁹ and further states that the manuscript was only a partial translation of Sai's book, a book Malherbe judged to be of "the utmost anthropological and ethnic significance".⁷⁰ Malherbe further opines that the Dutch Reformed Church should "honour" Sai's contributions to the development and production of Tiv literature and the Bible.⁷¹ Fardon states that the "retitling" of Sia's book by colonial representatives and publishers "was consistent with the prejudice that Akiga's work was not a history, nor was it an ethnography, but perhaps a 'story' or piece of literature".⁷² It appears as though DRC personnel who worked with Sai in the early decades of the twentieth century were in agreement with twenty-first century scholars that Sai's book was of immense cultural significance and did not undervalue its worth as colonial authorities at the time of its publication did.

In addition to the publication of Sai's landmark book, Casaleggio informs readers that Sai "became the editor of a Tiv paper, 'Mwanger u Tiv'" and that he was "also head of Adult education in Tivland and even represented the Tiv in Parliament in Kaduna"⁷³ after he left the employ of the Mission. Before he departed from the mission, however, Sai worked as a translator for the missionaries and is specifically mentioned by Casaleggio in relation

67 DRCSAA, Stellenbosch, Cape Synod Collection, KS 1247, "Akiga van die Soedan" by W.A. Malherbe. There is no handwritten copy of the manuscript available in the archive. Malherbe is probably referring to the bound typescript.

68 Fardon, "Do you," 586.

69 DRCSAA, Stellenbosch, Cape Synod Collection, KS 1247, "Akiga van die Soedan" by W.A. Malherbe.

70 DRCSAA, Stellenbosch, Cape Synod Collection, KS 1247, "Akiga van die Soedan" by W.A. Malherbe.

71 DRCSAA, Stellenbosch, Cape Synod Collection, KS 1247, "Akiga van die Soedan" by W.A. Malherbe.

72 Fardon, "Do you," 586.

73 Casaleggio, *The Land*, 56.

to his work as a Bible translator.⁷⁴ He is also remembered for his services as an evangelist. However, his role as a teacher has not been discussed and the scope of his contributions as evangelist and translator have not received due scholarly attention. The remainder of the article focusses on addressing these paucities regarding Sai's life and work, and hopefully, 'honours' Sai's numerous contributions to the church and the development of Tiv as a written language.

Akiga Sai as evangelist-teacher

An overview of Sai's work as an evangelist and teacher from Casaleggio's account is compiled and then expanded upon by relying on archival sources showcasing the scope of his evangelical work. Carl Zimmerman opened a school at Salatu in August of 1911. Sai attended the school and "progressed rapidly"⁷⁵ because he was an "intelligent"⁷⁶ pupil. On 21 January 1912, Sai professed his belief in God in public.⁷⁷ Sai started his training as an evangelist on 8 January 1915 and was part of the group of four Tiv formally baptised on 30 December 1917.⁷⁸ After Sai's training was complete, he was posted to Tivland to "conduct school and services" and was expected to write yearly reports describing his activities.⁷⁹ In 1919, Sai was placed under censure for 'living in sin' and prohibited from doing evangelical work.⁸⁰ In 1920, Sai was posted to Zaki Biam to aid Rev. Attie Brink and his wife, Alice Brink, with translation work. In June of 1922, he received further training as an evangelist at Salatu from Rev. Botha. Sai was yet again placed under censure in 1926 but then received more advanced training as a teacher. Censure prohibited Sai from conducting religious work, but the teaching

74 Casaleggio, *The Land*, 48.

75 Casaleggio, *The Land*, 19.

76 DRCSAA, Stellenbosch, Cape Synod Collection, KS 1247, "Akiga van die Soedan" by W.A. Malherbe.

77 Casaleggio, *The Land*, 20.

78 Casaleggio, *The Land*, 21-25.

79 Casaleggio, *The Land*, 54. I have been unable to locate the reports from 1915-1935, however, the archive has copies for the period 1935-1943.

