

**"DESCRIBING AN AFRICAN DANCING WITHOUT HEARING HIS
MUSIC" : KEVIN HOWARD HAS GENERALLY MISUNDERSTOOD KWAME
BEDIAKO**

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ABSTRACT

In April 2013, Kevin Howard published an article entitled “Kwame Bediako: Considerations on the Motivating Force Behind his *Theology and Identity*.”¹ It was solely and narrowly based on the late Bediako’s volume *Theology and Identity*. Howard stated in his introduction, “Running randomly into a forest in Africa without knowing what is there could be ill-advised...It is always better to have a guide...Perhaps Bediako could be our guide in African Christian theology.”²

Howard summed up Bediako’s volume by stating, “*Theology and Identity*...is significant in its scholarly contribution to African theology and in its key idea that African Tradition Religion (ATR) has more continuity, rather than discontinuity, with the gospel.”³ He posited, “The forest Bediako beckons us to venture into is interesting, but possibly dark and threatening. For the philosophical spirits that move through his writings are not always

friendly, and the theological owls that live there seem to commune more with the dead than the living.”⁴ Howard finally concluded,

One of the most damning things we can accurately say about Bediako's theology and methodology is that they diminish the importance of Christ's first coming, namely his death and resurrection. In the face of such a statement, he surely would have protested and stressed how valuable Christ was, but Bediako's need to hold on to his identity—his ancestors—at all costs could be too high a price to pay. This is why Christians should approach his theology with caution and discernment. While much good may be gained by walking into the bushes with Bediako, some danger may lurk in the shadows, and perhaps something deadly.”⁵

Critically reading through Howard’s damning conclusions about Bediako, the above title was developed beginning from where he ended.

INTRODUCTION

Africa and African Christians are not, as Howard posited, all jungle, where “that forest Bediako beckons us to venture into... [is] possibly dark and threatening.” Africa and African Christians are not associated with myriad spirits, in which “the philosophical spirits that move through his writings are not always friendly.” Africa and African Christians do not engage in “ancestral worship,” so that the “owls that live there seem to commune more with the dead than the living.” (In the *Akan* spirituality, the owl is satanic—a demonic bird which howls demonic curses from witchcraft).

This response to Howard’s proposition will begin with a brief description of the forever existing Euro-American negative attitude towards African culture including Bediako’s angst. It will continue with an ethnographic description of some aspects of Bediako’s cultural background. Moreover, the main issue of continuity or discontinuity between Bediako and Byang Kato will be explained. Furthermore, the man Bediako and

his African theology which Howard has misunderstood will be discussed. Finally, Bediako was an African evangelical. His evangelical theology will be explored. In addition, Bediako's African experience of Jesus Christ with regard to his theology and culture will be discussed. This response then will culminate in conclusions that draw attention to the importance of contextualizing African Christian practice.

EURO-AMERICAN NEGATIVE ATTITUDE TOWARD AFRICAN CULTURES

Western Value-Setting Toward African Cultures

Howard contended that one of the most damning things about Bediako's theology and methodology is that they diminish the importance of Christ's first coming, namely his death and resurrection.⁶ This paper seeks to suggest that this statement is not factual. It is made out of the usual Euro-American negative attitude towards African cultures. What is this negative attitude?

African nationalist critics of the 19th century European missionaries accused them of trying to create "white persons in black skins," cut off from their roots in terms of culture: religion, names, language, traditions, norms, and values. Whether this accusation is right or wrong, some Western scholars have continued to give credence to this assertion through their negative attitude towards African culture in their scholarship. Howard had stated,

We suppose this evaluation of Bediako's theology can be easily dismissed as mere 'Western value-setting.' This would be the most convenient approach. But our

challenge to all Christian Africans interested in serious theology is to critique Bediako's theology with the Bible open...Bediako's views must not be embraced simply because he was intelligent or an African. He and his works can be appreciated without being wholly adopted.⁷

This is self-indictment. It is a strong representation of Western negative attitude toward African cultures.

Instance of an African Nationalist's Experience

Western attitude is sometimes regarded as Eurocentric arrogance in Christendom that condemned everything in African culture as heathen when the Christian faith was introduced in Africa. An incident will suffice to illustrate this Western attitude towards African culture.

One of the foremost Ghanaian nationalist died in America and was buried in Salisbury, North Carolina (NC). Nkrumah attended the funeral during which the African offering of libation rite was performed. A newspaper of the Association of African Students (AAS), *The African Interpreter*, reported this incident. Nkrumah's long time mentor and the then President of Lincoln wrote this reprimand, "My attention was called to the "African Funeral Rites" performed at the grave of Professor Aggrey...It was purely an Animistic Service without Christian significance ...To pray to heathen gods and to pour libation to them is directly forbidden in the Holy Scriptures... Christ has made us free, and be not entangled again in the yoke of bondage."⁸ Nkrumah replied,

With regard to your remarks on the Aggrey Memorial Service... You seem to have misunderstood me... May I say, however, that to meet Christ... by way of Christian salvation, and turn back, is a spiritual impossibility. The burden of my life is to... become a living symbol of all that is both in Christianity and in the laws, customs, and beliefs of my people. I am a Christian and will ever remain so, but never a blind Christian.⁹

The import of Nkrumah's position is that if Christianity is to be cut off from one's roots culturally as an African, then "take back your Christianity." Ironically, the public perception is that Nkrumah never remained a Christian forever. Next is Bediako's worry about the general Euro-American attitude towards African cultures.

Bediako's Angst of Western Negative Attitude of African Cultures

A statement from *Christianity in Africa* is an apt description of the Eurocentric paternalistic attitude of self-praise of the achievements of the nineteenth century missionary movement in Africa. Bediako stated, "A strong Afro-pessimism suggesting that 'nothing good could come from the African continent' had its religious Christian variant which was expressed by the attitude of triumphalism of the nineteenth century missionaries to Africa."¹⁰ What role did the missionaries play in the exponential growth of African Christianity? What caused the triumphal attitude of the missionaries?

