Parish Registers: a Challenge for African Historical Demography

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On the worldwide scale Africa is the least-known continent demographically. Until the mid-twentieth century not even the size of the population was precisely known in many areas of sub-Saharan Africa. The major problems in African historical demography have either been the almost total lack of relevant sources or, if some have been available, they have been fragmentary and non-systematic. The reliability of the most commonly-used sources in African historical demography—population counts and early censuses—remained questionable until the 1960s.\(^1\) However, fairly far-reaching conclusions and estimations based on these sources using indirect methods have been drawn. Despite the development of methods in historical demography, the questionable source materials have naturally provided serious grounds for argumentation.

An excellent example is the debate between the natalistic and antinatalistic school over changes in fertility and mortality in sub-Saharan African societies during the precolonial and early colonial period.\(^2\) The

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The fragmentary nature of the available sources has offered a firm basis for the disagreement.

The objective of this paper is to discuss limitations, pitfalls, and opportunities related to sources used in African historical demography. The paper first reviews the conventional sources—population counts, censuses, and surveys—and then presents an old but seldom-used group of sources, Christian parish registers. The usability of parish registers is discussed through a concrete research project based on data produced since the late nineteenth century in the parishes of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Namibia (ELCIN). Finally, attention is paid on widening the range of disciplines where African parish registers could be utilized.

II

The first population enumerations in sub-Saharan Africa were head counts for military recruitment and taxes begun in Réunion in 1690. The first complete African population count was taken on the island of Mauritius in 1735 under the administration of the French colonial governor, and about ten other colonies made their first enumerations before the twentieth century. These early counts were neither elaborate nor accurate. Undere-numeration occurred quite often, Africans were not properly counted and misstatements of age were common, and there were many other shortcomings. The earliest analyses of the collected data were made by colonial authorities to estimate the whereabouts of the indigenous population and locate able-bodied men who could be taxed and thus forced to work for colonial governments and for European entrepreneurs. During the 1930s the League of Nations began to collect data on fertility, mortality, and migration in African colonies.


The most systematic analysis based on these early population counts is Robert R. Kuczynski’s study on population development in the British colonies. The first two volumes of his *Demographic Survey of the British Colonial Empire* concentrate on British colonies in Africa. When considering the reliability of censuses and population counts, Jean Stengers points out that the people using censuses must keep in mind the will of authorities to try to determine the reality, and the will of individuals to tell the truth. According to Stengers it is clear that in the Republic of Cameroon in the 1960s and 1970s the northern part of the country, where the president originated, was credited with a population substantially greater than reality in order to allocate larger subsidies. The substantial under-registration of events due to the unwillingness of individuals to speak e.g. of dead children and inaccuracies in the recording of events, such as underestimating people’s age to avoid the head tax, also makes the reliability of vital statistics collected by the administration questionable in many African countries even after independence. He also comments on the illusion of progress related to the history of enumerations and censuses, remarking that it should not be taken as a matter of course that the latest censuses are more reliable than earlier ones. For example, in the present Democratic Republic of Congo the pre-independence census was more reliable than the census of 1970.

Censuses conducted during the colonial period underestimated the size of the population in many African colonies. The reliability of censuses began to improve in the 1960s, when the United Nations, the United States, and former colonial powers encouraged the regimes of the new independent states to employ more rigorous methods in implementing population censuses that would conform to the standards established in the industrialized countries. By the 1970s about thirty African countries had conducted censuses in collaboration with the United Nations African Population Census Program. During the 1960s the Office of Population Research at Princeton University also produced demographic estimates for tropical Africa.

