

## The Conversion of a Child Fetish Priest

Aaron Dunlop (June 13, 2025)

Byang Henry Kato was born on June 23, 1936, in Sabzuro, a rural town in North Nigeria, during the British colonial era (1900-1963). Sabzura, at that time was home to about 1500 inhabitants, in the Kwoi district, Kaduna State. The Kato's were from the Jaba tribe whose Nok ancestry extends back some two thousand years in that region.<sup>1</sup> Byang was the first child born to Heri and Zawi, and of the seven children born after Byang, only one survived.

The religious and spiritual context into which Kato was born was a mixture of Islam in the northern regions and traditional African religions. Many terms have been used to refer to African spirituality, including idolatry, fetishism, witchcraft and magic, but the most comprehensive term for the religions of Africa is African traditional religions (ATRs). These, as Kato later explained, are "distinctively African, though similarities are traceable in the Caribbean Islands and other Latin American countries."<sup>2</sup> They are "traditional" as opposed to the new religions on the African continent such as Islam and Christianity, and they are plural because each tribe has its own religious system.<sup>3</sup>

One observer identified five elements common to the tribes of West Africa at that time; an organized family life, a name for a supreme unseen Power, sovereign and benevolent; a moral sense of good and evil, of truth, justice and shame; the idea of a soul that does not die with the death of the body, and communion with the unseen Supreme Power by prayer and sacrificial rites.<sup>4</sup> The religion of the Jaba people included these elements and transmitted orally through the generations, did not have a written code when Kato was born. Agreement among tribespeople on the details and origins of their religion has been lost over generations.

The Jaba did not have a fully developed polytheism as might appear in other parts of Africa. They believed in a spirit world, a Supreme Being they called Nom, a future life, revelation from their god, and a concept of sin, redemption and salvation—although very vague.

Sins for the Jaba fell into two categories: big sins and small sins. Big sins included violation of tribal taboos such as revealing the secret of what goes on in the shrine to women or the uninitiate, adultery, stealing and witchcraft. The punishment for the big sin varies from the drinking of human waste to capital punishment. Adultery, for example was punishable by demanding that the adulterer drink wine mixed with human waste from the adulterous woman. Small sins included, trespassing on a neighbour's property, failing to take care of animal stock, child abuse and bitterness. Blood sacrifice was used on occasion, usually for deliverance from the power of the evil spirits.

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<sup>1</sup> Aiah Dorkuh Foday-Khabenje, Byang Kato: *The Life and Legacy of Africa's Pioneer Evangelical Theological*, (Cumbria: Legacy of Africa's Pioneer Evangelical Theological, (Cumbria: Langham Publishing, 2023), 59.

<sup>2</sup> Byang Kato, *Theological Pitfalls in Africa*, (Kisumu, Evangel Publishing House, 1975), 24.

<sup>3</sup> Kato, *Pitfalls*, 24.

<sup>4</sup> Kato, *Pitfalls*, 29.

For the Jaba, Nom was the maker of heaven and earth, who dwelt in the sky. They believed that they had received their religion from this Supreme Being, but there is no agreement as to when or how this happened, whether by direct revelation or otherwise. The Jaba believed that the whole world is full of spirits, and they are always associated with "Kuno," Satan. They only bring harm and disorder, possessing certain women and dominating by fear. In fact, the word "hyong" (spirit) is also used for fear.<sup>5</sup> Women possessed with evil spirits, Kato says, prophesy, speak in tongues and do miracles. They,

Pour fire on their bodies without being burned, jump over high walls, fall down from roofs about 15 feet high and other such feats. When they are in a state of seizure, they drink filthy water from ponds, eat human waste, and possess such power that it takes several strong men to hold a woman.<sup>6</sup>

This adds another layer to the religion of the Jaba, for exorcism was necessary; medicine men with drums, calabash, and a stringed instrument, to calm down the spirits bothering the possessed.

While Nom was a constant feature in the language of the Jaba, he was not the object of their worship. The people related more to the lesser gods whom they worshipped, particularly an idol called "buko" in the Jaba language, or "dodo" in Hausa. Worship among the Jaba revolved around buko as a religion of fear and manipulation, aimed at appeasing the proliferation of spirits, the wearing of magical charms, or fetishes, and other outward practices, sacrifices and exorcisms, all employed to avert curses and benefit the worshipper materially. It was also a religion that elevated the men and kept the women and children in ignorance and superstitious fear.