Bediako observed that currently, some Westerners wrongly claim self-praise for the activities of the nineteenth century missionaries. Some also put successes of the massive explosion of the exponential increases in African Christianity on the door step of the missionary movement. This, he claimed was wrong, because most of the Great century's missionaries had very negative attitude towards African cultures. Some of these missionaries condemned everything in the African pre-Christian cultures as Satanic without anything to offer for the propagation of the Gospel. Some were selective, though.

Historical Antecedent: 1910 World Missionary and Ecumenical Conference

For Bediako, that the 1910 World Missionary and Ecumenical conference had no sub-Saharan African representation is an understatement. At that time Africa was known as the “Dark Continent.” With such perception, African Christians were totally ignored with regard to the invites to attend this landmark missionary conference.

“The Missionized and Non-Missionized: Can the Animist be Converted?”

Walls suggested that the 1910 Edinburgh conference divided the world into the missionized and non-missionized worlds. However, by the end of the twentieth century the non-missionized areas such as Africa have had explosive increases of Christian populations through Pentecostalism contrary to the Eurocentric and paternalistic attitude of “no good could come from Africa.”¹¹

Describing the then African view of Eurocentrism, Bediako posed the question, “The View at Edinburgh 1910—Can the Animist be Converted?”¹² He cited Beecham as stating, “the Gospel itself was ‘the great civilizer of barbarous men’...such confident assertions regarding the efficacy of the Gospel could, however, give the erroneous impression that all missionary circles easily overcame their doubts over the ignorant, superstitious, and barbarous savage.”¹³

Mission by Diffusion and Mission by Translation

Bediako’s contextual theologian colleague, Lamin Sanneh, posited two main strategies for mission in translatability: “mission by diffusion and mission by translation. In mission by diffusion, the missionary’s culture is the carrier of the gospel message. The gospel becomes associated with the culture of the message giver.”¹⁴ Therefore, the

recipient of the message should also accept the missionary's culture as part of the gospel. An example is the nineteenth century sub-Sahara African missionary enterprise.

In that context, the missionary projected the European culture as synonymous with the Gospel message. They thus became Eurocentric and paternalistic who tried to propagate a "pristine" European culture while condemning almost every aspect of the African culture as Satanic and devilish. That was problematic. Events have shown that there are many African cultural values that resonate well with Christian values.

BEDIAKO'S BACKGROUND: SOME ASPECTS OF AKAN CULTURE

Western Conception of African Cultures

The observation that Western accounts of African cultures are in some cases "a thick description of a group of Africans dancing without hearing their music"¹⁵ aptly fits *etic* scholars such as Howard. While these Euro-American scholars "have brilliant academic description of Africans dancing they have neither seen the dance, nor danced themselves."¹⁶ It is obvious that Howard has neither seen Africans dance nor danced himself. Before some aspects of Bediako's background is discussed, it is expedient to look at two examples of Western theoretical conceptions of African cultures. This will help in understanding academic propositions of some Westerners about African cultures.

Jeffrey Parrinder and Robin Horton's propositions are hereby provided.

Geoffrey Parrinder's Triangular Conception of the Pantheon

Parrinder is one of the pioneer scholars theorizing about the African traditional religion (ATR), its pantheon, and ontology. He suggested an ontology consisting of the

Supreme Being, earth goddess, ancestors, divinities, and humanity. Out of this cosmology, Parrinder posited a pyramidal/triangular/three-dimensional ATR features. At the apex is the Supreme Being—God Almighty. He stated, “The power of God is supreme; all flows from him and inheres in him. The relationship between these spiritual powers has been aptly represented by a triangle. At the apex is the sky, which symbolizes the Supreme Power from whom life flows and to whom all returns.”¹⁷ God is considered as the Ultimate Reality—the God who is the creator of all the others in the pantheon.

At the base is the earth, embodied as a goddess at all times essential to humankind as producer of their food and the burial ground of hiding their dead. On one side of the triangle are the ancestors rising up in the hierarchy by their increased powers. They keep close eyes and impinge on the living because they are potent to aid or harm. Thus, they can be malignant or benevolent depending on one’s relationship with them. They must be venerated, respected, and must be kept in constant touch or else they become angry and evoke curse on the living. For the *Akan* the ancestors might be put on the right side of the triangle.¹⁸ On the other side of the triangle are the divinities or deities: the gods, natural forces which, like the ancestors, must be propitiated lest they become angry at neglect and cause the seasons to fail.

As non-African, Parrinder’s triangular system is made from the foreign *etic*’s perspective. His propositions do not agree with the hierarchical perception of the *Akan*

cosmology. Therefore, some *emic Akan* scholars and theologians such as Asare Opoku, Kwame Gyekye, and Bediako do not agree with him.

Robin Horton's Intellectualist/Cognitive Model

Robin Horton developed a model (i.e. “intellectualist” or “cognitive”) for interpreting religious change in modern Africa. According to his theory, there is a two-tier pattern of African cosmology. “Level one is microcosmic where devotion to divinities exists. Activities of adherents who often lack formal education are underpinned by localized events and processes. Level two is macrocosmic. Adherents support the idea of the Supreme Being whose relationship with humanity is underpinned by universal events and processes.”¹⁹

With these two levels, a center-periphery analysis was developed. On one hand, at the first microcosmic level, the deities are prominent and are shifted into the center of adherence. The Supreme Being is relegated to the periphery. Ancestral spirits, deity, and natural spirits occupying marine bodies, rocks, trees, and forests operate at this level. On the other hand, at the second macrocosmic level, knowledge and adherence to the Supreme Being is moved to the center while the deities are shifted to the periphery. Adherents include the educated, the socio-economically well to do, and urbanized people.²⁰ What concepts in Bediako's African culture are related to all these?

Concepts in Bediako's *Akan* Culture

Three basic aspects of Bediako's *Akan* cultural background inform academia as an African Christian theologian. These are the concepts of God, ancestors, and salvation. They are provided and discussed below.

