Spiritan Missionaries: Precursors of Inculturation Theology

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SPIRITAN MISSIONARIES AS PRECURSORS OF INCULTURATION THEOLOGY IN WEST AFRICA: WITH PARTICULAR REFERENCE TO THE TRANSLATION OF CHURCH DOCUMENTS INTO VERNACULAR LANGUAGES

Introduction

Recent studies based on documents available in the archives of missionary congregations have helped to arrive at a positive appreciation of the contribution of the early missionaries to the development of African cultures. This presentation will center on the work done by Spiritans in some West African countries, especially in the production of dictionaries and grammar books and the translation of the Bible and church documents into vernacular languages. Contrary to the widespread idea that the early missionaries destroyed African cultures (the *tabula rasa* theory), this presentation will argue that, despite their limitations, the early missionaries were precursors of what is known today as inculturation theology. The reflection hopes, on one hand, to challenge African scholars to update their interpretation of the history of the early missionary enterprise in Africa and, on the other, to challenge present day African missionaries to pursue the task of inculturation of the Gospel in their different missionary contexts.

The reflection has three sections. The first section defines the problematic and the historical borders of the research. The second section exposes samples of works done by Spiritans in the area of linguistics and translation of church documents, in some West African countries – Senegal, Nigeria, Ghana and Sierra Leone. Finally, the third section presents a theological reflection on the work of translation done by Spiritan missionaries. It will show that Spiritan missionaries not only contributed to the development of the cultural identity and heritage of the peoples they encountered in West Africa, but also inaugurated what is today called African inculturation theology.

1. Problematic and Delimitation of the Subject

*Period Considered*

The period under consideration is the eighteenth to the twentieth-centuries, precisely from the arrival of the first Spiritan missionaries at the West African Coast of Senegal, 1779, to the end of the Second Vatican Council, 1965. We
have chosen to highlight this period because it is a period that remains unknown to many historians. Most of the documents produced by the early missionaries - dictionaries, Bibles, Catechisms, and hymn books that gave birth to more modern ones - are not available in the market or even in the libraries of religious congregations and dioceses in West Africa. They are mostly found in the archives of the congregations in Europe. Our research was done in three archives of the two major congregations that initiated the evangelization of West Africa, namely, the Spiritan General Archives in Chevilly-Larue, France, the Spiritan Archives in Ireland, and the General Archives of the Society of African Missions (SMA), Rome.

Moreover, it is instructive to discover how the work done by these missionaries prepared the Vatican II Council. After Vatican II, foreign missionaries were largely replaced by the indigenous clergy they had formed. In Nigeria, the expulsion, in 1971, of foreign missionaries among whom were a majority of Spiritans and Holy Rosary Sisters at the end of the Biafra-Nigeria war marked the end the nineteenth to twentieth-century missionary adventure in Nigeria. It would be interesting also to know how the work the early missionaries initiated was prolonged and even perfected by the indigenous clergy, diocesans and religious.

Beyond the Tabula Rasa Theory

For reasons connected with the struggle for emancipation from colonialism, historians invented the *tabula rasa* theory which has it that Western missionaries destroyed indigenous culture. Intellectual honesty requires that the errors and cultural biases of the early missionaries be recognized and critiqued. Nevertheless, some affirmations based on the positions of missionaries as regards some cultural practices, like African traditional religion, polygamy, title taking, etc., give the impression that those missionaries did not make any positive contribution to the development of indigenous culture.4

An open and comprehensive retrieval of the legacy of the early missionaries is a *conditio sine qua non* for the renewal of missionary fervor in the present generation of missionaries.5 The exercise will be more fruitful if instead of analyzing missionary theories, we ask ourselves the question: What exactly did the missionaries do?6 From this perspective, we can take a different look at the contribution of Spiritan missionaries to the development of cultures in West Africa as prelude to the work of inculturation.
Inculturation

We have to avoid anachronism here. The word “inculturation” dates to 1962 when a French Jesuit, Fr. Jean Masson, asked for “un catholicisme inculture” (an inculturated Catholicism). However, it took almost fifteen years for the word “inculturation” to be used in its present theological sense. It was officially used at the thirty-second Congregation of the Society of Jesus in 1975, and later by the general of the Jesuits, Fr. Pedro Arrupe, during his Introduction at the Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops in Rome, *Evangelization in the Modern World*, 1974:

Inculturation is the incarnation of the Christian life and message in a given cultural milieu such that the Christian message is not only expressed through the elements of the culture in question (which would be a superficial adaptation) but also that the experience becomes a principle of inspiration and at the same time a unifying norm that transforms and recreates this culture and consequently becomes the origin of a new creation.

