

Echoes from a Bygone Era: The African Precedent in Frontier Missiology

I could hear the voices of African missiologists as I reviewed the articles for this issue. They were echoes from an older African frontier. These voices began to be heard amidst the post-colonial turbulence of the 1960's, from pan-African theological consultations to prestigious posts within Western academia. It's a remarkable change from the African absenteeism at the World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh a hundred years ago. Their perspectives will echo through these articles, like the musical genre my 16 year old son listens to called "mash-up" (where one tune transposes on another tune). It's our modest way to salute the African precedent in frontier missiology.

Many are conscious of the recent loss of two of these prominent African voices. The deaths of Kwame Bediako (Director, Akrofi-Christaller Memorial Centre, Ghana) and Ogbu Kalu (Henry Winters Luce Professor of World Christianity and Mission, McCormick Theological Seminary) seem to have come too early. Fortunately their writings have helped ignite a generation of new reflection from the African context. Bediako was unique in his ability to synthesize the various African theological perspectives on the African-ness of their Christian identity.¹ He very perceptively identified this 20th century African concern with the early church's struggle on the Greco-Roman frontier.² Bediako recognized in both a singular concern for continuity and authenticity in their Christian identity. Is this not the very same concern reflected in the continuing debate over Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists coming to faith? Bediako's masterful framing of the question is echoed in Brogden and Lewis's debate on insider movements (pp. 33-48).

It was at the 1977 Pan-African Conference of Third World Theologians that we began to hear that perceptive voice of Ogbu Kalu.³ This historian of African Christianity addressed Western missionary assumptions by training his indigenous eye on the empirical study of African spirituality, poverty and pluralism.⁴ His writing disclosed the force and pervasiveness of an African Pentecostalism that challenged Western presuppositions.⁵ His "groundedness," his attention to the "what really is" rather than "what ought ideally to be," must be applied to newer frontiers. Kalu's concern for empirical research is reflected in both Gene Daniels' new installment from the Fruitful Practices team (p. 21) and James Bultema's study of receptivity in Turkey (p. 27).

But the African voice of Lamin Sanneh (Professor of History and World Christianity, Yale University) also shadows these pages. His insights are found all across mission studies today. Maybe it's because he was shaped so uniquely, being born a Muslim from a royal household and educated in colonial Africa, subsequently matriculating through prestigious Western universities in both Islamic and Christian studies. Or maybe it's because he was shaped by that older "theatre of Christian-Muslim engagement" in West Africa.⁶ But it goes without saying that Sanneh has an instinctive grasp of religious frontiers that can help reframe our questions especially in Muslim contexts today.⁷

A hint of Sanneh's and Bediako's influence is found in the article by Gilles Gravelle (p. 11), a published address from the ISFM last September. It's Sanneh who asserts throughout his writings that the singular missionary method of vernacular Bible translation built indigenous confidence among African peoples burdened under colonial "overlordship." That confidence rose up and ultimately sabotaged the entire

(continued on p. 54)

The views expressed in **IJFM** are those of the various authors and not necessarily those of the journal's editors, the International Society for Frontier Missiology or the society's executive committee.

Editor

Brad Gill

Managing Editors

Anya and Chris Gandy

Consulting Editors

Rick Brown, Gavriel Gefen, Herbert Hoefler, Rebecca Lewis, H. L. Richard, Steve Saint

Layout

Anya Gandy, Heather Holt

Secretary

Karen Watney

Publisher

Bradley Gill, representing the student-level meeting at Edinburgh 1980.

2010 ISFM Executive Committee

Greg Parsons, Brad Gill, Rory Clark, Darrell Dorr

Web Site

www.ijfm.org

Editorial Correspondence

1605 E. Elizabeth Street
Pasadena, CA 91104
(626) 398-2108, editors@ijfm.org

Subscriptions

One year (four issues) \$18.00
Two years (eight issues) \$34.00
Three years (twelve issues) \$48.00
Single copies \$4.00, multiple copies \$3.00

Payment must be enclosed with orders.

Please supply us with current address and change of address when necessary. Send all subscription correspondence to:

IJFM

**1605 E. Elizabeth Street
Pasadena, CA 91104**

Tel: (626) 398-2119

Fax: (626) 398-2101

Email: subscriptions@ijfm.org

IJFM (ISSN #0743-2529) was established in 1984 by the International Student Leaders' Coalition for Frontier Missions. It is published quarterly.

COPYRIGHT ©2010 International Student Leaders Coalition for Frontier Missions.