***Akan* Concept of God**

In *Akan* ATR, there is no high and low God as posited by Paul Heibert et al. God is God and the Ultimate Reality, the incomparable Supreme Being. God's separation²¹ in the *Akan* cosmology, as Opoku posited, is appropriate because of His special attributes which include:

- *Otumfoo Nyame* (Omnipotent God),
- *Owo Baabiara Nyame* (Omnipresent God),
- *Onimde Nyame* (Omniscient God).
- *Tetekwaforamoa Nyame* (An Ancient to Ancient God),
- *Ototrobonsu; oboo asu boo awia Nyame* (Creator God who created the rain and sun),
- *Ahumobo Nyame* (Compassionate God), and
- *Abawmubaafre Nyame* (God upon whom one calls in one's experience of distress—the Dependable God).²²

These attributes are exclusive for God. The evil, capricious and vengeful others in the cosmology do not share these attributes with God. These *Akan* attributes are similar to the Christian attributes of God. However, the Christian doctrine separates the essential attributes of God which are not shared from the moral attributes which are shared by humanity.²³

Acestors—the *Akan* “Living-Dead”

An important link between the world of the spirits and the living *Akan* is the performance of the ancestral rituals. *Akan* life is cyclical, making ancestors keep their eyes on whatever happens in the physical world. Do the *Akan* worship the ancestors—“the living-dead”? Two schools of thought exist about this issue. Some scholars, mostly from the *etic* missionary perspective, contend that adherents of ATR worship the ancestors.

That *Akan* ancestral rituals revolve around the chieftaincy institution in the community and ritual secrecy is factual. The secret cultic rituals usually culminate in slaughtering animals for blood purification, “feeding” dead ancestors, offering libation, and cleansing stools. A stool is the authoritative throne of office of the king or chief. It is a carved wooden seat on which the ruler sits. For the ancestral cult, each dead ruler has a stool that is stored in remembrance and inheritance. Stool names are chosen through the selection of the stool of a former ruler.²⁴

Akan society is communal and festivals are the means which bring all the people together. As the custodians of the *Akan* customs, the king/chief with the elders are living representatives of the ancestors. They act as the liaison between the living and the dead. Within the family unit, this role is played by the *abusuapanyin*—the family head. *Akan* festivals are, thus, occasions for various purposes including:

- The community and family coming together as a united composite force;
- The remembrance of the ancestors for their great deeds;
- The payment of homage to the king/chief as the custodian of the *Akan* culture;
- Settlement of disputes among various factions in the family.²⁵

There are two main kinds of festivals. They are the annual and 42-day festivals which are considered as both “holy” and holidays. During these festivals and other occasions, secret rituals are performed by community or family leaders to appease the ancestors. Some of these are done in stool rooms where the majority of the people are not participants. Thus, the perception of these scholars is that festivals are anniversaries for ancestral worship.²⁶

Conversely, some scholars from the *emic* perspective contend against the notion of ancestral worship. Their contention is that the “worship” argument has been presented

mostly by non-African/Western scholars over the years. Only God, the Ultimate Reality is worshipped. Thus, at best, the description of the relationship between the living and the “living-dead” is that of ancestral veneration or respect, not worship. Further, ancestral belief is universal. Accordingly, since the main issue is associated with veneration, the question of how to factor the ancestors into African Christianity is the challenge.²⁷

***Akan* Concept of Salvation**

Salvation in *Twi*, one of the *Akan* languages, is *nkwagye*. Etymologically, it is made up of two words *nkwa*—life and *gye*—get. Therefore, *nkwagye* means “get life.” Salvation, thus, to the *Akan* means abundant being. This is an “embodiment of *nkwa tenten* (long life), *apow mu den* (good health), *ahonya* (prosperity) and...*banbo* (security),²⁸ both from the spiritual and physical worlds.

The concept has been invoked in the African Christian worship experience giving the members assurances of healing, prosperity, and deliverance. “However, all the above are good for life but none can wash human sin away. Only the Blood of Jesus can. The Christ-Event...epitomizes the love of God for humanity (John 3:16, 10:10; Romans 5:8). This is the Divinity, Kingship, Lordship, and the Salvific Authority of the Lord Jesus Christ. For that reason, the Christological salvation is the basis of the Christian faith.”²⁹ With these three cultural basics, this article continues to discuss Bediako’s African contextual theology beginning with the continuity/discontinuity debate between him and Kato.

**THE CONTENTION: CONTINUITY (BEDIAKO) OR DISCONTINUITY
(KATO)**

Howard's Criticism of Bediako's Assessment of Kato's Discontinuity

Theology

In this response to Howard's assessment of Bediako, the long standing continuity-discontinuity debate is considered from the perspective of practicing the Christian faith in the African cultural context. On one hand, Kato's case was the theology of discontinuity—"cut the bridge behind you."³⁰ For some African theologians, including Bediako, this extreme position is impossibility. On the other hand, Bediako's case was the theology of continuity—"use the African culture as a medium for the practice of the Christian faith."

Howard' Perception of Beiakos' Assessment of Kato

Citations from Howard's article of his assessment of Bediako's evaluation of Kato will help in delineating the basics of Kato's theology of discontinuity. First, Howard wrote the following about Beidako's evaluation of Kato:

The section that most concerns us is chapter ten, "*A Variety of African Responses: Byang Kato or Theology as Bibliology I...*" This chapter clearly shows what drove Bediako in this discussion of identity. Byang Kato was Nigerian...He is considered the father of evangelical African theology and his most notable work is *Theological Pitfalls in Africa*. The theme of identity is key to all that Bediako says throughout this chapter...In fact, identity may be the key that unlocks much of what he wrote elsewhere too.³¹

It is actually a fact that identity is the major theme in Bediako's *Theology and Identity*. However, to make the generic statement that identity is the major key in all Bediako's writings elsewhere is unrealistic.

Second, for Howard, Bediako provides clear summation of his chapter towards its end when he wrote, "Not only was his [Kato] negative and unsympathetic posture towards the African pre-Christian religious heritage based on outdated assumptions about the nature of African 'traditional' religion, but also his very attitude rendered him incapable of appreciating and discerning some of its crucial and positive dimensions. Absorbing this statement will grant the reader a firm grasp on what Bediako thinks of Kato's approach to ATR."³²

Third, he again stated, "Bediako's own words serve as the best summary of his thoughts for Kato's theology...Bediako constantly uses the word "negative" in reference to Kato's views towards ATR. Bediako teased out his whole chapter arguing this way, while never indicating that perhaps his own overly positive assessment of ATR or overly negative assessment of Kato would lead him into the abyss that he thinks Kato has fallen."³³

Fourth, Howard completes his critique of Bediako with another long reference from *Theology and Identity*.

