

## THEOLOGY, IDENTITY AND THE PRE-CHRISTIAN PAST

A critical analysis of Kwame Bediako's theology from a Frisian perspective.<sup>1</sup>

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### Introduction.

One of the central themes in the theological work of Dr. Kwame Bediako, director of the Akrofi-Christaller Memorial Centre for Mission and Applied Theology in Akropong, Ghana, is the relationship between African Christianity and the pre-Christian heritage, i.e. the African Traditional Religions. In all his books and articles, Bediako basically struggles with this same subject. In several places he expresses this by quoting E. Fasholé-Luke from Sierra Leone: "The main thrust of African Christian scholarship has been the argument that conversion to Christianity must be coupled with cultural continuity".<sup>2</sup> For Bediako, this interaction between Christianity and the cultures of Africa marks a new creative stage in Christian theology. Reflecting on his own theological development he writes:

My own studies in the formative stages of modern African theology brought me to the conclusion that the issue of identity lies at the heart of the process by which the Christian theological enterprise is actually carried forward. As it emerged in the post-missionary context of African Christianity in the 1950s and 1960s, the question of identity entailed (...) confronting constantly the problem of how "old" and "new" in African religious consciousness could become integrated in a unified vision of what it meant to be Christian and African (...) African theology, therefore, by becoming something of a dialogue between the African Christian scholar and the perennial religions and spiritualities of Africa was thereby a struggle for an appropriate Christian discourse which would account for and hold together the total religious experience of Africans in a coherent and meaningful pattern. Identity itself thus became a theological concern and the formulation of theological questions were linked as the inevitable by-product of a process of Christian self-definition.<sup>3</sup>

In this article I want to analyse how Bediako develops such a "unified vision". I will try to understand Bediako's theological paradigm in which African Christians "can be authentic Africans and true Christians".<sup>4</sup> Important then is, of course, Bediako's appraisal of the pre-Christian past.

In the second part of this article, I will apply Bediako's African theological attitude to the European history of mission. And even more specifically, I want to raise some basic questions

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<sup>2</sup> K. Bediako, *Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and Modern Africa* (Oxford: Regnum Books, 1992), 427; K. Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Oxford: RegnumBooks/Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995), 260; K. Bediako, "Understanding African Theology in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century", *Bulletin for Contextual Theology in Southern African & Africa*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (1996): 4.

<sup>3</sup> Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 256.

<sup>4</sup> K. Bediako, *Jesus in African Culture: A Ghanaian Perspective* (Accra: Asempa Publishers, 1990), 12.

related to my own Frisian identity and culture. Reading about the encounter of Western Christianity with African cultures, many questions rise to the surface concerning the first centuries of Christianity in Western Europe, particularly about the attitude to the indigenous cultures and traditional religions of the Germanic tribes and so to the traditions of my own Frisian people! In this way, I will try to meet Bediako's challenge, for he suggests that it may be worth exploring whether African Christian thinking may have some relevance to the present task of theology in the West. Several times Bediako compares his own findings with the European history of mission and suggests, for example, how important it may be to study Bede's *History of the English Church and People* from a missiological point of view.<sup>5</sup> I will engage in this discussion by raising some basic questions as to the theological attitude in Western Europe to the European pre-Christian past.

## **I. African and Christian**

### **1. European Ethnocentrism**

African Theology emerged in the post-missionary context of the 1950s and 1960s when African theologians started to reflect on their own context of being Christian and being African. The basic emotion behind this movement was the outrage about the negative attitude of the missionaries towards African cultures and religions. It became necessary for African theologians to study African religions, African traditions and African cultures. Practically all leading African theologians, trained on a Western model, moved into an area for which no Western syllabus had prepared them. Each of them was forced to study and lecture on African Traditional Religion and found himself writing on it.<sup>6</sup>

Bediako himself does not belong to this first generation of African theologians, but he analyses this era carefully in his PhD dissertation.<sup>7</sup> He fully joins in the outrage about the negative attitude of the Western missionaries towards the African traditions. He often writes elaborately about European ethnocentrism, judgements of African traditions as "sheer paganism" and "heathen superstitions". This generally negative attitude of the missionary movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> and first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this missionary failure in encounter as a result of European ethnocentrism, became the basis for Bediako's entire missiology. And it is certainly not without irony that he writes about the "success story of the savage and barbarous heathen"<sup>8</sup> (the "explosion" of Christianity in African since) against the secularity of Western Europe: "The question now is: can the West be converted?"<sup>9</sup>

### **2. Decolonization of Christianity**

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<sup>5</sup> K. Bediako, "World Evangelisation, Institutional Evangelicalism and the future of Christian World Mission" in Vinay Samuel and Albrecht Hauser (eds.), *Proclaiming Christ in Christ's Way: Studies in Integral Evangelism* (Oxford: Regnum Books, 1989), 66.

<sup>6</sup> A. F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books/Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 13.

<sup>7</sup> K. Bediako, *Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and Modern Africa* (Oxford: Regnum Books, 1992).

<sup>8</sup> Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 198.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 260.