The census data collected in different African countries is not always comparable due to various methods used in its collection. However, dur-

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ing the last thirty years the enumerations and censuses have been carried out according to the same principles. In 1972 the need for comparative data on a global scale spurred the creation of the World Fertility Survey (WFS). The WFS conducted surveys on fertility, family planning, and infant and child mortality in more than 60 countries. A more focused survey program, Contraceptive Prevalence Surveys (CPS) was created in 1977, and in the mid-1980s the Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) combined the qualities of the WFS and the CPS. The DHS+ program, as it is officially known, incorporates traditional DHS features with expanded content on maternal and child health. It has provided technical assistance for more than 100 surveys in Africa, Asia, the Near East, Latin America, and the Caribbean.10

The advantage of censuses and surveys is that they include huge amounts of information and are easy to use for administrative and research purposes. From the point of view of historical demography a problem related to censuses and surveys is their retrospective nature. People are asked questions such as the total number of children born and the number of births and deaths occurring during specific periods.11

III

A noteworthy, but rarely used, additional option for collecting more accurate data on the individual level concerning births, deaths, marriages, and migrations is offered by the parish registers of the African Christian churches. In sub-Saharan Africa the vital registration during the precolonial and the early colonial era was initially carried out by missionary organizations. The first permanent base of Christianity in sub-Saharan Africa was the Elmina Castle on the Gold Coast established by the Portuguese in 1482. The main purpose of the Castle and other Portuguese forts was to secure trade in gold and slaves, but the building of forts offered an excellent opportunity for missionary work. The Portuguese continued their explorations southward from the Gold Coast and reached the mouth of the river Congo in west-central Africa in 1483. The results of missionary work in the Congo were more visible than on the Gold Coast.12 Until the beginning of the nineteenth century expansion of missionary work in sub-Saharan Africa continued slowly and concentrated

on the coast, but interest in intensifying work in Africa then increased both among Protestants and Catholic missionary organizations.  

On the eve of the colonial invasion of the interior of Africa hundreds of missionary stations had been established in different parts of sub-Saharan Africa. Parish registers, annual reports, letters, and diaries concerning the indigenous population were compiled at missionary stations. A great many of these written records can be found in the archives of European missionary organizations, but records also exist that are available only in Africa. From the point of view of historical demography, the most important group of records is composed of parish registers, which are often located in African local parishes. As the number of baptized Africans grew, many missionary stations turned into parish centers and the practice of documenting vital events was regularized. One of the biggest problems relating to parish registers in Africa is that they have sometimes suffered damage and sometimes simply disappeared. However, when researchers have found undamaged registers, they have proved to be useful in both the demographic and social historical sense. Parish records are undoubtedly important but have remained almost unutilized.

In central Africa the initial publication of the White Fathers’ annual reports, parish records, and the annual statistics of the Catholic missions of the Belgian Congo and Ruanda-Urundi in 1935 opened excellent possibilities for demographic research. However, it still took decades before population studies based on these parish records were carried out.  

John Thornton was among the first to utilize the parish records of Catholic missionaries working in the area of the present-day Democratic Republic of Congo systematically. Basing his study on baptismal registers of the Capuchin priests, Thornton showed that in the seventeenth century the kingdom of Congo did not, as had previously been claimed, suffer a severe decline in population. In 1990 Gaëtan Feltz published an article in which he presented and used annual reports of the Missionary Society

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of Africa and parish registers maintained in the local Burundi Catholic parishes. Feltz estimated population growth and crude death rates among the Burundi Catholics from the mid-1930s to the late 1950s. In west Africa research teams led by Daniel Benoit and Bernard Lacombe used parish registers in Senegal and in the present Burkina Faso for demographic studies. In southern Africa parish registers were first used for analyzing population development among the white population.

Methodologically, Katzenellenbogen, Yach, and Dorrington took a new step in demographic research based on parish registers in dealing with changes in mortality in rural South Africa in three ten-year cohorts. Data were collected for individuals born during the periods 1837–1846, 1870–1879, and 1900–1909. Each cohort included approximately 500 persons. The study was based on records of the Moravian Mission at Mamre in the Western Cape region. By assembling demographic information from different church registers and notebooks, individuals were followed through their lifetimes or until the church lost contact with them. Age at death was the main topic of interest in this study. Although the sources of birth and death data differed in type and quality between cohorts, indicating changes in registration conventions over time, this thorough study proved the quantity and reliability of data collected from African parish registers adequate enough for modern demographic longitudinal analysis.

