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African Christians or Christian Africans: Byang H. Kato and his Contextual Theology

Abstract:
Byang Henry Kato, a promising African Christian leader, passed away in 1975 at only 39 years of age. In spite of his brief career, he has left his imprint on the pages of African Christian history. He is not without his supporters and critics alike. It appears that while his critics have misunderstood him in some aspects, his supporters also have not paid enough attention to his theological conviction and articulation. While this article aims at clarifying some of Kato’s conviction, it also informs readers how, regardless of context and time, others can appreciate, learn, and even adopt some aspects of his contextual model. The writer, an Asian living more than forty years apart from Kato, argues that Kato was indeed an evangelical leader whose theological conviction and model cannot be confined merely to a past era.

Keywords: Byang H. Kato, Contextualization, African theology, Culture, Hermeneutics, Kwame Bediako

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Introduction

That Byang Henry Kato was a man of the Bible and the Church, even his critics accept. That he was also a man of vision, many affirm. That he was a man of a particular context, who faced specific challenges in a particular manner, even some of his sympathizers admit. However, that he was an evangelical Christian whose theological understanding arose from deeply held convictions about the Bible, the world, and humanity that are very much consonant with the fundamental evangelical ethos, his critics deny, and some of his sympathizers misunderstand. On the one hand, people like Njoya Timothy Murere (1976: 62) have fiercely reacted to Kato's theological stand, questioning Kato's motive to privilege assistance from the West by being apathetic to his own culture. It was reported “One theologian reportedly threatened legal action over certain passages in his book” (Bowers 1980: 86). He was accused of preserving the neo-colonial interests (Bowers 1980: 86). Kwame Bediako (1997: 431) calls Kato's position a “radical Biblicism” emerging from “outdated assumptions” and he also charges that his position “would seem to be more problematic than, perhaps, has been realized in Evangelical circles” (Bediako 2011: 414). On the other hand, Yusufu Tukari (2001: 135-139), Paul Bowers (1980: 84-87), Keith Ferdinando (2004: 169-174), Timothy Palmer (2004: 3-20), and Tite Tienou (2007: 218-220) have come to defend Kato and argued that Kato was truly committed to contextualizing Christianity to the African Context. In his review of Kato’s first book, Theological Pitfalls in Africa, in 1980, Bowers (1980: 85-86) observed, “Pitfalls represents the first sustained effort by an African evangelical to engage in the theological issues being debated in Africa by African theologians . . . Kato’s book must be recognized as a highly significant ‘maiden effort’ within the wider general debate in Africa.”

However, except for Ferdinando (2007: 121-143) and maybe Palmer, the rest have been very brief and even nuanced in their defense of Kato. Turaki (2001: 134), in discussing the theological legacy of Kato, made a brief positive comment on Bediako’s contribution to the debate of salvation in African traditional religions and moves on leaving one to speculate whether Bediako’s interpretation of Kato might be right. Tienou (2007: 218), while defending Kato, mentions that Kato is not “the representative of evangelical type of theology in Africa” . . . because “Kato’s successors in Africa have moved on with the times in their thinking and preoccupations.” Bowers (1980: 85), in his review mentioned above,
indicates that given time Kato might have modified his position. All of them have some validity in their claims. My point here is not to suggest that they are wrong or that they should have dedicated their time defending Kato; however, I am pointing out that compared to the criticism hurled against Kato, their responses seem to be insufficient. Ironically, it is Kato’s critic, Bediako, who has dedicated more time and energy engaging with his ideas. Among other places, Bediako (2011: 386-425) devotes one entire chapter to Kato in his most elaborate work, *Theology and Identity*. Bediako, pulling together many of Kato’s works, demonstrates his knowledge of Kato’s position. While both Kato’s critics and supporters have valid points, they, except for Ferdinando, do not satisfactorily deals with Kato’s view and thus inadvertently overlook that for Kato certain things are non-negotiable and that his overall theological framework is very much in line with the evangelical ethos.

This paper looks at Kato’s available corpus of writings to see how he approached Christianity in relation to African traditional cultures and religions, focusing on his method of contextualization. I argue that Kato’s understanding of Christianity was driven by his conviction that the essential message of Christianity can, and should, be universally understood and constructed. It should then be adequately communicated using contextual forms; therefore, acceptance or rejection of his contextual approach must consider this aspect. To put things in a clearer perspective, I will look briefly at his life, focusing on his personal and theological journey and the impact he made. I will then investigate how Kato interpreted Christianity from and to his particular context, scrutinizing some important elements of his theological framework. I will conclude by making some additional observations and drawing some missional applications for the contemporary Christianity.

