

# THE FORMATION OF AFRICAN EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY

Detlef Kapteina

## I. The Historical Setting of African Evangelical Theology

### A. AEA General Assembly 1973

The beginnings of African evangelical theology are closely linked with events at the Christian Education Strategy Conference that was held 25-31 January 1973 in Limuru, Kenya, immediately preceding the 2<sup>nd</sup> General Assembly of the Association of Evangelicals of Africa and Madagascar (now AEA) held at the same venue. It was at this Christian Education Strategy Conference that participants expressed an urgent concern regarding the lack of relevant theological reflection in their churches. They expressed a need for higher academic theological training to equip the church in its struggle with various challenges in Africa.

Instrumental in this call for higher theological expertise was the young Nigerian church leader Byang Kato. Regarding Kato's influence during this conference and the following AEA General Assembly, it is the estimation of the African scholar Tite Tiénou that "the challenge he gave marked a turning point in evangelical theological development in Africa."<sup>1</sup> In his

---

Dr. Detlef Kapteina is on the teaching staff of a Bible College in Tunduru, Tanzania. Formerly he served in Sierra Leone, lecturing at the Sierra Leone Bible College, and thereafter as a pastor in Germany. His advanced theological studies were done at the University of Gottingen. This essay is based on his doctoral dissertation, completed at the Evangelical Theological Faculty, Heverlee-Leuven, Belgium, and published in 2001, under the title: *Das ganze Evangelium dem Afrikaner. Profile Afrikanischer Evangelikaler Theologie*.

<sup>1</sup> Tite Tiénou: "The Theological Task of the Church in Africa: Where are we now and where should we be Going?" *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology* 6/1 (1987) p. 3.

presentation entitled "Theological Trends in Africa Today," Kato coined the term of "theological anemia" as the major problem of the African church, allowing "syncretism, universalism, and Christo-paganism" to creep into the church. He prophesied for the 1970s that "the spiritual battle for Africa ... will be fought...largely on theological grounds."<sup>2</sup>

The result of Kato's impressive address was that the Christian Education Strategy Conference presented two proposals to the Assembly, to establish not only (a) an AEA Christian Education Commission, but also (b) an AEA Theological Commission. The proposals were unanimously approved. The latter Commission was to take up the functions of the former AEBICAM ( Association of Evangelical Bible Institutes and Colleges in Africa and Madagascar), which had been launched at the inaugural session of AEA in 1966, especially as the administrative frame for promoting Theological Education by Extension (TEE) in Africa. The other main thrust of the new Theological Commission was the decision to establish two graduate schools of theology, one for the francophone Africa and the other for the anglophone Africa.<sup>3</sup>

Byang Kato was thus a key figure at this starting point for official theological endeavour and strategy by Africa's evangelicals. He became the AEA General Secretary, the Executive Secretary of the AEA Theological Commission, and he was the main toiler behind preparations for founding the francophone Bangui Evangelical School of Theology (BEST), the Accrediting Council for Theological Education in Africa (ACTEA), and the Evangelical Theological Society (ETSA).

But in making this assessment one should not overlook the historical framework of AEA structures, combined with the earlier awareness of Christian Education concerns, which led to the planning of the 1973

---

<sup>2</sup> B. Kato, *Biblical Christianity in Africa*. Achimota, Ghana, 1985; p. 11

<sup>3</sup> For more about other specific assignments for this Commission see in: *Africa Pulse* IV/1 (4/1973) p. 3-4 (e.g. academic evaluation and accreditation, and theological research).

Christian Education Strategy Conference. This conference was to develop adequate programmes for “biblical training of laymen” to help their needs “for deeper teaching of the Scriptures, for understanding and application of their truths” . The conference was to “reflect a shared concern for the propagation of conservative evangelical Christian teaching in Africa.”<sup>4</sup>

It is also noteworthy of understanding the opening phase in the formation of evangelical African theology to recognise that the first sprouts grew out of the well-prepared ground of six AEA constitutional purposes relating the task of evangelicals in Africa, to the public manifestation of “belief in the infallibility of the written Word of God” in the second place, and to “alert Christians to ... dangers which would undermine the scriptural foundation of the gospel testimony...” in the fifth place.<sup>5</sup>

The context of such concerns substantiated the spirit out of which the AEA Theological Commission was born and which marked the early stage of African evangelical theology as a theology safeguarding the church against syncretism and universalistic soteriology, “defending the church's doctrinal position”,<sup>6</sup> and holding firmly to the Bible as the “basic source of Christian theology”.<sup>7</sup>

## **B. Opposition to “African Theology”**

To identify the causes for the rise of evangelical theology in Africa, a second context must be considered: the growing influence of publications from African theologians outside evangelical circles, who from the beginning of the 1960s attempted to develop an indigenous concept of theology. They made considerable effort to rehabilitate African traditional religion (ATR) by proving it to be a religion equal to other recognised

---

<sup>4</sup> *Africa Pulse*, Wheaton, Vol III, No.4 (9/1972), p. 3.

<sup>5</sup> *Africa Pulse* (Wheaton) Vol. III, No.4 (9/1972) p. 1-2.