Bediako wishes Kato had realized that theology must be about so much more than the sheer limits of Scripture. When Kato applied Scripture he was theologizing—by the very nature of the task—outside the bounds of the Bible, even if the principles he was theologizing about were biblical. For Kato, the content of the Bible constituted not only 'the basic source', but also virtually the only subject-matter of theology."³⁴

.Kato posited that African Christians should cut off themselves from their cultural roots at radical conversion. He felt, in other words, that Christianity called for a radical break with much, if not all, of ATR.

At this point, a summary of Howard's criticism of Bediako's theology is most relevant. Howard admonished African Christians to read Bediako's theology with the Bible opened. This presupposes that by calling on Africans to use categories in ATR as vehicle for the Gospel practice, Bediako rejects Biblical application. This is a clear misunderstanding of the African theologian Bediako. What was Bediako's argument in his *Theology and Identity*?

Bediako's Continuity Theology

Bediako was an African contextual theologian and scholar. Accordingly, translatability of the Gospel in the African context was the foundation of his theology. He contended that no African can completely cut himself/herself from his/her cultural roots to practice any faith. Rather, African Christians should use their culture as vehicle in practicing their faith. This would appear an anathema to Kato. Some other African theologians also contend that there is the existence of cultural relativism that makes African cultures relevant. However, in the pre-missionary era, there were obviously some aspects of African culture that were in direct opposition to some values of the Christian faith. In such a situation where the Christian faith engages and confronts any African culture, biblical absolutism should prevail.

Hinne Wagenaar gives three examples, two of continuity (God and sacral power) and one of discontinuity (Polygamy). The first two are discussed here. In Africa, with few exceptions, Christian missionaries in their teaching and translation of Scripture, adopted African persona; names for God. This was unlike Western Europe where traditional deities and their names were abandoned. In Europe a class word “God” was used against the traditional names for God. This was unlike Africa where the names like *Onyame* or *Onyankopon* as in the *Akan* language³⁵ and *Nyongmo* (God) or *Ataa Naa Nyongmo* (Grandfather-Grandmother God) as in the *Ga* language were used.

Again, in Africa, the “context of power is usually sacral power. The ruler does not have power only in the secular world. In the traditional society there is a tendency to sacralize authority and political office”³⁶ because there is no sharp dichotomy between the secular and the sacred. Hence, there is no sharp distinction between religion and the physical society. An example is where the living social representative of the ancestors is the king/ chief. For Bediako, Christianity has been a “desacralizing force for history.” He refers to that in his “search for a new, Christian concept of power” but he does not accept that “desacralization may lead to secularization.”

As Wagenaar posited, “Bediako’s dissertation is a kind of introduction to African theology. For African theologian’s work to commence, continuity between the Christian present and the pre-Christian past must be present. One of the central tasks then is to find criteria for continuity/discontinuity with the Christian past.”³⁷ All these thoughts are debatable and other African scholars contend Bediako’s scholarship. Was Bediako an evangelical like Kato?

EVANGELICAL BEDIAKO AND HIS AFRICAN THEOLOGY

The Man Bediako: An Evangelical African Theologian

During his University of Ghana graduate days Bediako was a mere professing nominal

Presbyterian. Consequently, he was not any serious practicing Christian. Born in 1945, he was a junior to Kofi Annan, the former UN Secretary General at Mfantsipim Secondary School at Cape Coast. In the practice of the Christian faith, how can an African be an authentic Christian and an authentic African? In other words, how can the Christian faith be practiced in the African context? This was the issue Bediako passionately pursued.

Bediako's Conversion

Hans Visser wrote,

Before he left for France in 1969, his father demonstrated his concern by taking his name to a shrine to ask for protection for his son during his studies abroad... When he returned to Ghana in 1976, his father proposed to thank the shrine-spirit for his safe return. Kwame explained to him that he had come to understand that it was Jesus who protected him. His father replied, "If Christ protects you now, that's fine. We do not need to go to the shrine." Then Kwame said, 'He protects you too, father. He is the wall surrounding us'"³⁸

The above statement about Bediako answers the debate of continuity or discontinuity of African Christianity; ideally, at conversion from the ATR, there is after all discontinuity of the former faith. The African Christian is therefore, a "new creation—the old is gone, the new has come!"³⁹ (2 Cor. 5:17). Nevertheless, it should be noted that the

form of partial “discontinuity” Bediako might advocate for is not a total cut from and throwaway of one’s culture but those aspects of one’s culture that conflict with Scripture.

Bediako’s conversion is an experience he shares as a testimony. He likens his “‘under the shower experience’ to the road to Damascus encounter of Paul. It was under the shower when the “fact that Christ is the Truth, the integrating principle of life as well as the key to intellectual coherence, for himself and for the whole world was impressed upon him with irresistible force.”⁴⁰ The power that he had resisted for a long time had found him and he searched for a Bible which he read through so many times.

Bediako’s Mentor in Scholarship

Out of Bediako’s conversion, he studied theology at the London Bible College and University of Aberdeen where he was ordained into the ministry. Bediako was a student of Andrew Walls under whose supervision he wrote his doctoral thesis in 1983 with the topic *Theology and Identity*, published in 1992. He also delivered the 2004 Stone Lectures of the Princeton Theological Seminary (PTS).

Visser again stated, “A former student of Andrew Walls. Bediako is impressed by the shift in the center of gravity of world Christianity in our days, in which Africa plays a significant part.”⁴¹ This expression described the man Bediako. The publication of his dissertation is what Howard has isolated in his review article, has generally misunderstood him as an African theologian and scholar, and has strongly criticized.

African Evangelical Experience of Christ: Jesus Christ in the African Deep Forest

Bediako was an African evangelical Christian. It is from this perspective, therefore, that his African cultural theological thoughts are explored as additional response to Howard. The following are some of the relevant thoughts of evangelical Bediako, among others.