**Kato’s Personal and Theological Journey**

Three things stand out as I investigate Byang Kato’s life and ministry: he was a man passionate about the scripture, he was a man given to the need of the church and the people, and he was a man who battled with specific challenges of a particular time in a particular manner. This section will proceed to look at the following sequence.
A Man of the Book

Even Kato’s critics do not overlook his passion for the Bible. Kwame Bediako (2011: 413), one of his ablest contemporary critics, credits him thus, “Byang Kato’s persistent affirmation of the centrality of the Bible for the theological enterprise in the Church in Africa must surely be reckoned to have been his most important contribution to modern African Christian thought.” Kato’s love for the Word of God began at an early age. Coming to Christ at the age of twelve, in 1948, from a family committed to the traditional religion (De la Haye 1986: 17-20), Kato treasured his newfound faith and God’s Word. He began to earnestly study and find ways to share his faith with others (De la Haye 1986: 22). It would not be a stretch to speculate that Kato’s testimony was instrumental in the conversion of his parents later. His passion drove him to study the Bible through correspondence in Igbaja Bible College and later, at the age of 18, to become a helper to a missionary (De la Haye 1986: 23). This trajectory would take him to places all over the world to learn, preach, and teach God’s Word. This same love for the Word led him to the love of his life, Jummai Gandu, who was also deeply in love with the scripture. Kato and Jummai not only brought up their children to love the Bible, but they would also spend the rest of their lives living by and feeding thousands of others the Word of God. The feeding of five thousand in Luke 7:1-17 was the last passage Kato read with his family before he drowned on December 19, 1975, while resting for his next mission of preaching the Word (De la Haye 1986: 91). The news of his premature death shocked the world. Bruce Nicholls called him “a skilled biblical exegete, theologian and apologist” (Breman 1996: 144). Yusufu Tukari (2001: 152) described him thus: “He had a very high view of scriptures and he studied the Bible regularly. For him the Bible was authoritative over the whole of life and everything in life was captive to the Word of God.” His friend and co-laborer in the Lord, Rev. Gottfried Osei-Mensah, solemnly yet victoriously proclaimed: “I know of no other young man in Africa today who was as clear a thinker, biblically and theologically, as Byang Kato, at the same time, had the heart of an evangelist” (De la Haye 1986: 102). Indeed Kato was a man of the Word who was also given to the need of the world.
A Man of the People/Church

Byang Kato’s love for the Word drove him to be a committed servant-leader of the church and the people in various capacities. He served as the general secretary of the Evangelical Church Winning All (then Evangelical Church of West Africa-ECWA), an organization, which Philip Jenkins (2012: 45) describes as “a thriving and respectable denomination,” and “the most important church you’ve never heard of.” He also served as the general secretary of the Association of Evangelicals in Africa (AEA), formerly known as Associations of Evangelicals of Africa and Madagascar (AEAM). At the same time, he also was active in a lesser-known position as a member of a deacon board in his home church (De la Haye 1986: 81). While a student in London and Dallas, he and his family were active in hosting fellow countrymen, friends, and anyone they were able to serve. A fellow Nigerian, Ebenezer O. Olsleye, who was converted through the witness of Kato in London testifies, “Through Byang’s preaching, a number of English people found Christ” (De la Haye 1986: 41). While at Dallas Theological Seminary, the Katos founded a Good News Club where they would invite children to come and learn about Jesus (De la Haye 1986: 66-67). There was never a dull moment with Kato when it came to serving the Lord and others. While keeping busy with all of his studies and ministries, he also excelled in his studies, receiving many awards, both in academics and for his character (De la Haye 1986: 67-68). As a student, in a context far removed from home, what Kato accomplished in terms of his relationship, ministry, and academics is indeed commendable. Kato’s commitment to serve others and the church transcends time, place, and social boundaries.

Today, the prestigious university African International University (then Nairobi Evangelical Graduate School of Theology-NEGST) and Bangui Evangelical School of Theology (BEST), whose establishments are linked to the vision that Kato bequeathed to his successors² serve many Christians and non-Christians alike.

Kato was tired, at times discouraged, but never without hope. He knew that serving others is serving Christ. For him, all these physical sufferings, hardships and even attacks on his character were known to his God (De la Haye 1986: 87) and in the grand scheme of things, temporary. It has been speculated that in his service for others, he burned himself out and that this sheer exhaustion may have been linked to his death (Bowers 2009: 11).
A Man of the Context

Kato responded to the needs and challenges of his time in ways he understood to be most biblical. He was a man of untiring energy who exerted positive influences and harvested bountiful results in whatever he did. From his beginning as a Boys’ Brigade leader to his culmination as the General Secretary of AEA, Kato made many positive contributions. It is reported that when he took the position in 1973 at AEA, its “image was very negative” but his entry into his diary after two years shows how the image had shifted (Breman 1996: 145). AEA’s membership also increased from seven national bodies in 1973 to 16 in 1975, an increase of more than 100 percent (De la Haye 1986: 89). My feeble attempt to write about him also demonstrates that his influence is still very alive today. By the time he died at 39, he had given numerous lectures, preached many sermons, written many articles and a book, and influenced many Christians worldwide including Francis Schaeffer who after hearing of Kato’s early demise, responded, “I literally wept. I do not cry easily, but the loss for Africa and the Lord’s work seemed so great” (Breman 1996: 102-103). Many today can identify with the lament of Schaeffer.

