

# BYANG KATO AND BEYOND

*The 2008 Byang Kato Memorial Lectures, 1*

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## A. Preliminaries

It is an honour to have been invited by ECWA Theological Seminary Jos (JETS) to give these *2008 Byang Kato Memorial Lectures*. My own personal links with Nigeria and with the Evangelical Church of West Africa (ECWA) go back to 1968, forty years ago, when my wife and I first arrived in Nigeria, under the international mission SIM, to serve at ECWA Theological Seminary Igbaja. The seminary at Igbaja was at that time one of the premier evangelical theological schools in Africa. Byang Kato had graduated from the Bible College at Igbaja, and later taught at the Seminary. It was there at Igbaja that Byang Kato first sought me out, and began a personal friendship that lasted until his untimely death.

We have come together here once again to honour the memory of Dr Byang Kato. It is now more than three decades since his tragic death in 1975. Why should we still be memorialising him? How should we still memorialise him?

Let me ponder these questions briefly. Why should our evangelical communities in Africa still call Byang Kato to mind? Certainly we are encouraged by Scripture to honour those who have gone before us, who have been heroes of the faith. If we memorialise Byang Kato, we mean to do no

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more than obey the injunction of the writer of Hebrews, who said: “Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith” (Hebrews 13:7). Paul also instructs believers to: “Respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord ... hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work” (1 Thessalonians 5:12-13).

Is there a risk of over-estimating Kato? Might evangelicals in Africa be in danger, as some suppose, of excess in this respect? One recognises that not everyone in Africa holds Kato in honour. Indeed there is an established tendency in learned academic literature to the contrary; I will speak to this later. Nevertheless it is the case today, more than three decades after Byang Kato’s death, that African evangelicalism does still remember him with esteem. If we were to visit the campus of the Nairobi Evangelical Graduate School of Theology (NEGST) in Kenya today, we would find the academic community gathering there in the Kato Memorial Chapel. Today in the Central African Republic, at the Faculté de Théologie Évangélique de Bangui (FATEB), we would find students hard at their studies in their beautiful Kato Memorial Library. Here in Nigeria at the Jos ECWA Theological Seminary you have the ongoing *Byang Kato Memorial Lectureship*. And just last year the vice-chancellor of NEGST, Dr Douglas Carew, travelled to England to visit that evangelical statesman and good friend of Africa, Dr John Stott, now in retirement, in order to confer on him the *Byang Kato Award*, given annually by NEGST to those who, as the award states, “best champion the vision of the founder of NEGST, Dr Byang Kato.”

So, regardless of other competing perceptions, African evangelicalism does still today sustain Kato’s memory. As we do here, willingly, once again this week. How should we do so? How shall we best estimate the man and his contribution in his own time, his own generation? And how best might we assess his possible relevance for our times, our quite different era in modern Africa, now in these opening decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. How do we appropriately move beyond Kato? It is on this set of questions that I wish to meditate with you in these *2008 Byang Kato Memorial Lectures*.

## **B. Theme**

I have taken as my theme for this lecture the phrase: *Byang Kato and Beyond*. In doing so I have not wanted merely to provide another set of personal recollections about Kato, nor one more review of his accomplishments and perspectives. These memorial lectures rightly include the expectation that something might be added to the store of reminiscences

about Kato by those who may have known him personally. And certainly each lecturer is meant to contribute further perspective on Kato's achievements and significance. I will in measure attempt to comply with both these expectations.

But I wish also to explore beyond those roles. It is also in the nature of lecture series such as this that one should attempt to be venturesome, to quest somewhat into new territory. If I try in part to live up to that criterion, it means that I cannot hope always to be exactly right, nor perhaps always persuasive. I would suppose, nevertheless, that we can enjoy thinking together, enjoy the opportunity to stimulate one another in our reflection about Kato. If we achieve that, then I would suppose we will have appropriately honoured Kato once again, in ways that would have pleased him, in ways fitting the biblical exhortations of Paul and of Hebrews, and in ways that will have achieved the purposes of a lecture series such as this.

On the other hand, in taking "Byang Kato and Beyond" as my theme, I do not wish to propose a way of going *beyond Kato* in the sense of displacing him, setting him to one side as it were in order now to move on to better things. Rather I want to recollect the measure of the man and of his contributions in his own time, in such a way that we can then assess his potential significance for our own time, his continuing relevance today. Looking backward in order to look forward. In this way we may go *beyond him* by building upon his commitments and his vision wherever appropriate, and thereby may strengthen our own footing, and enlarge our horizons, for fulfilling our calling before our Lord now in our present 21<sup>st</sup> Century modern Africa.