<sup>6</sup> B. Kato: *Biblical Christianity ...* (1985), p. 13.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

world religions and therefore to be a substantive source for theological reflection in Africa, and they even tried to present ATR as “preparatio evangelica” for the Christian Gospel.<sup>8</sup> John Mbiti and Bolaji Idowu were principal pioneers of such a theology, which received since the late 1950s the name of “African Theology”.<sup>9</sup> Even though the term had been used that early, Kato and Mbiti both agreed that still during the late 1960s the church in Africa found itself “in the situation of trying to exist without a theology”.<sup>10</sup>

This deplorable assessment provoked a man like Idowu, along with others, to search for a strong beginning. The ecumenically-oriented All-Africa Conference of Churches (AACC) had been formed in 1963 to link mostly main-line churches on the continent, and Idowu appears to have functioned within those circles in a similar way as Kato within AEA, as an initiator of theological endeavour in claiming to help the church do a better job in Africa. Idowu was the promoter and the pre-eminent speaker at the first pan-African Protestant theological conference held in Ibadan, Nigeria, in 1966, which worked under the theme “Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs”, and where for the first time at a conference an attempt was made to identify “African Christian Theology”. In several historical reviews this conference is considered to be the starting point or ‘momentum’ towards

---

<sup>8</sup> John Mbiti: *Concepts of God in Africa*. N.Y., 1970; p. xiii.

<sup>9</sup> Other important names have to be added here as early African proponents of African Theology, for instance C.G. Baeta, H. Sawyerr, and K. Dickson on the Protestant side, V. Mulago and T. Tshibangu on the Catholic side. We concentrate in this paper on Mbiti and Idowu, because Kato addresses his theological work mainly to these two African theologians.

<sup>10</sup> B. Kato in *Biblical Christianity* (1985) p. 11; regrettably he does not give the source of his quotation of Mbiti. But a similar observation of Mbiti is stated in “Afrikanische Beiträge zur Christologie” in Beyerhaus, P., editor. *Theologische Stimmen aus Asien, Afrika und Lateinamerika*. München, 1968; p. 72: “Doch hat die Kirche noch keine wissenschaftliche Theologie, ... und kennt noch keine theologischen Fragen.”

that 'African Theology' to which AEA leaders felt a need to respond for the sake of protecting their churches.<sup>11</sup>

There have been many attempts in the literature to define this term. John Mbiti gives the shortest definition : "...theological reflection and expression by African Christians."<sup>12</sup> But this definition overlooks the historical setting of the rise of "African Theology" definitely representing the attempt to emphasize the 'Africanness' of theological work in Africa, and thereby marginalizing the biblical, historical and doctrinal aspects of Christian theology. Kato identifies 'African Theology' with Philip Turner's definition: An "attempt to find points of similarity between Christian notions and those drawn from the traditional religions of Africa....and to amalgamate elements of Christian and elements of traditional beliefs."<sup>13</sup> Such a narrow definition would necessarily lead Kato to faulting such an approach for accommodating syncretism and heresy.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> A. M. Lugira, "African Christian Theology" ATJ 8/1 (1979) p. 56; D. Bosch, "Missionary Theology in Africa" JTSA 49 (12/1984); p. 19-20; J. Parratt: *Theologiegeschichte der Dritten Welt. Afrika*. München, 1991, p. 34-35. E. Fashole-Luke quotes from Idowu's address to participants of that Consultation, referring to the need for theological work to be done to the evangelistic(!) concern behind the calling for this Conference ("Footpaths and Signposts to African Christian Theologies" *Bulletin de Theologie Africaine* II/5 (1/1981), p. 25.

<sup>12</sup> "The Biblical Basis for Present Trends in African Theologies" AFER 7/2(1978) p. 83. In earlier writings he is more cautious with a definition. See in his *New Testament Eschatology in an African Background*. London, 1971; p. 185.

<sup>13</sup> B. Kato: *Theological Pitfalls in Africa*. Kisumu, Kenya, 1975; p. 55.

<sup>14</sup> Later evangelical scholars like Tite Tiénou or Kwame Bediako are wider in their approach of identifying 'African Theology', recognizing its apologetic motif in the sense of "legitimizing the existence of an indigenous African theology within the confines of Western Christianity," and defining it in line with J. Upkong's category of "African inculturation theology", thereby

Mbiti and Idowu do not fall under this category of 'African Theology' and Kato does not criticize them just on the ground of such a definition. But he sees the two involved in a theological movement, which overemphasizes the value of African culture and religions for the African Christian identity, running the danger of applying to the substance of the African religiosity the form of Christian vocabulary, and this mixed with certain liberal theological western concepts, coming in through the arm of AACC. In his writings, Mbiti obviously had set the presuppositions for his future theology: African theology was to build upon four "rich(!) sources": the Bible, the theology of the older churches, the African traditions and the present experiences of the church in Africa.<sup>15</sup> Such equalizing of the Scriptures with other authorities for an African Christian theology was alarming enough for Kato to become more and more critical of this "father of African Theology" as he calls him,<sup>16</sup> ending up in a harsh overall rejection of Mbiti's writings in the book *Theological Pitfalls in Africa* (1975). Kato even went so far as to question Mbiti's ability to understand African traditional religions adequately, because Mbiti had not been raised in a thoroughly traditional setting.<sup>17</sup>

It is indeed regrettable that this rough but inspiring beginning of theological dispute was not to be continued and improved, owing to the

---

distinguishing it from the other two categories of 'Black Theology' and 'Liberation Theology' (T. Tiénou, "Indigenous African Christian Theologies: The Uphill Road." IBMR 14/2 (4/1990) p. 74-75; K. Bediako describes the early theological work of Mbiti and Idowu as an honest attempt in a search for their own African Christian identity, but with divergent answers to that quest for identity. Mbiti's answer is valued as a christo-centric one, and Idowu's answer as the claim that Christian belief can easily identify itself with the authentic revelatory substance of African religion ("The Roots of African Theology" IRMR 3/2 (4/1989), pp. 58-65).

<sup>15</sup> John Mbiti, "Afrikanischen Beiträge zur Christologie", *Theologische Stimmen* (Hg: Gensichen u.a.) Bd II, 1968, p. 72.