Despite the fact that possibilities offered by the parish registers for historical demography in Africa have become quite well-known, there has been no rush to the parish registers. Even today the use of parish registers as sources in African historical studies is quite exceptional. An important cause of this is their troublesome accessibility. The physical accessibility of parish registers becomes a problem if parishes are located in outlying areas. It is also worth noting that researchers normally need to have permission from the local churches to use parish records. When studying

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17Daniel Benoit and Bernard Lacombe, “Towards Getting Precise Data in Contemporary Africa for the Years 1920–30” in African Historical Demography, 68–70; see also Bernard Lacombe, Fakao (Sénégal); dépouillement de registres paroissiaux et enquête démographique rétrospective, méthodologie et résultats (Paris, 1970); Daniel Benoit, Mariatang: enquête de sources complémentaires en pays Dagara (Haute-Volta) (Paris, 1982).
recent trends in population development parish registers include sensitive information that may violate the privacy of living parishioners and their relatives. In industrialized countries legislation against the violation of the privacy of this kind of data exists, but many African countries still lack laws protecting privacy. It is therefore necessary that researchers abide by clear ethical principles when working with parish registers.

Another important limitation on the use of parish registers is the physical condition of the register books. Parish registers are usually stored in local congregations and are in constant use. Due to poor storage conditions the registers may have suffered serious damages caused by white ants, fire, or burglars. Due to the poor physical condition of registers, parishes may have to be excluded from analysis. Another important limitation related to parish registers is the validity and reliability of the data. Despite commonly accepted principles of keeping parish registers, the practices of writing down vital events have differed noticeably between parishes. Some priests, both European and African, were more interested in preaching to their parishioners than doing office work.

IV

The usability of parish registers in analyzing the main indicators of population development (fertility, mortality, and migration) is next approached through an empirical example from the present north-central Namibia. Today’s Namibia is one of the most Christianized countries in Africa. The London Missionary Society and the Wesleyan Missionary Society began to introduce Christianity to the southern parts of present-day Namibia in the beginning of the nineteenth century.\(^{20}\) The most successful of the pioneer missionary organizations was the Rhenish Missionary Society (RMS), which started work in the Namibian territory in 1842. In the mid-1860s the RMS decided to open a new mission field in north-central Namibia, called Ovamboland until Namibia’s independence (1990), but scarce human and capital resources prevented them from implementing the plan by themselves. The task was delegated to the Finnish Missionary Society (FMS), which was looking for a mission field to start its work. The first Finnish missionaries entered Ovamboland in 1870 and their work there still continues.\(^{21}\)

\(^{20}\)See e.g., Brigitte Lau, *Namibia in Jonker Afrikaner’s Time* (Windhoek, 1987); Isaac Goldblatt, *History of South West Africa from the Beginning of the Nineteenth Century* (Cape Town, 1971).

\(^{21}\)G.L. Buys and Shekutaamba V.V. Nambala, *History of the Church in Namibia 1805–1990: An Introduction* (Windhoek, 2003); Carl–J. Hellberg, Mission, Colo-
The success of missionary work can generally be read from the parish registers. The baptismal register clearly reveals the progress of missionary work in a new field. On the basis of the number of baptisms, Finns were not successful in the nineteenth century. The first Ovambos were baptized only in 1883 and the number of Christians remained very low until the beginning of the twentieth century. A new phase in the Finnish missionary work began only during the first years of the 1900s, when new parishes were established in different Ovambo communities. The number of parishes grew from 3 in 1900 to 12 by 1920; at the same time, the number of parishioners increased from 872 in 1900 to 7,695 in 1920.