80 Casaleggio, *Die Land*, 105. Circumstances and documentation relating to the three times he was placed under censure is discussed below. Church censure is explained in detail further on.

profession was an alternative course devised by the mission to retain Sai's services. He worked as a teacher in Sevav following the completion of his training in 1927.⁸¹ Sai was posted to Makurdi in 1931 to pave the way for the coming of the newly arrived Rev. M. Visser (language proficiency necessitated the aid of an indigenous evangelist).⁸² Sai undertook much of the evangelical work in the area, attempting to counter the spread of Catholicism, and taught children desirous of schooling in the afternoons.⁸³ He was often employed for exploration missions to report circumstances in certain areas, sent out on his own to preach the gospel, to aid groups of Tiv not within the reach of the mission stations, or to prepare a new station for the arrival of a missionary.⁸⁴ Sai and Malherbe were transferred from Sevav to Mkar in 1933 to complete the translation of the New Testament.⁸⁵ Documentation for the period 1934-1945 is available in Sai's own writing and discussed in more detail further on. In 1945, Sai was yet again placed under censure and then left the employ of the mission for good.

In the nascent years of the mission (ca. 1911-1925), Sai was mostly employed as a translator. The missionaries' knowledge of the Hausa language was better in the early years of the mission and Sai's proficiency in this language was excellent.⁸⁶ In the capacity of translator, being one of the few employees of the mission at the time fluent in Tiv, he conducted most of the services and undertook the bulk of the initial evangelical work. The scope of his task comes to fore when consulting the diaries written by the missionaries. Rev. Du Toit van der Merwe partially or fully transcribed

81 Casaleggio, *The Land*, 89.

82 Rev. M. Visser was stationed in Sudan from 1931-1941 (Casaleggio, *Die Land*, 236).

83 Casaleggio, *The Land*, 73. Roman Catholic missions and schools were founded in areas in Tivland where the DRC were already working. This was a source of great consternation and irritation for the Protestant DRC missionaries (Casaleggio, *Die Land*, 83). Sai reflects on this period of his life stationed at Makurdi and mentions that he worked as a teacher (*History of Tiv*, edited and translated from Tiv by Harold M. Bergsma and Martin L. Akiga, *Cambridge University Press & Assessment*. [Online]. Available: <https://static.cambridge.org/content/id/urn:cambridge.org:id:article:S0001972015000613/resource/name/S0001972015000613sup001.pdf>). [Accessed: May 26, 2024]. 285-287.

84 Casaleggio, *The Land*, 73 & Casaleggio, *Die Land*, 129.

85 Casaleggio, *Die Land*, 214.

86 DRCSAA, Stellenbosch, Cape Synod Collection, KS 1247, "Akiga van die Soedan" by W.A. Malherbe.

and/or translated into English the diaries of Alice Brink⁸⁷ and J.G. Botha, the letters of A.S. Judd⁸⁸ and the biography of J.G. Strydom⁸⁹ which contains many diary entries. These translations / transcriptions are also accompanied by editorial comments, overviews of the data and historical notes. Van der Merwe was a missionary in Tiv from 1953 onwards⁹⁰ and one of the group responsible for finalising the complete translation of the Bible in Tiv, published in 1964. He informed me in 2023 when I contacted him regarding his transcriptions that he was entrusted with collecting and boxing the Sudan Mission archivalia at the various mission stations which was transported to South Africa in the wake of the mission exiting Nigeria. He came to the DRC Archives in 2015 to assist the staff with rearranging, sorting, and cataloguing the entire collection. In conversations I had with Van der Merwe (he was my great-uncle), he relayed that he was motivated to transcribe and translate the missionaries' diaries to provide access to Nigerians who desired to undertake research about *their* history.

Sai's aid to the missionaries as evangelist-teacher and translator was vital in the early years of the mission when language still posed a barrier. Sai started to work for the mission as a teacher at the age of roughly 15, before receiving any formal training. J.G. Strydom's diary entry of 4 August 1914 reads: "In the village of Dogo we opened our first outschool today with Akiga as teacher. The children of two other villages which are nearby can also attend this school".⁹¹ This was a remarkable feat if Sai's youth and his level of education is considered. Pine explains that Sai's schooling started only three years prior in 1911 and that he wrote his first letter in 1914. He

87 Alice Mathewson was a missionary in Sudan from 1912. She married Rev. Attie Brink, and the couple remained in Sudan until 1954 (Casaleggio, *Die Land*, 235.).