### **C. Kato the Man**

In its major points the life of Byang Kato is already familiar to many. Nevertheless it is just as well to remind ourselves about salient aspects both of the man's life and of his achievements. Not only because there are now new generations "that knew not Joseph", not only because of persistent misrepresentation of Kato in parts of the academic world, not only because memories of those among us who knew him begin to fade, but not least because, as I wish to suggest, not everything of significance about Kato has yet been fully surfaced and attended. Surprising as it may seem now more than 30 years since his death, there are yet important aspects of his life and vision not entirely brought to light and explored.

Byang Kato was born in Kwoi, Nigeria, in 1936. Raised by his parents in traditional religion, Kato made a personal decision for Christ at age 12. He

finished primary schooling at age 18. From that point Kato's educational trajectory intermingled increasingly with various ministry roles. He became involved with Boys Brigade, with Youth for Christ, he went off to Bible college, he joined the staff of the magazine *African Challenge*, he passed his A levels. And in 1957 he got married, to Jummai, with whom he enjoyed God's blessing of three children, Deborah, Jonathan, and Paul.

It was at Igbaja that I first met Kato nearly forty years ago. Kato was about six years older than I. As best I can remember now so many years later, it happened just about the time I was to leave for doctoral studies in Cambridge, England. Kato had already studied in England, at what is now the London School of Theology, and had earned a BD degree from London University. On returning to Nigeria he had been elected General Secretary of ECWA, the first from the northern part of Nigeria to assume that post. At the time of our meeting he had been awarded a scholarship for doctoral studies in the States, and was about to leave for that. He was visiting Igbaja, and in the process of his visit he went looking for me, found me at home, and took time to get acquainted, to make friends.

I pause to remember the occasion because, as many who knew him would testify, he was an exceptionally friendly person. I suppose some may at times have found him too earnest, or perhaps too clear in his certainties. But I did not. I found him to be, as did so many others, an unusually winsome person. An impressive person yes, but also easy to like, easy to feel comfortable with, someone who routinely showed warm personal interest in whichever individual he might be with. I think this quality of personal warmth and easy friendliness has not been adequately surfaced in subsequent representations of the man. But just this factor goes a long way toward accounting not only for his achievements in life, but especially for his sustained influence in the years after his death. It helps explain the formative impact he had on so many of those in the first generation of African evangelical leaders that succeeded him. Certainly I myself cannot remember Kato without first and foremost that sense of personal warmth, of Kato as a friend.

It was again here in Nigeria, at Igbaja, when I got back from my overseas doctoral studies, that my contact with Byang Kato resumed. In the interim he had finished his doctoral work, had been elected as the first African to head the Association of Evangelicals in Africa (AEA), had addressed the historic global assembly at Lausanne in plenary session, and was involved with highly energised engagements not only all over Africa, but also internationally.

When we met at Igbaja at that time, it was Kato who again took the initiative in making contact, and made the contact very agreeably personal, as was his custom. At Igbaja in 1975 he sought me out on two different occasions to ask me to take on an assignment from AEA to form what has since become ACTEA, the association of evangelical theological schools in Africa. I easily recollect one of those occasions as though it were yesterday. Kato was making a quick overnight visit to the campus, and had spoken to the students and faculty in a special evening session. Afterward in the moonlight he walked with me down the roadway from the seminary chapel. I can still feel his friendly grip on my elbow, as he pressed his request that I accept a task to launch a continental association for evangelical theological schools.

We met again several times at the Nigeria Congress on Evangelism held at the University of Ife that same year. I remember visiting across the lunch table, as he discussed the possibilities of post-graduate theological schools for francophone and anglophone Africa—something that at that time seemed to me an incredibly venturesome notion. But that was characteristic of the man. I particularly remember at that Ife conference hearing him give his so memorable, stirring address, on “Christianity as an African Traditional Religion”, which ended with the ringing words: “Let African Christians be Christian *Africans!*” At which point the entire audience of some 800 Christian leaders from throughout Nigeria rose spontaneously to their feet to applaud. Some minutes later, in the midst of the crowded hubbub, I felt again his grip on my elbow, and he was asking what I thought of the address.

It was at Igbaja in December that same year 1975 that I heard the so shocking news of my friend’s death. The word came by SIM’s radio connection early that morning. I was still getting washed up for the day when my wife came to tell me. To both of us it seemed entirely unbelievable - as it did of course to so many others hearing the news that day and in the days immediately thereafter, right round the world.