<sup>16</sup> B. Kato, *Theological Pitfalls* (1975); p. 56.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 60.

sudden death of Byang Kato, who tragically drowned while on holiday only ten days after a reconciliatory meeting with John Mbiti in December 1975. At that time, according to the report of Mbiti, Kato agreed to revise the wording of some of his judgements regarding Mbiti's writings, so that the two could part in peace with each other.<sup>18</sup>

### **C. International Polarization between Evangelicals and Ecumenicals**

A third impact on the forming of African evangelical theology in the early 1970s was the involvement of the AEA leaders in the international evangelical movement of that time, which tended to distinguish itself from the global ecumenical movement. Kato himself was realistic enough to accept the fact of western theological influence on the African church scene, both for the ecumenical side as well as for the evangelical side.<sup>19</sup> He critically followed the theological development of fellow African students, who had returned from WCC-sponsored overseas studies and became leaders of the AACC. The more they identified with international ecumenical theology, the more he saw the proverb confirmed: "He who pays the piper dictates the tune." He continues: "It is unrealistic to expect so many students from the Third World to digest Aquinas, Tillich, or Cone,

---

<sup>18</sup> J. Mbiti, "The Biblical Basis for Present Trends in African Theology" *AFER* 7/2 (1978) p. 85. Mbiti himself declares his openness to correction of his theological approach in the article "Christianity and Traditional Religions in Africa" (in McGovern, editor. *Crucial Issues in Missions Tomorrow*. Vol III; Chicago, 1972; p.158): "I know that there are those who are ready to shout 'Syncretism! Syncretism!' in order to dismiss this concern (of inculturation), but who of us is free from syncretism, pride, prejudice and sheer obstinacy? Are we not prepared to let the Holy Spirit guide us into all truth...which ...will no doubt show us where we are or that we could be wrong in our approach to the question of religion in Africa?"

<sup>19</sup> "External forces from both ecumenical and evangelical movements outside of Africa have been a part of the history of the church in Africa. ...Thus fuel is provided for various theological convictions on the continent (of Africa)." B. Kato, "Theological Issues in Africa" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 133/530 (4-6/1976) p. 144.

and return home unaffected.”<sup>20</sup> Of course, he would not exclude himself and other evangelical overseas students from this judgement. But this is his observation, that Africa in the 1960s and early 1970s had become the battlefield of influential strategies of international Christian bodies and church associations in their struggle for dominance in the young and growing African churches. And this battle, so he stated in his prophecy of February 1973, and reconfirmed in his *Pitfalls* of 1975, will be fought on theological grounds for the next two decades in the next generations.<sup>21</sup>

At its birth in 1966 the AEA had the two evangelical international mission organisations, the Interdenominational Foreign Mission Association (IFMA) and the Evangelical Foreign Mission Association (EFMA) as its midwives; or shall one say, its parents. They had established an “Africa Evangelical Office” in Nairobi in 1962, in part to protect the churches they had helped initiate in Africa from rising ecumenical influences.<sup>22</sup> The World Evangelical Fellowship (WEF, now WEA) joined them very soon after.<sup>23</sup> At the inaugural session of AEA in 1966 many expatriate missionaries were founding members. During these years the question of “American missions... exporting their own problems (of

---

<sup>20</sup> B. Kato: *Theological Pitfalls*, p. 140.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* Observe how he had to change his prediction in this instance from that in his speech of February 1973 at the AEA Assembly in Limuru, Kenya, where he spoke of only one decade of theological struggle. Now the 1980s are included and the next generation!

<sup>22</sup> Some sources refer this event to 1961. (G. Okoronkwo: “Christian Partnership in Action”. *Afroscope* 56 (»AEAM Silver Jubilee Special«; 9–10/1991), p. 6 and Kenneth L. Downing in “AEAM – History and Ministries”, Nairobi/Kenya, ed. between 1988 and 1991, p. 4.). David Howard speaks of 1962 in *The Dream that would not Die. The Birth and Growth of the World Evangelical Fellowship. 1846-1986*. Exeter, 1986, p. 67. There were preparations in progress to set up the WCC supported ecumenical “All African Conference of Churches” (AACC) in 1963 in Kampala/Uganda.

<sup>23</sup> D. Howard, *The Dream* (1986), p. 67, 71-77.

ecumenical relationships) to Africa, ..." happened to be an issue of dispute between IFMA/EFMA and WEF.<sup>24</sup> So one can see that the early African evangelical leaders were working within a setting of international polarization between the ecumenical and evangelical movements, even in the midst of international evangelical tensions between North American mission bodies and the World Evangelical Fellowship. Such a field of discussion must have sensitized African theologians like Kato, who grew very soon into leadership responsibilities of WEF, and participation in the Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization in 1974. He was able to look into the "infallibility issue", which occupied the WEF, when this body dealt with its relationship to the European Evangelical Alliance in 1968 and her moderate understanding of the infallibility of Scriptures.<sup>25</sup> Certainly those experiences had helped form his anti-heretical and apologetic approach to theologizing in Africa.

Ecumenical conferences, such as the General Assembly of the World Council of Churches held in Uppsala in 1968, and the eighth WCC International Mission Conference in Bangkok in 1972/1973, focusing as they did on "liberating" Third World churches from so called conservative, "old-fashioned" missionary theology added to the alarming feelings, which occupied Kato and the other participants of the 1973 AEA Assembly, and led them to push even more for an official evangelical theological strategy.

