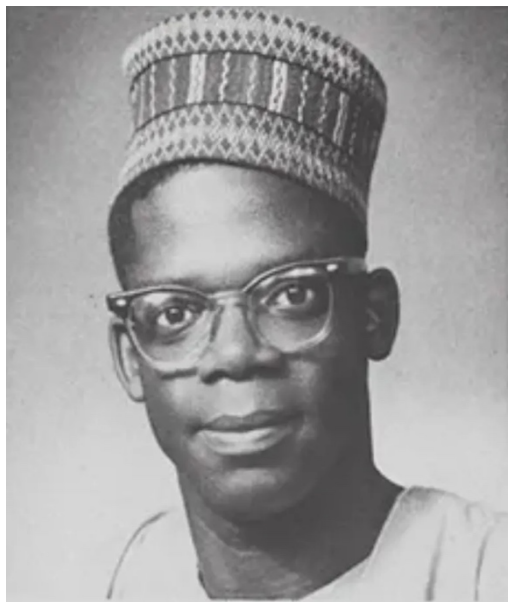

Biography

Introducing Dr. Byang H. Kato

Aaron Dunlop



This year (2025) marks the 50th anniversary of the untimely death of Dr. Byang H. Kato. He died at the age of 39 in a tragic swimming accident in Mombasa, Kenya on December 19th, 1975.

Kato was born on June 23, 1936, in Kwoi, northern Nigeria. A few months after his birth, his father dedicated him as his successor to be a priest of the local god Pop-ku. In his mid-teens however, Kato was converted to Christ through the ministry of some SIM missionaries. The story of his education, from the missionary school to Bible school at Igbaja, to the London Bible College and then on to post-graduate work at Dallas Theological Seminary is remarkable (although he left his family for a good part of his foreign studies).

Among his many gifts, Kato was a pastor, an educator and scholar, a visionary and national church leader, and an apologist. His greatest burden for the Church in Africa was theological education and he was instrumental in the establishment of two theological college in West and East Africa. He recognised the threat of the synchronising of Christianity and African Traditional Religions (ATR) in the Church in Africa and his stand for the purity of the Gospel against the religions of his forefathers brought him under heavy criticism from his countrymen, even fellow

Christians; "The pride of culture" he wrote, "and undue respect of African Traditional religions have already started to lead some churchmen astray."¹

His rejection of ATR was not a rejection of African thought or a disdain for "African theology." He introduced the evangelical church to the language of "contextualisation," by which he meant not the content of the gospel, but the "mode of expression."² He taught his students, that,³

"whatever would reflect the glory of Christ in his Church in Africa and make the African feels that "this is my faith" should be promoted. If there are any alien beliefs or practices mingled with Christianity, the answer is not to throw away the baby with the bathwater, rather we should purge biblical faith in Africa for the Africans, since it is as much an African religion as it is a European religion."

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

² *Ibid*, 80.

³ *Ibid*, 64.

With a high view of the authority of Scripture, Kato took on the ecclesiastical establishment on this issue, and when the World Council of Churches met in Nairobi in 1975, he wrote an open letter critical of the WCC and the All-African Conference of Churches (AACC). He said, "their main concern is unity, and it does not matter very much what a person believes as long as he calls himself a Christian."⁴

This syncretism was addressed in his doctoral thesis, *A Critique of Incipient Universalism in Tropical Africa*, which was published in 1975 by Evangel Publishing House in Kisumu, Kenya under the title, *Theological Pitfalls in Africa*. This work is still used today as a textbook for colleges, and it is considered his *magnum opus*.

The context that formed Kato's thinking on the Church in Africa was not just syncretistic universalism, a polemic for which he is best known— "Theology in Africa is increasingly turning to African traditional religions rather than the Bible as its absolute source."⁵

⁴ *Ibid*, 68.

⁵ Aiah Dorkuh Foday-Khabenje, *Byang Kato: The Life and Legacy of Africa's Pioneer Evangelical Theological*, (Cumbria: Langham Publishing, 2023), 299.