But by God’s design that proved *not* to be the end of Kato’s role in Africa, nor the end of his role in my own life. In those months after my return to Africa from Cambridge, Kato had asked me repeatedly to undertake an assignment to organise a continental association for evangelical theological schools. Each time I had gently turned him down. Kato was not to be so easily dissuaded. It turned out that, knowing as he did how SIM functioned, in the weeks before his death he had gone over my head without my knowledge, to my superiors in SIM, and had arranged to have me assigned to the task. And so, when several months later the AEA Executive formalised the appointment,

I could do nothing but accept. After all, as the Lord seemed to be reminding me at that time, I had returned to Africa thinking above all that I was meant to assist in the emergence of African Christian leadership. It seemed that the Lord was saying to me, so now, if African leaders have begun to lead, are you prepared to follow? So I followed, as best I could. I continue to try to do so.

It is appropriate therefore in this context for me to confess freely that my own sense of vocation was, and continues to be, fundamentally shaped by the influence of Byang Kato on my life, and by his vision, for an evangelical Christianity on this great continent that can be at once both truly biblical and truly African. He impacted so many others in the same way. And in my own case, that manoeuvre of Kato's just before he died, commandeering me to the task of starting up ACTEA, has directly affected my ministry career over all the years since his death. First this was so for me within Africa, from 1976 onward, in the founding and development of ACTEA, as he had envisioned. But then it proved also so for me, secondly, beyond his own vision and beyond Africa, but nevertheless directly derivative from his vision, that from 1979 onward I became tasked by the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) with forming a global alliance among evangelical theological schools, linking ACTEA with similar continental associations around the world, the body that has come to be known as ICETE, the International Council for Evangelical Theological Education, an entity with which I have been associated ever since, and for which I presently serve as Deputy International Director. In just such ways Kato's vision has continued a role *beyond Kato*.

#### **D. Kato's Achievements**

Taking a comprehensive measure of Kato and his achievements must be left to other occasions. I would like here, nevertheless, to review with you something of the uncommon *scope* of Kato's achievements. In many circles his memory has blurred over the years, reduced to awareness almost solely of his part in the debate over African Theology, as represented by his single book-length publication, *Theological Pitfalls in Africa*. If Kato is judged solely by *Pitfalls*, then in my estimation he will be *misjudged*. I wish to highlight briefly how much more there was to Kato the man in actual experience, some of this well known to many at the time but not as well recollected today. We will not have a responsible sense of this man without awareness that the man's achievements were in point of fact of an exceptional nature.

For example, earning a London University BD was exceptional. In those still early years of post-colonial Africa, in the 1960s, it was unusual for

anyone from his context to achieve that coveted distinction. He was also later the first African doctoral student at Dallas Theological Seminary in the States. Evangelical Africans achieving professional doctorates now seems so commonplace, that we might forget how extraordinary it was in that day. In the literature he is credited with being the first African evangelical to attain that distinction. Whether that is so, certainly in the years immediately following Kato's death I know that I myself could count on the fingers of one hand the number of evangelical Africans with earned doctorates. It has been often noted of course that he was the first African elected to head the Association of Evangelicals in Africa. In addition to his book *Pitfalls*, it is perhaps this AEA role for which he is still most widely remembered. Not so often noted is that at that same event in 1973 Kato was also appointed executive secretary of AEA's new Theological Commission, which was the actual base within the AEA structures from which he launched most of those visionary projects of his that still endure today.

In 1974 Kato was selected to give one of the plenary addresses at the historic Lausanne Congress on World Evangelisation, an altogether exceptional role to be accorded. Also at Lausanne he presented a major study paper which, as best I have been able to discover, represents the first time that the word 'contextualisation' was publicly introduced within global evangelical discourse. That paper was presented for detailed discussion to a special study unit at the Congress, populated by many luminaries of the evangelical academic world of the day. So far as I can trace it out, that particular discussion at Lausanne became the seed event leading to the 1978 *Willowbank Report*, still a foundational evangelical statement on contextualisation. Following the Lausanne Congress, Kato was appointed to the Lausanne Continuation Committee. Meanwhile the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA), the formal structure for global evangelical collaboration and identity, had appointed Kato as its Vice President. And when WEA then formed its Theological Commission, it was Kato who was selected to be its first chair. In short, Kato was no obscure, second-rate individual operating at the fringes of world Christianity. In evangelical structures of the time he was a well-regarded member of its inner global leadership circles.

I realised an entirely different side of Kato's ministry some years later. It was in 1995, some twenty years after Kato's death, in Harare, Zimbabwe. I was with a group of eight or ten of the principal leaders at that time in evangelical theological education in Africa. We were having tea together before a meeting, and engaging in light conversation. Somehow Kato's name came up, and I mentioned my surprise to have discovered recently that one of

those present had been visited by Kato during that person's student days overseas. Kato had travelled to his school, searched him out, gone to his dorm room, taken time to get acquainted, encouraged and challenged him, and prayed with him, leaving a lasting impression. Someone else in our gathering then commented that that had happened to him too, that Kato had visited him in the same way during his overseas student days. A third and a fourth person spoke up, all from different parts of Africa, all by then senior figures themselves twenty years after Kato's death, all visited in different parts of Europe and North America in their student days. My memory is that virtually everyone in the room had been visited by Kato in this way. No wonder his influence remains to this day.

