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A table of contents for the *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_ajet-02.php

A BIRD'S EYE VIEW OF A.E.A. THE ASSOCIATION OF EVANGELICALS IN AFRICA

Christina M. Breman

*Dr. Alister McGrath, Research Lecturer of Oxford University, considers evangelicalism as the light of the 21st century: "Head and heart are being brought together in a movement that is looking forward to the future with a sense of expectancy and anticipation." Yet there is an appalling ignorance about evangelicalism in academic circles and a lack of objectivity marked by stereotypes. On the continent of Africa, **The Association of Evangelicals in Africa (AEA)** is the main ecclesiastical umbrella for African evangelical churches. This continental organisation has branches in most sub Saharan countries and is a major movement in Africa today. Any scholarly research which can provide greater understanding of evangelicals in Africa is most welcome.*

The late Dr. Christina Maria Breman has performed a valuable service for the evangelical churches in Africa by doing her Ph.D. research on The AEA. This article, "A Bird's Eye View of the Association of Evangelicals in Africa," is a brief synopsis of her dissertation, a 600 page publication now available.

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Every theological institution and university in Africa should own a copy.

The late Christina Breman earned her B.Th. degree in 1981, an M.Th. degree in 1985, an M.Div. degree in 1986 and a Ph.D. in 1995, all from the University of Utrecht in the Netherlands. Beginning in 1987 she served as a lecturer in Nassa Theological College with the Africa Inland Church in Tanzania. Health reasons compelled her to return to home to the Netherlands in 1989 when she began her research on the AEA which is now published under the title, *The Association of Evangelicals in Africa: Its History, Organisation, Members, Projects, External Relations and Message*. Prior to her death in 1998, she was also a lecturer on the Evangelical Theological Faculty in Heverlee, Belgium and served as a researcher and editor.

INTRODUCTION

It is our purpose to give an overall view of this Association in all its aspects. AEA was founded in 1966, and since then the Association has experienced notable growth.

In the middle of the last century an (International) Evangelical Association or more correctly the Evangelical Alliance was mentioned for the first time. It was founded in London, England, in 1846 by people from the United States and Europe. This Evangelical Alliance has been the most prominent until the establishment of the Ecumenical Movement, now known as the World Council of Churches (WCC). The historical connection between the international Evangelical Alliance and the World Council of Churches lies in the field of mission. I mention in this regard the important mission conference in Edinburgh in 1910.

The growth of the Association of Evangelicals in Africa is connected with the growth of Christianity in Africa. Dr. Byang H. Kato, the first African General Secretary of the AEA, says somewhere, that when he was converted in the late forties, there was hardly any Christian witness in his home land Nigeria. At present the Evangelical Churches of West Africa (ECWA) of which Kato was a member, have about one thousand missionaries. They work mainly in their own country Nigeria. There are 3,000 local churches, 2,500 pastors and about 3 million people are church-members. This is a major difference from fifty years ago when Kato became a Christian.

GENERAL SURVEY

In this article I will discuss AEA's foundation, its history and the most important themes of its General Assemblies. After that I will briefly discuss the administrative structure of AEA. Next, I will examine the four categories of members. Then, I will describe most of its projects, and I will consider the position of AEA in connection with other Christian organisations. Finally, I will discuss the theological orientation of AEA.

THE FOUNDATION OF AEA, ITS HISTORY AND IMPORTANT THEMES OF ITS ASSEMBLIES

Two American mission agencies have played an important role in the formation of AEA: The Interdenominational Foreign Mission Association (IFMA)¹ and the Evangelical Fellowship of Mission Agencies (EFMA), which was called Evangelical Foreign Missions Association until 1991. A committee, set up by both mission agencies, led to the foundation of the Africa Evangelical Office (AEO) in Nairobi in 1962.

cies, led to the foundation of the Africa Evangelical Office (AEO) in Nairobi in 1962. A major reason for the foundation of AEO was the concern about the numerous scholarships for further theological study in America and Europe, offered by the World Council of Churches. Particularly the American evangelical missionaries in Africa were alarmed by these scholarships. They feared that the African pastors would return to Africa as liberals. Missionary Kenneth L. Downing was appointed by both mission agencies to lead this Africa Evangelical Office.