Theology of the Omnipresent God

Here, a historical instance of the first encounter of some African kings and chiefs with European missionaries will suffice. In the history of the Presbyterian Church of Ghana (PCG), after almost ten years Andreas Riss, the surviving missionary had no convert. The Basel Evangelical Missionary Society (BEMS) home committee was compelled to order him (Riss) to go back to Basel in 1840. At a departure ceremony to bid him farewell, Nana Addow Dankwa I, the paramount chief of Akuapem told him, “When God created the world, he created the book for you Whitemen and he created the ancestors, the gods, and juju for us Blackmen. If indeed you want us to believe you, bring and show us any Blackman who has converted to your religion and we will follow you.”⁴²

Once in Basel, Riss felt challenged by the statement of the paramount chief. He was able to convince the home committee which commissioned him and Wigan to go to Jamaica to recruit Black Christians from the West Indies. Twenty four Moravian Christians from eight families arrived at Christianborg and subsequently moved to Akropong-Akuapem which began the foundations for the PCG. The rescue mission of the West Indian Moravians was the God-given redemption that saved the Basel mission. Nana Addow Dankwa’s “prophetic” statement to Riss indicates that before the introduction of European Christianity into African societies, Africans knew God. In agreement with Bolaji Idowu,

Bediako believed that European missionaries did not bring God to Africa. Rather, it was God who brought the missionaries. God is omnipresent.

Jesus Christ—the Supreme Victor

Bediako agrees with Mbiti that in the African Independent Churches (AIC's), African believers have been able to express freely their experience of the Christian faith than in the mainline churches. Jesus' relationship with Christians makes African believers consider Him as the Supreme Victor, our Savior, and the Almightyness of God. To begin with, Jesus is seen as victorious over death, Satan and all evil forces. In the African worldview, there is a thin line between life and religion. There are, thus, forces and powers at work fighting against believers always. Jesus' supreme victory over evil forces meets the need of a powerful protector for all believers.

Moreover, with salvation interpreted to mean long life, good health, prosperity, and protection, among others, Jesus' death brings salvation to believers through the provision of these essentials of life. Furthermore, for African Christians, the term "our Savior" refers also to God the Father and the Holy Spirit too. Bediako stated, "Jesus as our Savior brings near and makes universal the Almightyness of God. Thus, He is able to do all things, to save all situations, to protect against all enemies, and is available whenever those who believe may call upon Him."⁴³ These are some of the African cultural aspects the Pentecostals speak to when their members appropriate these essentials of being.

Jesus Christ—the Purification Power (Hebrews 1:3)

During one of Bediako's private Bible studies on Hebrews 1:3 with a group of the indigenous people at the ACI, a powerful discernment dawned on one female participant. The Bible study was during the annual *Odwira* festival of the people of Akropong-Akuapem. The term *odwira* means cleansing or purification. Like the ancient Hebrews the *Akans* perform purification rites through the sacrifices performed with animal blood.

The female participant though illiterate came to understand that the annual *odwira* festival has been performed once and for all by hearing the word of God in her mother tongue. The *Twi* rendition stated, "*Na ode nankasa ne ho dwiraa yen bone no.*"⁴⁴ Literally, this means, "having used His own body to purify us from our sins."⁴⁵ Concerning this female participant, the real meaning of the text comes out vividly through the use of the local dialect. Bediako was so excited about this and projected it in some of his thoughts on mother tongue theology.

Jesus Christ—the Unique Lord in Pluralistic Africa

Bediako rightly perceived African religious reality as pluralistic. Christianity co-exists with Islam and ATR, to a larger extent, and the South Eastern Asian religions like Hinduism and Buddhism, to a lesser extent. Comparing the situation with the early centuries, when the apologists justified their faith in Christ as the unique Lord and Savior, Bediako posited three aspects of Jesus' life and ministry which makes Him unique. "First, the Incarnation in which God becomes vulnerable man and where Christ's divinity is

translated into humanity. Second, the Cross, in which God's will for reconciliation through redemptive suffering, is expressed. Third, the Lord's Supper, where the communion with the Lord is celebrated in a human community that transcends all borders, nations, and languages."⁴⁶

Bediako then concluded that Christ is the vulnerable one who accepted the way to the Cross and in doing so shows Himself to be in line with true OT prophets. He contrasted Christ with Mohammed, who, when faced with similar circumstances, fought back to take over completely the city of Mecca. Therefore, it is in the will to be vulnerable that Jesus Christ is Lord.⁴⁷

Jesus Christ—the Greatest Ancestor.

In the African (*Akan*) traditional society ancestors are part playing important role in the lives of the people. This was one aspect of the ATR that the missionaries ignored and, thus, condemned everything connected with them as evil and demonic. Scripture illustrates our adoption (Rom. 8:23, 9:4; Ephesians 1:5) as children of God through faith. The analogy is that if Jesus Christ is the Son of God and heir and we are adopted children of God and heirs, then, Jesus is our Senior Brother whose death makes Him sit at the right hand of God interceding for us. He is, therefore, the Greatest Ancestor of all times. This is because the ancestors keep watch on Africans in everything that they do.

Bediako cited Pobee, "We look on Jesus as the Great and Greatest Ancestor, since in the Akan society the Supreme Being and the ancestors provide the sanctions for good life, and the ancestors hold that authority as ministers of the Supreme Being."⁴⁸

BEDIAKO'S THEOLOGY AND AFRICAN CULTURES

Grassroots Theology: Towards the Use of Cultural Values

Two important aspects of Bediako's African theology are at this point discussed in relationship with the African culture. These are theology and culture and the mother tongue theology. From the perspective of ministry in an oral culture, Bediako passionately proposed that even though oral culture may not be academic, it is very important for human development. His major advocacy, therefore, is to use African cultural values in the expansion, proclamation, and development of the Christian faith in Africa. Consequently, he wrote, made presentations, and contended on how oral communities draw on oral culture, stories, proverbs, wise sayings, anecdotes, relationships, and mother tongue theology to mould their world. This is precisely what Bediako meant by using the African culture as a vehicle for theologizing and the proclamation of the Christian faith in the African context.