The Rhenish Missionary Society had been working in the northernmost Ovambo community, Uukwanyama, since 1891 to obstruct the intrusion of Catholic missionaries from Angola to German South West Africa. However, in 1915 the Rhenish missionaries were forced to withdraw from Ovamboland due to the events of the World War I. South African troops defeated the Germans in July 1915 and the Namibian territory then came under South African rule until Namibian independence. Until 1924 the FMS was the only missionary organization working in Ovamboland, at which time the South African administration accorded permission to both the Roman Catholic and Anglican missions to expand their work into the northern parts of present-day Namibia.

The arrival of the Roman Catholic and Anglican missions activated the work of the FMS. In the competition between the different missionary organizations the FMS proved to be the most successful. The administration of the Lutheran parishes was gradually transferred from the Finnish missionaries to native ministers. By the late 1930s almost all parishes were formally led by Ovambo ministers, and in 1933 the members of the Lutheran parishes accounted for about 26% of the estimated total population of Ovamboland (1933 census 107,861). The last step on the way to an independent church was taken in 1954 with the establishment of the Evangelical Lutheran Ovambo-Kavango Church. During the 1950s the proportion of Lutherans reached one-half, and in present-day north-central Namibia the Lutheran Church occupies the dominant position.

In 1991 ELCIN could count 409,949 members in the Ovamboland parishes. According to the 1991 census the total population of that area was 618,117; thus over two-thirds of the population were members of
ELCIN. The actual share of Lutherans in the total population of the former Ovamboland region may be slightly lower because some members of the ELCIN parishes live permanently outside Ovamboland but are still members of their home parish. Despite taking this error into account, Lutherans form the largest religious group in the former Ovamboland, which makes the data collected from the ELCIN parish registers representative for investigating population development.

V

What makes the ELCIN parish registers even more interesting is the fact that population registration has been based on the same principles since the very beginning. The population registration system used by the Finnish Missionary Society followed the Scandinavian tradition of population registration. The wealth of data in Scandinavian parish registers has been recognized among historical demographers. Since the seventeenth century the clergy in Scandinavia have been responsible for updating the main books, population registers, and the so-called history books registering baptisms, deaths, confirmations, marriages, and migrations. These sources of information were also used by crown officials of the kingdom of Sweden (which included Finland until 1809) for purposes of military recruitment and taxation.

Various vital registers are also maintained in the Roman Catholic and Anglican parishes, but the main book or family book, is used only in the Evangelical Lutheran parishes. Until the 1940s notes on vital registers in the Evangelical Lutheran parishes in Ovamboland were written on forms sent from Finland. The structure of register books was defined by two ordinances enacted in 1924 and 1929, and only minor revisions have since been made to the registration system. The language used in the register forms has changed from Finnish to Afrikaans and English and to the local Ndonga language.

All parish registers excluding the main book are chronological lists of people. In the main book a married couple and their children form a family. One single double-page in a main book includes all vital events that have occurred to the couple and their children. The information in the main book is gathered from the different vital registers and makes it pos-

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23 Ibid.
sible to cross-check the data. In the main book family members are listed according to the following principles: husband first, wife second, and then the children from oldest to youngest. The main book includes the following information about all family members: first name and surname, date and place of birth, date of baptism, confirmation, marriage, death, any move, and information about excommunication from the parish.

There are several main books in each parish, but only one or two are used at the same time. In the main book about one-half/one-third of a double page is reserved for each family. The number of families in a main book grows by opening a new page to every newly-married couple. When the main book eventually fills up, all the living members of families are transcribed to a new main book. The number referring to the next main book is usually found in the earlier one, so all family members can be followed individually from one book to another. It is hard to imagine a population registry system more appropriate for population studies than the Scandinavian Protestant system. However, ELCIN parish registers did not attract academic interest until the 1960s. The Finnish anthropologist Maija Tuupainen was the first systematically to utilize the ELCIN parish registers in her dissertation, which dealt with marriage practices in the Ovambo communities.\(^\text{26}\)