In 1966 this Office resulted in the Association of Evangelicals in Africa. The American Ken Downing was later its first General Secretary of this Association. Kato succeeded Downing a few years later and was the first *African* General Secretary of the Association. Downing travelled extensively in Africa to set up National Evangelical Fellowships.

The term *evangelical* is difficult to explain. Dr. P. Beyerhaus from Germany divides evangelicals into six categories, using as a standard their attitude towards the modern Ecumenical Movement: *new evangelicals*, *fundamentalists*, *confessionals*, *pentecostals*, *radical evangelicals*, and *ecumenical evangelicals*. Dr. K. Runia from The Netherlands on the other hand divides the evangelicals, also somewhat chronologically into three layers: 1) they go back to the (radical) Reformation; 2) they are known under different names: the Puritans in America and England, the Pietists in Germany and the Continuing Reformation in The Netherlands; 3) they are connected with the revival movements from the eighteenth and nineteenth century.

The history of the AEA can be traced from the biographies of important persons in the Association and events in the period of the different General Secretaries. In this summary I confine myself to Dr. Byang Kato mentioned earlier and the present General Secretary Dr. Tokunboh Adeyemo. Both were converted to Christ at a young age. Kato was destined to become a *juju*² priest - his mother had almost become a witch doctor - and Adeyemo comes from an Islamic noble *Yoruba* family. Both grew up in the *Evangelical Churches of West Africa (ECWA)* in Nigeria, but later Adeyemo attended a Pentecostal church, and still is a member. They both went to the same Bible College of ECWA, although not at the same time. They also studied both at *Dallas Theological Seminary* in the United States and received their doctorate in theology.

The AEA expected much from Kato, when in 1973 he was appointed to succeed Downing, after Downing's office had been vacant for three years. Unfortunately, Kato only held office for just over two years. In December 1975 at the age of 39 he drowned mysteriously in the Indian Ocean. During the two years he had held office the total of National Evangelical Fellowships had multiplied from

seven to sixteen. From a small beginning Kato was able to bring growth to the movement and he initiated the establishment of an evangelical theological school in francophone Africa, the *Bangui Evangelical School of Theology (BEST)* in the capital of the Central African Republic.

Kato, a sincere and genuine witness of Jesus Christ, saw the importance of good theological education in Africa. Until the end of the seventies the evangelicals were deprived of theological education at a university level. One of the reasons was that evangelicals were anti-theological. They considered a Bible School good enough for the education of their pastors. From The Netherlands visiting professors from orthodox Reformed Churches were sent to the school in Bangui. Visiting professors from other countries like Sweden came as well. Kato was opposed to the Ecumenical Movement, especially to the World Council of Churches, but also to the *All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC)*, allied to the WCC. Kato's sudden death was a great blow to the evangelicals in Africa and elsewhere in the world.

Once more there was a vacancy of some years until Dr Tokunboh Adeyemo was appointed as successor and some time later started with his work. Dr. Adeyemo is also known for his presidency of the *World Evangelical Fellowship*, a connecting organisation of national or continental evangelical alliances. Under Adeyemo's leadership the AEA has continued to grow, from sixteen National Evangelical Fellowships then to more than thirty now. Besides, there is another evangelical theological school in Nairobi, Kenya, the *Nairobi Evangelical Graduate School of Theology (NEGST)*. Other projects have likewise blossomed. Adeyemo's attitude towards the Ecumenical Movement differs from that of Kato. He thought it much better to take independent initiatives than to (re)act against the Ecumenical Movement, as such a reaction leads to nothing.

In September 1994 Dr. Tokunboh Adeyemo received a doctorate *honoris causa* in theology from the *Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education* in South Africa. This degree has been extended to him for having promoted the evangelical unity and for having contributed to the development of education and of Christian literature in an African context. It is interesting to note that this is a Calvinist university with a white background, which bestowed this honorary degree on an evangelical black Christian with a Pentecostal background.