Time fails me for calling adequately to our attention two other essential categories of Kato's exceptional achievements. Both I have already alluded to. One of these would be Kato's amazing achievement in a range of visionary implementations that have endured. It is one thing to have vision, and entirely something else to achieve parts of that vision. In Kato's case we live amidst major examples of vision achieved, ongoing powerful blessings to evangelicalism across the continent still in our own day, deriving directly from Kato's personal vision. I speak of NEGST, FATEB/BEST, and ACTEA. One must not fail to note as well in this respect his foundational contribution which underlies the vitality that AEA has continued to represent, not to mention his parallel contribution to WEA, and to the WEA Theological Commission, all still significant movements for good among us; and as well the global movement for which I presently work, ICETE, a direct derivative of Kato's energetic vision. By no means can the significance of Kato in our own day be reliably assessed without taking these exceptional, enduring contributions into account.

The other remaining category of Kato's unique achievement I have also already alluded to, namely that he was the first African evangelical to attempt to engage with the African intellectual world, to participate in the principal intellectual project of African Christianity in his day. And the first to provide a published contribution in that effort. For this alone he deserves exceptional credit, for this alone to be highly honoured amongst us. Indeed it is just this particular contribution, his challenge to intellectual engagement, that I want to single out and elaborate in a separate presentation. I want to ask what we can and should be doing in carrying forward this part of his vision, embracing our own Christian intellectual responsibilities in modern Africa. For, from a

certain perspective, we have hardly begun to get *beyond Kato* in this particular component of his vision. In this respect there is still much land to possess.

### **E. Expanding Kato Studies**

In appropriately honouring the memory of Byang Kato, it is important that I should also mention how much study still remains to be done for a proper understanding of the man, and for a reliable assessment of his achievements. One might think that all there is to know about Kato has already been well rehearsed over the years. But not so. The fact is that not everything relevant about Kato has yet been adequately surfaced or sufficiently pursued. There is still room for further fruitful inquiry, rich opportunity for further professional research and exposition.

This situation has been particularly highlighted by the distribution, in these opening months of 2008, of the extraordinary collection of Kato's writings, published and unpublished, now presented on the CD titled: *Perspectives of an African Theologian: The Writings of Byang H. Kato*. Here on a single CD we have essentially everything that was gathered on Kato by Christina Breman, the gifted scholar from the Netherlands, who wrote a comprehensive history of AEA, and died soon afterward. Now as a labour of love over several years, her collection of materials by and about Byang Kato has been carefully scanned and made accessible by that good man, a beloved colleague of many of us, George Foxall, long serving in Nigeria and now retired in Canada. If you have explored the content of this CD, this vast new resource, you will realize how little most of us were aware of Kato's considerable output, even in the few years that God allowed him for ministry. If some believe, as some do, that he died of sheer exhaustion, that he burned himself out, here in his astonishing productivity might be some supporting confirmation. Browsing through the materials, one finds numerous new angles deserving follow-up research in getting the fuller measure of the man.

But even so, this CD does not have everything. In preparing for these lectures I searched out my own thick file folder of Kato materials. There was a Kato prayer letter designated #25, and dated April 1974. Where, I wonder, would one find copies of letters #1 through #24? Last month by chance I came across reference to a book just published, memoirs of an expatriate missionary who worked in Nairobi many years ago as Kato's administrative assistant. I found that the text includes information relating to those days immediately preceding and following Kato's death, providing details that I have never seen anywhere else previously. Let me ask: is this the only person who worked

directly with Kato and is likely to still have unique memories? Or am I the only one from Kato's era likely to still have unique Kato materials buried in a file folder somewhere?

Long ago my wife and I had occasion to drive that notable African Christian leader, Gottfried Osei-Mensah, from Kisumu to Nairobi in Kenya, an all-day drive. We visited as we went, and among other things I discovered that Gottfried and his family had been good friends of the Kato family in Nairobi, and that the two families had been on holiday together on the Mombasa coast that December 1975. Gottfried had been part of the search party for Byang. During that day-long drive Gottfried talked at length about his friendship and about the event. Who has ever interviewed him properly, and other such persons, on matters that still puzzle and trouble many of us?