Opposing this European ethnocentrism of the missionary movement, Bediako tries to decolonize Christianity. He is of the opinion that Christianity is fundamentally universal and so transcends any language, tribe or nation. The word “translatability” is often used to express this:

Translatability is also another way of saying universality. Hence the translatability of the Christian religion signifies its fundamental relevance and accessibility to persons in any culture within which the Christian faith is transmitted and assimilated. Nowhere is this character of Christianity more evident than in the Christian view of Scripture. Unlike, say, Islam, in which the effectual hearing of the Word of Allah occurs essentially only through the medium of the Arabic language, Christian doctrine rejects the notion of a special, sacred language for its Scripture and makes God speak in the vernacular so that “all of us hear (...) in our own languages (...) the wonders of God”.<sup>10</sup>

The task for Bediako, and for African Theology in general then, is to make clear that Christianity and European civilization are not identical and, what is more, to prove that Christianity is a non-Western religion. The subtitle of his book *Religion in Africa* is “*The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion*”. Just like other theologians doing theology from a non-Western context, Bediako has to struggle against the worldwide misconception that Christianity is synonymous with Western culture.

In order to explain that a missionary movement need not be negative towards the missionized culture, i.e. need not be colonial and imperialistic, Bediako brings up arguments from a biblical perspective. The modern missionary enterprise from the West was fundamentally different from the Gentile mission of the early church as crystallized in the vision and achievement of St. Paul. Also in other places he regrets the fact that “(...) Africa had no Paul (...)”.<sup>11</sup> Though Bediako mentions the importance of St. Paul several times, he does not give an in-depth analysis of the position of St. Paul.

Instead, Bediako uses his profound knowledge of the Patristics to make clear that, already in the early centuries of the church, different opinions and attitudes towards the cultural and religious contexts of the Christian converts existed. In his dissertation Bediako lucidly explains the position of Tatian, Tertullian, Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria. In general, Tatian and Tertullian tended to be more in favour of discontinuity with the existing culture, while Justin and Clement tended to stress (some) continuity. Especially this open and inclusive approach of Justin and Clement to the pre-Christian tradition and their refusal to treat Christian revelation and the “non-Christian” traditions as mutually exclusive systems is of great importance to the second part of Bediako’s dissertation. There Bediako analyses a variety of African responses towards the cultural and religious contexts of the Christian converts. Best known is the position of Mbiti who maintains that:

God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is the same God who for thousands of years has been known and worshipped in various ways within the religious

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>11</sup> K. Bediako, “Biblical Christologies in the Context of African Traditional Religions” in S. Vinay and C. Sugden (eds.), *Sharing Jesus in the Two Thirds World: Evangelical Christologies from the Contexts of Poverty, Powerlessness and Religious Pluralism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 89. The same idea reappears in later writings.

life of African peoples, and who, therefore, was not a stranger in Africa prior to the coming of the missionaries. (...) Missionaries did not bring God to Africa, God brought them.<sup>12</sup>

Mbiti, very much like Clement and Justin, considers African cultures and religions as “*praeparatio evangelica*”, preparations for the gospel of Jesus Christ. In the final chapter of his dissertation, Bediako concludes that the perspective of African theologians who tend to be open to the pre-Christian past, is part and parcel of a longstanding tradition of the (early) church. As this is the case for African theology in general, this dissertation is a kind of apologetics for African theology, and, at the same time, a repudiation of the Western missionary enterprise, which must be considered a failure in encounter.

Such an attempt to decolonize Christianity is of great importance! This does not imply, however, that I do not have serious questions. One of the weaknesses of this dissertation is the lack of balance. It is an impressive work and I certainly acknowledge its thesis that identity is an important theological category. I also consider the comparison of the modern African theological enterprise with the theological contexts of the Church Fathers to be very important. But I find the systematic comparison and evaluation of the two periods too general and unsatisfactory. For example, there is no serious analysis of the differences in context of the early church and of modern Africa. It seems to me that there may be an enormous difference in the attitude of missionaries working in a “civilized” and cosmopolitan non-Christian culture, like the Hellenist culture, and the attitude of a missionary coming from a “civilized culture” and entering a (considered) “backward” culture, as was the situation for Western missionaries in Africa. In addition, several terms are used without specific clarity like: pre-Christian past, African traditions, African religiosity, African cultures, primal religions. And where do we find the continuity Bediako speaks about? What does it practically consist of? Is it a cultural or a religious continuity? That kind of general theological discourse functions as long as it is meant to challenge the negative attitude of Western missionary enterprise, but fails to be specific enough when continuity and discontinuity between the pre-Christian past and Christianity is at stake in a given practical context of day-to-day life.

### **3. The pre-Christian past**

Bediako’s dissertation is a kind of introduction to African theology. Once there is initial acceptance of continuity between the Christian present and the pre-Christian past - that the God of biblical revelation has been worshipped for ages by African peoples - the real work for African theologians can commence. That is, to construct a unified vision in which an African Christian may be truly African and truly Christian. One of the central tasks then is to find criteria for both continuity and discontinuity with the pre-Christian past.