88 A.S. Judd worked for the South African English branch of the S.U.M. Van der Merwe told me that he tried to locate the relevant individuals or organisation to which he could send these letters but was unable to determine ownership. He decided to place it with the rest of the Sudan Mission archive in the DRCSAA for safekeeping.

89 Strydom worked as a missionary in the Sudan from 1912-1919 (Casaleggio, *Die Land*, 235).

90 Casaleggio, *Die Land*, 235.

91 DRCSAA, Stellenbosch, Private Collection, PPV 481/1, Strydom diaries, translated by Du Toit van der Merwe.

had only received “basic literacy training”⁹² by the time he was entrusted with the responsibility to run an outpost school.

Sai was transferred to Zaki Biam in 1916. Alice Brink’s diary reveals that Sai was responsible for a considerable amount of the teaching in the school they opened. In her diary, Brink confessed that she had never felt so “incapable of doing something” and wrote: “I knew only a few words of the language and here I had to teach children to read whose mother tongue it was”.⁹³ Sai’s arrival was thus a huge relief. Brink used the term “evangelist-teacher” to describe Sai’s work and noted: “Akiga took the Bible lesson in school. The language remains a difficulty for me”.⁹⁴ Sai was also responsible for teaching other school subjects.⁹⁵ Teaching was often one of the duties of a DRC Sudan evangelist, hence the use of Brink’s term evangelist-teacher.

During a “journey of investigation” undertaken by George Botha in 1917, he was accompanied “most of the way by Akiga who played the main part in communicating the gospel to the people.” The journey started at Zaki Biam and lasted 38 days.⁹⁶ On 30 May 1917, Botha expressed his gratitude that Sai would be joining him because he was “convinced that [Sai] will be of great help”. The following day Botha wrote that “Akiga led a service [in the] evening which was attended by 56 people”.⁹⁷ On 4 June, Botha’s diary reports that Sai “told the people about our Lord and Saviour”.⁹⁸ The diary continues in this manner and bears testimony to the fact that Sai did most of the evangelical work on this trip. Malherbe’s account of Sai further explains Sai’s invaluable service to the missionaries: “Akiga travelled a lot. Everywhere the missionaries had to undertake special trips, Akiga

92 Pine, “Akiga Sai,” 7.

93 DRCSAA, Stellenbosch, Private Collection, PPV 16, Brink diary no. 1, translated by Du Toit van der Merwe.

94 DRCSAA, Stellenbosch, Private Collection, PPV 16, Brink diary no. 1, translated by Du Toit van der Merwe.

95 DRCSAA, Stellenbosch, Private Collection, PPV 17, Brink diary no. 2, translated by Du Toit van der Merwe.

96 DRCSAA, Stellenbosch, Private Collections, PPV 13/4, Botha diary no. 7, translated by Du Toit van der Merwe, “note by the compiler”.

97 DRCSAA, Stellenbosch, Private Collections, PPV 13/4, Botha diary no. 7, translated by Du Toit van der Merwe. 31 May 1917.

98 DRCSAA, Stellenbosch, Private Collections, PPV 13/4, Botha diary no. 7, translated by Du Toit van der Merwe. 4 June 1917.

accompanied them to help with the negotiations and interviews with headmen and other people”.⁹⁹