Ministry of Oral Culture

Bediako expounded oral theology in African Christology. Consequently, he proposed “Jesus of the deep forest: theology from where the faith must live, the evidence of a theological articulation within Ghanaian Christianity.”⁴⁹ He called it “grassroots theology” or a “reflective theology,” while others may call it oral, spontaneous, or implicit theology. Here, he used the profound spontaneous adoration of Jesus in the poetry of Madam Christiana Gyan also known as Afua Kuma, an illiterate Kwahu woman from Obo where she lived and practiced her traditional midwifery and farming. She converted to Christianity and became a member of the Church of Pentecost (CoP). Her prayers and praises of Jesus were in *Twi*, her mother tongue.

Bediako stated, “What is...striking about Madam Afua Kuma’s prayers and praises is how intensely they reflect a well-known and important feature of African primal religion, namely, a keen sense of nature...In this setting of ubiquitous forces and mysterious powers, the Christian who has understood that Jesus Christ is a living reality, can be at home, assured in the faith that Jesus alone is Lord, Protector, Provider, and Enabler.”⁵⁰ Accordingly, Afua Kuma used metaphors from her *Akan* experience in adulation of Jesus as: “*Okatakyi Birempon*—Hero Incomparable; *Nsenkyerene Wura*—Wonderworker; *Tutugyagu*—Fearless One (literally means, “fire-killer”); *Adubasapon*—Strong-armed One (literally means, “ten arms rolled into one”).”⁵¹

Meaningful Use of Stories

For Bediako, proclamation should be meaningful to people groups in their language and culture. Accordingly, through the use of stories, the gospel would be significant to the people rather than abstract doctrines. Two stories will suffice to make the vicarious death of Jesus and our adoption as children of God meaningful in an African context.

With regard to Christ's vicarious death, "God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). Here, the death of a mother-hen in a bushfire instead of its chicks will be more meaningful to any people group in the huge African savannah grassland.

Once there was a furious bushfire near a village surrounded by grassland. There was a mother-hen and her chicken that were trapped. The only thing the mother could do was to gather all the little chicks under her wings while the raging fire was coming closer and closer to them. Eventually the fire reached them and with the swiftness of the wind that drove the fire, it soon passed over them leaving all the grass and the mother-hen totally burnt, but the little ones were safe because of their mother's wings that covered them.⁵²

In believers' adoption as children of God Paul stated, "He predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will" (Ephesians 1:5). Another story can make this doctrine meaningful to Africans who are living testimonies of war, brutal killings, and famine through civil wars.

During the Liberian civil war, a rebel soldier who was by then having no problem with Ghanaians was dragging a Liberian woman from an enemy tribe into the bush to be shot. This woman was being followed by a five year old innocent biological daughter, crying. Suddenly, the rebel stopped and asked the woman; "Is that your daughter?" The terrified woman turned to look at a Ghanaian woman standing by, and with an appeal in her eyes said; "No, the baby is hers." She said this pleadingly, pointing to the Ghanaian woman. The Ghanaian woman picked the child up, brought her to Ghana, nurtured and educated her to the graduate level. Though the Liberian civil war has ended, the biological mother of this child

has never been found. Since then the child who is in her early twenties now has become an adopted daughter of the family of this Ghanaian woman.

These stories “would be more relevant to African believers than any Pauline theology of the vicarious death of Christ”⁵³ and the adoption of all believers. In other words, such stories used for illustrations will be more meaningful to an African audience than abstract theologizing.

Importance of the Use of Proverbs

The importance of the use of proverbs in the African context cannot be overemphasized. To illustrate salvation and life in abundance in Christ an *Akan* proverb states, “*Abe pe nkwa tenten inti ode ne ho kowuraa odum yem na ama wanwu da.*” Literally, this proverb means that for long life and lack of death, the palm tree embedded itself in the oak tree. This proverb will be more meaningful to the people of the African deep forest in explaining the abundant and eternal life in the Lord Jesus Christ.⁵⁴

Significant Use of Relationships

Yet still, the use of relationships is very important in the African context. African societies are based on community, communality, and commonality. Therefore, for traditional Africans, relationships aid the understanding of society rather than abstract concepts. The community persists on relationships. Likewise, smaller congregations have

the same characteristics. Here, communion and communality are the uniting force of the social group. The “other-oneness” rather than the “oneness” of the self is projected.

In the African context, building of relationships among members of the family as well as with members of other families is the basic concern. Relationships can be built through marriage for instance. For the *Akan* tribe, since one cannot marry from one’s own family or clan, the bringing together of two lovers is also the bringing together of two families with two different backgrounds. Right from the marriage of the two people a different relationship is built.

Another example is neighborliness. A neighbor becomes a brother or sister who relates to all members of the neighborhood in moments of joy and sadness. Friendship is yet another form of relationship building. A friend usually becomes a relative. In the moments of joy and sadness neighbors and friends are usually the first to hear of them, even before relatives who may be far off. Neighbors and friends are always present on such occasions to help. Bediako lived with a deep understanding of relationship building.

Mother Tongue Theology

To look at theology and culture, Bediako explained culture as “the sum total of ways of living developed by a group of human beings... Central to culture is language.”⁵⁵ Since language is the cultural pivot around which mission is done, the Word of God had to be translated into the languages of the receptor cultures. This brings us to the issue of translatability of the Bible for missionary impact on culture.

Here, Martin Luther, Andrew Walls, Lamin Sanneh, and Bediako, are examples of scholars and theologians who have developed the theology of mother-tongue. Luther's German Bible was unique, phenomenal, and revolutionary. Sanneh wrote, "In the Christian example the stress on the vernacular brought the religion into profound continuity with mother-tongue aspirations."⁵⁶ Reflecting on the significance of Pentecost, Bediako also stated that "Its deeper significance is that God speaks to men and women—
always in the vernacular."⁵⁷

CONCLUSIONS

In this response to Kevin Howard's propositions, Kwame Bediako has been discussed as one of the prominent African theologians, scholars, and evangelicals, who believe that

African Christian faith and theology should be practiced within the African cultural context. First, this article began with a narrative of the long running Euro-American attitude towards African culture. Typical examples provided were an experience of another African scholar, nationalist, and politician and Bediako's angst against Western negative attitude toward African culture. The 1910 Edinburgh Conference was also provided as historical antecedent.