It is surprising to notice that, given the rather massive language on “continuity” in the work of Bediako, his actual reflection on continuity and discontinuity remains rather abstract and does not come down to earth. There are not many examples of concrete issues in real-life situations of Christians to be found in his work. However, I will give some short examples of (dis)continuity which I found in Bediako's books and articles. I will start with three subjects which seem to be important, namely the “naming of God” (a); the (de)sacralization of power (b); and polygamy (c).

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<sup>12</sup> J. Mbiti, quoted in Bediako, *Theology and Identity*, 331 and 345.

In the then following section I will try to analyse the most important aspect of Bediako's theology concerning this issue of (dis)continuity: Jesus and the Ancestors.

(a)

According to Bediako, an essential difference between the Christian missionary history in Europe and Africa is the use of the "name for God". In Africa, with few exceptions, Christian missionaries in their teaching and translation of the Scripture, adopted African personal names for God, while in northern and western Europe the traditional deities (and their names!) were abandoned. In Europe a class-word "God" was used against the indigenous names for God in Africa. Bediako even writes:

(...) in Africa the bearers of the Christian faith encountered a well-rooted belief in one great God, Creator and Moral Ruler of the universe and one not too distinguishable from the God of the Bible.<sup>13</sup>

This is a remarkable statement on continuity, but at the same time it calls for serious reflection. When Bediako starts doing this, the continuity appears to be quite superficial. Serious questions are raised by him: "Can the conception of God be abstracted from the "old" African world?"; "Is it consistent with our new faith?"; "Does it give sufficient basis for the witness of the Living God in Africa?" Though several African theologians and anthropologists have argued that African traditional religions are basically monotheistic, Bediako struggles with their plurality, i.e. divinities, ancestors and other spirit-powers. He confronts the African reality quite suddenly with a "strictly biblical viewpoint". He even quotes Tatian, that father of the early church who was on the side of "discontinuity", and initiates a discussion on the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. Finally, we learn that the African traditional religions had an "intuition of plurality". In the Trinity the plurality is now in God himself. What only remains for the African traditions is that the African experience of plurality was "valid".<sup>14</sup>

Bediako himself does not use the indigenous names. In his writings I only found one setting in which he uses an indigenous name for God, "Onyankopon". He uses this name against and in comparison with the indigenous names for God in northwest Europe, and not as a name for the God he confesses.

(b)

In the African context power is usually "sacral power". The ruler does not have power only in the secular realm. In the traditional society there is a tendency to sacralise authority and political office, for there is no sharp dichotomy between sacred and secular. According to Bediako, Christianity has been a desacralising force in history. Bediako refers to that in his search for a new, Christian concept of power. But he does not accept that desacralization may lead to secularization:

What African societies seem to stand in need of is a new conception of power that will eliminate sacral overtones. But desacralization need not mean secularization, while the "spiritual" character of the African view of life should

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<sup>13</sup> Bediako, "Biblical Christologies in the Context of ATR", 78-79.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 79ff, 90-94.

remain.<sup>15</sup>

Surprisingly enough, there are certain aspects of tradition which Bediako does not refer to when searching for continuity. It is important to notice this, apart from judging the content of his choice. For example, Bediako does not use the concept of “consensus”, which is important in the traditional way of decision-making and which would easily link with the “way of Jesus”, namely the way of non-dominating power. Instead, Bediako chooses full-scale desacralization, even of the spiritual realm. This seems quite un-African. I wonder whether this combines with the African view of life and the “spirituality of the primal religions”, so highly esteemed by him.

(c)

The issue of “polygamy” is quite precarious in African churches. In some independent churches polygamy has been accepted, or is at least not considered a mortal sin. Bediako mentions the Independent Churches as being more alive to this and other aspects of the traditional culture. He acknowledges that Christians from the historical churches are more in a situation of “living in two worlds”.<sup>16</sup>

Basically, Bediako does not show much openness to polygamy. We do not find any historical elaboration on the issue, nor any discussion on how to relate to polygamy in the Hebrew Bible, nor an analysis of the contemporary African context. Bediako concludes:

(...) African Christianity must courageously recognize polygamy as *not* a peculiar African form of marriage, but as a *theologically* false way, a mere human contrivance and one which is ultimately incapable of fostering the righteousness of the Gospel of the Kingdom of God.<sup>17</sup>

At this point we may already notice the emphasis on discontinuity of Christianity with the pre-Christian past. There seems to be an imbalance between Bediako’s wish of being open to the traditions and his actually critical and even negative attitude towards them. Bediako’s “strictly biblical viewpoint” may be an obstruction to the openness he would like to practise. We will return to this issue later. First, we still need to consider Bediako’s attitude towards the ancestors.