In the early 1990s ELCIN parish registers were “rediscovered.” The Finnish-Namibian project on fertility, mortality, and migration concentrated on analyzing long-term changes in the key indicators of population development in Ovamboland. In the first phase of the project, emphasis was on investigating changes in fertility, mortality, and migration from the mid-1920s to the turn of the 1990s. During the second phase research has been focused on analyzing the impact of HIV/AIDS on mortality and fertility between 1990 and 2003.\(^\text{27}\)

VI

The data used in these studies were acquired by microfilming parish registers of the selected ELCIN parishes. Microfilming parish registers is not a new procedure. The films produced by the Church of Jesus Christ of Lat-


\(^{27}\)The project has been implemented in collaboration with the Department of Sociology of the University of Helsinki, the Department of History of the University of Joensuu, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Namibia, the University of Namibia, and the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine.
ter-day Saints, for example, are familiar to genealogists everywhere, but outside Europe and North America the transcription of parish registers has been more or less casual and has often been based on the activity of voluntary workers. In Namibia the only microfilmed parish registers today are those filmed by the Finnish-Namibian research project in collaboration with ELCIN.

The documentation part of the project started in 1993, when the registers of two old parishes (Elim and Oshigambo) were microfilmed. The encouraging experiences gained from the pilot project was a spur to expanding the microfilming. In 1994 the records of five old parishes in different parts of the former Ovamboland were microfilmed. Microfilming continued in 1997 and 2001 by filming nine new parishes in the former Ovamboland and Kavango regions. In October 2003 the latest registers of baptisms, deaths, and out-migrations of the Ovamboland sample parishes were photographed. Church registers of the 16 ELCIN parishes in microfilm form are now available. At the end of 1991 there were 90,830 members in the microfilmed sample parishes, which means that in 1991 the microfilmed data covered almost 11% of the total population of the former Ovamboland and almost 18% of the total population of the Kavango region. The master copy of the microfilmed data is stored at the National Archives of Namibia in Windhoek. Users’ copies of the data are available at the Auala ELCIN Library in Oniipa (Namibia) and at the Archives of the Department of History of the University of Joensuu.

VII

The collection and organization of information from parish registers has been based on the family reconstitution method developed in the 1950s by the French demographers Michel Fleury and Louis Henry. The family reconstitution method (family histories) became a widely-used method in historical demography in France, England, Germany, Sweden, and several

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other countries. Parish records and the family reconstitution technique opened new possibilities for analyzing changes in fertility and mortality over the long-term and in different age groups. According to John E. Knodel the introduction of family reconstitution as a technique for assembling data vastly expanded the horizons of historical demography. The technique involves a process through which records of births, deaths, and marriages contained in parish registers are linked together into histories of vital events for individual families.

Undoubtedly the introduction of the family reconstitution method was a significant improvement in historical demography, but this technique requires data in the form of fairly long, consistent time series, and such data are rare, even in many industrialized societies. Due to the lack of—or to a rudimentary system of—vital registration, adaptation of the family reconstitution technique to African conditions has been difficult. We know of only one other project where the family reconstitution technique has been applied in the collection of data from parish registers. The University of Cologne is carrying out the research project Demographic, Economic and Social Transformations in a Namibian Multiethnic Region, which concentrates on central Namibia and is led by Julia Pauli.

In the research project on population development in north-central Namibia, the area formerly called Ovamboland, the marriage contract was the criteria for selecting the follow-up cases. The entire life histories of the couples who had entered their marriage between 1925 and 1985 were compiled, and their children were followed in the first phase of the project until the day of their confirmation (normally between 15 and 22 years of age). In the second phase, when the emphasis was on analyzing the impacts of AIDS on mortality and fertility, one new marriage cohort was included in the data (1986–95) and the follow-up of children born after 1955 was continued until October 2003. The selected sample parishes represent population development in different parts of north-central Namibia. The three most important criteria for a sample parish were: (1) that the parish was old, a so-called mother parish; (2) that the parish remained administratively undivided as long as possible to avoid so-called “technical” moves; and (3) that the physical condition of parish registers was sufficiently good and the registers were systematically kept.