Any leader, especially of Kato’s caliber and influence, fighting for something is bound to have opponents. Opponents could be people, social structures, or ideas. In Kato’s case, it is the idea. In the context of Africa in particular and the ecumenical circles in general, he saw the problems of theological liberalism as the most significant challenge. He fought it fiercely, yet biblically. However, humans are bound to imbibe the limitation of the context. Kato was also not immaculate in his approach. He had his flaws. Some see him as hostile to ideas with which he disagreed (Shaw 1996: 278), others consider his approach as too Western (Njoya 1976: 60) and faulty (Paratt 1995: 63). I indicated earlier that Paul Bowers (1980: 85), a great admirer of Kato, wrote that Kato’s book, Theological Pitfalls in Africa, was not without limitations, and that Kato was already in the process of revising some of those ideas at his death. Timothy Palmer points out how Kato was not entirely accurate in his assessment of Mbiti’s position. Palmer (2004: 12-13) notes, according to Mbiti’s testimony, that Kato apologized to the former for attacking him unjustifiably and promised to rewrite the relevant sections of the book. The place for mystery, ambiguity, paradox, and tensions are mostly absent in his writings. However, he did not claim to be perfect either. Besides, his limitations do not necessarily invalidate his accomplishments.
Kato's Interpretation of Christianity From and To African Context

Mark Shaw (1996: 278) introduced Kato as “The founding father of modern African evangelical theology.” As an evangelical Christian, Kato stood for what he thought was biblical. His evangelical passion is one thing that set him apart, but it is from this same passion that he has gained the greatest criticism from his critics. In this section, we will discuss how Kato understood Christianity from his context and tried to contextualize into his context.

Kato’s Interpretation of Christianity as a Universal Religion

Kato was very much involved in the debate surrounding the term contextualization in the early 1970s. The Theological Education Fund (TEF), an agency associated with the WCC, coined the term contextualization to emphasize the importance of taking into account the local context in developing theology (Prince 2017: 40). Whereas indigenization, the commonly used term in the context of gospel propagation, emphasizes the need of universal theological articulation and applying in a context, contextualization came to highlight the need of theologizing in context (Prince 2017: 38). In other words, contextualization of theology came to be differentiated from theologization in context. The latter emphasizes the need for developing contextual theologies rather than applying the so-called universal or biblical theology (Pachuau: 2018: chapter 5). While the introduction of the neologism was a reaction against the concept associated with the term indigenization, contextualization was also met with resistance especially from the conservative circle. The International Congress of World Evangelism (ICWE), in which Kato presented a paper and was also elected to the committee at the 1974 gathering (De la Haye 1986: 116) distanced itself from the TEF’s use of contextualization. In his presentation, he incorporated the term but limited it merely to the forms of expression of the gospel (Kato 1975: 1217). While respecting and propagating the need of integrating African cultural forms in contextualization, he argues that our aim must first be to construct a biblical theology and then contextualize such a theology to a given context.

Kato believed that Christianity is first and foremost a universal religion and only after that a local religion. According to him, regardless of context, the content of theology must remain the same; the change should only be in its expression (Kato 1975b: 5). He reasoned, “Evangelical Christians know of only one theology—Biblical theology as opposed to
many contextual theologies—though it may be expressed in the context of each cultural milieu” (Kato 1985: 12). Hence, contextualization “is an effort to express the never changing Word of God [The Christian Theology] in ever changing modes of relevance” (Kato 1985: 12). The unchanging message of Christian faith must be communicated using native language, idiom, and concepts (Kato 1980: 38). For him, “the use of sources other than scriptures as in equal standing with the revealed Word of God” in formulating African theology was unacceptable (Kato 1973: 3). In expressing the truth of the scripture in a particular context, one must use local and traditional concepts, but those concepts follow, never precede the Bible. Hence, his assertion, “Let African Christians be Christian Africans!” (Bowers 1980: 84). Reactions have been different: some agree, others disagree, and a few misunderstand and disagree.

**Kato’s Interpretation of Christianity as an African Religion**

Kato was concerned as much as his critics that Christianity should be made an African religion. At the beginning of his book *Theological Pitfalls in Africa*, he asserts, “The noble desire to indigenize Christianity in Africa must not be forsaken. An indigenous theology is a necessity” (Kato 1975d: 16). On the topic of *Christianity as an African Religion*, he affirms, “It is my conviction that Christianity is truly an African Religion” (Kato 1980: 33). He then explains, “Christianity is truly an African religion and Africans should be made to feel so. Christian doctrines should be expressed in terms that Africans can understand, where such has not been the case . . . Let Christianity truly find its home in Africa by adopting local hymnology, using native language, idiom and concepts to express the unchanging faith” (Kato 1980: 37-38). Kato truly believed that “Christianity is an African religion to its African adherents, just as it is European to the European, American to the American or Asian to the Asian followers of Christ” (Kato 1980: 37). Kato wanted to make Christianity truly an indigenous religion but not the way some of his critics envisioned.

**Assessing Kato’s Understanding of Christianity**

First, the most important thing in assessing Kato’s position is to avoid anachronism. Kato lived and wrote during a period when the evangelicals, in general, were skeptical of the term contextualization because of its origin from, and association with, the ecumenical circle (Prince 2017: 37) as noted earlier. Even though evangelicals would later
more openly embrace the term, the period during which Kato lived was dominated more by a reaction and less by acceptance. However, whereas some evangelicals after Kato would continue to debate whether the term contextualization is even necessary (Prince 2017: 43-44), Kato was already using it, albeit in his understanding. Like his fellow evangelicals, he thought he was battling with some real threats to the purity of the gospel rather than picking on some minor issues; he genuinely considered the gospel to be at risk. Most of his defenses of the gospel and criticisms of others are in the context of either denying the uniqueness of Christ or the Bible. When such criticism is taken out of context, they could very well be misread. We may disagree with him, but we can identify with his desire to preserve the sanctity of the gospel. Kato must be read within this context to avoid anachronistic historical analysis.