PRINTED in the USA

Allow me license to extend this a bit further. McGrath appreciates the diversity and energy of a young Christian movement which contains a multiplicity of groups across the Greco-Roman world. In its early years it's centered on common themes and truths, and while teeming with debate and dialogue, is less prone to drawing hard protective boundaries. It's only over time that one senses an increasing force to the judgment of heresy. Any contemporary mission movement might manifest what McGrath sees in this classical era, i.e., that a single Christian movement will have a *necessary* exploratory process with many diverse perspectives focused on Christ as the center. Forgive me if I'm overextending McGrath's insights, but this is where the book becomes valuable aid to cross-cultural mission.

But McGrath keeps us honest about this process by another question that shadows his chapters: Could heresy result from an overzealous contextualized apologetic? McGrath sorts the evidence of these centuries, when the Christian church faced the philosophical and pluralistic thought forms of the Greco-Roman world. He focuses on Justin Martyr and other church fathers who claimed they saw the finger prints of God amidst their pagan philosophical systems. They searched for useful terms like "Logos," indigenous to the intellectual vernacular of the period. McGrath sees the use of these indigenous terms for Christian apologetic as being a two way street. Any effective accommodation to the pagan mind was potentially a "Trojan Horse" that could "destabilize or distort the mystery" of the gospel. But McGrath "the historian" sees as well that terms like "Logos" offered a useful presentation to the Platonic mind of Christ as mediator between humanity and God. (p. 178) Yes, he does see the threat of overzealous apologetic, but his historical judgment is to appreciate a *judicious* translation of indigenous themes.

This is a good work for mission fields, but the missiologist might find himself restless with it all. I might suggest a sequel to answer this restlessness. While McGrath mentions that cultural influences affect heresy, and spends a final chapter on the emergence of Islam, he does not examine how the rich cultural mosaic affected theological development (and heresy). He does not pursue how this young Christian movement had already moved east, north and south into drastically new cultures. He treats Iraeneus of Lyons simply as a heresy hunter and not as one trying to preach into the Celtic barbarian world that surrounded him. And what of the transition from Greek to Roman (Latin) worlds? Of the movement into Armenia? Of the Syrian church's backlash to Greek dominance? Of the Nubian and Berber influences on theology in Africa? How are we to understand heresy on these early cross-cultural frontiers of the faith? Did a cultural frontier simply demand a defense of the truth against heresy, or did it open new perception of truth? Ah, historians must give us volume two. **IJFM**

From the Editor's Desk (continued from p. 3)

colonial enterprise.⁸ Such a positive assessment of translation, when combined with Bediako's call for mother-tongue translators, is the basis for Gravelle's historical analysis of changing roles in Bible translation.

These African voices continually call us beyond our Western preoccupation with the transmission of the gospel (contextualization *for* them) to examine the authentic African response to the gospel (contextualization *by* them). In his recent interpretation of Africa's "post-Western discovery of the gospel," Sanneh mentions the appearance of a new contextualized creed among the Maasai people of Africa (p. 7).⁹ The world of nomadic wandering and ravenous hyenas peeks through its poetic cadence. It raises the interesting question of theological form on the frontier, and how creeds may protect both the truth and the authenticity of any younger movement to Christ. Larry Dinkins speaks to the issue of crafting contextualized creeds from his experience in Buddhist Thailand (p. 5).

I recently spent a week sitting under Dr. Tite Tienou (Dean of Trinity's School of Intercultural Studies) and he spoke of Bediako and Kalu's legacy. I was attending his seminar "Ethnicity: Gift and Barrier" in preparation for this same theme at the upcoming September meetings of the ISFM in Charlotte (details at ijfm.org). I was enervated by this perceptive African scholar as he probed and provoked my American assumptions on the subject. His voice joins the "mash-up" of African contributions to contemporary frontier missiology. Their mature insights on indigenous agency, cross-cultural transmission and religious identity will echo throughout the pages of this issue.

Enjoy,



Brad Gill

Endnotes

¹ Kwame Bediako, *Jesus and the Gospel in Africa*, Orbis, Maryknoll, NY, 2004, and, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion*, Edinburgh University Press, 1995

² Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture upon Christian thought in the Second Century and Modern Africa*, Regnum Books, Oxford, 1992

³ Ogbu Kalu, "Church Presence in Africa," in *African Theology in Route*, Orbis Books, 1979

⁴ Ogbu Kalu, ed., *African Christianity: The African Story*, African World Press, 2004

⁵ Ogbu Kalu, *African Pentecostalism: An Introduction*, Oxford University Press, 2008

⁶ Andrew Walls, "Africa in Christian History," in *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History*, Orbis, Maryknoll, 2002, pp. 85-173

⁷ Lamin Sanneh, *The Crown and the Turban: Muslims and West African Pluralism*, Westview Press, Boulder, CO, 1997

⁸ Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message*, Orbis, Maryknoll, NY, 1989

⁹ Lamin Sanneh, *Disciples of All Nations*, Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 241-242