What important oral memories may still be available? What of all those eminent leaders visiting over tea in Harare in 1995? I have never seen anyone allude to, much less write up, this till then still hidden, unknown and yet important dimension of Kato - a dimension that I myself only stumbled on, by accident as it were, namely his deliberate resourceful effort to locate, encourage, and challenge young evangelical Africans preparing for leadership roles, one by one in different locations across the world. Who is going to interview these people before we all pass on?

Who has properly investigated Kato's *ECWA phase* as we might call it, the period in the late 1960s when he was ECWA General Secretary, indeed the first person to hold that post from the northern part of Nigeria? I have not seen that important phase of Kato's life dealt with properly anywhere. Is it possible that relevant archives are right here in Jos? Kato was reportedly the first African student at the London School of Theology to achieve the coveted London University BD. But nowhere have I seen a proper treatment of what we might call Kato's *London phase*. Indeed in the academic literature it is usually assumed that his overseas educational experience was limited to North America, a quite misleading assumption. I have just outlined Kato's singular role and status at the centre of global evangelicalism before his death. I have never seen either his Lausanne or his WEA roles anywhere properly attended. Who should search out the minutes of those leadership meetings of Lausanne or WEA for relevant details on Kato's role? Who will fill in these important gaps in the Kato portrait?

In preparing for these lectures, as I was scanning through the new Kato CD, I discovered there a typescript relating to Lausanne 1974, one that is not

present in the official compendium of Lausanne 1974. The published compendium has Kato's Lausanne study paper on contextualisation, and it has a summary report of the discussions that followed within the study unit concerned. But here on the CD is not that summary report, but apparently a copy of the actual secretarial transcript of those discussions, verbatim, three days worth, with many of the leading academic personalities of evangelicalism engaging each other over the ramifications of this new word 'contextualization'. Here is a priceless bit of history, of Kato history, just emerging to the light. I have no doubt that there is much more yet to be found. Somewhere perhaps there are those who will feel a challenge, a call perhaps, to benefit us all by undertaking some of the further Kato research that yet awaits attention.

In saying all this I must not in any way give the impression that there have not already been major contributions in the study of Byang Kato. Very much to the contrary. There is not only the present contribution of Foxall to celebrate, and with that the weighty contribution made by Breman beforehand. Long ago in 1978 Professor Tite Tiénou gave lectures at Igbaja, which were later published as *The Theological Task of the Church in Africa*, still widely used today. Discussing the role of Kato, Tiénou says that Kato's vision "still provides the basic framework" for evangelical theological strategy in Africa. Later in 1986-87 Kato's successor at AEA, Dr Tokunboh Adeyemo, gave a series of lectures on Kato under ACTEA auspices, the text for which remains regrettably to this day unpublished, but which helped much in taking a fuller measure of the man, from the unique perspective of his immediate successor.

Then of course there was the distinguished commemorative lecture given in 2000 here at JETS in Jos, on the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Kato's death, by Dr Yusufu Turaki, titled "The Theological Legacy of the Reverend Doctor Byang Henry Kato." That lecture was later published in the *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology* (AJET 20.2 [2001] 157-75). Also appearing more recently in that journal was the valuable contribution by Dr Timothy Palmer, from the Theological College of Northern Nigeria (TCNN) here in Bukuru, an article titled "Byang Kato: A Theological Reappraisal" (AJET 23.1 [2004] 3-20). More recently appearing in AJET was a major article by Dr Keith Ferdinando, titled "The Legacy of Byang Kato" (AJET 26.1 [2007] 3-16), reprinted from the *Dictionary of African Christian Biography*, an article which is likely to become a fundamental point of reference for all future Kato studies.

Is there possibly a sort of renaissance in Kato studies emerging among us? I am sure I have missed several other significant contributions. But I may be allowed to mention my own contributions, which have been two. First was a review of Kato's *Pitfalls* which appeared in 1980 in the journal *Themelios* (5.3 [1980] 33-34), and was then reprinted in the *Evangelical Review of Theology* (5 [1981] 35-39). Then also is my comprehensive treatment of African Theology, which appeared originally in the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, and has subsequently been published in AJET ("African Theology: Its History, Dynamics, Scope and Future" AJET 21.2 [2002] 109-25), which includes express focus on Kato's role within the African evangelical heritage. Finally, just a few months ago Professor Tite Tiénou's treatment of African evangelical theology appeared in a learned collection of essays devoted to evangelical theology globally. In that article Tiénou presents a judiciously favourable estimation of Kato's particular contribution to evangelical theology in Africa ("Evangelical Theology in African Contexts", in T. Larson and D. J. Treier, eds. *The Cambridge Companion to Evangelical Theology* [Cambridge: CUP, 2007] 213-24).