Second, we should also acknowledge that affirming Kato’s core conviction, as consonant with the evangelical ethos, does not necessarily mean there are no ambiguities in his writings. The fact that most of his writings accessible to the public come from his last stage of life (1972-1975), many of which are published posthumously, makes it difficult to analyze any theological development in his thoughts and writings. I suggest that one of his harshest criticisms comes because of this ambiguity. For example, Kato did not get the chance to successfully clarify how biblical theology can be constructed by disassociating from the past traditions and beliefs of Africa. He assumes rather than proves that biblical theology can be constructed without using the existing African mental framework, which necessarily includes not just the cultural, but also the religious understanding of reality. At several points, he states the need for “biblical theology” (among others, Kato 1974; 1975b: 1203; 1977: 47) without clarifying what that entails. At one point, he referred to the African traditional religions as pagan and argued that no pagan practices, without distinguishing between the good and the bad element, should be borrowed to add to Christianity (Kato 1980: 33). He even expressed his doubt “whether theology can actually be localized” (Kato 1973: 4). Of course, those affirmations are made within a particular context and as such cannot be read independently, for there are also other places where he recognizes the importance of redeeming and channeling cultural elements for the good of the gospel. He states, “Jesus Christ wants to redeem the good values found in African culture for the spreading of the gospel in this great continent. Let us not shut Him out by dismissing the fact of the presence of such values in African culture”
(Kato 1975a: 36). In another place, he affirms, “Whatever would reflect the glory of Christ in His Church in Africa and make the African feel that ‘this is my faith,’ [sic] should be promoted. If there are any alien beliefs and/or practices mingled with Christianity, the answer is not to throw away the baby with the bath water” (Kato 1980: 37). Perhaps, he was naïve to expect African Christians to buy his idea of a Biblical Theology without qualifications and possibly he could be faulted for not synthesizing the aspect of particularism and universalism more coherently, but he cannot be blamed for being apathetic to the African culture by emphasizing only one side of his argument.

Third, he is not an outlier regarding contextual theology. If we assess his overall body of writings, he is more consistent than others credit him. For instance, today upholding the tension between indigenizing and pilgrim principle (Walls 1996: 7-9) is considered praiseworthy. Kato was aware of such tensions, even though owing to his particular contextual challenges he veered towards the pilgrim principle. He did reject the term “African theology” and the idea of doing theology as conceived by many of his African counterparts. However, he states,

In rejecting the term African Theology, we are not denying the fact that there is a need for expression of theology in the context of Africa. African theologians need to and can contribute to the further understanding of Biblical theology for the benefit of the universal body of Christ. There are certain issues peculiar to Africa where only African theologians may be able to speak effectively. (Kato 1974: 2)

His rejection of “African theology” is therefore not necessarily a rejection of the need for articulating theology from the African context. For him, Christians have only one authoritative Bible, and all Christians must read and theologize together. Such an aspiration for biblical theology was consonant with the larger biblical theology movement that was prevalent in North America during Kato’s time, even though today the term has been expanded (Mead 2007: 42-59).

Fourth, Kato’s insistence that there must first be biblical theology before it can be conveyed using local cultural forms comes from his understanding of the Bible as the inspired, inerrant Word (Kato 1975c: 1216). For him, inerrancy means that the content of the Bible is without any error and it cannot be changed. The biblical cultures were used only as
vehicles to convey God's eternal truth; therefore, regardless of the change of culture and time, the content of the Bible remains the same (Kato 1975a: 49). He argues that this content is “revealed propositionally and must be declared accordingly” (1975c Kato: 1216) for “Inerrant authoritative scripture can alone give us reliable facts about Jesus Christ's and man’s relationship to him.” (Kato 1985: 12). It is with the content of the scripture that biblical theology must be constructed. It would not be unfounded to assert that people like John F. Walvoord who was the president of Dallas Theological Seminary when Kato was a student, Charles Ryrie who endorsed Kato's book and was also the Dean of Doctoral Studies and Chairman of Systematic Theology during Kato's period, Francis Schaffer and other American evangelical conservative theologians, who championed the doctrine of inerrancy, had a substantial impact on Kato during his formative period. In this aspect, he had absorbed an evangelical understanding of God's Word as proposition (Kato 1985: 12). For Kato, not just the ideas but also the words of the Bible are inspired. Such a conviction forced him to remain steadfast so that even though a mustard seed is not found in Africa, instead of substituting a local grain for it, the original term has to be retained and the meaning explained (Kato 1985: 24). One can debate the validity of retaining the forms in this context, but the point is, that for Kato, every Word of God is inspired and, therefore, inerrant and authoritative (Kato 1985: 12).

Given Kato’s position on inerrancy, it is understandable that he prioritized the textual accuracy more than the contextual relevance. He insisted, “Instead of employing terms that would water down the gospel, the congregations should be taught the original meaning of the term” (Kato 1985: 24). Such an approach is typical of those who subscribe to the concept of unlimited inerrancy. While the limited inerrantist like Clark H. Pinnock (cf. Pinnock and Callen 2009: 264)and others believe that the perfect accuracy of the text is not necessary for the Bible to be considered a reliable source for Christian faith, the unlimited inerrantist like Kato believe that not just the narrative, but also every single word in the Bible is accurate. He reasons, “But how can I know for sure about Jesus Christ in an errant Bible?” (Kato 1985: 12). Therefore, for evangelicals in the camp of Kato, retaining the basic structure and content of the biblical text is crucial since the meaning lays in the inspired texts, not “beneath, above, beyond the actual words of the Bible” (Hesselgrave 2006: 247). Millard J. Erickson (1987: 233) observes, inerrantists tend to place “a particularly high value
upon retaining the basic content in the process of giving various expressions to the message” of the gospel. Those who affirm the doctrine are likely to adhere more strictly not only to the biblical categories but also to the words of the scripture in translation, interpretation, and theologization.