Now I will mention the General Assemblies, seven of which have been held so far: the first two in Kenya, the third one in Ivory Coast, the fourth in Malawi, the fifth in Zambia, the sixth in Nigeria and the last one in South Africa. The total number of delegates increased with every new Assembly. The first General Assembly in Kenya 1969 accepted a document against the *Ecumenical Movement*. At the second in 1973, also in Kenya, decisions were made to establish the *Bangui Evangelical*

School of Theology in the Central African Republic, mentioned before and Kato was appointed as General Secretary. The third Assembly dealt with the *family*, a subject which Kato had mentioned in 1973 as an important issue. At the fourth Assembly in Malawi the theme was: *The Church in Africa Today*. The fifth Assembly in Zambia in 1987 had as the main topic: *The Following of Jesus in Africa Today*. Three new commissions were founded there - in addition to the three existing - 1) ethics, peace, and justice; 2) prayer and church renewal; 3) relief and development. The Association of Evangelicals in Africa functions for an important part through its commissions. The sixth Assembly in Nigeria in 1993 had as the main topic *Adopt a Nation*. The National Fellowships were asked to adopt a neighbouring country and to witness in that country. This plan will take seven years to accomplish. The purpose is to reach the rest of Africa with the gospel. For instance Chad was asked to adopt the Islamic Libya. It was also decided at this Assembly to change its name. The *Association of Evangelicals of Africa and Madagascar (AEAM)*, to *The Association of Evangelicals in Africa (AEA)*. The last Assembly, was held in December 1997 in Johannesburg, South Africa and had the theme, *Making a Difference in Africa*.

THE ADMINISTRATIVE STRUCTURE OF AEA

AEA's headquarters counts several departments and commissions and it operates through both. In this way AEA is able to provide services to churches and organisations and National Evangelical Fellowships. The commissions were there from the beginning. The total has extended from two to nine or more. The departments were organised at the end of the seventies, when Dr. Adeyemo was appointed General Secretary. The commissions work more independently than the departments at the headquarters. The departments are supervised by Adeyemo. At the same time several departments are allied to the distinctive commissions. The Communications Department is connected with the *Communications Commission*. There is a regional office in Chad and a semi-regional office in Nigeria. The office of *the Gospel from Africa to Europe (GATE)*, is located in Amsterdam, The Netherlands. It is headed by Pastor Dr. Joshua Sendawula from Uganda.

THE MEMBERS OF AEA

AEA has four categories of members: full, associated, special, and individual.

The full members are the *National Evangelical Fellowships* in more than thirty countries. Some fellowships flourish more than others. The fellowship in Burkina Faso is an example of an active alliance.

The *associated members* are *international organisations*, directed to service,

some to Africa, others have a worldwide orientation. Their ministry can be based on missions or evangelism, but also on mass media work, health or relief.

The *special members* are mostly churches in countries, where it is not easy to establish National Evangelical Fellowships.

Finally there is a category of *individual members*, but its total is limited. Africans are more inclined to community life than to an individual life style than in the West.

PROJECTS OF AEA

The main projects are two theological schools for francophone and anglophone Africa, in the Central African Republic and in Kenya. These faculties are of great importance for the education of prospective pastors and teachers at Bible schools and colleges. The faculties have an important function as "training institute of the trainers."

The *Accrediting Council for Theological Education in Africa (ACTEA)* is a large network and service institution for evangelical theological education. The Council has been established to bring more theological institutions to a higher level of education. The Council has since its official beginning in 1977 been very active. The schools in Africa don't all have the same educational level. The Accrediting Council has as one of its tasks to try and accredit all schools in the different academic levels. Graduates of accredited schools have easier access to theological schools in the United States and Europe. ACTEA knows three types of affiliation: 1) correspondents; 2) a consortium and 3) candidates of accredited schools. An important purpose of ACTEA is to improve the theological education in the different types of Bible schools, colleges, seminaries and faculties in Africa. Another purpose is publishing information on theological education in Africa.