After Sai was placed under censure in 1926 and then posted to Sevav as an assistant teacher, the Superintendent of Education for the mission wrote that the support offered by Sai and other indigenous teachers enabled the work to proceed much more “effectively”.¹⁰⁰ Sai’s work in the school and his abilities as a teacher was undoubtedly impressive because he was employed by the mission in 1935 (after completing his work on Bible translation with Malherbe) as a “travelling evangelist”.¹⁰¹ Sai explained that his new post involved: “1. to travel everywhere in Tivland to visit villages, to preach, to address headmen and other people; 2. to visit the Bible schools of the mission and talk to the leaders and children”.¹⁰² He reported that he visited 431 villages and brought the Word to 3086 people in the period 1935-1936. His conversations with the headmen mostly centred on the dangers posed by Catholicism entering the area and ‘translating’ or clarifying “white” practices that puzzled the local headmen.¹⁰³ The work Sai conducted as a travelling supervisor and advisor to the Bible schools was extensive: he preached the gospel, motivated the teachers and children, accompanied new teachers to their posts, and taught in the various schools he visited while travelling.¹⁰⁴ Sai stated that he expended most of his energy to educate the Bible school teachers, many of whom had received little formal training.¹⁰⁵ Sai continued his work as translator and travelling evangelist until 1945.

99 DRCSAA, Stellenbosch, Cape Synod Collection, KS 1247, “Akiga van die Soedan” by W.A. Malherbe.

100 DRCSAA, Stellenbosch, Cape Synod Collection, KS 1246, Onderwys, Verslae van die Superintendent, 1924-1961, Rapport van die Superintendent van Skole 1926-1927.

101 DRCSAA, Stellenbosch, Cape Synod Collection, KS 1226, “Verslag van Reisende Evangelist. Tweede Jaar Rapport van Benjamin Akiga. April ’36 – Maart ’37”, 1.

102 DRCSAA, Stellenbosch, Cape Synod Collection, KS 1226, “Rapport van Akiga i.v.m. sy werk 1935-1936”, 1.

103 DRCSAA, Stellenbosch, Cape Synod Collection, KS 1226, “Rapport van Akiga i.v.m. sy werk 1935-1936”, 1.

104 DRCSAA, Stellenbosch, Cape Synod Collection, KS 1226, Verslae van Akiga.

105 DRCSAA, Stellenbosch, Cape Synod Collection, KS 1226, “Die Vierde Jaar Rapport van B. Akiga Evangelist van die Soedan Sending. Mkar 1939,” 2.

Sai's time working as an evangelist-teacher was fraught with controversy and contentious disagreements with the Mission Board (*Die Raad*). The disruption caused to indigenous cultures by the import of colonialism and Christianity is evident in the censured evangelists'¹⁰⁶ struggle to reconcile their adopted faith and foreign customs with Tiv traditions and mores. Casaleggio expresses the following religiocentric, but sympathetic (albeit patronising) view regarding the issue:

The spiritual and moral life of the small group of first converts was fairly changeable. They also gave a good deal of offence to the Tiv. It must be remembered that these first Christians were young and inexperienced so recently converted from a hardened paganism; surrounded by and in constant contact with hostile powers of darkness, they had a superhuman struggle to keep straight.¹⁰⁷

Casaleggio's account of the three separate occasions on which Sai was placed under censure by the church lacks clarity. The reasons which compelled the Mission Board to employ these extreme actions to protect the "purity of the Church"¹⁰⁸ is obfuscated by non-descript phrases: Sai was "living in sin"¹⁰⁹ in 1919, he "lost his way"¹¹⁰ in 1926, and he "was found guilty of a number of transgressions of immorality"¹¹¹ in 1945. Consulting the documents of the Mission Board to clarify these vague accusations proved frustrating. The 1919 incident was the only occasion where censure was applied with accompanying documentation revealing the details of the case. The report of the extraordinary meeting held at Salatu on 7 January 1919 states: "1. All four baptised Christians were found guilty of immoral behaviour. 2. Akiga, who not only fell into the sin of adultery but who also lived in it, will be placed under strong Church censure for 18 months".¹¹² The minutes of the mission board do not state what being placed under

106 Sai was not the only evangelist to be placed under censure. The records in the archive indicate that evangelists were placed under church censure on several occasions.