Kato’s conviction about the Bible as propositional truth has led Bediako incorrectly label his position “Theology as Bibliology” (Bediako 2011: 386) or “radical Biblicism.” (Bediako 1997: 431). Bediako (1996: 33) argues that biblical affirmations “are not given as fixed data,” or “the truth of the biblical revelation is the truth, not of assertion but of recognition.” Bediako here is reacting, and rightly so, to the modern fundamentalist claim of the Bible as storage-of-data book where the assertion of propositional truth becomes the primary aim. He explains thus, “The truth of biblical revelation, therefore, is not just truth to be “believed in” as by mere intellectual or mental assent; it is truth to be ‘participated in’” (Bediako 1996: 33). Even though evangelicals have debated over the precise understanding of scripture as a proposition, they have, more or less, unanimously acknowledged that the primary purpose of the scripture is not the assertion of propositional truth or that the Bible can merely be understood in terms of propositional truth (Collins 2005: 41-45; Vanhoozer 2005: 86-91). It is also true that not all evangelicals subscribe to the doctrine of inerrancy, as Kato understood it (Mohler et al. 2013). Michael Bird (2013: 145-146), an Australian theologian, argues that even though inerrancy possesses a certain utility in the “battle for the Bible” in the North American context, it is not an essential facet of faith for global evangelicalism as the majority of world Christians have always upheld the inspiration, authority, and high view of the Bible even in the absence of such nomenclature. Oliver D. Crisp (2015), a British theologian, asserts that the fixation with the doctrine of inerrancy “was never really an issue for British evangelicalism.” It is understandable; therefore, that Kato was criticized for importing this ‘problematic’ doctrine to the African context (Bediako 2011: 398-399), even though I do not think that the idea behind inerrancy is merely an American construct. I, as an Asian Christian, can subscribe to the concept of inerrancy without fighting for the terminology. But that topic is beyond the scope of this paper. The point here is that Kato is criticized for equating “the content of Bible and the content of theology” (Bediako 2011: 400). This accusation is legitimate, and Kato might have accepted this because according to him, biblical theology is to be constructed with the content of the Bible. However, Kato’s affirmation does not necessarily
imply that one cannot use cultural and philosophical concepts to convey the content. He appears to be objecting to the construction of theology through the means of synthesizing the African traditional religions and Christianity. Kato affirmed that there should be only one biblical theology and that everyone must contribute in its formation, but nowhere have I come across him saying that, therefore, we must not use linguistic and cultural forms to construct this theology.

On the contrary, just before Kato (1985: 12) affirms “theology itself in its essence must be left alone” he also asserts “Africans need to formulate theological concepts in the language of Africa.” Disagreement on the matter of inerrancy and biblical theology is understandable, but it is an in-house evangelical debate. However, Bediako ignores the fact that even though evangelicals have affirmed that the Bible is more than propositional truth, they have not affirmed it less. After all, we know the truth of the Bible through the written propositional text. Bediako’s objection to Kato’s proposal comes in part because of his (Bediako’s) conviction that the proposition of the scripture neither possesses a fixed data nor is revelation to be found in the theological propositions, but in Jesus (Bediako 1996: 33, 34). In one sense, Bediako is right, because, for Kato, theology must be constructed from the Bible as the authoritative source and then only expressed using relevant forms. However, to equate such position to bibilology in a rather pejorative manner is unsatisfactory. In fact, even the 16th-century Reformers, whom Kato claimed to follow, were driven by the conviction of *Sola Scriptura*. By it, they do not mean the Bible alone, but the Bible as the supreme authority (Vanhoozer 2016: 111-117). No one calls his or her theology, bibilology. Bediako, however, has a point in that Kato did not clarify how biblical theology can be constructed with the biblical content by interacting with the existing African mental framework. Regardless, what Bediako sees as limitations, others see as Kato’s greatest strength. Yusufu Turaki (2001: 152)acclaims Kato’s accomplishment thus, “His primary tool for doing theology was Bible; he never made the Bible secondary in his theological tools. May God grant us the wisdom, grace and enablement to profit from his example.” Kato’s conviction about the Bible as the inerrant Word of God drove him to the belief that there must be a biblical theology around which Christians of all nations can relate.