#### 4. Jesus and the Ancestors

In Bediako’s work, the dialogue between African traditions and the Christian gospel takes place most seriously on the issue of the ancestors. Bediako writes on “Jesus as Ancestor” and a “Theology of the Ancestors”. Though the use of the word “ancestor” suggests that we deal with the same topic, Bediako insists on the differences. There is a qualitative distinction between Christ as Ancestor as dealt with in Christology, and the natural ancestors which are the subject of a theology of the ancestors. The latter is, according to Bediako, an unavoidable by-product of the continuity of God in the African experience:

If the God of the African pre-Christian tradition has turned out to be the God of the Christians, then it is to be expected that he has not left Himself

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<sup>15</sup> Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 182.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 67-68.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 185.

without testimony in the past. (...) God did speak to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways.<sup>18</sup>

The theology of the ancestors is about the interpretation of the past in a way which shows that present experiences and knowledge of the grace of God in Jesus Christ have been anticipated and prefigured in the lives of African people. Not every forefather and foremother becomes an ancestor, neither in the African traditional way, nor in the new Christian way. Only those who have lived an exemplary life of benefit to the community (African) or those who have lived an exemplary Christian life and have become a witness to Jesus Christ (Christian African). Bediako makes sure that he desacralizes and despiritualises the ancestors thoroughly. Ancestors, even to the African understanding, belong essentially to the human realm. They are the "Living Dead" who belong to the community and society. From a Christian perspective, they cannot be worshipped or venerated. They have no mediatory role between the human realm and the spiritual realm. As such, the Communion of Saints, in the sense of the cloud of witnesses (Hebrews 12:1), becomes the outcome of a theology of ancestors. But then, contrary to the theology of saints in the Roman Catholic tradition, the saints/ancestors only have the role of witnesses!

Bediako's "secular" approach to the ancestors allows him to hint at libation as an acceptable African Christian form of prayer. Based on statements of Nana Addo Dankwa, the current traditional King of Bediako's area, it is possible to understand libation as a way of praying in which the prayer is offered to Christ, and the ancestors are invited to be present. A libation is not an invocation of a supernatural or spiritual being! Bediako does not make clear, however, whether he finds libation in this way acceptable. Maybe this has to do with the current discussion in the Presbyterian Church of Ghana. But it may also be that, for Bediako, this "invitation of ancestors" implies and accepts the actual existence of the ancestors as spiritual beings which roam around in our human worldly existence.

In Bediako's reflections concerning "Jesus as Ancestor" the question of "how to be authentic Africans and true Christians" receives serious significance. It culminates in the question: "Why should an Akan relate to Jesus of Nazareth, who does not belong to his clan, family, tribe and nation?"<sup>19</sup> I find this a fascinating question as it finally admits the African perspective to be central. Not a question to the African reality from the biblical perspective, but the other way around. And fascinating because it constitutes a very complicated question. To treat the relationship of Israel and the nations from the Israelite (biblical) perspective is not easy, but generally practiced in biblical theology and missiology. To treat the subject from the particular perspective of the nations is far more difficult, and so far not many attempts have been made.

Though Bediako gives this question a central place in his expose, he leaves this floor of particularity quickly in order to jump into the universal biblical perspective. He criticizes Pobe for sticking too much to the particular world of the Akan and not allowing the biblical revelation to speak sufficiently. In fact, Bediako dismisses the above-stated question by choosing to start the discussion with the following statement:

I recommend that we make the biblical assumption that Jesus Christ is not a stranger to our heritage. I therefore start from the universality of Jesus Christ rather than from his particularity (...) To make Jesus little more

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 225. With reference made to Acts 14:17 and Hebrews 1:1.

<sup>19</sup> J. Pobe, quoted in K. Bediako, *Jesus in African Culture: A Ghanaian Perspective* (Accra: Asempa Publishers, 1990), 12 and 34.

than a “typical” Jew is to distort the truth. There is clearly more to him than Jewishness.<sup>20</sup>

And thus Bediako returns to the “traditional” theology that chooses its beginning in the particular perspective of Israel, which then contains a universal promise. Accordingly, Christians are considered the true children of Abraham through their faith in Jesus Christ: “(...) the divine promises given to the Patriarchs and Israel belong also to us”. And therefore, Bediako speaks of a “natural past” and an “adoptive past”. Through this adoptive past the biblical history is not strange anymore. The gospel must be read and accepted as *our (African)* story.

Beyond this point of the “adoptive past”, Bediako walks another avenue in order to achieve continuity between the Gospel and the indigenous history. He links creation to redemption, both achieved in and through Jesus Christ:

We are to understand our creation as the original revelation of God to us. It was in the creation of the universe and especially of man that God first revealed his kingship to our ancestors and called them and us to freely obey him. Working from this insight, that our creation is the original revelation to, and covenant with us, we, from African primal tradition, are given a biblical basis for discovering more about God within the framework of the high doctrine of God as Creator and Sustainer, which is deeply rooted in our heritage.<sup>21</sup>

Once this basic, universal relevance of Jesus Christ is granted, the way is open to further development into the particular African context. From the earlier statements on a theology of the ancestors, it is not surprising to hear that Jesus Christ displaces the mediatorial function of the natural “spirit-fathers”. Here Bediako feels highly related to the letter to the Hebrews. Jesus is the High Priest whose death has eternal sacrificial significance. He is our Elder Brother who shared in our experience and who, after his death and resurrection, returned to the Father. For Bediako this implies that Jesus returned to the realm of spirit and power, the realm of the ancestor spirits and the “gods”. Jesus is, therefore, Lord over the living and the dead, including the “Living Dead”. He is the only universal and true answer to the spiritual longings of people: He is the true sacrifice, the true priest and the true ancestor.