The term entered the *magisterium* of the church when Pope John Paul II referred explicitly to it in his *Address to Members of the Pontifical Biblical Commission* on 26 April, 1979. He used it to express an element of the mystery of incarnation. He argued that one of the consequences of the incarnation - the fact that “God always communicated his marvels using the language and experience of men” - is that cultures have great value. Since cultures already contain the germ of the divine logos, “…. the proclamation of the Church is not afraid of using contemporary cultural expressions: thus they are called, so to speak, through a certain analogy with the humanity of Christ, to participate in the dignity of the divine Word itself.” In *Catechesi tradendae*, John Paul II took up the question again and argued that like evangelization in general,

Catechesis … is called to bring the power of the Gospel into the very heart of culture and cultures. For this purpose, catechesis will seek to know these cultures and their essential components; it will learn their most significant expressions; it will respect their particular values and riches. In this manner it will be able to offer these cultures the knowledge of the hidden mystery and help them to bring forth from their own living tradition original expressions of Christian life, celebration and thought. 
Since then, inculturation became the term used in theological reflection to designate the confrontation between the gospel and cultures, faith and cultures, Christianity and cultures in such a way that permits the insertion of the Gospel in the cultural values of different peoples. Saying that the early Spiritan missionaries did the work of inculturation would be an anachronism. However, it is possible to demonstrate - and that is the goal of this research - that the work done by Spiritan missionaries before Vatican II prepared the evangelization approach that is known today as inculturation.

2. Development of Languages and Translation of Church Documents

Origins of Catholic Missionary Adventure in West Africa

The spread of the Gospel in Africa took place in different phases. The first centuries of Christianity saw the evangelization of Egypt and North Africa. The second phase, involving the parts of the continent south of the Sahara, took place in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The third phase was the missionary enterprise that started in nineteenth-century.

One had to wait for the late eighteenth-century for the first missionaries to arrive West Africa. The City of St. Louis, Senegal, was founded in 1638, and in 1763, a century after, it was erected as Apostolic Prefecture. The first Spiritans arrived St. Louis in 1779. In 1787, freed slaves from USA were settled in Freetown, capital of future Sierra Leone, which became a British Colony in 1808. The majority of the slaves were of Igbo origin. Converted to Christianity they, in 1857, called on the Church Missionary Society (CMS) to come to the assistance of their brothers and sisters in Nigeria. In 1816, other migrants from USA arrived in Liberia. Thanks to the insistence of Pope Gregory XVI Propaganda Fide asked Bishop Baron from Philadelphia to initiate a mission in Liberia. On 28th September 1842 he was appointed Vicar Apostolic of the Two Guineas, an area covering 7408 km, from Senegal to Gabon, Congo and Angola.

The first Missionaries of the Society of the Holy Heart of Mary, founded in France in 1842 by Fr. Francis Mary Paul Libermann, arrived Liberia in September 1843. In 1848, this Congregation merged with the Congregation of the Holy Spirit, founded in Paris, France in 1703 by Fr. Claude Francis Poullart des Places. On 20 June 1848, Fr. Bessieux,
C.S.Sp. was appointed Apostolic Vicar of the Two Guineas.