31 Pauli’s project is a sub-project in the ACACIA Research Programme carried out at the University of Cologne.
Collection of data from the microfilmed parish registers is very time-consuming. The follow-up of families was accomplished periodically between 1993 and 2003. It took a total of approximately six person-years to transcribe the needed data. The data files include information of about 9,000 married couples and more than 30,000 children. The reliability and validity of African parish registers differ from the corresponding registers maintained in Europe in many ways. The major disadvantage of African parish registers is that in many areas of sub-Saharan Africa Christians represented only a fraction of the population during the first decades following the establishment of the first parishes. In North-Central Namibia Christians have formed the majority of the population since the late 1950s.

It was also characteristic that during the first half of the twentieth century parish records included hundreds of “lost souls.” This was partly related to poor registration of migrations and partly to the abandonment of Christianity, especially before the 1940s. As a consequence of the growth of the number of Christians, new parishes were split off from the so-called mother parishes, which in the very beginning might have covered whole communities. The establishment of a new parish has meant that parishioners living in the area of the new parish have “technically” been moved from the registers of their old parish to the registers of their new one. In their old parishes these people have been registered as out-migrants and in-migrants in the new, even though they have not moved anywhere. These “technical” moves have complicated registration of vital events occurring in the follow-up population because the parish registers of many new parishes have not been available in microfilm. The increase of the number of ELCIN parishes clearly describes the great number of “technical moves” that have occurred between parishes. In 1980 ELCIN had 69 parishes, in 1990 88, and in 2000 107, but the sphere of activities of the church has not spatially widened.32

Another problem related to migration concerns registration of interregional migrants. Until the 1970s the interregional mobility of population was very strictly controlled by the South African administration. Only able-bodied men were allowed to leave Ovamboland for migrant work. However, during the last two decades of South African rule, the administration was steadily losing control of interregional migration. At the time of Namibian independence in 1990, all the remaining restrictions concerning internal migration were repealed. The problem related to the

investigation of interregional migration has been that migrants seldom register their moves but have retained their membership in their home parish, even though many migrants and their families live hundreds of kilometers away from their native district. Due to an increase in the number of unregistered interregional moves, the ELCIN church registers are not valid sources for studying post-1970s migration. The long physical distance between the home parish and the residential area causes a time lag in entering vital events in church registers. The analysis of death registrations has revealed that deaths have been carefully registered because the deceased are normally buried in the graveyards of their home parish.

The third problem characteristic to all African parish registers before the 1950s is that a great number of the new Christians were baptized as adults. Information concerning the birth date of a person baptized as an adult (if mentioned) is usually unreliable because missionaries might often have guessed the age of the baptized person. In real life no one, including the person her/himself, could know the exact date of birth. The time lag between birth and baptism varied from a few weeks to more than a year. The problem with the registers is that children who died before baptism are missing both from the registers of deaths and births.

The fourth issue reducing the validity of parish registers is the non-systematic maintenance of the registry books. Variation in the quality of parish registers between parishes is great. This might have been related to varying bookkeeping skills among both the Finnish missionaries and the local ministers during the first half of the twentieth century. The foundation of new parishes in the 1950s and 1960s also created a situation where there was lack of educated personnel. The gaps in parish registers are extremely problematic when the analysis is based on the follow-up of population. In our project two parishes (Eenhana and Olukonda) had to be excluded from the analysis. In Eenhana entries of vital events in the parish registers were inadequate, while in Olukonda some pages of three main books were badly mixed and other pages were missing.

The weaknesses presented above have also been identified in both Catholic and Protestant parish registers. Despite these and some other problems, parish registers still make it possible to analyze population development in a more diversified manner compared to the traditionally used population counts and ‘rough’ censuses.