Fifth, Kato’s unwillingness to approach African traditional religions with an open-ended mindset should be understood from his understanding of the relationship between special and general revelation. In his Master
of Sacred Theology thesis, *Limitations of Natural Revelation*, he argues that although general revelation reveals the existence of God, it is not sufficient for a redemptive purpose (Kato 1971: 61-72). It is insufficient mainly because the purpose for which it was given (Kato 1971: 70). He argued the general revelation was to point to the creator but never meant to be redemptive. It is also inadequate to be redemptive because of human sin due to the Fall. Due to human sin and the resulting curse from God, humans are in a spiritual state of total depravity where they are unable to perform any meritorious act towards their salvation (Kato 1971: 64-66). In other words, “Humanity does not live in neutrality. Since the original fall, the total race of Adam has been condemned to death (Rom. 3:23; 6:23)” (Kato 1975: 180). Therefore, humans need special revelation, now given through the scripture, without which they are lost (Kato 1971: 72). Hence, every element of African traditional religion and culture must be judged through the lens of this special revelation (Kato 1975d: 182).

Bediako (2011: 387) indicts that Kato’s overtly negative and fundamentally unsympathetic attitude towards non-Christian religions, including his own religious past, prevented him from adequately assessing other religions. He was displeased that Kato would give only a secondary place to the study of African traditional religions compared to the inductive study of God’s Word (Bediako 2011: 387, n. 8). It is true that Kato lumped all other religions under the category of the unsaved group and dismissed it as unimportant to spend too much time and energy studying them, but he also exhorted that they be investigated carefully (Kato 1975d: 183). However, Bediako (2011: 388) faults Kato for overlooking the “convergence between Jaba religious ideas and Biblical teaching.” According to him, Kato’s presupposition of the radical divergence between Christianity and Jaba religion forces him to diminish the biblical concept of sin as personal by ignoring the social dimension, which in fact is the view of the Bible and that of the Jabas. Bediako contends that had Kato recognized this social dimension, he would have understood that the Jaba’s view of sin converges with the scripture.

It is true that Kato did not give as much emphasis to the social dimension of sin as he did to the individual or the spiritual. Kato, on many occasions, emphasized the spiritual over the material/physical (Kato 1985: 15-17; 1977: 44; 1980: 38; 1975a: 41). When the editor of *Christianity Today* queried him about the concerns of AEAM, Kato (1975b: 5) unapologetically responded, “While we appreciate the emphasis on social
concern and political liberation today, we of the AEAM do not view that as our primary occupation. Rather, our emphasis is on evangelism and church development basically in the spiritual realm.” However, in the context from which Bediako quotes (Kato 1975d: 42) Kato is in fact not minimizing the societal aspect of sin; he is maximizing the personal aspect of sin. He is pointing out the absence of this personal dimension in Jaba society. He clarifies, “But sin against society is only a minor manifestation of the basic sin of rebellion against God . . . Jaba’s wrong conception of sin results in a wrong view of salvation. If anti-social act [sic] is all there is to sin, salvation can be procured by satisfying social demands” (Kato 1975d: 42). Kato’s point is that though Jaba’s conception of the Supreme Being (and Africans in general) and morality can be attributed to the “vestiges of Imago Dei imprinted in the original creation,” their understanding is distorted without the special revelation (Kato 1975d: 42-45). Kato’s view of the limitations of natural revelation prevents him from an open-ended approach to the traditional religion or any other religion.

Sixth, another area which will enable us to understand Kato’s theological framework is concerning his view on the continuity and discontinuity between the African traditional culture and religion and Christianity. This aspect of Kato’s thought appears to be ambiguous, if not problematic. However, reading him in the light of his overall literature helps clarify the haziness. We have pointed out that Kato argued for the development of biblical theology without really showing how exactly it could be done within the existing African mental framework. Bediako (2011: 391) capitalizes on this ambiguity in Kato’s thought and blames him for confirming the earlier missionary perception of Africa as a “tabula rasa” on which a wholly new religious psychology was somehow to be imprinted.” He continues, “Kato was convinced that the religious past had no significance for African Christian self-consciousness except as darkness in relation to light.” Since, in the previous sentence, Bediako was not quoting Kato’s words, and as the source from which Bediako cites cannot be accessed at the moment, our judgment, to a certain degree, is premature. Nevertheless, in the light of what Kato has stated elsewhere, that to which we have referred earlier, it is unlikely that Kato would deny incorporating neutral elements of African traditional religion and culture to construct Christian theology. It is true that he rejects the term African Theology and when speaking of incorporating the positive elements of African tradition, he only refers to culture, not once (as far as I can find)
to religion. For instance, after arguing that religion is part and parcel of culture (Kato 1977: 13-31), he concludes, “Christians should be willing to go along in adapting African culture [not religion] as long as it does not conflict with the scriptures. When such conflict does arise, such as worship of pagan gods, wearing of indecent clothing, Christians must choose to obey God rather than men” (Kato 1977: 131). It is evident that religion is part of the culture for him, yet he was cautious not to mention religion. This is understandable not only because of the likelihood of conflating the two, but also because of his perception of the syncretistic tendency of African Christianity (Kato 1985: 25-30). The kind of African theology he rejects is not the kind of theology that is done today by upholding scripture as the norming norm (Kato 1975d: 53-67). He might not have precisely sorted out the elements of continuity between the African traditional religion and Christianity, but his theological framework gives room for such continuity since he himself argued that general revelation functions as a pointer, a schoolmaster, that ultimately must lead to Christ (Kato 1971: 70-71).

