
Biography

The Life of Dr. Byang H. Kato

Aaron Dunlop

Byang Henry Kato was born on June 23, 1936, in Sabzuro, a district of Kwoi, a rural town in North Nigeria, during the British colonial era, the firstborn to Heri and Zawi Kato.

The religious and spiritual context into which Kato was born was a mixture of Islam in the northern regions of Nigeria and traditional African religions (ATR). His father was the fetish priest to the local deity, Pop-ku, and as the first-born and the heir apparent, Kato was expected to succeed his father. Soon after his birth, therefore, young Kato was dedicated to the gods to become a fetish priest, with the promise that his parents would nurture him in

the religion of the Jaba people and cultivate the fetish practices to appease the gods. He was, as he later said, a child of Satan.

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 tribe.

Sometime in the late 1940s, 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. It was here that Kato first heard the gospel and at twelve years old, an adult by the standards of his tribe, Byang began his formal education in a little mission school. He worked

with his father in the morning and attended school in the afternoon.

He was a bright student, and during class one day, he heard the message of salvation in the story of Noah and the Ark and he had to face the facts; "Juju [ATR] could not save my soul." And so, Kato stood before the class and openly confessed Jesus as his Saviour. He was baptised on November 21, 1948, by Rev. Raymond Veenker and given the name Henry, an anglicised version of his father's name, Heri.

Even as a young boy, Kato had an insatiable thirst for learning and an extraordinary commitment, seeking out every opportunity to improve his English. He worked his father's farm in the morning and found employment at the missionary's compound, to pay for his school fee and supplies. He threw himself into the activities of the Boy's Brigade (BB) also and benefited from the discipline of military structure and biblical instruction. By the time he was sixteen, Kato was the superintendent and director of a reading unit of the *African*

Challenge magazine, a Sergeant in the BB and the first Nigerian to win the Proficiency Star of that organisation.

A turning point in Kato's life came at a conference in 1953. At that conference, organised by the SIM, there was an emphasis on holiness, repentance from sin and the call for believers to give themselves to the service of the Lord, and for the Church in Kwoi to send out their own missionaries. Kata recalled those meetings, "The Holy Spirit convicted us of our selfishness and materialism. In that congregation of nearly a thousand, men and women wept for their sins. Husbands and wives were confessing how they'd sinned against each other. One after another rose and, stripping off an outer garment or emptying their pockets, went forward, offering these possessions to show they would keep nothing back from the Lord. Day after day, the Holy Spirit moved hearts.

The Lord was working on Kato's heart also. *"With my heart breaking within me,"* he says, *"and tears streaming down my face, I went*

forward to confess my sins before the Lord and His people." As a symbol of his sincerity, Kato took off his shirt and laying it alongside the other gifts that had begun to gather at the front of the church, he said, *"Lord, I give you my life."*

Kato continued his studies with enthusiasm and in time moved on to Igbaja Bible College, 300 miles from his home. Back home however, he had left behind a young lady who had won a special place in his heart, Miss Jummai (Juma) Rahila Gandu. In one letter from bible college, he wrote, "I have prayed a long time to know the Lord's choice for my wife. I'm certain you're the one." A few months before his graduation, on January 26, 1957, Kato and Juma were married. They had three children together, Deborah, Jonathan and Paul.

When he graduated from the Igbaja Bible College in 1957, Kato returned to Kwoi to teach at the Bible Training School. He joined the staff at the *African Challenge*, a magazine published by the SIM in Lagos, and he was offered further training in writing and a

residential course in journalism if he would come to work for the magazine. He had a difficult decision to make. He enjoyed writing, and saw the value of it for the church, but he felt the Lord would have him prepare for pastoral ministry. He decided however, to pursue pastoral ministry, and put his all into studies in preparation for entrance into seminary.

His cheerful and vivacious personality and his hard work had won the respect and love of those around him, and the joint scholarship board of the SIM) and his church, the Evangelical Church of West Africa (ECWA) granted him a scholarship to study at the London Bible College, in the UK.

On his return from London in 1966 Kato took a teaching position at Igbaja. The following year he was elected General Secretary of the ECWA. It was a full-time position which necessitated the family relocating to the ECWA headquarters in Jos, and during the Biafra Civil War, which continued for three years (July 1967 – January 1970) Kato worked

tirelessly for the ECWA, in a network of 1400 churches with an average attendance of 400,000 throughout the country.

In February of that year he travelled to Limuru, Kenya as a delegate for ECWA-SIM, to attend the tercentennial General Assembly of the Association of Evangelicals of Africa and Madagascar (AEAM). The theme of the conference was "*The Unchanging Word in a Changing Continent*" and Kato was asked to present a plenary address on *Christian Education*, to a gathering of sixty delegates from nineteen African countries.

By the early 1970's Kato, at thirty-four years old, ordained to the Christian ministry and with huge influence as General Secretary of the ECWA, Kato had come to the conclusion that biblical Christianity was at a turning point in Africa. He believed that with the threat of syncretism, universalism, and Christopaganism, the spiritual battle for Africa would be fought largely on theological grounds. In the spring of 1970, in the providence of God Dr. Goerge Peters was visiting Nigeria from

Dallas Theological Seminary, and Kato was given an opportunity to study in DTS.

He studied hard and finished the two-year programme in one year-with honours. He was also awarded the Four-Way Test Award, for scholarship, Christian character, human relationships, and trustworthiness, with a \$500 tuition grant attached. Before Kato had completed his doctoral degree in 1973, the AEAM had invited him to speak at a conference in Nairobi in 1973, and an invitation to serve as its General Secretary followed. In correspondence with the AEAM Kato had laid out his position very clearly.

"To me, the great need in Africa today is ministerial training, coupled with in-depth teaching in the church. We should make an effort to convince missionaries and Christian leaders that while evangelism should not be neglected, teaching the converts we already have should be our priority. A well-taught Christian will become an evangelist."

The next two and a half years would prove exceptionally exhausting for Kato as he

crisscrossed Africa and the world on behalf of the AEAM and saw the organisation grow. In the two years he served the AEA, the membership of national bodies more than doubled, and the organisation represented 10 million Christians in Africa. He also served as the Executive Secretary of the Theological Commission of the AEAM, to meet in Nairobi in November 1975. The Fifth Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC) overlapped the Theological Commission Conference in Nairobi, and Kato attended the WCC meetings from November 23rd to December 10th.

Kato left Nairobi for a holiday with his family in Mombasa after the conferences. It had been after an exceptionally busy month, and he was exhausted. His family had rented a holiday cottage close to the beach south of Mombasa. On December 19, 1975, Kato went missing and was found dead on the beach the following morning. A memorial service at Nairobi Baptist Church was arranged on Dec. 23, and his body was returned to Nigeria for burial in his hometown of Kwoi.

Sources

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