The ELCIN parish registers also provide a much longer-term perspective on population development in Namibia than the available census and survey data, on which the analyses of population development in north-central Namibia have previously been based. In African conditions maintaining parish registers according to the same principles from 1880s to the present is exceptional. The first estimates of the population residing in the Namibian territory were presented in travel accounts in the nineteenth century. The first more official population figures were presented by the South African administration in 1921. The population was classified into twelve ethnic groups, of which the north-central Namibian Ovambos were the most numerous (91,500 of 223,665). The present north-central Namibia (formerly Ovamboland) has been the most densely populated rural part of the country. Today it consists of four administrative regions in north-central Namibia, i.e., Ohangwena, Omusati, Oshana, and Oshikoto. These regions cover a larger area than the former administrative region of Ovamboland.

In Namibia, as well as in many other African countries, figures for the African population must be approached with great caution, because systematic enumeration of population was initially organized only among the white population. In 1926 the colonial administration tried to correct the previous inaccurate estimates of the population living in Ovamboland by carrying out a “rough census.” The main aim of the census was to chart the labor potential of Ovamboland to be recruited for the mines located in central and southern parts of the country. The census was implemented by counting all homesteads and in a sample of homesteads their inhabitants (men, women and children) as well.

The result of the 1926 “rough census” was a revision of the estimate of the total population of Ovamboland to 126,800. In 1933 the estimate of Ovamboland’s total population was again revised, but downward, to 107,861. The 1933 estimate is the best available colonial record describing the structure of population in Ovamboland before the 1950s. Since 1951, censuses have been carried out at ten-year intervals. According to the 1991 census the population of the area was 618,117 persons, covering

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34 See Harri Siiskonen, *Trade and Socioeconomic Change in Ovamboland, 1850–1906* (Helsinki, 1990), 41–44.
about 44% of Namibia’s total population (in 1991 the total population was 1.4 million, in 2001 1.8 million).\textsuperscript{37} However, before the 1950s it was impossible to present any detailed figures concerning the key indicators of population development in Ovamboland on the basis of the available census data.

The ELCIN parish registers enable us to take a significant step forward when studying long-term changes in population development in the former Ovamboland region. The analysis of fertility, mortality, and migration can be traced back to the 1920s. Fertility in Ovamboland was close to the natural fertility rate and couples did not use contraception or abortion before the 1980s. Despite this, a noticeable decline and increase in fertility occurred between 1930 and 1980 which has been impossible to indicate by means of the census data. A comparison of the results of the fertility analysis from the last two decades to the latest censuses and survey figures indicated that parish record data gave slightly lower fertility estimates, but otherwise the parish record data was very reliable. This might be due to missing births in the parish register material.\textsuperscript{38}

When considering the transition of mortality, the parish record data document significant discontinuities and reversals in the mortality trend in Ovamboland. Only inconclusive evidence existed concerning any decline in mortality of adults before the early 1950s. Unlike adult mortality, infant and child mortality probably fell in every decade examined except the 1940s. For children as well as adults, the period between 1950 and 1965 showed a particularly rapid decline in mortality. The transition to moderately low mortality was largely complete by the late 1960s. The great benefit of parish records is that they enable us to analyze mortality transition in different age groups with direct methods as early as during the first half of the twentieth century. This has been impossible with the census data. Parish registers have also proved to be excellent sources when investigating the impact of AIDS on mortality. Unlike the sentinel surveys and hospital statistics on which estimates of AIDS mortality are normally based, and represent small special groups of the population, parish registers cover all age groups in a certain area. However, parish registers do not accurately tell which parishioners have died of AIDS. A comparison of mortality rates in different age groups before and after the