Kato analyzes convincingly the lines of growing influence from WCC on the All-Africa Conference of Churches, from AACC's formation in 1963 down to the 6 final resolutions of the AACC assembly held in Lusaka in 1974, which included the appeal to liberate themselves in the first place from "theological conservatism".<sup>26</sup> In addition to that confrontational attitude, if one imagines that the head offices of the AACC and the AEA were placed in the same city of Nairobi, one should not be surprised by the explosive ground on which the official theological work of the evangelicals

---

<sup>24</sup> E.g. in Nov 1967; cf. Howard, *The Dream* (1986); p. 76.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87-89.

<sup>26</sup> *Theological Pitfalls* (1975); p. 169.

in Africa started. But is such an emergency situation not an authentic basis for the development of biblical theology, if we compare it with the motifs behind the forming of theology in the times of the early church? David Bosch confirms: "...theology had no reason to exist other than to critically accompany the Church in its mission to the world, that theology was therefore, by definition, the product of an emergency situation."<sup>27</sup> Almost all evangelical theologians in Africa saw and see themselves in a situation parallel, for instance, to the struggle of Tertullian (160-220) with his 'Prescription against Heretics'.<sup>28</sup>

## II. Early Leaders in African Evangelical Theology

### A. Byang Kato

Byang Kato's initial role in the forming of African evangelical theology is evident, remembering his already mentioned involvement in the starting of a theological strategy within the framework of AEA.

Born in Nigeria in 1936, he became General Secretary of the Evangelical Church of West Africa (ECWA) in Nigeria in 1966, General Secretary of AEA in 1973, soon afterwards Executive Secretary of the AEA Theological Commission, Vice-President of the World Evangelical Fellowship in 1974, and Chairman of the WEF Theological Commission in 1975. No other evangelical leader around him produced the extent of conspicuous theological literature for the African setting as he did.<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup> D. Bosch: *Missionary Theology in Africa*. J TSA 49 (1984) p. 15.

<sup>28</sup> Tite Tiénou, "Issues in the Theological Task in Africa Today" AJET 1/1, 2 (1982) p. 5: "I think the majority of evangelicals would, at least in theory, agree with Tertullian."

<sup>29</sup> Even Osalodore Imasogie, Principal of the Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary in Ogbomosho, Nigeria, who later published his *Guidelines for Christian Theology in Africa* (1983), did not deal in his early doctoral thesis of 1972 with African issues.

Kato's 1974 doctoral dissertation at Dallas Theological Seminary in the United States, entitled "A Critique of Incipient Universalism in Tropical Africa," was published in book form in Nairobi in 1975 under the title, *Theological Pitfalls in Africa*. It was well received among African evangelical theologians and became the model for African evangelical theology in public awareness. It was indeed typical of Kato's theological concerns at that time in its apologetic and anti-heretical character, and it does reflect the above mentioned historical circumstances of the birth of official evangelical theology. Kato saw himself in the midst of world-wide growing theological tensions between evangelicals and ecumenicals. Serving in international evangelical functions he had to face personally the movements around the great international conferences, mainly the ones in Bangkok in 1972/73 and Lausanne in 1974, with their competitive focus on the Third World churches, not least in Africa. Those experiences shaped the content of his theological work in Africa to bear a polemic character.

He was a pastor and church leader, who wanted to protect his church from false teaching and preserve biblical Christianity in Africa. As a person he certainly stands for a theology grown within the life of the church rather than in some religio-philosophical realm of distant academic departments at universities. In his book, his concluding "Ten Point Proposal" for "Safeguarding Biblical Christianity in Africa" relates his theological purposes to the apologetic task and to practical problems of the church, like questions of polygamy, family structure, liturgy, spirit-world or the necessary training of church-leaders in the Scriptures, and the mandate of evangelism, and social concerns.<sup>30</sup> These points expose the real scope of his theological aspirations.

One should also not overlook his positive attempts to deal with African identity in culture and religion in articles like "Christianity as an African

---

<sup>30</sup> *Theological Pitfalls*, pp. 182-183

Religion” or “African Cultural Revolution and Christian Faith.”<sup>31</sup> Paul Bowers observes correctly that “*Pitfalls* is not Byang Kato's *magnum opus*.”<sup>32</sup> One must recognise that his initial theological contributions were just beginning to represent his intended profile for African evangelical theology in general. His sudden drowning accident at Mombasa at the end of 1975 tragically ended any further outlining of his theology.

What Kato did manage to accomplish before his untimely death was to set the stage for theological work among evangelicals; namely, by initiating the AEA Theological Commission, the AEA theological publication “Perception”, laying the groundwork for founding the Accrediting Council for Theological Education in Africa (ACTEA), and the two AEA-sponsored post-graduate institutions, BEST in the Central African Republic and NEGST in Kenya. These endeavours represent a considerable legacy.

#### **B. Tite Tiénou and Tokunboh Adeyemo**

We will focus on these two theologians in this article, because they in particular added to Kato's work other fundamental aspects in the forming of African evangelical theology.

Tiénou, supported later by the Ghanaian theologian Kwame Bediako, attempted a more constructive evaluation, by acknowledging African Theology's apologetic motif against Western Christian theologies with their devaluation of African culture and religion, and by attributing to people like Mbiti and Idowu an honest personal interest in clarifying the serious

---

<sup>31</sup> B. Kato, *Biblical Christianity* (1985), p. 32-39; the article “African Cultural Revolution and Christian Faith” (Jos, Nigeria, 1976) is referred to in K. Bediako's article “The Roots of African Theology”, *IBMR* 13/2 (1989), p. 58-65, as Kato's attempt “to address the (African) identity question” (p. 62).