There are others who support Kato’s emphasis on the element of discontinuity between African traditional religion and Christianity without necessarily denying the aspect of continuity. Keith Ferdinando (2004: 171-172) has not only unapologetically defended Kato in this case, but also critiqued that Bediako allows more continuity between the African traditional religion and Christianity than needed (Ferdinando 2007: 123-143). He points out that “Bediako tends in fact to assume what needs to be proved,” ironically falling guilty of his accusation against Kato (Ferdinando 2007: 131 n. 42). He goes on to charge, “To establish with sufficient plausibility the continuity between Christianity and African traditional religion required by his overall approach, Bediako would need to demonstrate more effectively the presence within African traditional religion of a ‘positive tradition’....” (Ferdinando 2007: 130). By ‘positive tradition,’ Ferdinando (2007: 126) is referring to Bediako’s argument that Christ was somehow positively working in the African traditional religion in such a way that Christian identity can be rooted in African religious past. This assumption, according to Ferdinando (2007: 125), is faulty and “there are strong grounds, biblically and philosophically, and with an equally long pedigree, for resisting an approach of this nature.” Similarly, Bernard van den Toren points out that Bediako seemed to have concluded that the only way to incorporate African religious tradition is to integrate it positively as part of the saving activity of God. This assumption, according to van den Toren
shirik: African Christians or Christian Africans (1997: 230), is flawed. He argues, “past experiences can also be integrated negatively in my present identity if I discover afterwards that I have walked in the dark and chosen the wrong way… It may be the case that we discover Jesus Christ to be the answer for our deepest longings, but at the same time we discover that we have tried to evade God’s caring presence in our lives.” The point here is that rejection of traditional religion does not default to building a Christian consciousness from scratch. Kato’s argument was not that Christian theology should be built on a blank slate; rather, his point was that “The Bible must remain the basic source of Christian theology” (Kato 1985: 12). Kato can be faulted for lack of precision and clarity in his theology, but not for being apathetic to the local tradition.

Seventh and lastly, Kato’s understanding of Christianity would be incomplete without considering the intersection of culture, religion, and scripture in his thought. His treatment of culture and religion is not without some ambiguity, but his overall message is clear. For him, even though “religion is the heart of culture” (Kato 1975a: 11) not all religious beliefs and practices are part of a culture (Kato 2004: 132). Therefore a Muslim can be an African Muslim and a Christian an African Christian (Kato 1975a: 11). However, since religion occupies a pivotal place in culture, “a change in religion necessitates a re-adjustment in culture.” He goes a step further and argues, “Not all the so-called African Culture is de facto culture. So much in the guise of culture is actually idolatry” (Kato 2004: 132). Therefore, he contends,

Certain practices not in accord with the teachings of these religions [referring to Islam and Christianity] will have to be dropped. To adjust one aspect of culture, or to refuse a change in any one aspect, does not, however, mean that the whole culture is, or is not, adhered to. Just because a person does not engage in tribal dancing or does not wear African clothes does not mean that he is throwing away his culture as a whole. (Kato 1975a: 11)

Kato seems to be saying that one does not have to continue embracing all religious and cultural beliefs and practices to be genuinely African. Crediting the idea to Donald R. Jacobs, though the language resembles Clifford Geertz (1973:5), Kato (1973: 13-31) pictures culture as a cobweb, a sort of concentric circles in the middle of which is the philosophical level followed by mythical level, value level, and formal level. These levels overlap yet the center, which is the philosophical level, is the hardest to alter (Kato
1973: 14-15). Even though Kato puts religious beliefs and practices under the mythical level, it is the philosophical level that motivates and stirs the religious practices. When a person’s heart is changed through conversion to Christ, s/he assumes a new philosophy of life and the reverberating effect touches the rest of the circles (Kato 1973: 30-31).

For Kato (1985: 18), this new philosophy of life cannot come from general revelation (in African traditional religion or any other religion), but only from special revelation (Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit based on the Bible). This does not mean that God is limited in power to use general revelation for saving purposes, but that humans are corrupted and blinded due to sin (Kato 1985: 18-19). It is here, therefore, the gospel takes an irreplaceable role in redeeming humankind. For even though “Christ is universally available to all men everywhere at any time... its effectiveness applies only to those who receive the offer” (Kato 1975d: 181).

From the larger corpus of Kato’s writings, it is clear that for him, all beliefs and practices must be subjected to the scrutiny of the Bible. He was pushing back against the theological trend that manifested the following features: “the use of sources other than the scriptures as in equal standing with the revealed Word of God, the possibility of salvation in African traditional religions, and a strong emphasis on things African for their own sake” (Kato 1985: 11-12). He was not without his challenges, his opponents, and his limitations; yet he soared above them and made an impact as a brave soldier of Christ, an astute student of the Word, and faithful Christian of a particular era.