Kato was conscious also of the creeping influence of theological Liberalism as well as the changing culture in the wave of national independence sweeping across the world. Kato also recognised the history of the undoing of the Church in North Africa centuries earlier—which he believed was owing to doctrinal strife.

“A continuing effort should be made,” he said,

“To relate Christian theology to the changing situation in Africa, but only as the Bible is taken as the absolute Word of God can it have an authoritative and relevant message for Africa.”⁶

In his 1974 doctoral dissertation, *“A Critique of the Incipient Universalism in Tropical Africa,”* Kato laid out a ten-point missional agenda for preserving biblical Christianity in Africa.⁷ Fifty years later it is still fitting.

⁶ *Ibid.* 299-300.

⁷ Adapted from Aiah Dorkuh Foday-Khabenje, *Byang Kato: The Life and Legacy of Africa’s Pioneer Evangelical Theological*, (Cumbria: Langham Publishing, 2023).

1. Adhere to the presuppositions of historic Christianity. The shape of this adherence includes God's general revelation through the imago Dei, conscience and creation ... and that the Bible alone is the final infallible rule of faith and practice.
2. Christianity should find a home in the African cultural setting by transforming the culture, and not the other way around ... The squabbles of Western Christianity do not have to be the pattern ... Evangelical theology in Africa should scratch where it itches, by providing answers for issues like polygamy, family structures, the spirit world, liturgy, etc.
3. Concerted effort should be undertaken for biblical training, including training leaders in the biblical languages to enhance their exegesis.
4. Careful study of African Traditional Religions (ATR) as well as other religions is proper, but as secondary to the inductive study of the Bible.
5. An aggressive program of evangelism and missions so that the fate of the

church in North Africa in earlier centuries will not befall the sub-Saharan church in our day.

6. Consolidate organisational structures, based on doctrinal agreement, as in the formation of the AEA and the national evangelical fellowships and alliances.
7. Attend to careful definition and concise expression of theological terms. This is necessary to safeguard against syncretism and universalism.
8. Develop apologetics relating to unbiblical systems that are creeping into the church.
9. Christians in Africa should not stay aloof from social ills, while maintaining a primary focus on the salvation of individuals, who in turn will revolutionise the society.
10. Follow the steps of the New Testament Church to contend for the faith at any cost, even to death.

Fifty years after his death the impact of Kato's legacy still echoes through the Church in Africa, but his biography sadly, is not accessible to the church at large, and this needs to be remedied.

In Abuja, Nigeria, Peter D. Sabo, published *Byang H. Kato : theologian and evangelist: the story of the founding father of African evangelical theology*, with Inspire Publications in 2020. Children's author Simonetta Carr published a biography for young readers with [Heritage Reformed Books](#) in 2022, and in 2023 Aiah Dorkuh Foday-Khabenje, published his PhD Thesis with [Langham Monographs](#), under the title *Byang Kato: The Life and Legacy of Africa's Pioneer Evangelical Theological*. Previous to this Sophie de la Haye published *Byang Kato: Ambassador for Christ*, in 1986 with Africa Christian Press. This is no longer in print.

Other articles and chapters include:
["Byang Kato,"](#) in the *Dictionary of African Christian Biography*.

["Let African Christians be Christian Africans"](#) by Carolyn Nystrom, in *Christianity Today*, June 1, 2009.

["Yang Kato \(1936-1975\): Theological Visionary,"](#) in Mark A. Noll and Carolyn Nystrom, *Clouds of Witnesses: Christian Voices from Africa and Asia* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 80-95.

["African Christians or Christian Africans: Byang H. Kato and his Contextual Theology,"](#) by Sochanngam Shirik, in *The Asbury Journal* 74/1: 131-156, 2019.

[Can we be Christian & African? // The Legacy of Byang Kato,](#) by Amanda Pungula, The Gospel Coalition, June 1, 2021.