With his exegesis of the letter to the Hebrews, Bediako dismisses the cultural identity and religious traditions of particular communities, both in Africa and elsewhere. It seems to me that his universal and biblical starting-point does not allow him to really come near to the traditional African societies. It is universality at the cost of particularity. This theological attitude may leave some space for African traditions, but their fulfilment makes these traditions look quite “backward”. No sacrifices offered on any shrine can ever equal the real sacrifice; no priestly ministry in an earthly temple or shrine can ever match the real quality of mediation. In fact, the ancestral function as traditionally understood is shown to have no basis. We may wonder whether in this way African traditions are done a favour.

(...) all those who acknowledge who he (Jesus) is for them and what he has done for them, abandon the blind alleys of merely human traditions and rituals

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 13-14.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 15-16.

and instead entrust themselves to him (...) Jesus brings the redeemed into the experience of a new identity (...) they belong now within the community of the living God (...) a fellowship which is infinitely richer than the mere social bonds of lineage, clan, tribe or nation.<sup>22</sup>

## 5. Evaluation

Taken the rather massive language and the emphasis on continuity in each book and article, it is quite surprising that in Bediako's actual dealing with the African reality the discontinuity appears to be more important than the continuity. Van den Toren has given a thorough analysis of this phenomenon.<sup>23</sup> We are here confronted with a central tension within Bediako's theology. On the one hand he insists on being open to the African traditions, while on the other hand he approaches these traditions with a quite massive "uniqueness of biblical revelation" and "divine self-disclosure culminating in Jesus Christ". It is this rather evangelical way of "being strictly biblical" in combination with an emphasis on Christology which makes it difficult to be really open to other traditions. In the discussion on "gospel and culture", Bediako accepts contextuality for the culture-side of the discussion, but apparently not for the gospel-side, whereas he should know, as a missiologist, that the gospel is not available in a pure form but it always mediated to us through culture and (church) traditions. Certainly, the African context is taken seriously, but this is nothing new. This was already the case in the early theology of indigenisation! Bediako's theology reveals a clear reluctance to regard African traditions as systems that are essentially independent of Christianity. That is why the African religious traditions receive the status of *praeparatio evangelica*. But it is the question whether this is the best thing that can be done and said in African theology.<sup>24</sup> In this way, a real encounter between Christianity and African religiosity will not easily be achieved. African traditions will merely be waiting to be fulfilled by the Christian gospel. Of course, this may be considered "continuity" but in reality it becomes more of discontinuity as it proves to be in Bediako's theology!

The denigration of African religions by earlier generations of missionaries makes it quite understandable that Bediako wishes to emphasize the real value of African religiosity. But many questions remain. Why reduce it to "usefulness for the preparation of the gospel"? Do the traditions have nothing to offer to Christianity? Would not a dialogue be possible in which Christianity receives something too, or does the gospel consist in a fixed set of assertions? Would it not be possible that, through new perspectives on reality, Christians will learn to understand the Scripture and its own traditions better?

Though this theological attitude is much more advanced than the one of earlier generations of missionaries, I still find that it belongs to the Christian tradition of superiority. Bediako may be strongly opposed to the ethnocentrism of the earlier traditions, he is still quite indebted to the European theological traditions.

Reading Bediako's work, I constantly experienced a tension between the critical African theologian and the traditional biblical evangelist. It may be that this tension is felt by Bediako

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>23</sup> B. van der Toren, "Kwame Bediako's Christology in its African Evangelical Context" *Exchange*, Vol. 26, No. 3 (1997): 223, 228.

<sup>24</sup> T.S. Maluleke, "In Search of 'The True Character of African Christian Identity'. A review of the Theology of Kwame Bediako", *Missionalia*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (1997): 216.

himself. In a recent article titled “How is Jesus Christ Lord?” I discover a new sensitivity concerning biblical exclusivism. Bediako’s approach to Scripture is quite different from his earlier stance. Is this a recent development? Bediako is clearly no longer satisfied with “affirmations of the unique status of our Lord Jesus Christ which discredit the religious values of other faiths”. In this article Bediako does not start from Christian affirmations as assertions, or fixed data, but as a recognition:

This is to say that the truth of biblical revelation is the truth, not of assertion, but of recognition (...) It is in this way that it becomes possible to describe the entire biblical revelation as a witness in response to the divine initiative (...).<sup>25</sup>

In this important article Bediako gives more meaning and relevance to human experience and Christian spirituality. It is not the meeting of fixed religious systems, but people meeting each other and witnessing each other’s responses to the transcendent. Bediako gives more room to the Holy Spirit, who works as much in the biblical as in the extra-biblical tradition, and phrases the earlier questions anew:

In other words, within every religion, there are indicators which point towards Christ, and there are indicators which point away from Christ. However, our concern is not so much with those indicators themselves, but with the human responses that are made to those indicators.<sup>26</sup>

This “new approach” allows Bediako also to be less massive in the field of Christology. He now chooses considerations in Christology which are important to him and which he wants to introduce and use in the discussion with other religions, like e.g. the threefold paradigm of divine vulnerability, redemptive suffering and reconciling love.