<sup>32</sup> P. Bowers, “Evangelical Theology in Africa: Byang Kato's Legacy” *ERT* 5/1 (4/1981) p. 36.

question of African identity and selfhood by means of an experimental inculturation theology.<sup>33</sup>

Tite Tiénou grew up in Burkina Faso, was a pastor and lecturer there and overseas in theology and missiology, and became the successor of Kato as head of the AEA Theological Commission (1977-1987), and Chairman of ACTEA. He concludes his "Historical Review of Evangelical Theological Strategy in Africa" with the remark: "Dr. Kato has done the groundwork for us; where and how shall we go from there?"<sup>34</sup> He indeed must have felt himself obliged to the theological legacy of Kato. He enthusiastically paints a picture of Kato as the integrative figure in the rise of evangelical theology in the AEA setting. Indeed, he expounded his view of the theological task of the evangelical church in Africa initially as part of his "Byang H. Kato Memorial Lectures" given in 1978 at Igbaja in Nigeria.<sup>35</sup>

Tiénou's main concern is keeping academic theology close to the "grass-roots church life", and to relate the "search for theological identity to worship and prayer life of the African churches."<sup>36</sup> He observes a "gap between academic and popular theology" and wants to implement a "third way in African theology", paved for the local pastor. In doing this, he helps the pastor to ground his shaky popular theology on "sound scriptural interpretation" and proper contextual theology.<sup>37</sup> It is indeed around this

---

<sup>33</sup> See note 14 above for reference.

<sup>34</sup> T. Tiénou: "The Theological Task of the Church in Africa", Achimota, Ghana 1982; p. 16.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>36</sup> T. Tiénou, "Indigenous African Christian Theologies: The Uphill Road" IBMR 14/2 (1990) p. 73 and 77.

<sup>37</sup> T. Tiénou, "The Theological Task of the Church in Africa: Where are we now and where should we be Going?" *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology* 6/1 (1987) p. 6-7. Tiénou finds support in Isadore Imasogie's article

church-based perspective where evangelical theologians could and should cultivate their '*proprium*'.

David Bosch evaluated Tiéno's contribution to the African theological enterprise with the impression that he "is an evangelical theologian worth watching."<sup>38</sup> Tiéno's dissertation on "The Problem of Methodology in African Christian Theologies" (Fuller, 1984) is another asset to evangelical theology in Africa because it offers a significant alternative methodology to the ones of Mbiti, Tshibangu, Pobee and Sanon. He does this by purposely limiting the contextual approach to three elements for methodological considerations: the church, the cultural and religious aspects of her surrounding local community, and the biblical revelation, which has the overall control over the hermeneutical process within such specific contexts.<sup>39</sup>

Tokunboh Adeyemo of Nigeria, Kato's successor as General Secretary of AEA, and later Chairman of the WEF Executive Council, has introduced another facet to the forming of African evangelical theology. His emphasis is on shaping theology by conscious encounter with the challenge of African Islam and Catholicism.<sup>40</sup> Having been raised in a strong Muslim tradition in Nigeria, Adeyemo is perhaps predestined to work out an evangelical theology related more directly to the actual social African context. He initiated the establishment of the AEA Department on Ethics, Society and Development in 1984 and its publication "Afrethics".

---

"The Church in Theological Ferment in Africa," where it is said that the "church must become the centre of theological instruction and discussion" ERT 9 (1985) p. 369.

<sup>38</sup> D. Bosch, "Missionary Theology in Africa" JTSA 49 (12/1984) p. 23.

<sup>39</sup> T. Tiéno: "The Problem of Methodology in African Christian Theologies," unpublished dissertation at Fuller Theological Seminary, USA. 1984; pp. ii and iii.

<sup>40</sup> T. Adeyemo: *Salvation in African Tradition* (1979); p. 12.

He is also an editor of *Transformation*, the specialist journal for "International Evangelical Dialogue on Mission and Ethics".<sup>41</sup>

### III. Identity of African Evangelical Theology

#### A. The AEA Context

The major life setting for the profile of African evangelical theology relates to the Association of Evangelicals in Africa (AEA), and to AEA's official representatives (until 1993 AEA was known as AEAM, the Association of Evangelicals in Africa and Madagascar). But there are now other influential evangelical theologians like Kwame Bediako or David Gitari, who have been only loosely connected with the AEA community, but were linked with initiatives of the WEF Theological Commission and should therefore be considered as contributors to the forming of African evangelical theology. I include here also theologians who hold official positions within member churches of national AEA member bodies, like the then Principal of the Baptist Theological Seminary in Ogbomosho, Nigeria, Osadolor Imasogie, who wrote a very essential book on evangelical theology in Africa,<sup>42</sup> or others like Gottfried Osei Mensah from Ghana, who was the travelling secretary of the African Fellowship of Evangelical Students before becoming the first General Secretary of the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization.

---

<sup>41</sup> Published by the International Fellowship of Evangelical Mission Theologians (INFEMIT), which links the Latin American Theological Fraternity, the Africa Theological Fellowship, and Partnership in Mission Asia. Edited in Wynnewood/PA/USA.

<sup>42</sup> Osadolor Imasogie: *Guidelines for Christian theology in Africa*. Achimota, Ghana; 1983. The Baptist Theological Seminary in Ogbomosho, Nigeria, is the leading official institution for theological education of the Baptist Convention in Nigeria, which is a member of the evangelical Alliance in Nigeria.