I seek to suggest that contextualizing African Christian practice was Bediako's issue and passion. For Bediako, the 19th century Western missionaries who introduced Christianity on the African continent failed to use African culture as vehicle to proclaim

the Gospel. This could have been done without the wholesale imposition of everything ATR since that would have meant idolatry.

Second, an ethnographic description of some aspects of Bediako's *Akan* cultural background was provided. *Akan* concepts such God, the Ultimate Reality, ancestors, the "living dead," and salvation were analyzed. Cultural relativism "proposes that as people in another society are studied [their] moral and aesthetic ideas must not be evaluated by the norms of the observer's own culture, but must instead be understood and appreciated in their cultural context."⁵⁸ I seek to contend that Howard's Western Christianity seems declined and fossilized through liberalization, humanism, secularization, and individual civil extreme religious rights. Confronting this critical situation, "Western Christianity needs to learn from African Christianity in order not to repeat the mistakes of their 19th century missionary counterparts."⁵⁹

Third, there has been a long running debate for African academia. In this article, the main contention of continuity or discontinuity between Bediako and Kato as African scholars and theologians has been explained. Both are right to some extent. However, extremism was their bane. Both of them were writing to impress their Western professors and scholars. The central debate was about Africans cutting themselves from all the externals, beliefs, moral norms/values, and the worldview—the core/pivot around which their cultures revolve.

Africans are communal, living in communities. Could it be possible for Africans to isolate themselves from their community in order to become genuine Christians? In the practice of the Christian faith, how can an African be an authentic Christian as well as authentic African? This was Kato's challenge which Bediako tried to confront.

Nevertheless, wholesale application of some aspects of African culture could be detrimental to the practice of the Christian faith in the African context. This was also Bediako's challenge which Kato, to some extent, confronted. Again, I seek to suggest that both scholars seemed to have reduced African culture solely to religion, the ATR, just because in Africa it is difficult to separate spirituality from the mundane. Maybe, Bediako also fell a victim of extremity and was too harsh on Kato.

Finally, the man Bediako and his African theology which Howard condemned have been discussed by drawing from the introduction to his book *Jesus in Africa*⁶⁰ by Hans Visser with Bediako's wife Gillian. Bediako was an African evangelical. His evangelical theology has been explored with regard to his experience of Jesus Christ of the deep African forest, grassroots theology—towards the use of African culture, and mother tongue theology. Contextualization is the practical sequel form of cultural relativism. "True inculturation is the one which crucifies all the sins of a culture that encounters the Christ and allows him to change the culture into a new creation."⁶¹ Culture being dynamic, the indigenous culture assimilates the message to refine it into a new creation. In this way the receptor culture becomes the vehicle through which the gospel message is transmitted.⁶² This is what Bediako and other like-thinking African scholars and theologians have proposed. Accordingly, Howard has seriously misunderstood Bediako as an African evangelical Christian. His generalization and conclusions indicate so.

End Notes

¹Howard, Kevin. "Kwame Bediako: Considerations on the Motivating Force Behind his *Theology and Identity*." In *www.globalmissiology.org*. Accessed on April 1, 2013.

²Howard, Kevin. "Kwame Bediako," 2013, 1.

³Howard, Kevin (2013), 1, 2.

⁴Howard, Kevin (2013), 1, 2.

⁵Howard, Kevin (2013), 23, 24.

⁶Howard, Kevin (2013), 23.

⁷Howard, Kevin (2013), 24.

⁸Addo, Ebenezer Obiri. *Kwame Nkrumah: A Case Study of Religion and Politics in Ghana*.

Lanham, NY, Oxford, University Press of America, Inc., 1999, 63. Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana's first President was a licentiate to be a Presbyterian minister in the Lincoln Seminary. Attendance of the funeral of Prof. Kwegyir Aggrey was not so much a challenge for the President of Lincoln. His challenge was for Nkrumah to be present while an African cultural rite such as offering of libation was being performed. This position of his Seminary President may have been taken by Nkrumah as an exact prototype of the Eurocentric paternalistic arrogant attitude of Western scholars.

⁹Addo, Ebenezer Obiri. *Kwame Nkrumah*, 63.

¹⁰Bediako, Kwame. *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion*. Edinburgh, UK: 1995, 111-123.

¹¹Walls, Andrew. "Towards Understanding Africa's Place in Christian History." In J. S. Pobee, ed., *Religion in a Pluralistic Society*, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1976, 180-189.

¹²Bediako, Kwame. *Christianity in Africa* (1995), 111-123.

¹³Bediako, Kwame (1995), 111-123.

¹⁴Sanneh, Lamin. *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*. New York, NY: Orbis Books. American Society of Missiology (AMS) Series, No 13 (1989). See also Sanneh's *Whose Religion is Christianity? The Gospel Beyond the West*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans (2003).

¹⁵Kalu, Ogbu U. "Ghana's New Christianity: Pentecostalism in a Globalizing African Economy." In *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, vol. 29, No. 3 July (2005), 160.

¹⁶Edu-Bkoe, Yaw Attah. "Review of *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* by Philip Jenkins." In *KOINONIA: The Princeton Theological Seminary Graduate Forum*, vol. XX (2008), 113-115.

¹⁷Parrinder, Geoffrey. *African Traditional Religion*. London: Hutchinson's University Library (1954), 24.

¹⁸The right side of the triangle is suggested for the ancestors because the right hand is important to the *Akan*. Naturally, *Akans* believe that majority of humanity are right-handed and thus, do many things using the right as such. Moreover, it is believed that *Akans* clean themselves when nature calls with the left

hand. Hence, the left hand is seldom used in public. For instance, greeting any person with the left hand is a sign of disrespect. Consequently, considering the type of veneration and respect *Akans* give to their ancestors, the left side of the triangle will never be used to represent the ancestors.

¹⁹Horton, Robin. "African Conversion." In *Africa*, 41: 2 (1971), 85-112.