**Observations and Missional Applications**

In my reading, Kato is profoundly evangelical in its true sense of the term. We have noted in the beginning that even his critics recognize Kato’s high regard for the Bible. Until the moment of his death, Kato was given to the cause of the gospel and the unity of the church. His criticism of others and skepticism of the larger ecumenical movement, especially the WCC, must be considered in the context of the trajectory that his contemporary theologians and the other Ecumenical movements were moving toward during the 60s and 70s. It is equally true that some of the harsh criticisms of Kato’s ideology were prompted by resentment against
colonialism (e.g., Timothy Murere Njoya’s criticism). Timothy Palmer (2004: 5-10) has given a rather elaborate picture of how, in the 1960s and early 1970s, “the cultural revolution was taking a decidedly anti-Christian appearance.” Kato assuredly recognized this (Kato 1976: 144-146; 1975a: 22-23). Ferdinando notes that such observed danger explains the passion and urgency in Kato’s polemics (Ferdinando 2004: 170-171). Bowers (1980:87) observed, and Gehman (1987: 71) affirmed that during Kato’s period the theological trajectory was moving towards an emphasis on being authentically African rather than authentically biblical. Tukari (2001: 134) points out that “The primary objective of Kato’s Theological Corpus vis-à-vis that of his opponents was to develop a biblical foundation for proclaiming Jesus as the only valid, authentic and unique Saviour of the whole world and Mediator between God and man.” In the interview by Christianity Today, Kato testified, “there is no clear evidence that the money [the WCC channeled to Africa to buy food] is not used for arms” (Kato 1975b: 1204). Therefore, Kato’s polemic about Christianity must also be considered within the larger framework of this context. His interpretations may not align with certain segments of Christianity or even segments of Evangelicalism, but he is no less evangelical, if not more, than any of his sympathizers and critics alike.

Of the ten point proposals in safeguarding biblical Christianity in Africa that Kato suggested, one is the need of exegeting the Word of God (Kato 1975d: 182-183). Prince (2017: 50) observes, “Throughout the 1970s, the importance of the Bible to contextualization had been more affirmed than demonstrated.” Perhaps Kato could be considered an exception as he attempted to demonstrate biblically and theologically that Christianity could be truly an African religion. His Limitations of Natural Revelation, Theological Pitfalls in Africa, and his posthumously published work such as Biblical Christianity in Africa, among others, show he truly wanted to anchor any contextual methodology to the Bible. Prince, however, is right that the general tendency was rather to assume contextualization than demonstrate it biblically. After more than forty years of the coinage of the term contextualization, Prince (2017: 68) calls for the urgency of developing contextual methodology biblically: “There is still much of the New Testament, and the Bible as a whole, that needs to be explored to give a comprehensive picture of biblical contextualization.” Kato’s voice indeed is prophetic in that he had attempted to engage the issue of contextualization biblically when some would envision such reality as futuristic.
Kato’s strength also lies in that he was able to speak beyond the confines of Africa. I, as an Asian, more than four decades separated from Kato, and with very different challenges and struggles, can affirm many of the things he affirms. He and I can read the scripture together to come to a common understanding. In this aspect too, he has bequeathed to his readers a compelling argument that all theologies must not be contextual to the degree that they have no universal resemblance and application. God speaks to us through his words sometimes differently, but not contradictorily. Our cultures can enrich our reading of the text, but they can also blind us from seeing the truth. Kato seems to have a profound understanding of both the limitations of culture and the universal applicability of the text.

Conclusion

Paul Bowers (2008: 19) asserts that had it not been for Kato’s early demise, he would have more clearly developed his theology. Therefore, it should be within this broader framework of Kato’s vision and accomplishment that he must be read and interpreted (Bowers 2008: 14). In a way, I have tried to frame Kato within this larger vision without fully conforming to Bowers (2008: 11) recommendation that we should move beyond the polemic of critiquing and defending him. Bowers is right that given time Kato would have more fully and clearly articulated his ideas. However, Ferdinando (2004: 171) seems to be more on point when he claims that “given the conviction that his writings demonstrate” any changes Kato made would not have affected his overall conviction. I also suggest that Kato had already laid his foundation, and any development must consider this groundwork. It seems clear that for Kato, some of his convictions, such as the supremacy of God’s Word, the limitations of natural revelation, and the need for biblical theology, are non-negotiable and even given time I doubt such convictions would have changed. Even though time has changed and our battles have taken new faces, the essential challenge of upholding God’s word and the need to test all our methodologies through the Word remains. It is in this aspect that Kato’s legacy remains very much alive.

Why did some react so fiercely to Kato’s approach? After all, his aim was noble, his doctrine praiseworthy, and his life an example. He genuinely wanted Christianity to be an African religion, albeit in the way he
envisioned. Maybe people were not ready. Perhaps, he went too fast ahead of the masses. Cultural change on a community level cannot be shoved upon people; it must occur gradually. Changes do not always happen overnight. Had Kato been more patient perhaps he would have been better accepted. Maybe people do accept him, and it is the elitist theologians who are disgruntled with his proposals. I do not know. I am neither an African, nor have I been to Africa. Kato had already gone to be with the Lord even before I was born. Kato lived in a context and culture far removed from mine. By the time I read his writings, it had been more than 40 years since Kato has articulated his thoughts and ideas. All these things aside, from what I gather, Kato was genuinely an evangelical Christian and a leader. He is a man I respect immensely and a man I want to emulate.

End Notes


3 I found a reference to Kato’s struggle with theological tensions only in two places. One is a brief entry in his diary where he referred to the tension between “God’s sovereignty vs. man’s responsibility.” De la Haye, Byang Kato, 84. Another is where he seems to leave a small space for ambiguity concerning the destiny of some unevangelized before he goes on to affirm his understanding of the Bible. Byang H. Kato, Theological Pitfalls in Africa (Kisumu, Kenya: Evangel Pub. House, 1975), 180.


5 In the footnote, Bediako suggests that Kato had positively responded to the allegation that he totally rejects the African past including their traditional religious life. However, Kato’s responses that Bediako cites do not conform to what the latter is implying. Ibid., 391, n30.
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