In 1872, an Alsatian Spiritan, Fr. Joseph Lutz, C.S.Sp. was sent to Freetown, Sierra Leone. Appointed later as Apostolic Prefect of the Lower Niger, he arrived Onitsha on 5 December 1885 in the company of Fr. John Horné, C.S.Sp. and Brothers John Gotto Jacob, C.S.Sp. and Hermas Hück, C.S.Sp. The growth of the mission in Igbo land surprised the missionaries themselves. They benefited from the hospitality of local chiefs, especially Chief Ogbonnaya Onyekomelu, Idigo 1 of Aguleri. The superior General of the Holy Ghost Fathers, Fr. Emonet asked Rome to erect the Prefecture of the Lower Niger. This was done in 1888 and entrusted to Fr. Lutz. He was followed by a certain number of Spiritans who distinguished themselves in different ways: Fr. Albert Bubendorf, Fr. Jean Cadio, Fr. François Xavier Lichtenberger, Fr. Aimé Ganot, Fr. Charles Vogler, Fr. Joseph Reling (1896-1898), Fr. Pawlas (1898-1900). Fr. Alexandre Lejeune who arrived from Lambaréné, Gabon, succeeded Lutz as Prefect of the Lower Niger. In 1902, Fr. Joseph Shanahan, Irish, who spoke French, because he did his formation in France, arrived to help Lejeune. He was later appointed Apostolic Vicar of the Lower Niger in 1920. Others include, Fr. Joseph Treich (1909), Fr. Charles Heerey, founder of the Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary Mother of Christ and later Archbishop of Onitsha (1950), and Fr. Joseph B Whelan, later Vicar Apostolic of Owerri (1948) and first Bishop of Owerri (1950) etc. After the Biafra-Nigeria War, Bishop Whelan was arrested together with many of his priests, thrown into jail for ten days, fined and expelled from Nigeria in 1970.

Spiritan mission in Ghana was established in 1971 by some of the missionaries expelled from Nigeria after the civil war.

Translating the Message

Nigeria

*Language and Culture.* Documents in the three archives mentioned above show that the early missionaries contributed to the development of languages in Nigeria. They believed that nothing would be achieved unless the missionaries spoke to the people in their local languages. The first missionaries to produce documents for the study of the Igbo language were the Protestants, missionaries of the Church Missionary Society (CMS). Joseph Friedrich Schön
(CMS), an eminent philologist, was the first to publish the *Vocabulary of Igbo Language* in 1843. This was revised by Samuel Ajayi Crowther’s *Vocabulary of Igbo Language* in 1882 (London). It was followed by *Grammaire élementaire* by J. O. C Taylor in 1892. This helped Taylor to publish the Igbo translations of the Gospels of Mathew (1860) and Mark and Luke (1864).

The Spiritans participated actively in the development of the Igbo language. A French Spiritan, Fr. Aimé Ganot, who arrived in Nigeria after the departure of Fr. Lutz learnt Igbo language, especially the Onitsha dialect. With the help of another French missionary, Fr. Charles Vogler, he published *Grammaire Ibo* in 1899. Ganot acknowledged that he benefited from the notes of his confreres, Frs. Lutz, Lécuyer, and P. Pawlas who was the Apostolic Prefect of the Lower Niger. He distinguished the different Igbo dialects according to different Zones. For example, he was able to note the similarities in the Igbo dialects spoken in Aguleri, Nsugbe, Umuleri, Nteje, Ugwuele, Nando, Ibaku, Anam, Nri, Awka and Igbariam. Later, Ganot published an *English-Ibo-French Dictionary* on 4 March 1904. It comprises of 306 pages and 17,000 entries. This was before the publication of *L’Essai de dictionnaire français-ibo ou français-ika* (1907) by Fr. Carlo Zappa, S.M.A. and T. J. Dennis’ *Dictionary of Ibo Language* (1923).

Fr. Alexander Lejeune, C.S.Sp. also encouraged the study of Igbo Language and worked for its expansion with the help of his team, especially, the Chief of Onitsha, John Okolo, who was baptized Catholic.

The work done by the missionaries served as basis for the development of Igbo grammar and literature. They set the pace for the prodigious works done by Frederick C. Ogbalu and Emmanuel Nwanolue Emenanjo etc. Ogbalu later created the Society for Promoting Igbo Language and Culture (1950), which handled the question of the standardization of the Igbo language. This brought about the establishment of the Department of Igbo Language and Culture at Alvan Ikoku College of Education, Owerri (1974). A Department of Igbo Language and Culture was started in 1978, with the opening of Anambra State College of Education, Awka, with Ogbalu as Head of Department, and in September the same year another Department of Igbo Language was established at Federal Advanced Teachers College, Okene, Kwara State. The contribution of Spiritans to the development of languages in other parts of Nigeria...
is limited since they arrived later in those areas. The SMA missionaries made more impact in the Yoruba speaking areas.

**Bible, Catechisms and Liturgy.** In 1901, Fr. Ganot with the help of a man he called Sami, Chief of Onitsha, produced the first catechism, *Katekism Ibo*, which is an exact translation of the Catechism of Cambrai, that was in use in the Dioceses of France. It has 36 pages and contains three sections. Section 1 presents morning and evening prayers. Section 2 has 2 litanies and the Rosary, and section 3 has the catechism in questions and answers. It concludes with the commandments of God and the church. At the end, there is a song “Agamedjefu I.”