107 Casaleggio, *The Land*, 48.

108 Casaleggio, *The Land*, 26.

109 Casaleggio, *The Land*, 26.

110 Casaleggio, *The Land*, 89.

111 Casaleggio, *The Land*, 56.

112 DRCSAA, Stellenbosch, Cape Synod Collection, KS 1186, Raadskommissee Vergaderings vir daaglikse aktiwiteite, notuleboek 1918-1931.

censure entailed, but in general, individuals were excluded from taking the sacrament. Consulting the DRCSA Kerkorde (Church laws) of the relevant period provides clues.¹¹³ Church law for 1919 dictated that censure should be applied with “love and concern for the spiritual welfare of the offenders”. Article 322 states that special attention should be paid to members of the church who were in service of the congregation or church to ensure their behaviour aligned with the principles of Reformed teaching. Article 323 mentions that general “misbehaviour” which contradicts and counteracts church formularies, especially those made when taking the sacrament, as well the confessions of faith made at the baptism and becoming a member of church, and the promises made upon marriage, could be grounds for applying church censure. However, the regulations are unclear regarding *what* censure would entail and for *how long* it would remain in effect.

Polygamy was cultural practice amongst the Tiv at the time and, from a contemporary viewpoint, Sai’s resistance to labelling the practice a “sin” is understandable and could potentially be regarded as practicing agency. Sai rather prophetically addressed the issue of polygamy in *History of Tiv*, considering he took up the practice in his later life:

Tiv young men hated the seventh commandment the most. It says you shall not commit adultery. It is based on this commandment that some of the young men who initially believed and accepted the Word of God later gave it up, saying that it was too difficult a commandment to follow. If that commandment would be taken away, they would be likely to assent to the practice of Christianity.¹¹⁴

Exhaustive postcolonial analysis does not fall within the purview of this article, since the aim is to provide biographical data on Sai and to make the

113 DRCSAA, *Wetten en Bepalingen voor het bestuur van de Nederduitsche Gereformeerde Kerk in Zuid-Afrika. Gerevideerd in de Synode, Gehouden te Kaapstad, den 15den October en volgende dagen van het jaar 1903. Met de veranderingen gemaakt in de Synoden, gehouden in de jaren 1847, 1852, 1857, 1862, 1863, 1870, 1873, 1876, 1880, 1883, 1886, 1890, 1894, 1897, 1903, 1906, 1909, 1915 en 1919* (Cape Town: DRCSA, 1919).

114 Akiga Sai, *History of Tiv*, Cambridge University Press & Assessment. [Online]. Available: https://www.google.com/search?q=history+of+tiv+2015+pdf&rlz=1C1CHBD_enZA1088ZA1104&oq=history+of+&gs_lcrp=EgZjaHJvbWUqCAGAEEUyJxg7MggIABBFGCcYoZIGCAEQRRg7MggIAhBFGCcYoZiHCAMQLhiABDIGCAQQRhAMgYIBRBFgDkyCggGEAAySQMgYAQyBwgHEAAyGATSAQkzMDMyajBqMTWoAgiwAgE&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8 [Accessed: May 26, 2024]. 278.

collection visible. I do, however, recommend future investigations pursue this avenue of research.

Strydom's diary entries reveal an alternative response to the 1919 censure case to Casaleggio's summary. He wrote that the missionaries were "shocked" by the event and did "not know what to do" and "could not really sleep".¹¹⁵ Strydom further noted: "We would also need advice from the Mission Committee at home. They would be allowed to work as ordinary labourers."¹¹⁶ Du Toit van der Merwe notes in his editorial comments accompanying the transcription of the diary entries that the Mission Committee suggested that Sai and the other three censured evangelists teach in the two "outschools", "but not to preach in church".¹¹⁷ Strydom concluded that the missionaries "were also at fault" because they "did not teach [the evangelists] in the right way and [the missionaries] did not pray enough for them".¹¹⁸

The minutes of the Mission Board's meeting of 1926 mention that it was decided that Sai and another evangelist, Alam, be placed under censure but that they would be allowed to teach.¹¹⁹ However, the reasons for placing the evangelists under censure are omitted. The minutes of the 1945 Sudan Mission Board are similarly opaque, simply noting that it was with "regret"¹²⁰ that they announce that Akiga was placed under church censure. Casaleggio's vague account can probably be attributed to the lack of available data in the documentation of the Mission Board. However, rule no. 69 of the Rules and Regulations for the Sudan Mission of 1937, for

115 DRCSAA, Stellenbosch, Private Collection, PPV 481/1, Strydom diaries, translated by Du Toit van der Merwe, 6 January 1919.