\textsuperscript{37}Notkola/Siiskonen, Fertility, 17–19; RoN, 1991 Population and Housing Census, 1.
\textsuperscript{38}For more about the results of the fertility analysis see Notkola/Siiskonen, Fertility, 68–87; Riikka Raitis, “Fertility in the Northwest Region of Namibia,” Yearbook of Population Research in Finland 32(1995), 106–17.
appearance of AIDS reveals the spread of HIV/AIDS on the local level. The impact of HIV/AIDS is not restricted only to mortality but clearly reflects fertility as well.\textsuperscript{39}

Investigation of migration using census data and population counts has been very problematic. Parish record data do not solve all the problems related to the analysis of migration but permit us to go much deeper than has been possible using traditional sources. The ELCIN parish registers are at their best when analyzing intra- and inter-community migration. The migration analysis revealed that moves firmly concentrated around the marriage contract and that the distances of moves were short. For males, the most important cause of moving was access to land. However, during the last decades of South African rule the reliability of parish registers for investigating migration weakened noticeably due to an increase in uncontrolled and illegal interregional migration within Namibia. At the time of Namibian independence all restrictions on internal migration were lifted. Today many people live permanently far away from their home parishes but have retained their membership there. In spite of the limitations related to registers of in- and out-migrants in the recent past, parish registers are excellent sources for investigating internal migration during the first half of the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{40}

The example presented above clearly shows the possibilities parish registers can offer for historical demography if the available records have been systematically maintained. The great obstacle to the use of African parish registers is that someone has first to discover them. Utilization of parish registers is not restricted to historical demography. They also offer an opportunity for social historians, anthropologists, medical scientists, linguistics, etc al. to deepen the analysis of African societies with accurate empirical data on the individual level. Minna Saarelma-Manunumaa’s dissertation on names as links between African and European anthroponymic systems, based on the ELCIN parish registers, is a good indication of widening the range of disciplines where African parish registers can be utilized.\textsuperscript{41}

\textsuperscript{39}For more about the mortality analysis see Notkola/Siiskonen, \textit{Fertility}, 88–109; Notkola et al., “Impact on Mortality.”

\textsuperscript{40}For more about the analysis of migration see Notkola/Siiskonen, \textit{Fertility}, 112–63.

\textsuperscript{41}Minna Saarelma-Manunumaa, \textit{Edhina ekogidho—Names as Links the Encounter Between African and European Anthroponymic Systems Among the Ambo People in Namibia} (Helsinki, 2003).
Parish register records comprise one of the most widely-used sources in studies dealing with European historical demography. When investigating population development in Africa, the utilization of parish registers has still been coincidental, although missionary societies and Christian churches have been actively working in sub-Saharan Africa since the second half of the nineteenth century. However, those few demographic studies based on church registers have proved their value as sources for historical demography in the African context as well. Parish registers have enabled us to use direct methods to analyze population development in African societies as early as the early colonial period. This has been very difficult with the traditionally-used colonial sources—population counts and censuses. Despite the fact that several weaknesses and pitfalls are related to the use of parish registers, they have proved to be more reliable and valid sources for historical demography than the early population counts and censuses.

One of the greatest problems concerning African parish registers is that time is continuously destroying the records due to rudimentary storage conditions. Burglars and fire may also suddenly destroy the records. Therefore it would be extremely important to organize projects to identify the existing parish registers from different parts of sub-Saharan Africa and film them (either on microfilm or digitally) for safety purposes and store the data in the appropriate archives. Collectors of oral tradition usually argue the importance of their projects using the clichéed idea that if their project cannot be quickly carried out, their informants will die. In the case of parish registers it is a fact that important collections will be destroyed before researchers have succeeded in discovering them.

The usability of parish registers is not restricted to demographic studies; they can also be used in linguistic, anthropological, historical, and medical research. It is also foreseeable that in the future Africans will become interested in their own roots, which means that parish records will be sought-after sources among African genealogists. Parish registers are the first written sources in sub-Saharan Africa to describe the life of African people. It is not an exaggeration to say that there is an urgent need to document parish registers in different parts of sub-Saharan Africa.