In 1903 a second catechism titled *Katekism n’okwukwe nzuko Katolik n’asusu igbo* (Catechism of Catholic Faith in Igbo Language) was printed in Strasbourg, France. In the introduction, it is explained that the Catechism was put together by Fr. Charles Vogler with the substantial help of Fr. Lejeune and indigenous catechists: Ephrem, Agha, Samuel Epundu, and Jacob Tshukwumaka. It contains three preliminary pages on Igbo language pronunciation. Later the *Katekism nke mbu nkuzi ndi Katolik* put together by Fr. Zappa SMA before his death in 1917 was published in 1928.

The Igbo Catechism was later simplified and improved by the Irish missionaries with a significant contribution from Bishop Joseph B. Whelan. This gave rise to *Catechism Nke Mbu, 1951* (Holy Ghost Fathers, Owerri) and *Catechism Nke Abo*.


Mention has to be made also of a publication in the Efik language, though with an English title *Catechism of the Catholic Religion*, by another French Spiritan, Fr. Louis Lena C.S.Sp. (M. C. Calabar 1908, reedited two times; M. C. Anwa 1909, M. C. Calabar, 1915). Fr. Lena was in-charge of the station called Old Calabar, which was renamed Calabar in 1904. He was instrumental to the development
of schools in Calabar. Unfortunately, he left Nigeria abruptly in June 1914 because of his election as member of the Congregation’s general council.

Fr. Paul Biechy, C.S.Sp., published the *Catechism of the Catholic Religion*, Anwa, St. Peter Claver, 1929. He worked with a network of 122 catechists. He was called back to France to be the novice master in Chevilly-Larue, and later Vicar Apostolic of Brazzaville, Congo in 1936. Fr. Joseph Krafft, C.S.Sp., also French, who was known for the development of schools in Calabar, published a hymn book in Efik, *Nwed Ikwọ*, M. C. Anwa, 1921.

The Spiritan Archives in Chevilly-Larue, Paris, also documented the *Tiv-English Children’s Bible History*, produced by Fr. Herbert Maher, C.S.Sp., Makurdi, 1961. He hailed from Great Britain and came to Nigeria in December 1944 after few years of mission in Angola. He was in charge of a station in Gboko with over 2,300 Catholics and Catechumens.

**Senegal**

*Language and Culture.* From 1873, French Spiritans began to produce documents in local languages, especially Wolof and Serer. In the Spiritan Archives in Chevilly-Larue, Paris, there are more than 500 documents in different vernacular languages. These include dictionaries, grammar books, collections of folk-tales, proverbs, and books on plants, Bibles, Catechisms, and hymn books. Spiritans learnt the languages of Serer and Wolof and the people’s customs, by being in contact with the people. Two of them, Frs. Crétois et Berthault were officially decorated by former President Leopold Sedar Senghor.

The Senegal Mission also covered Guinea-Conakry and Guinea Bissau. In his recent book, *God or Nothing*, Cardinal Robert Sarah renders a vibrant homage to Spiritan missionaries who evangelized his people and trained him. He noted that the Spiritans taught him catechism in his own language as well as in French.

Fr. Ezanno, C.S.Sp., *Quelques proverbes sérère recueillis à Fadiouth*, Anthropos, 1953. These studies served as basis for further studies on the vernacular languages like that of Gabriel Manassy and Serge Sauvageot, *Études de phonétique et de grammaire descriptive*, University of Dakar, 1963. A Belgian Botanist continues till date the monumental work of Fr. Berthault.


Catechisms abound: *Katisism Fana (Sénégambi & Senegal)*, Ngasobil, 1886; *Katesism nà dat kërtèn Katolik*, Mission catholique, Dakar, 1913; *Kao kin a hèlna and ndah té vâg o fadik na ardyana* (Les verities nécessaires, Mgr. LE ROY) translated by Fr. Ezanno, Fadiouth, 1922; *Katésis mbat Akatin nà dat kërtèn katolik*, Mission de Fadiouth, St. Peter Claver, Rome, 1927; *Katésis. Akatin nà dat kertèn katolik* (with illustrations by R. Rigot), St. Peter Claver, Rome, for Dakar diocese, 1956, etc.