Christina Breman's book on the AEA<sup>43</sup> provides helpful background information on the key theologians of the AEA: Kato, Adeyemo and Tiéno. The book offers detailed biographies and her bibliographical survey of these evangelical theologians is of high value, since she also tried to give brief abstracts of their literature. Breman's book is an important source for the historical background of the beginnings of African evangelical theology. Furthermore, she offers a helpful analysis of the links between IFMA and EFMA and the roots of the AEA(M).<sup>44</sup>

Her short survey of the writings of Kato and Adeyemo concentrates only on their contribution to the message of the AEA. It is to be noted that she confines the message of AEA to the theological profile of Kato and Adeyemo, because they were the General Secretaries of AEA. On this ground she views the theology of the AEA as an apologetic theology against the liberal ecumenical theology, and against an "African Theology" too intermingled with African traditional religions. An interesting comparison between Kato and Adeyemo leads Breman to the observation that Adeyemo developed Kato's theology towards a contextual theology, and that Adeyemo showed more openness to pentecostal views. This observation is confirmed in the present author's book on African evangelical theology, *Afrikanische Evangelikale Theologie. Plädoyer für das ganze Evangelium im Kontext Afrikas*.<sup>45</sup>

---

<sup>43</sup> Christina Breman: *The Association of Evangelicals in Africa. Its History, Organisation, Members, Projects, External Relations, and Message*. Zoetermeer (Uitgeverij Boekencentrum), 1996.

<sup>44</sup> The two North American evangelical mission associations IFMA (Interdenominational Foreign Missions Association) and EFMA (Evangelical Foreign Missions Association; since 1991 Evangelical Fellowship of Missions Agencies) initiated the founding of an African Evangelical office in Nairobi in 1962 in counteraction to a theological scholarship programme of the ecumenical AACC. Breman. *The Association of Evangelicals*, p. 7-19.

<sup>45</sup> Detlef Kapteina: *Afrikanische Evangelikale Theologie. Plädoyer für das ganze Evangelium im Kontext Afrikas*. Nürnberg (VTR); 2001; p. 35-36. Adeyemo's rising interest in a charismatic impact on church life and theology can be seen in his joining and becoming an elder of the Nairobi Pentecostal Church (Kato had been a member and elder of the Nairobi Baptist Church), and in his emphasis on the importance of the Holy

Besides the activities of AEA, there had been another widely recognized movement in Africa which grew out of the enthusiasm experienced at the 1974 Lausanne International Conference on World Evangelisation in Lausanne in 1974. This movement resulted in the Pan African Christian Leadership Assembly (PACLA) held in Nairobi in December 1976, with Gottfried Osei-Mensah as Chairman and other African evangelical leaders like Festo Kivengere and Tite Tiénou as main speakers. After settlement of some preliminary misunderstandings in the planning phase, AEA leaders were able to cooperate together.<sup>46</sup> Some reviewers of the history of theology in Africa state that participants at this assembly had announced this conference to be the starting point of evangelical "African Theology".<sup>47</sup>

This article argues for another view of the time and the context regarding the beginning of African evangelical theology. It makes more sense to relate African evangelical theology to the official organs of African evangelicalism. Moreover, the PACLA initiators themselves denied this "historic" view. Such notions result rather from a lack of thorough research on the evangelical presence in Africa. However, since AEA representatives did support the evangelistic enterprise of PACLA, it certainly has to be considered as one factor in the forming of African evangelical theology. The "PACLA theology" is to be considered as an

---

Spirit's leading role in the work and person of the theologian. (T. Adeyemo: "Towards an Evangelical African Theology" ERT VII/1(1983); p. 147. Cf. Kapteina, *Afrikanische Evangelikale Theologie*; pp. 175-176 und 242). The increasing openness to the work of the Holy Spirit is also indicated in the preamble of the AEA constitution (1993), which refers the founding of the AEA to the "prompting of the Holy Spirit".

<sup>46</sup> In the beginning AEA leaders had some problems with the acceptance of two invited speakers, John Mbiti and John Gatu (who had emphatically supported the idea of "Moratorium" in Bangkok). See open letter of AEA representatives of 29 June 1976 in Nairobi.

<sup>47</sup> H. Rücker, '*Afrikanische Theologie*'. *Darstellung und Dialog*. Innsbruck, 1987; p. 65. , referring to a report of G.E. Stoll: "Trommel und schwarze Hand". *Evangelikale Afrikaner tagen in Nairobi*. In: *Evangelische Kommentare* 10/2 (2/1977); p. 93-95. Cf.: Fr. Kollbrunner: *Auf dem Weg zur afrikanischen Theologie*. In: G. Collet (Ed.): *Theologie der Dritten Welt. EATWOT als Herausforderung der westlichen Theologie und Kirche*. Immensee, 1990; p. 49, 50.

essential aspect in the early development of African evangelical theology. It extended Kato's concern for a Bible-centred and Christ-centred theology to a holistic theological approach. PACLA began to develop an evangelical contextual theology, which emphasized the relevance of the Gospel not only in the realm of culture and religion but also in the context of the modern African's social and physical needs and socio-political life-setting. By inviting John Mbiti to the conference, the PACLA leaders also made first steps away from Kato's rather polemic and defensive criticism against non-evangelical African theologians towards a critical but constructive dialogue with them.

### **B. Defining the terms**

I found three sources of African provenance where an explicit definition of African evangelical theology has been attempted. The earliest is from Tite Tiéno in the booklet *The Theological Task of the Church in Africa*, which contains his lectures during the 'Byang H. Kato Memorial Lectures' in 1978. To him "evangelicalism is the description of those committed to the historic Protestant understanding of the Gospel," and evangelicals are "those Christians who are committed to the authority of the Word of God as their 'rule of faith and practice.'"<sup>48</sup> Concurrently, Tiéno's understanding of theology is "the reasoned statement of biblical revelation which makes possible the transmission of the Christian faith to the future generations." To clarify his conception he uses the picture of the Christian faith being a beautiful song, to which the biblical revelation is given for the words of this song and the theology for the music and rhythm.<sup>49</sup>

The other source is the *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology* (AJET; titled until 1989 the *East Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology*), published since 1982 in Kijabe by Scott Theological College. The editor at that time, Isaac Simbiri, writes in the second issue (1983) on the question 'What is African evangelical theology?' He points to three basic elements in the following priority list: 1. African evangelical theology has to be based

---

<sup>48</sup> T. Tiéno, *The Theological Task* (1982); pp 7-8.