### **F. Reinterpreting Kato**

I am suggesting that in important respects our discussion about Kato needs to be reformulated, by setting him within the larger framework of his agenda and accomplishments. Much of the conventional treatment of Kato has repeatedly taken his measure almost exclusively in terms of his distinctive input to the African Theology debate. Kato is then interpreted either by critiquing or by defending that input. To the extent that this has become a common framing of the entire Kato discussion, it can prove reductionist and hence misleading.

I am suggesting two things in remedy. I am suggesting, first, that Kato's involvement in the African Theology discussion needs very much to be assessed within the context of Kato's wider visions and accomplishments. We need to work from a larger picture, a more holistic framing. Kato was nothing if not a visionary, and his lasting contributions were firmly rooted in that characteristic of the man. But Kato was more than a visionary; he was to an extraordinary degree an innovative implementer of fresh vision. That is what he was most about, that is what was so tragically cut off by his death. It is this larger perspective on Kato that I believe we need to reenergise. And in doing so, his fledgling theological interventions, his opening steps in intellectual engagement with the theological trends of his day on the continent, can then

be evaluated in rightful context, as part of a much larger agenda, and a more encompassing set of achievements.

Then, secondly, as to Kato's particular input to the African Theology debate, I am saying that it is not enough to fix on what he *said*. We need to focus as well on what Kato was *doing*, what he was attempting by that intervention. Conventional interpretation of Kato needs to be reformulated in that specific respect. The content of Kato's book, *Theological Pitfalls*, was shaped as a word of warning for evangelical Africa. But what bears particular notice is that he worked out that warning by means of academic engagement. What Kato was *doing* was attempting to engage the theological issues of modern Africa's intellectual life. So I am saying that in interpreting Kato more holistically, we need to recognise that Kato's intervention in the African Theology discussion was meant not just to provide a warning, but was also meant as a positive demonstration. *Pitfalls* was Kato's attempt to make his own personal contribution within his larger challenge to the African evangelical community, to embrace its Christian *intellectual* responsibilities in Africa.

## G. Assessing Kato

### 1. Kato's Commitments

At this point I want to recall something of Kato's essential commitments. In taking a fresh measure of the man, it is prudent to recollect what he most cared about. For example, it mattered to Kato to be evangelical. He devoted his life and ministry to the cultivation of a biblically-defined evangelical identity on this continent. Within that evangelical commitment, Kato's concern for Christian theological engagement in Africa kept in balance two crucial components.

On the one hand was Kato's profound commitment to the vision of African Christianity being truly *African*. He affirmed the richness and beauty of African culture, and his grateful pride in being an African structured his entire vision. He emphasized with the need for African Christianity to be not only truly biblical but also truly African. Only in this way could it attain a stable, fruitful maturity. On the other hand was Kato's profound commitment to the vision of African Christianity being truly *Christian*. He believed in contextualisation. But he also knew that if, in pursuing that goal, one were to *over*-contextualise, if one were to *over*-adjust the proclamation in order to suit the context, then what takes root may very well *not* be true Christian faith. What takes root can all too easily prove to be indigenous weeds, rather than

gospel wheat—as has happened again and again in the history of the Christian faith elsewhere, and is so evident in western lands today. So it was that in pursuing theological engagement Kato kept in critical balance an emphasis on appropriate cultural contextualisation and an emphasis on sound biblical grounding.

If we want to understand the impact of Kato's vision, and its continuing relevance today, we may wish to tease out these core strands, reflect on them, and reanimate them in our own commitments as we go forward in our generation, our new century, for God's good purpose in and for and through Africa, namely: a commitment to an evangelical Christian identity in Africa characterised both by biblical faithfulness and by contextual sensitivity.

## **2. Critiquing Kato**

Kato's particular set of commitments may seem sound enough. But it was just these commitments that left him out of step with much of the larger movement of African theological reflection in his day. Elsewhere I have explored the degree to which the African Theology movement has been determined at its core by the ideological commitments of African intellectual modernity. It framed its entire agenda as a sub-set of the larger intellectual endeavour of its context, namely the quest to establish an authentic African identity over against western intellectual pretensions.

African Theology set itself to work out just this set of commitments within a Christian idiom, to articulate and advocate an authentic African Christian identity, by means of a more positive valuation of Africa's distinctive traditional heritage. With extraordinary effectiveness, African Theology's basic project has been to find appropriate ways to affirm Africa's traditional heritage within a Christian framing, and thereby to accommodate African Christian thinking to Africa's prevailing intellectual demands.