**Ghana**

The Holy Ghost Fathers, who had to leave Nigeria on account of the Biafra War, arrived in Kumasi on 30 October 1971. Hence their contributions to the mission in Ghana cannot be taken care of in this discussion of the Spiritan legacy before Vatican II. The major works available within the period we have chosen were done by the Society of African Missions (SMA).

**Sierra Leone**

Though Spiritans arrived Sierra Leone in 1864, the mission there grew very slowly with many difficulties. Many
died because of sickness and difficult climate. Nevertheless, the major contribution of Spiritan missionaries in Sierra Leone was in the field of education. At the independence from Britain in 1961, the Spiritans, Sisters of St. Joseph de Cluny and Holy Rosary Sisters headed about 300 schools.


3. Spiritans as Precursors of Inculturation

What are the theological implications of these works done by the early missionaries? The translation of the Bible, catechisms, and hymns in vernacular languages marked the beginning of the process of inculturation. Though mostly done in view of the work of evangelization, they turned out as beneficial for the development of the cultural identity and heritage of the peoples.

Openness to Cultures and Peoples: Libermann’s Instructions

The Spiritan approach to local cultures and traditions was influenced by radical and innovative openness to cultures and peoples by their second founder, Francis Libermann. In 1844, Liberman submitted to Propaganda Fide, a document he called “Plan for the Salvation of the Peoples of the African Coast.” At the heart of the plan is the idea of the formation of indigenous clergy and catechists in view of the independence of the local churches, to whom the missionaries can entrust the work of evangelization, the development of schools, social works, and a positive attitude towards peoples and cultures. The ideas he advanced influenced Pope Gregory XVI’s Encyclical Neminem profecto published on 23 November 1845. The Encyclical was edited by Bishop Luquet, a close friend of Libermann who belonged to the Foreign Missions of Paris. He was appointed to India in 1842 and took part in the synod of Pondicherry in 1844. He was later chosen by Propaganda Fide to be the principal editor of Neminem profecto. After this publication, Libermann followed up with a “Memorandum On the Black Missions in General and that of Guinea in Particular,” 1846. “If missionary activity is to lead to the implantation of the Church in a new region as a self-sustaining Christian community, it will have to be rooted in the mentality,
customs and culture of the people and not in the civilization proper to the missionary’s home country.”

So, in 1847 Libermann sent a detailed letter to the Spiritan community of Dakar, warning against listening to colonial masters who were prejudiced about the Africans. Rather, they must listen to the people and strip themselves of Europe in the light of the kenosis of Jesus Christ.

Do not judge by first impressions or by what you are used to in Europe. Forget about Europe, its ways of thinking, its customs, its conventions. Make yourselves Negroes with Negroes and you will learn how to judge them as they should be judged. Make yourselves Negroes with Negroes so as to form them into what they can be, not along European lines, but according to their own way of being. Relate to them as if you were their servants and they were your masters, adapting yourselves to their style of doing things.

The expression “make yourselves Negroes with Negroes” may shock many people who discover it for the first time. This led to a reinterpretation of the text to read “make yourselves Blacks with Blacks.” However, if one wants to respect the text, one has to leave it as it is. Libermann knew that the word Negro was pejorative. He used it in this text as a provocation in the context of the nineteenth-century, when people were reduced to inhumanity because of their color and race. He also knew the word “Black,” which he always used positively. He called his Congregation “L’oeuvre des Noirs,” “The Work of the Blacks.” When he used the expression “Negro,” he meant Black slaves subjected to inhuman treatments in the colonies and in Africa at that period. This translated the Pauline use of the word “doulos,” in Phil 2:6–1. This brings out the depth of Libermann’s reflection. Making oneself Negro with Negroes means making oneself slave with slaves. The movement becomes even more radical when in the light of Paul, Libermann said: “be to them as servants to their masters,” that is, the missionaries should make themselves servants of the slaves or even slaves of slaves.

It would be an exaggeration to claim that all Spiritan missionaries who worked in West Africa adopted this mystique attitude. One cannot deny the fact that some of the missionaries were disrespectful to the peoples and their cultures. Some found it difficult to strip themselves
of Europe and the colonial mentality of their epoch. Some others, due to circumstances beyond their control could not immerse themselves in the local culture.