<sup>49</sup> *ibid.*, p. 10.

on the “Lordship of Jesus Christ over the powers of this world”; 2. African evangelical theology has to be “committed to the Word of God and (!) the Spirit of God as the only reliable guide to understanding the truth about the Lordship of Christ”; 3. African evangelical theology has to apply “biblical, Christ-centred faith to life in Africa”, summarizing that African evangelical theology is “simply evangelical theology applied to the African context.”<sup>50</sup> He refers to the African part of the Seoul Declaration, 1982, which relates issues like traditional African world view, the reality of the Spirit-world, competing ideologies, Islam, and contemporary cultural, political and religious struggles to the African context, and urges evangelical theologians in Africa to participate in the “quest for human identity in the context of the dehumanizing history of colonial exploitation, tribal feud and racial discrimination.”<sup>51</sup> One observes already the widened range of the theological task, certainly influenced by issues which evangelicals in Latin America and South Africa have had to face.

Tokunboh Adeyemo wrote an article “Towards an Evangelical African Theology” (1983), obviously using the term ‘African Theology’ in a neutral sense. His definition is based on the understanding that evangelicals are “Bible-believing Christians” living in “a personal dynamic relationship with Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord” and draws from there a line to evangelical theology as “an obedient Spirit-led reflection upon God’s revelatory words and acts, culminating in Jesus Christ, an honest application of the same to our lives, and consequent sincere communication of it for perfecting the saints for the work of the ministry.”<sup>52</sup> I quote this whole definition, because it accurately describes the theological process in three stages: Spirit-led reflection, application to life, and communication in the church. His priority list takes the Bible concern first, followed by

---

<sup>50</sup> AJET 2/1 (1983) pp. 1-2.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3. Cf.: “The Seoul Declaration: Toward an Evangelical Theology for the Third World” (1982) IBMR 7/1 (1/1983) p. 3.

<sup>52</sup> T. Adeyemo, “Towards an Evangelical African Theology” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 7/1 (1983) p. 147.

commitment to the Lordship of Christ, the supremacy of the Holy Spirit, spiritual discipline of the theologian (prayer), and integration within the interaction and dialogue of the community of the believers.

Looking at those three contemporary sources of identifying evangelical theology in Africa, it becomes evident that they build on Kato's understanding of theology to define and defend the church's doctrinal position and to excel in *biblical* scholarship, even going as far as to accept "the need to deepen his [the African evangelical's] historic roots in the Western stream of creedal and doctrinal development."<sup>53</sup> But one sees also a development to a wider range of the theological task which lays more emphasis on Christology than 'bibliology', on pneumatology, and on contextuality. In the summary phrase which is typical for Kato, namely 'biblical Christianity', if perhaps the accent in that phrase had initially been on the first word, '*biblical* Christianity', then the accent had gradually shifted to accent the name of *Christ*, to '*biblical Christianity*'.

### C. "African Fundamentalism" ?

Finally we must take into account the perspective of theologians outside official evangelical circles, as they identify and describe African evangelical theology. The term "African evangelical theology" in itself is not used at all. Even the term "evangelical" is a rarity when they mention one or other evangelical theologian. The mark of fundamentalism is preferred.

Among the few theological surveys or historical reviews which notice literature of evangelicals, the most objective one is by David Bosch. His article "Missionary Theology in Africa"(1984) respects the wording that evangelicals use for themselves, calling the authors he selected "Protestant evangelical theologians" (Kato, Adeyemo, and Tiénou) and taking their work seriously as a real alternative theological perspective opposite to the exponents of 'African Theology'. He sees them, too, "sharing one concern:

---

<sup>53</sup> AJET Vol 1 (1982) p. 1 and AJET 6/2 (1987) p. 1.

to develop an authentic and relevant African Christianity and theology...”,<sup>54</sup> He recommends especially Tite Tiénou as an “evangelical theologian worth watching.”<sup>55</sup>

The majority of scholars referring to evangelical presence in Africa move quickly to a devaluing fundamentalistic notion. John Parratt in his *Theologiegeschichte der Dritten Welt. Afrika* (1991) sees here a North American import, and stigmatizes people like Kato with the judgement of mere “Wiederholung der Position einer bestimmten Ausprägung des westlichen Christentums” (“repeating the position of a certain type of Western Christianity”), which means that such persons are unable to make a specific African theological contribution. But Parratt is fair enough to admit that Kato's book contains important observations. For example, he welcomes the fact that Kato urges the centrality of Christ as the critical factor in the theological inculturation process.<sup>56</sup>

Edward Fashole-Luke is more supportive, even though he speaks of 'Biblical Fundamentalists', characterized by an “uncritical approach to Scripture”. But in the same paragraph he can continue with the remark that they “underline a basic feature of the Christian faith...: the uniqueness and finality of Christ's revelation...”<sup>57</sup> He sees the evangelicals at least as one of

---

<sup>54</sup> D. Bosch, “Missionary Theology in Africa” *JTSA* 49 (12/1984) p. 23. D. N. Wambutda, too, takes it as a matter of course to list the books of Kato and Adeyemo among all the other renowned African theologians in “the quest for a Christian African Theology”. D.N. Wambutda, “Savannah Theology: A Biblical Consideration of the Concept of Salvation in the African Context” *Bulletin de Theologie Africaine* III / 6 (7-12/1981) p. 137.

<sup>55</sup> D. Bosch: *Missionary Theology ...*(1987) p. 23.