In this sense African Theology developed in deliberate step with the drumbeat of African intellectual ideology. It has been part of the same celebration, an attempted Christianisation if you will of the same dance. And Kato was found to be out of step. He was not dancing to the prevailing drumbeat. He was taking his own way; his core commitments led him in a different direction. He wanted a theology that was suitably African, but also a theology in Africa that was soundly biblical. He affirmed Africa's cultural heritage wherever appropriate, but also critiqued it wherever necessary. He was prepared to censure the west and western Christianity wherever that was deserved, but he was also prepared to affirm and encourage fruitful

cooperation where appropriate. For just this seemingly grounded, realistic, and balanced approach he attracted, and continues to attract, almost inevitable criticism.

Scholarly African theological literature, from Kato's own time and continuous to the present, has largely treated Kato dismissively, or even disdainfully, as representing a deviant anomaly in the history of African theology. Possibly many of us are not entirely aware of this assessment, which has nevertheless become the dominant interpretation in major sectors of African theological discourse. Kato was no more than a man, with inevitable limitations.

But it is not excessive to say that these common representations of the man in the literature of African Theology are demonstrably flawed and misleading. At advanced academic levels of evangelical theological engagement in Africa, I suggest that we cannot afford merely to ignore or sidestep such representations of Kato, because they unavoidably impinge upon us too.

I asked earlier if there might be a risk of over-estimating Kato? Have evangelicals in Africa at times been in danger of making him into something of a heroic icon? No, I think not. It would of course be a disservice to the man to do so, a disservice to his memory, and to his Lord, if we began to honour his memory by treating him as an ideal type, of canonising him. For he was indeed a man among us, uncommon indeed, but still a man, seeking amidst the limitations and vicissitudes of his life to serve his Lord in faithfulness. Only as we continue to remember him, and honour him, as such a man, enabled by his Lord, can he be a truly effective model of goodness and godliness amongst us.

As it happens, the most extensive assessment and critique of Kato occurs in the writings of the Ghanaian scholar Kwame Bediako. Bediako is uniformly elegant, sophisticated, and nuanced in all his contributions, if not always reliable. His magisterial first book *Theology and Identity* devotes an entire chapter to Kato. There he states, quite wrongly as it happens, that to Kato's mind "no cultural factors had any part in the shaping of one's understanding of the Christian Faith." And in subsequent publications Bediako has not hesitated to characterise Kato expressly by the word "extremist", because of what he terms the "radical discontinuity" that Kato stoutly championed between Christianity and Africa's religious heritage. He also charges Kato with what he terms "radical Biblicism" (in David Ford, ed. *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* [2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Oxford:

Blackwell, 1997] pp 431-32). Similar assessments have followed in other literature. For example John Parratt, in his influential book, *Reinventing Christianity: African Theology Today*, labels Kato a fundamentalist, one who has “swallowed uncritically” the opinions of a particular brand of western Christianity, and in doing so has not made “any specifically African contribution to theology” (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995, pp 62-63).

Examples of this customary interpretation of Kato could be multiplied. It has now even entered into some evangelical presentations. Thus William Dyrness, in a summary survey of African Theology, has written that Kato presented African culture “in a negative light”, that he “could see no positive value in the study of traditional faiths”, and that he did not believe that “one’s understanding of the Gospel could be made any clearer by a dialogue” with traditional religion (*Learning about Theology from the Third World* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990], p 6). Kato would in fact have denied each of these statements. Likewise Diane Stinton, in a major scholarly presentation on African Theology, speaks of Kato as taking an extreme position, at the far end of the spectrum, in stressing “the radical discontinuity between the Bible and African religions”, and in believing that “Biblical revelation alone can point out the way the Christian should go” (in John Parratt, ed. *An Introduction to Third World Theologies* [Cambridge: CUP, 2004], p 118).

### **3. Correcting Kato’s Critics**

In recent times Kato has been increasingly defended against such mischaracterisations, for example in the noteworthy articles on Kato that I have already referenced, namely those by Timothy Palmer and by Keith Ferdinando. And now Tite Tiénou, in his summary article on African evangelical theology last year, has expressly challenged Bediako’s representation of Kato. Let me confine myself therefore to addressing only two central aspects of these conventional allegations, the issue of extremism and the issue of radical discontinuity.

As for extremism, Kato was an extremist, at the far end of the spectrum, only if all ordinary evangelical Christianity is extremist. Kato actually functioned not at the edge but at the centre of both African and global evangelical Christianity, as a well-regarded member of its central leadership groups. One did not get selected to be the first chair of the World Evangelical Alliance’s influential Theological Commission by being other than a centrist. Kato was extremist only in the sense that he was extremely centrist within evangelical Christianity.