It is beyond the scope of this article to expatiate on this issue, but a development in the thinking of Bediako is evident, certainly in the way in which he uses Scripture in the missiological discussion. This may be of great significance for the further formation of his theology, for we noticed that his strict approach to Scripture appears to be a serious hindrance to a genuine dialogue between Christianity and the pre-Christian past, which is so essential in his thinking.

## **II. Frisian and Christian.**

### **1. My own identity**

I now intend to relate Bediako’s work to my own context and identity. Though I have been quite critical of his theological attitude, this does not imply that the impact of Bediako’s thought on my Frisian theological search and on the present task of theology in the West in general is not worth exploring. I want to examine its relevance.

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<sup>25</sup> K. Bediako, “How is Jesus Christ Lord?: Aspects of an Evangelical Christian Apologetics in the context of African religious pluralism”, *Exchange*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (1996): 33.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

In general there is, in theological and missiological circles in the West, quite some interest in the relationship between gospel and culture, but preferably in far-away and exotic places or related to the “non-indigenous” churches. Rarely the discussion is related to our own history of mission. An important exception is the recent book by the Dutch missiologist A. Wessels.<sup>27</sup>

Allow me to introduce Friesland briefly. The Frisians are one of the Germanic tribes in the northwest of the European continent. Already before Christ the Frisians lived in the geographical area ranging from the rivers in the middle of what is now the Netherlands up to the south of Denmark. Little is known of this pre-Christian period, but excavations and some reports by Roman writers and Christian missionaries give us some information. The religion can probably be compared with the Germanic religions in general. The Frisians were the last tribe on the European continent to be converted to Christianity around 800 AD. Only parts of Scandinavia, parts of Britain and Iceland kept their (cultural) independence further into the Middle Ages. It was in the period between 800 and 1400 that the real “struggle” of inculturation, the encounter between the old and the new religion, took place. Friesland was an independent nation until far into the Middle Ages. But gradually it lost its independence and was occupied by several other nations. After the struggle against the oppression by the Spaniards, Friesland became part of the united provinces of the Netherlands in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Today, Friesland is one of the twelve provinces of the Netherlands. The Frisian language is still actively spoken in this province, as well as in a few other Frisian areas in eastern Friesland (northern Germany) and northern Friesland (southwest Denmark).

Christianity came, in first instance, to Friesland from Britain, where Christianity was still quite independent of the Roman stream of the religion. With Wilfried, Willibrord and (Winfred) Boniface, monks who travelled to Friesland at the turn of the 8th century, Christianity was initially not introduced as a by-product of a “colonial” or military process. However, these missionaries were not very open to the Frisian customs and religion and soon became encapsulated in Roman Christianity. Boniface was murdered by the Frisians at Dokkum in 754, probably not for religious reasons. At first, the Frisians did not accept the Christian faith. But later in that century, the Christian faith was imposed on the Frisians as part of the expansion of and occupation by the Franks, who came from the south with their Roman branch of Christianity, for they themselves had been conquered by the Romans.

The Frisians have always had their own language, which belongs to the group of West Germanic languages together with German, English and Dutch. When Christianity came to Friesland, the church language was Latin. As Friesland had lost its independence *before* the Reformation in the 16th century, Latin was replaced by the new dominant language in Friesland, which was Dutch. The Reformation had introduced the use of vernacular languages. Christianity in Friesland did not experience the highly praised “translatability” of the gospel. On the contrary, until today the dominant language in the Frisian churches is Dutch. The struggle for worship in our own language in church, which may be considered one of the first steps of inculturation, only started at the beginning of this century. Then the use of this “peasants language” in church was

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<sup>27</sup> A. Wessels, *Europe: Was it Ever really Christian?* (London: SCM Press, 1994).

revolutionary and not accepted at all! Today most congregations worship in their own language once a year.<sup>28</sup>

An illustration of that fact is given in Lamin Sanneh's book *Translating the Message*.<sup>29</sup> In one of the appendices he provides the reader with a list of "First complete printed Bibles in languages" in which he mentions the year in which the complete Bible was first translated and printed. For my Frisian language this year is 1943. For Dutch: 1522; for German: 1466; for English: 1535; for French: 1530. In comparison, for example, with some languages of tribes in Bediako's country: translation into Ga, 1866; in Ewe, 1913; in Twi (Akuapem) 1871. It was shocking to read that we, Frisian Christians, missed the vernacularisation during the Reformation and even received the Bible later than many of the languages of Ghana. I often asked myself the question which Bediako raised in one of his early articles: "Why did the genuine encounter and dialogue between the gospel and African (Frisian) religious life not take place?"<sup>30</sup> It is here where I feel very much attached to Bediako's spirit and attitude. My own tradition has been the victim of a missionary approach, just the same as African traditions later on during the next stages of Christian expansion. Starting from here, I will try to relate Bediako's theology to my own tradition. I will refer to a few subjects: Identity (2); The pre-Christian traditions (3); and "From Africa to Europe"(4).<sup>31</sup>

## 2. Identity as theological category

The context of Friesland cannot easily be compared with the African situation. In Friesland there is no such material poverty as we generally find in Africa. Everybody will agree that there is freedom and prosperity. However, we may perhaps speak of "anthropological poverty" in the way the Cameroonian theologian E. Mveng has used it.<sup>32</sup> For Mveng, anthropological poverty takes account of the humiliation of people in history, the loss of their social and cultural identity. In Friesland people live in relatively good circumstances but have lost, and are losing, their cultural independence in the midst of dominant cultures. And worse, under the surface they always live

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<sup>28</sup> See my chapter "Church and Language: a comparison between Friesland and Anglophone Cameroon".