116 DRCSAA, Stellenbosch, Private Collection, PPV 481/1, Strydom diaries, translated by Du Toit van der Merwe, editorial comments.

117 DRCSAA, Stellenbosch, Private Collection, PPV 481/1, Strydom diaries, translated by Du Toit van der Merwe, 4 & 5 January 1919.

118 DRCSAA, Stellenbosch, Private Collection, PPV 481/1, Strydom diaries, translated by Du Toit van der Merwe, 12 January 1919.

119 DRCSAA, Stellenbosch, Cape Synod Collection, KS 1185, Getikte notules 1925-1961, "Notule van die Raad van die Soedan Sending van die N.G. Kerk in S.A. (gehou te Mkar op 17 Mei, 1926 en volgende dae)," 12.

120 DRCSAA, Stellenbosch, Cape Synod Collection, KS 1183, Notules van Raadsvergaderings 1935-1946, "Notule van die 39ste sitting van die Raad van die N.G. Kerk Soedan Sending. Gehou te Mkar vanaf 10 Mei – 19 Mei 1945."

example, states: “Fornication [*Ontug*]: All baptised individuals and those in catechism classes who work for the Mission who commits adultery [*oorspel*], will be released from service for the minimum period of three months. The minimum period of censure in the case of adultery will be six months”.¹²¹ This rule is the *only* mention of censure, including causes and consequences under which it would apply, in the document. One could infer that adultery was typically the grounds for applying censure, or at least the most common reason, evidenced by its singular listing as offence in the official regulations of the Sudan Mission Board.

The extent of Sai’s endeavours as evangelist-teacher and the controversies involved in the work showcases the complexity of the disruptions caused by colonialism and Christianity in early twentieth century Tivland and contributes to the existing scholarship on Sai. The following section focuses on Sai’s contribution to developing Tiv literature and his involvement with various translations.

Akiga Sai as translator

Sai is credited with his assistance in translating the Bible, both the New Testament and Old Testament, into Tiv.¹²² He also aided the DRC missionaries with the translation of numerous other texts and this section highlights his contribution to the establishment of Tiv literature and the development of Tiv orthography unrelated to the publication of *History of Tiv*. Sai was frequently assigned to assist the missionaries with translation work, especially in relation to Bible translation, and on account of his “intelligence” and exceptional “linguistic” abilities, was ultimately employed almost exclusively for “language work”.¹²³

121 DRCSAA, Stellenbosch, Cape Synod Collection, KS 1260, Reëls en Regulasies vir Soedan, “Reëls en Besluite van die Raad 1937,” 8.

122 Casaleggio makes frequent mention of Sai’s aid in translating the Bible in Tiv (Casaleggio, *Die Land*, 211-218).

123 DRCSAA, Stellenbosch, Cape Synod Collection, KS 1247, “Akiga van die Soedan” by W.A. Malherbe.

Sai's first posting related to translation work was when he was sent to Zaki Biam to assist the Brinks with "writing the OT History in Tiv".¹²⁴ This text was used for religious education.¹²⁵ Alice Brink noted that they "were so glad to have the assistance of Akiga".¹²⁶ *The History of The Old Testament*, which was published in full as *Akaa A Bibilo* (date unknown),¹²⁷ was partially completed with the aid of Sai in 1922. The section of the history Sai assisted with provided context and background information for the Old Testament books Genesis to Judges.¹²⁸ He was further involved with the translation of Psalms and Church Hymns.¹²⁹ These were published as *Atsam Agen No. 1*,¹³⁰ *Atsam Agen No. 2*,¹³¹ *Atsam Agen No. 3*.¹³² Malherbe lists Sai's literary contributions in an obituary he wrote in 1959, published in the Church's mission magazine, *Die Koningsbode*:

It can also be mentioned that Akiga was the missionaries' main helper with the translation of songs for use in school and church, the compiling of reading books [study materials for schools] and the translation of the New Testament and Psalms. His aid was indispensable to the author with the compilation of the Grammar Book and Dictionary in the Tiv language. Akiga's name will thus forevermore be connected to the development of Tiv Literature. We want to believe that his Tiv History will one day be published in Tiv, the original language in which it was written.¹³³

124 DRCSAA, Stellenbosch, Private Collection, PPV 16, Brink diary no. 2, translated by Du Toit van der Merwe, September 29–October 4, 1919.