An example of this is seen in the use of two instruments: a dry fruit shell, the size of a small apple, and a horn of about three and one-half feet long. The two instruments of worship are blown within the seclusion of the groves. Kato explains further,<sup>7</sup>

A man behind the little dry shell speaks in a faraway tone, and another man interprets for the benefit of women and the uninitiated young male. The voice is supposed to be that of a deceased ancestor. He rebukes the disobedient child, coerces the woman into complete submission, and orders plenty of locally brewed wine and demands cooked meat and beans. Only the initiated men are supposed to know that it is another man speaking. At the age of puberty, a week-long ceremony marks the initiation of boys into the state of manhood. They too become cognizant of the secret of "dodo" worship. But they are not supposed to reveal the secret to women at the pains of death.

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<sup>5</sup> Kato, Pitfalls, 36.

<sup>6</sup> Kato, Pitfalls, 36-37

<sup>7</sup> Kato, Pitfalls, 34.

This was the religion into which Kato was born, and in which his Heri was the fetish priest to the local deity, Pop-ku. Furthermore, as the first-born and the heir apparent, Kato was expected to succeed his father. Soon after his birth then, Kato was dedicated to the gods to become a fetish priest. This dedication was a commitment on the part of his parents to nurture Kato in the religion of the Jaba people and cultivate the fetish practices to appease the gods.

He also underwent the initiation rite into manhood. This rite required the young man to live for one week in the bush. The women believed that they had been swallowed by the devil. The mothers were required to provide enough food and drink for the devil, until he was full and would vomit their sons out again. The week in the jungle was spent indoctrinating the boys in the arts of fishing, farming and warfare. They also took an oath not to reveal the secret to the women and children in the village, on pain of death.

Kato then, was initiated into the religion of his father and received incisions on either side of his temples, as a blood-covenant, it seems, between the members of his family and the gods. These marks, along with the initiation rites for manhood, instructed in the art of offering sacrifices and other fetish practices, give Kato an authentic cultural and religious identity among the Jaba.

Sometime in the late 1940s however, Christian missionaries came to Kato's hometown of Kwoi, one of the earliest settlements for Christian missionaries in Nigeria. Among them was Miss Mary M. Haas, a missionary with the Sudan Interior Mission (SIM). Miss Haas set out her stall on a rock in the centre of the town, including a phonograph machine to play music. Among those who gathered to listen was young Byang Kato, and as Haas returned many times in the future with her music and the message of the gospel, Kato loved the opportunity to carry her phonograph wherever she went.<sup>8</sup> She invited the children to day school and to Sunday school, but Kato's parents refused to let him attend. His grandfather however, recognising that "times have changed," intervened and encouraged his son to allow Byang to attend school, with the understanding that he would continue to help his father on the farm.<sup>9</sup>

At twelve years old then, Byang began his formal education in a little mission school. He worked with his father in the morning and attended school in the afternoon, but he was a bright student and he filled his time with learning. During class one day in school, his teacher explained the way of salvation in the story of Noah and the Ark. Kato realised that God had prepared a way of escape for Noah and his family, despite the mockery and ridicule of his neighbours. That way was opened for him also, if he trusted in Jesus. He later testified.<sup>10</sup>

Finally a day came when I knew I had to decide what I would do. I had to face these facts" Juju [ATR] could not save my soul. Judu demands

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<sup>8</sup> Ruth M. Jacobson, *Queen with a Pure White Crown*, (Belleville, ON, Essence Publishing, 1998), 24.

<sup>9</sup> Sophie de la Haye, *Byang Kato: Ambassador for Christ*, (Kisumu: Africa Christian Press, 1986), 19.

<sup>10</sup> Aiah Dorkuh Foday-Khabenje, *Byang Kato: The Life and Legacy of Africa's Pioneer Evangelical Theological*, (Cumbria: Legacy of Africa's Pioneer Evangelical Theological, (Cumbria: Langham Publishing, 2023), 45.

bloody sacrifices – often human sacrifices. Judu demands torture, keeps women and children in fear. Judu priests claim they have the power of life and death over anyone who fails to give the required number of goats, rams, and cocks. These priests are a terror to everyone.

And so, Kato stood before the class and received Jesus as his Saviour. The cost of being a follower of Jesus became clear when Byang reached home, and his father heard about his conversion. His father beat him, refused to give him food, took his shirt from him and kept him from attending school. Another missionary, Ms. Elsie Henderson, along with an elder of their church pleaded with Kato's father to allow him to continue his schooling.<sup>11</sup> His father reneged, and after some Biblical instruction through the Evangelical Church of West Africa (ECWA, now Evangelical Church Winning All), associated with SIM, Kato was baptised on November 21, 1948, by Rev. Raymond Veenker and given the name Henry, an anglicised version of his father's name, Heri.

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<sup>11</sup> Emele Mba Uka, "Byang Kato," in the *Dictionary of African Christian Biography*, online <https://dacb.org/stories/nigeria/kato1-byang/>, retrieved June 13, 2025.