<sup>29</sup> L. Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1989).

<sup>30</sup> Bediako, "Biblical Christologies in the Context of ATR", 88 and 93.

<sup>31</sup> In the following pages, there are few references simply because it constitutes a new discourse. I refer to a few recent Dutch titles: A. Wessels, *Europe: Was it Ever Really Christian?* (London: SCM Press, 1994); G. Noort, *Germaanse cultuur en christianisatie van Noordwest Europa* (Utrecht/Leiden: IIMO, 1993); Allerwegen 22, *Evangelie en cultuur in Friesland* (Kampen: Kok Uitgeverij, 1996).

<sup>32</sup> E. Mveng, "Impoverishment and Liberation: A Theological Approach for Africa and the Third World" in R. Gibellini (ed.) *Paths of African Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1994), 156. See also Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 144-145.

with shame and feelings of inferiority towards these dominant cultures: shame for the language and accent, shame for who they are.

Since the introduction of Christianity in Friesland, the Frisians have gradually lost their religion, culture and language. Fortunately there have always been movements which struggled against the cultural domination and fortunately Christians have played a meaningful role in these movements. But those who tried the combination of being authentically Frisian and truly Christian lived in the margin of our churches and society. Christianity appears to have a double face. It has robbed us from our cultural identity, but at the same time has played a central role in the Frisian (proverbial) search for freedom. Today, the movement for Frisian culture and identity is getting quite some support in sports, politics and even schools! In the churches it remains marginal, though.

Bediako's dissertation on the issue of theology and identity has shown the importance of the process of inculturation of the early church in the Greco-Roman world for the reflection on inculturation and identity in African theology. For (western) Europe the expansion of the Roman Empire was of great importance, as the Christian faith was confronted with many new cultures. In our area these were the Germanic and Celtic cultures. And after a long process of inculturation and "domestication" of Christianity it was "exported" along with the European expansion.<sup>33</sup>

From the Frisian perspective it then becomes important to analyse the missionary history. To research how Christianity was brought to us and what happened in the centuries after the "conversion". How did the inculturation take place? It is my assumption that the general attitude towards the traditions was negative, but that the inculturation took place despite this negative attitude. However, what would the Christian churches and the Frisian culture look like if a serious dialogue and encounter had been established? And what would have happened to the Frisian language and culture if Willibrord had spoken Frisian, as Bediako suggested in an interview with a Frisian paper: "I wish Willibrord would have spoken Frisian". These questions become urgent for the reflection on identity and inculturation in Frisian Theology. But there is a main difference with African Theology: Christianity was introduced to our people more than 1,200 years ago. The question now is whether it is still possible to bridge this gap of 1,200 years in the search for a Frisian Christian identity.

### **3. The pre-Christian traditions: the Frisian religion**

The quest for identity leads us to the pre-Christian tradition, just as was the case with Bediako and with African Theology in general. Not much is known about the religion of the Frisians. We only know something about it through the descriptions of some Roman writers and Christian missionaries, and through comparison with the Germanic religions of the surrounding tribes. It may be that Frisian theologians have to do the groundwork here just like the African theologians, in the first period of African theology, found themselves writing on African religions and cultures.

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<sup>33</sup> T.S. Maluleke, "In Search of 'The True Character of African Christian Identity'. A review of the Theology of Kwame Bediako", *Missionalia*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (1997): 217.

More important at this moment, however, is to consider the general attitude towards the pre-Christian past in history and in the present among theologians and Christians in Friesland and the Netherlands. This is a very delicate issue, which I can only introduce here briefly.

After the introduction of Christianity in our area, there was quite a struggle between this new “foreign” Christian faith and the traditional religious ways of life. Throughout the “dark” Middle Ages this was a serious issue. In the last part of this period, say between 1200-1500, Christianity turned out to be the glorious winner. Practically everybody was baptized a Christian and churches were established all around. At the end of the Middle Ages, when Renaissance and Reformation marked a new era, northwest Europe was confronted with numerous witch-hunts, which I consider to have been an expression of the final victory of the new faith over the traditional religion. During this new era of Reformation and Renaissance, scholars searched for their roots and began to read, anew, the classical sources of our European civilization: the Greek philosophy and mythology, and the Bible! The Germanic (and Frisian) traditions certainly did not form a constituent element of our civilization, according to the official and general opinion. This has been the view since. Up to very recently, these two streams of religion and culture formed the predominant curriculum for the intellectuals and especially for ministers in the Protestant churches. This implies that the traditional religion and the traditional culture have long been rejected and neglected.