125 Casaleggio, *Die Land*, 213.

126 DRCSAA, Stellenbosch, Private Collection, PPV 16, Brink diary no. 2, translated by Du Toit van der Merwe, September 29–October 4, 1919.

127 *Akaa A Bibilo: Akaa A Ken Bibilo A Ken Ityendezwa I Tse* (Dutch Reformed Church Mission 5th edition).

128 Casaleggio, *Die Land*, 213.

129 DRCSAA, Stellenbosch, Private Collection, PPV 16, Brink diary no. 2, translated by Du Toit van der Merwe, October 6, 1919.

130 *Atsam Agen No. 1* (Kaduna: Baraka Press Ltd., n.d.).

131 *Atsam Agen No. 2* (Kaduna: Baraka Press Ltd., n.d.).

132 *Atsam Agen No. 3* (Kaduna: Baraka Press Ltd., n.d.).

133 W.A. Malherbe, "Akiga Benjamin Sai," *Die Koningsbode*, Augustus, 1959, 5.

Malherbe credits Sai's contribution to the compilation of the *Tiv-English Dictionary with Grammar Notes and Index*¹³⁴ on other occasions as well.¹³⁵ For Sai's role in producing the first Tiv education books as well as the first published Tiv dictionary and grammar book, he should receive due credit for his aid in developing Tiv orthography. His invaluable assistance with conceptualising theological principles in Tiv emerges from Malherbe's account:

When the Mission Board decided to dedicate someone to work solely on Bible translation, and the choice fell upon me, it was self-evident that Akiga would be appointed as my aid. Together we moved from Sevav to Mkar, relocating to the main station where we worked in the closest of circumstances on the translation of the New Testament. Akiga had a deep spiritual insight into Christian truths. I was often amazed by the thoughts he expressed. He also had a good knowledge of the Hausa language, and with the translation or the Hausa Bible in hand he could help me especially well. Sometimes we simply pushed the commentaries and other research books aside and talked to each other about the wonders of the Word: the Christian truths in the Bible, the wonderful choice of words in the Word (the dogma of Scriptural inspiration)¹³⁶ and the spiritual ideas of, e.a. Paul expressed in his epistles which is almost untranslatable in a primitive language, like Tiv used to be.

In the minutes of the Language Commission for 1918-1959, documents appear in which the spelling of various Tiv words as well as grammar and language rules are decided upon. Many of these terms requiring standardisation emerged from the translation work of the missionaries, in which Sai played an integral part.¹³⁷ Unfortunately, the minutes are rather formal in nature (reporting progress and future requirements) and the aid of indigenous evangelists are not mentioned. Although I am unable to

134 W.A. Malherbe, *Tiv-English Dictionary with Grammar Notes and Index* (Lagos: Government Printer, 1931).

135 DRCSAA, Stellenbosch, Cape Synod Collection, KS 1247, "Akiga van die Soedan" by W.A. Malherbe.

136 The Afrikaans reads "inspirasie-leer".

137 DRCSAA, Stellenbosch, Cape Synod Collection, KS 1248 A, Taalkommissie notules 1923-1959.

ascertain the extent to which Tiv evangelists such as Sai were involved in language standardisation and the development of Tiv orthography, their involvement in this work is clear from other documentation relating to translation and language work. The assistance Sai offered Malherbe while he was completing the first Tiv dictionary requires further investigation.