²⁰Horton, Robin (1971), 85-112. Also see Wan, Enoch and Yaw Attah Edu-Bekoe. "Diversity of the Ghanaian Diaspora in the U.S.A: Ministering to the Ghanaian Communities through Ghanaian Congregations." In Scott Moreau and Beth Snodderly. *Reflecting God's Glory Together: Diversity in Evangelical Mission*. Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, Evangelical Missiological Society (EMS), no. 19 (2011), 35-62.

²¹Opoku, Kofi Asare. *West African Traditional Religion*. Accra: FEP International Private Limited (1978), 5. In his conceptual framework of the ATR Opoku, an *Akan*, disagreed with Parrinder's triangular or pyramidal representation of the cosmology. He thus, called for a separation of God—the Supreme Being—from the other spiritual entities as the Ultimate Reality. He postulated, "The Supreme Being is definitely different and outside the other lesser divinities in the cosmology. Opoku argued that in ATR. God, or Supreme Being, is outside the pantheon of gods. He is the eternal Creator... This makes God absolutely unique, and God is differentiated from the other gods in having a special Name. The Name is always in the singular—and not a generic Name—like "obosom" in *Akan*. All the other divinities have a generic name in addition to their specific names. This is the African's way of showing the uniqueness of God."

²²Wan, Enoch and Yaw Attah Edu-Bekoe. "Diversity of the Ghanaian Diaspora in the U.S.A (2011), 35-62. See also Edu-Bekoe, Yaw Attah and Enoch Wan, *Scattered Africans Keep Coming* (2013), 23.

²³Wan, Enoch and Yaw Attah Edu-Bekoe. "Diversity of the Ghanaian Diaspora in the U.S.A (2011), 35-62. See also Edu-Bekoe, Yaw Attah and Enoch Wan (2013), 26.

²⁴Edu-Bekoe, Yaw Attah and Enoch Wan (2013), 26.

²⁵Edu-Bekoe, Yaw Attah and Enoch Wan (2013), 26.

²⁶Edu-Bekoe, Yaw Attah and Enoch Wan (2013), 26.

²⁷Edu-Bekoe, Yaw Attah and Enoch Wan (2013), 27.

²⁸Larbi, Kingsley. *Pentecostalism: Eddies of Ghanaian Christianity*. Accra: Centre for Pentecostal and Charismatic Studies (2002). See also "The Nature of Continuity and Discontinuity of Ghanaian Pentecostal Concept of Salvation in African Cosmology." In *Cyber Journal of Pentecostal-Charismatic Research: African Cosmology* (2008), 4.

²⁹Edu-Bekoe, Yaw Attah and Enoch Wan. *Scattered Africans Keep Coming* (2013), 27.

³⁰Kato, Byang. "The Gospel, Cultural Context, and Religious Syncretism." In J. D. Douglas. *Let the Earth Hear His Voice*. Minneapolis, ME: World Wide (1975), 1217.

³¹Howard, Kevin. "Kwame Bediako" (2013), 6.

³²Howard, Kevin (2013), 6.

³³Howard, Kevin (2013), 6.

³⁴Howard, Kevin (2013), 7.

³⁵Wagenaar, Hinne. "Theology, Identity and the Pre-Christian Past: A Critical Analysis of Dr. K. Bediako's Theology from a Frisian Perspective." In *International Review of Mission*, Vol. LXXXVIII, January/April, 1999, 364. See also Bediako, Kwame. *Jesus in Africa* (2000), viii.

³⁶Bediako, Kwame (2000), viii.

³⁷Bediako, Kwame (2000), viii.

³⁸Bediako, Kwame (2000), viii.

³⁹Bediako, Kwame (2000), viii.

⁴⁰Bediako, Kwame (2000), viii.

⁴¹Bediako, Kwame (2000), viii.

⁴²Reynolds, Edward. *150 years (1835-1985): Akropong Presbyterian Church*. Accra: Presbyterian Press, 1985, 49, 50.

⁴³Bediako, Kwame. *Jesus in Africa* (2000), 22.

⁴⁴Bediako, Kwame (2000), 22.

⁴⁵Bediako, Kwame (2000), 22.

⁴⁶Bediako, Kwame (2000), 22.

⁴⁷Bediako, Kwame (2000), 22.

⁴⁸Pobee, John S. *West Africa: Christ Will Be a West African Too*. Geneva: World Council of Churches (WCC) Publications (1996), 94.

⁴⁹Bediako, Kwame. *Jesus in Africa* (2000), 11.

⁵⁰Bediako, Kwame (2000), 9.

⁵¹Bediako, Kwame (2000), 11-15.

⁵²Asamoah, E. L. *The Preacher's Companion: Short Stories with Bible Quotations for Sermon Preparation*. Accra: Asempa Publishers, 1987, 1. See also Edu-Bekoe and Wan, 2013:40.

⁵³Edu-Bekoe and Wan. *Scattered Africans Keep Coming* (2013), 40.

⁵⁴Edu-Bekoe and Wan (2013), 40.

⁵⁵Newbigin, Lesslie. *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture*. Geneva, World Council of Churches Series, 1986, 3.

⁵⁶Sanneh, Lamin. "The Horizontal and Vertical in Mission: An African Perspective." In

International

Bulletin of Missionary Research vol. 7, no. 4, October, 1983, 229.

⁵⁷Bediako, Kwame. *Christianity in Africa*, 1995, 60

⁵⁸Allison, Norman E. "The Contributions of Cultural Anthropology to Missiology." In Romen, Edward and Corwin, Gary, eds. *Missiology and the Social Sciences: Contributions, Cautions, and Conclusions*. Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, Evangelical Missiological Society (EMS) Series, no. 4, 1996, 36.

⁵⁹Wan, Enoch, ed. *Diaspora Missiology: Theory, Methodology, and Practice*. Portland, OR: Institute of Diaspora Studies, Western Seminary (2011).

⁶⁰Bediako, Kwame. *Jesus in Africa* (2000), viii.

⁶¹Loba-Mkole, Jean-Claude. "Bible Translation and Inculturation Hermeneutics." In Ernst R. Wendland and Jean-Claude Loba-Mkole. *Biblical Texts and African Audiences*. Nairobi, Kenya: Acton Publishers (2004), 37-58.

⁶²Edu-Bekoe and Wan. *Scattered Africans Keep Coming* (2013), 40.

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