The *Christian Learning Materials Centre* was founded in 1981. The Centre is completely africanised at the moment. The publications are in English, French, and Swahili. Moreover, the Centre provides training, assistance, and help for the translation of its material in other African languages, such as Kinyarwanda or Hausa.

The AEA Project *Theological Education by Extension (TEE)* may in future offer an important contribution to the Christian faith by establishing the *TEE Centre for Distance Learning*, a kind of Open University with courses at different levels. We can think of a diploma for teachers in Christian Religion, a B.A. diploma in *Christian Education*, and Masters studies in that subject, and Rural Development.

The AEA Project *Production d'Évangile par les Médias en Afrique (PEMA)* can have the same impact as the TEE Project. PEMA produces television programmes, aimed at the African culture. It intends to show the African life in all its facets, in the light of the gospel. Since 1994 the Project PEMA is completely Africanized.

POSITIONING

The external relations of the Association of Evangelicals in Africa compared to other evangelical, ecumenical, and independent organizations are analyzed. When we see the relationship with other organizations the following can be noted:

- a) The *World Evangelical Fellowship (WEF)*, the world connection of Evangelical Alliances, of which the AEA is a regional member, has tried to keep the evangelical world united. Dr. T. Adeyemo, the General Secretary of the AEA, is also chairman of the WEF. As an example of this effort I mention the offer of the WEF to the younger *Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization (LCWE)* - established in 1974 - to consider becoming WEF's *Evangelism Commission*. The Lausanne Committee has turned down this request. The WEF has as successor to the (international) Evangelical Alliance - established in England in 1846 - the oldest credentials.
- b) The relationship with the Ecumenical Movement, in particular the *All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC)*, which is unofficially connected with the WCC, has been superficial until recently. On a personal level there are contacts with Dr. T. Adeyemo as General Secretary of the AEA, and Dr. José B. Chipenda, the General Secretary of the AACC.
- c) A relationship with the Organisation of African Instituted Churches (OAIC), the Organisation of African Independent Churches, could be stimulated. It could be valuable, especially for the group of Pentecostal Churches within the OAIC.

The *Pan African Christian Leadership Assembly (PACLA II)* conference, held in 1994, showed a remarkable cooperation between the different categories of Christian organizations in Africa, namely between the *African Enterprise, (AE)*, the AEA, and the AACC and OAIC. The African esteem for communal life must surely have played a role. This gives hope for further cooperation. PACLA II can serve as an example for Christian organisations in Europe, which often are less willing to advance together.

THEOLOGICAL ORIENTATION OF AEA

The theology of the Association of Evangelicals in Africa has been formulated in publications of Dr. Byang H. Kato, Dr. Tokunboh Ademeymo, and Rev. René Daidanso ma Djongwe. These writings unmistakably show the orthodox, Christian faith. I confine myself to the concept of these three AEA representatives concerning the African Theology.

Kato was a genuine witness of Jesus Christ, who did not give up the essentials of the Christian faith. He was in short a firm apologist of the Christian faith. Because of that attitude he came in conflict with ecumenical, more "liberal" Christians, represented in the World Council of Churches and the All Africa Conference of Churches. In this connection he polemized with the African ecumenical theologian, Dr. John S. Mbiti from Kenya, until recently Director of the Ecumenical Institute Bossey in Céligny, Switzerland. This Institute is connected with the World Council of Churches. Kato saw in Mbiti universalism and syncretism (a mixture of paganism and the Christian faith). Therefore Kato also rejected the African Theology, of which he considered Mbiti to be the creator.³ This Theology, according to Kato, was too artless with respect to the Africa Traditional Religion(s). Mbiti once said "Africa is christianized, now it is time to africanize Christianity". Dr. J.K. Agbeti from Ghana defined African Theology as "...the interpretation of pre-Christian and pre-Muslim experiences of African peoples of God." Agbeti sees as sources of the African Theology not only the Bible, but also the material about the African Traditional Religion. Kato was fiercely opposed to this view. As stated before, Kato was destined to become a *juju* priest, but became a Christian through the witness of SIM missionaries when he was twelve years old. He recommitted his choice for Christ as Lord and Saviour when he was seventeen. We agree with the Ghanaian theologian Dr. Kwame Bediako, who writes about Kato: "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".⁴