In 1926, The New Testament was published in two parts; Part one contained the Four Gospels and Acts and part two the Epistles through to Revelations.¹³⁸ The complete New Testament was published in 1942 as *Ityendedzwa I He*.¹³⁹ Sai also assisted with the translation of the Old Testament. In his yearly report to the Mission Board, he noted in 1939 that he had been assigned to assist Rev. J.F. Orffer¹⁴⁰ with the translation and called it “holy work”.¹⁴¹ In 1942, Sai explained that the translation process worked as follows: “I translated out of the Hausa Bible, Rev. Orffer wrote it down and checked it. When a significant portion was completed, I could leave and Rev. Orffer and Biam revised the entire section again”.¹⁴² The complete Tiv Bible was published in 1964.¹⁴³

Finally, Sai wrote in his 1939 Mission Board report that he was assisting Mrs. M.P. Loedolff¹⁴⁴ with the translation of J.R. Miller’s *Come ye apart*,¹⁴⁵ a devotional daily Bible study book. Sai explained that it would make a significant contribution to mission work because it provided context and exegesis for the New Testament.¹⁴⁶

138 Casaleggio, *Die Land*, 214.

139 *Ityendedzwa I He* (London: British and Foreign Bible Society, 1942).

140 Orffer worked as a missionary in Sudan from 1921 and was instrumental in Bible translation (Casaleggio, *Die Land*, 235).

141 DRCSAA, Stellenbosch, Cape Synod Collection, KS 1226, “Die Vierde Jaar Rapport van B. Akiga Evangelist van die Soedan Sending. Mkar 1939,” 1.

142 DRCSAA, Stellenbosch, Cape Synod Collection, KS 1226, “Raport van B. Akiga, 1941-1942,” 1.

143 *Bibilo Ka Kwaghóron U Aóndon Je La Ka Ikuryan I Tse Kua I He Cii* (London: The British And Foreign Bible Society, 1964).

144 Mrs. Loedolff arrived in Sudan in 1932. She was the second wife of Rev. M.P. Loedolff. Unfortunately, I have not been able to determine her name (Casaleggio, *Die Land*, 235-236).

145 J.R. Miller, *Luun A Yesu*, trans. M.P. Loedolff (Mkar: Dutch Reformed Church Mission, n.d.).

146 DRCSAA, Stellenbosch, Cape Synod Collection, KS 1226, “Die Vierde Jaar Rapport van B. Akiga Evangelist van die Soedan Sending. Mkar 1939,” 1.

Conclusion

As this case study of Akiga Sai has indicated, part of the DRC in South Africa's important heritage is its archive: the rich and varied sources, available in a wide variety of languages, contains valuable information about aspects of macro and micro (Southern) African history unavailable elsewhere. Rev. Martin Blignaut, archivist of the DRC in South Africa in 1985, asserted that the main function of the archive was "to serve as a reference tool: It is the memory of the institution that created it".¹⁴⁷ By fulfilling the archives main function, sources are stored that reflect the social, cultural, economic, and political milieu of the environment that gave rise to their creation. Though at its core it reflects its creating institution, its scholarly use is, as this article indicated, much broader. When commemorating the bicentenary of the DRCSA in 2024, the archive should be celebrated as part of its heritage; as containing the memory, the evidence, the body of its wider history and influence.

This article has illustrated that it is possible to extract valuable biographical and contextual data regarding Akiga Sai from the records of the DRC Sudan Mission, which forms part of the collection of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa's Sub-Commission for Foreign Missions. The case of Sai was employed to demonstrate the value of the collection of the Sub-Commission for Foreign Missions as it relates to *indigenous communities*. Unfortunately, this collection remains hidden and underutilised by anthropologists, historians, linguists, and African studies scholars. Shellnack-Kelly opines in relation to the existence of collections pertaining to indigenous knowledge and indigenous cultures: "More efforts need to be made to inform the general public of collections that exist. More users need to be encouraged to include archival records in their research."¹⁴⁸ Raising awareness about the Sub-Commission for Foreign Missions' documentation and its use should encourage not only Sai and Tiv scholars to consult the DRC Archives, but hopefully illustrates the wider scholarly value of the collection and attracts scholars from a variety of disciplines and geographical locations.

147 Martin Blignaut, "Die argief, sy funksie en doel," *Die Kerkbode*, Mei 22, 1985, 2.

148 Shellnack-Kelly, "Decolonising," 292.

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