<sup>56</sup> John Parratt: *Theologiegeschichte der Dritten Welt. Afrika*. München, 1991; p. 99.

<sup>57</sup> E.Fashole-Luke. “The Quest for African Christian Theologies” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 29 (1976); p. 166.

“three major streams” of theologians in Africa, namely those who take the Bible as a “primary and basic source for...African Christian theologies.”<sup>58</sup>

H. Rucker argues that such a predominant “biblicistic fundamentalism” in a theology seems to be mainly concerned with an alternative hermeneutical approach than forming a specific theology. Nevertheless, he too respects the emphasis of this “*einflussreiche Strömung im Christentum Afrikas*” (“influential movement within African Christianity”) on the uniqueness of the biblical message and its critique of philosophical and religious idolatry in Africa.<sup>59</sup> The Catholic observers of the African theological scene in the Dutch periodical 'Exchange' always deal with the evangelicals in a way of critical sympathy. The evangelical view is appreciated and taken as an acceptable critical opposition to the ecumenical position.<sup>60</sup>

### Conclusion

In observing the initial stage and some further developments in the forming of African evangelical theology, we may refer to one of Byang Kato's favourite expressions, which he mentions twice in his writings. The first emphasis, which appears in Kato's book on *African Cultural Revolution and the Christian Faith*: “Let African Christians be *Christian Africans!*”,<sup>61</sup> lays stress on biblical authenticity and priority for African Christianity. The same wording, but with different emphasis, occurs again as the conclusion of a notable address he delivered once at a large

<sup>58</sup> *ibid.* p. 165 –166.

<sup>59</sup> H. Rucker, '*Afrikanische Theologie*' (1987); p. 64, 65.

<sup>60</sup> E.J. Schoonhoven, “The Bible in Africa” *EXCHANGE* 9/25 (4/1980) p. 42ff: The Evangelicals: Biblical Theology in an African Context. M.R. Spindler: Struggling for the Liberation of Ecumenism: Ecumenical Theology in the Third World. In *EXCHANGE* 14 (9/1976) p. 20f., 31ff: Referring to B. Kato and his “evangelical model: Unity with the Bible”(p. 31)

<sup>61</sup> B. Kato: *African Cultural Revolution and the Christian Faith*. Jo, Nigeria, 1976; p. 51. Italics by Kato.

Bowers, saying: "Let African Christians be Christian *Africans!*",<sup>62</sup> underlining the necessity of an indigenized Christian theology for Africa. African evangelical theologians like him and several of his successors have helped the evangelical churches of Africa to grow towards that end.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Adeyemo Tokunboh. *Salvation in African Tradition* (1979)

\_\_\_\_\_. "Towards an Evangelical African Theology" *Evangelical Review of Theology* 7/1 (1983)

Bediako, Kwame. "The Roots of African Theology", *IBMR* 13/2 (1989)

Bosch, David. "Missionary Theology in Africa" *JTSA* 49 (12/1984);

Bowers, Paul. "Evangelical Theology in Africa: Byang Kato's Legacy" *ERT* 5/1 (4/1981)

\_\_\_\_\_. "Evangelical Theology in Africa: Byang Kato's Legacy" *ERT* 5/1 (4/1981)

Breman, Christina. *The Association of Evangelicals in Africa. Its History, Organisation, Members, Projects, External Relations, and Message*. Zoetermeer (Uitgeverij Boekencentrum), 1996.

Fashole-Luke, E. "The Quest for African Christian Theologies" *Scottish Journal of Theology* 29 (1976)

Imasogie, Osalodore. *Guidelines for Christian Theology in Africa*. Achimota, Ghana, 1983.

Kato, Byang. *Biblical Christianity in Africa*. Achimota, Ghana, 1985

---

<sup>62</sup> P. Bowers, "Evangelical Theology in Africa: Byang Kato's Legacy" *ERT* 5/1 (4/1981) p. 35. Italics by Bowers.

- \_\_\_\_\_. *Theological Pitfalls in Africa*. Kisumu, Kenya, 1975
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Theological Issues in Africa" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 133/530 (4-6/1976)
- \_\_\_\_\_. *African Cultural Revolution and the Christian Faith*. Jo, Nigeria, 1976
- Kapteina, Detlef. *Afrikanische Evangelikale Theologie. Plädoyer für das ganze Evangelium im Kontext Afrikas*. Nürnberg (VTR), 2001.
- Lugira, A. M. "African Christian Theology" *ATJ* 8/1 (1979)
- Mbiti, J. "The Biblical Basis for Present Trends in African Theologies" *AFER* 7/2(1978)
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Concepts of God in Africa*. N.Y., 1970
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Christianity and Traditional Religions in Africa" in McGovern, editor. *Crucial Issues in Missions Tomorrow*. Vol III. Chicago, 1972
- Okoronkwo, G. "Christian Partnership in Action". *Afroscope* 56 («AEAM Silver Jubilee Special», 9–10/1991),
- Parratt, J. *Theologiegeschichte der Dritten Welt. Afrika*. München, 1991
- Schoonhoven, E. J. "The Bible in Africa" *EXCHANGE* 9/25 (4/1980)
- Tiénou, T. "Indigenous African Christian Theologies: The Uphill Road." *IBMR* 14/2 (4/1990)
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Issues in the Theological Task in Africa Today" *AJET* 1/1, 2 (1982)
- \_\_\_\_\_. "The Theological Task of the Church in Africa: Where are we now and where should we be Going?" *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology* 6/1 (1987)
- \_\_\_\_\_. "The Problem of Methodology in African Christian Theologies," unpublished dissertation at Fuller Theological Seminary, USA. 1984.
- Rücker, H. *'Afrikanische Theologie'* (1987)