Dr. Adeyemo and Rev. Daidanso have, just like Kato, clear objections against the African Theology. Adeyemo concludes about the *Supreme Being* in the African Traditional Religion, that "the High God of the traditional African faith is no One else than the Only Living God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." Adeyemo is of the opinion that through the general revelation "the traditional African peoples know God as their Creator," but they do not know God as Redeemer. On the other hand Adeyemo concludes that African Theology is "Theology of the African Traditional Religion", which he rejects as such. Elsewhere he classifies the African Theology critically as "theology of contextualization."

Rev. Daidanso from Chad considers the African Theology to be ambiguous. He also sees this theology as a "theology of the African Traditional Religions" and calls it an ethno-theology. Daidanso believes that the promoters of the African Theology make man and his problems the heart of this theology. He wonders whether under the cover of so-called African Theology, liberalism subtly finds its way in Africa.

CONCLUSION

The British theologian, Dr. Alister E. McGrath, considers evangelicalism as a light for the 21st century. He gives reasons for this in his article "Why Evangelicalism is the Future of Protestantism," which appeared in *Christianity Today* of June 19, 1995, as a resumé of his book *Evangelicalism and the Future of Christianity*. (His new book *A passion for truth: the intellectual coherence of evangelicalism* gives a more elaborate treatment of this subject).

Let us hope and pray that the Association of Evangelicals in Africa continues to take its responsibility seriously now it has grown up, and the influence of American missionaries has diminished considerably, and that the gospel will remain pre-eminent now that the Association of Evangelicals in Africa has been africanised. That is what Kato defended.

LITERATURE

Christina Maria Breman, *The Association of Evangelicals in Africa: Its History, Organization, Members, Projects, External Relations, and Message*. Zoetermeer (The Netherlands): Boekencentrum Publishing House 1996, xxii and 602 pp.

FOOTNOTES

1. For the history of IFMA, see Edwin L. Frizen, *75 Years of IFMA 1917-1992: the Nondenominational Missions Movement*, Pasadena. California: William Carey Library 1992, 478 pp.
2. Juju comes from a French "joujou", meaning "toy". This religion is known in African countries like Nigeria and Ghana. Juju demands bloody sacrifices - also human sacrifices. According to Kato people who serve juju are hardhearted, cruel, wicked, and bloodthirsty. Cf. his article *From juju to Jesus Christ in African Challenge*, September 1962, p. 13; cf. also the article of an Anglican pastor S.C. Onwuka, "I was a juju priest" in ed. E.A. Ade. Adegbola, *Traditional Religion in West Africa*, Ibadan (Nigeria):

article of an Anglican pastor S.C. Onwuka, "I was a juju priest" in ed. E.A. Ade. Adegbola, *Traditional Religion in West Africa*, Ibadan (Nigeria): Daystar Press 1983, 471 pp., pp. 2-11.

3. The late Dr. David J. Bosch, a well known missiologist of South Africa, mentions that the term "African Theology" has been in usage since the mid fifties. Cf. his article "Missionary Theology in Africa" in *Indian Missiological Review*, Vol. 6, No. 2, 198, p. 112. This article was also published in the *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*. No. 49, December 1984, pp. 14-37.
4. Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and in Modern Africa*, Oxford: Oxford Regnum Books, 1992, p. 413; cf. also Paul Bowers, "Evangelical Theology in Africa: Kato's Legacy" in *Themelios*, Vol. 5, No. 3, May 1980, pp 33-34 and *Evangelical Review of Theology*, Vol. 5, No. 1, April 1981, pp. 35-39.