This “negligence” of our own indigenous traditions constitutes a complicating element in our search for Frisian identity. And there is more! There has been a taboo on Germanic traditions since the German Nazis in the Second World War (mis)used the Germanic symbolism and religions for their own fascist world view. Fascism has been, and still is, enormously traumatic in Europe. Subsequently, Germanic traditions cannot be a subject for discussion. Especially in the main Protestant circles in the Netherlands, this subject is very delicate. The main question for Christians then becomes: “Why has Christianity been only a varnish which has covered up the real heathen dimensions of European culture?” The reasoning behind this question is that the Germanic traditions are considered “negative” (focus on power, violence and destruction), and that in the run of more than 1,000 years, the “positive” religion Christianity (focus on love and justice) has not been able to wipe out these traditions.

From a Frisian perspective, the discussion on a quest for identity, in which a reassessment of pre-Christian traditions is considered or undertaken, is thus “bewitched” right from the outset both because of the disregard and rejection of the indigenous traditions, and because of the deeply rooted prejudice against this “fascist” pre-Christian tradition. However, Bediako’s perspective to be open to pre-Christian religions, his assertion that God was not unknown to Africa before the missionaries brought the gospel, and his search for continuity between the traditions is of enormous importance for Frisian Christianity!

#### **4. From Africa to Europe**

In the introduction to this article, I mentioned that Bediako several times compares his findings with the European history of mission. He suggests that it may be worth exploring whether the African Christian thought that has emerged may have some relevance and may hold some special interest for the present task of theology also in the West. He mainly gives us some hints about the

supposed importance of the “primal religiosity” to the European Christian crisis. I would like to respond to this challenge by engaging in the discussion on that point.

Bediako’s reasoning is as follows: In the case of Europe, the Christian mission appears to have been pursued to such an extent that the primal traditions were virtually wiped out. But it may well be that in Africa the opportunity for a serious encounter between Christian and primal traditions, which was lost in Europe, can be regained. So Africa may well be the place for redeeming wrongs done, and not to her alone, in the name of the mission. The primal religions and the dialogue with this primal religiosity is, according to Bediako, one of the main constituents of the African Christian success story. It is here that the African contribution to Christian scholarship may become a blessing to the West:

For the African vindication of the theological significance of the African primal religions, if it has validity, also goes to affirm that the European primal heritage was not illusory, to be consigned to oblivion as primitive darkness. The nature of the meeting of Christianity with European primal religions may hold more significance for understanding the modern West than it may have been assumed. A serious Christian theological interest in the European primal traditions and in the early forms of Christianity which emerged from the encounter with those traditions, could provide a fresh approach to understanding Christian identity in the West too, as well as opening new possibilities for Christian theological endeavour today.<sup>34</sup>

Bediako identifies several signs in the West which point towards a renewed interest in a primal world-view: the post-modernist rejection of the Enlightenment, the resurgence of the phenomenon of the occult and the various quests for spiritual experience and wholeness, like in the New Age movement. For Bediako these are sufficient indicators that a primal world-view, which has been suppressed rather than encountered, redeemed and integrated, will rise to haunt the future.

I find this reasoning of Bediako fascinating, for it opens new perspectives on the European religious situation. It may be true that the emergence of “spiritual movements” confronts us with the churches’ general attitude of disregard of the European primal traditions and primal religiosity in general, both in the past and the present.

But there are also many difficulties related to this approach, for the presupposition in Bediako’s thinking about the primal world-view is that it represents some kind of “original religiosity” of human existence, on top of which the “world religions” erect their superstructures. Subsequently, Bediako presupposes “(...) that Europe shares with Africa an identical pre-Christian heritage”.<sup>35</sup> I am afraid that this thesis is very debatable, for there is no proof whatsoever for this

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<sup>34</sup> K. Bediako, “The Impact of the Bible in Africa” in Y. Schaaf, *On Their Way Rejoicing: The History and Role of the Bible in Africa* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press: 1994), 251; Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 261-262 and K. Bediako, “Understanding African Theology in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century”, *Bulletin for Contextual Theology in Southern African & Africa*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (1996): 8.

<sup>35</sup> Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 260.

supposed unity of primal-religions. And is it true that Europe and Africa share an identical heritage? Even if this were true, there still appears to be a main difference between the present contexts of Africa and Europe, namely, the very evident difference in religiosity!

However, this does not denounce the importance of Bediako's thinking for Europe. Certainly, we need to engage in the discussion with Bediako, but we need to be careful in our analysis and terminology. To me, Bediako sometimes makes general assumptions too easily. In some cases I even wonder whether he does not confuse the primal religiosity with his own evangelical way of believing.

## **Epilogue**

In this article I have tried to analyse Kwame Bediako's perspective on pre-Christian traditions. Though I have been quite critical, I consider Bediako as one of the important voices in contemporary African Theology. Those interested in African theology cannot afford to ignore the voice of this erudite theologian. In the latter part of this article I have tried to reflect on the implications which Bediako's theology may have on a Frisian identity and theology. These reflections have been very preliminary and are in need of serious further research.

Above all, I have become aware of the fact that, if I want to continue reflecting on my Frisian and Christian identity, I have to listen seriously to, and learn from, African Theology.