And as for radical discontinuity, one can only charge Kato with holding to this position if one does not read him with responsible care, since Kato can be and has been easily quoted explicitly to the contrary. He certainly saw no salvific capacity in traditional religion, but that is a standard, fixed perspective of African evangelical Christianity. If that is radical, it is the radicalism of Scripture. But Kato certainly did not believe in an utter discontinuity between traditional religion and Christianity in the absolutist degree attributed to him by Bediako. Kato spoke of traditional religion as representing the cry of the African heart for which the Gospel is the answer. And in his understanding of traditional religion he held to a theological position of long and honourable history, which (grounding itself in Romans 1) takes all non-Christian religions to have had access to God's general revelation, although not to His special revelation. That may not be Bediako's brand of continuity, but it is also not radical discontinuity. Whatever Kato's limitations, in these core respects the standard criticisms of Kato have been irresponsible and wrong.

### **H. Going Beyond Kato**

Recalibrating our own estimations of Kato is a worthy project, taking proper note of those who have already enhanced our understanding of Kato is a worthy enterprise, sensing the need for expanding our research on Kato is a worthy challenge, and correcting misrepresentations merits our attention. But the title of this paper is *Byang Kato and Beyond*. I want in conclusion to probe how we might properly go beyond Kato, how to appropriate the values of Kato for our own day in order to go forward beyond him, still faithful to his commitments and his Lord.

For indeed we must not become entrapped in a backward vision, fixated on an era now past. We serve in different times, within a new era of modern Africa. Let me mention briefly at least six ways in which we may wisely seek to go beyond Kato, confident there are others as well.

- *Expanding reflection.* Kato died young. His life was seemingly cut off in mid-step. He did not get to develop his thoughts nor fulfil his dreams. He was rapidly growing in his thinking, but he did not get to elaborate that thinking to fullest refinement and potential. He was only just beginning. So we must be prepared to go beyond him in filling out those dreams, extending that vision, pursuing further implications of his commitments and thinking.
- *Multiplying initiatives.* Kato only managed barely to get launched certain key projects for sustaining theological life in African Christianity. I think for example of ACTEA, NEGST, and FATEB. We need to go well beyond Kato

by resolutely initiating a range of additional innovative projects for evangelical theological vitality and engagement in Africa. Thus the *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology*, the Ethiopia Graduate School of Theology, the *Africa Bible Commentary*, and JETS itself here in Jos are all important post-Kato infrastructures for encouraging theological life in Africa. What other pragmatic initiatives for this larger purpose do we yet need to implement together?

- *Constructive theologising.* One might say that Kato's own actual theological contribution hardly got beyond a warning of dangers. His only book was in the most part only a polemic, a preliminary ground-clearing. That doubtless needed to be done. But following through within his larger framework of evangelical contextual commitment, there is so much yet to be accomplished in elaborating a positive, constructive African evangelical theology, faithful to Scripture and suitably tuned to the African context. Beginnings have been made, but very much still awaits achievement.
- *Bridge-building.* Kato expended much energy in building bridges, cultivating community, creating networks, organising and energising body-life, both within the African evangelical community and beyond. That was a principal component of his ministry. It also remains an unfinished task, an ongoing calling fully worthy of our commitments and energies. There are other bridges needing to be built, more networks needing to be nourished, more synergy to be cultivated, in support of healthy vibrant theological life and community in Africa and beyond.
- *Reassessing for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.* Kato was a man of his time, and the times have changed. He served his generation in Africa. We need to serve ours. We cannot merely repeat Kato. We live in a new era, patterns have changed, which call for fresh understanding and for taking up new challenges and opportunities. As he did in terms of the context of his day, so we must newly assess our different context and respond to its needs and opportunities accordingly.
- *Engaging African intellectual modernity.* Perhaps the most pressing challenge in going beyond Kato relates to the intellectual challenge that he represents. Kato was the first African evangelical to attempt engagement with Africa's intellectual life, the first African evangelical to take up a participant role in African Christianity's principal intellectual project, and the first to call for evangelicals in Africa to address their intellectual responsibilities on the continent. We have since his time done much intellectual work; evangelical

reflection has thrived. But we have yet to engage effectively with the dominant intellectual trends of our context.

### **E. Conclusion**

In going beyond Kato in such ways as we have just reviewed, we may also find great wisdom in reanimating and building upon his core commitments and vision. In this respect how timely Kato may seem to be for us as Africa enters its new era. In key respects Byang Kato, with all his limitations, offers African evangelical Christianity some sure and balanced grounding for the day now dawning. For indeed in this new 21<sup>st</sup> Century of modern Africa, if what we need in part is a more balanced, responsibly realistic assessment of Africa, if it is commitment both to African authenticity and to biblical faithfulness, if it is critical engagement with African intellectual modernity rather than a largely unrecognised complicity, and if it is looking outwards towards African Christianity's identity and responsibilities in our now global world, in such respects we will find Kato already standing with us, and pointing forward.