Bishop Joseph Shanahan of Southern Nigeria would complain that his Irish confreres were very poor in learning the Igbo language. This is probably because they were involved in schools and lost contact with the local people. Moreover, there was strong pressure from the colonial administration to reinforce the learning of English language in schools. Some historians believe that the increase in the number of people who spoke English reduced the gap between the missionaries and the people, hence the missionary no longer felt the pressure to learn Igbo. Missionary annals and bulletins of the epoch documented the explosion of interest in the English language among the Igbo. This was certainly exploited by the Irish missionaries. A Spiritan Nigerian theologian and historian, Charles Ebelebe noted that,

The Irish Spiritans discovered quickly the Igbo love for novelty and the mystique of the English language for the Igbo (…) It is because they discovered this Igbo attraction for English that the Irish Spiritans emphasized its teaching and learning in their schools to the almost total neglect of the Igbo. This was an important selling point of their schools in contrast to the Church Missionary Society who used Igbo as a medium of instruction in their schools.

He also noted that “…English language played a significant role in giving the Catholic Church the upper hand against the Church Missionary Society in their missionary rivalry in Igboland.”

Throughout the history of the Spiritans, there have been several members of the Congregation who have gone to extraordinary lengths to learn and write in the language of the people to whom they were sent as missionaries. It is not uncommon for Spiritans to know/speak three or more languages. Language, of course, is an essential bridge to get to know those among whom Spiritans live and work. Suffice it to name for example Blessed Fr. Jacques Dérisé Laval (1803-1964), one of the early companions of Fr. Libermann. He is known today as the “Apostle of Mauritius.” He learned Creole upon arrival on the island and wrote a Catholic catechism in Creole to help instructed natives and freed slaves in the faith.
Fr. Peter Maillard arrived in 1735 to work among the Micmac tribe in eastern Canada. He mastered their language and “created a hieroglyphic alphabet, a grammar and a dictionary, in addition to a book of prayers, hymns and sermons ... Copies of his manuscripts containing prayers, hymns and sermons were placed in the hands of every chieftain. In the absence of a priest, the chief was to hold Sunday services as described in the book, and to use its formulas for baptisms, marriages, and funerals.”32

Fr. Vince Stegman of the American Province spent thirty years in mission in Ethiopia, working among the Borana people. He has been instrumental in developing compilations of the Borana language and providing commentaries on the meanings of Borana words and phrases. The Dutch Spiritan, Fr. Ton Leus, produced a Borana Dictionary in 2006. Fr. Ralph Poirer was among the first Spiritan missionaries to the Maasai tribe in Tanzania. He learned the language of the Maasai, produced a dictionary of the language, and even developed pictographs which could explain connections between Maasai culture and Gospel stories.

The Impact of Translation on Cultural Identity and Heritage

The first striking impact of the translations done by the missionaries is the collection of linguistic and ethnographic data, words, rituals, ceremonies, practices, names of animals, plants, etc., and the fixing of the vernacular languages. The historian, Lamin Sanneh, notes that

The meticulous and painstaking business of learning African languages, of producing very careful scientific linguistic materials as an aid to translation, including the creation of alphabets - all this constituted landmarks that belonged with the native patrimony. They redefined Africa’s material and intellectual values by placing them solidly within the general language of human consciousness, and it is a matter of incalculable significance that on the historic front line of cross-cultural encounter, Europeans should meet Africans not just as vanquished populations but as inalienable possessors of their own languages.33

Second, the translation of the gospel message into vernacular languages transformed the encounter between Christianity and the African cultures. This work stimulated Africans who saw Christianity as a canal for their
emancipation. First, it gave them a stronger self-awareness as part of a larger world. For example, they were able to develop concepts to think about God in dialogue with other concepts of God in the Western culture. Second, as Sanneh observed, “the Christian Scriptures, cast as a vernacular oracle, gave the native idiom and the aspirations it enshrined a historic cause, allowing Africans to fashion fresh terms for their own advancement and possibility…”

African Inculturation Theology

Theological Speculation. The movement initiated by Spiritan missionaries was also a determining factor for the development of African theology of inculturation. The first official attempt at an African theology was made by young priests from Africa and Haiti. They included the Cameroonian Jesuit, Meinrad Hebga, Vincent Mulago (Zaire), Robert Sastre (Benin), Gerard Bissainthe, C.S.Sp., (Haiti). They published a book, Des prêtres noirs s’interrogent, in 1956 in which they asked Christianity to adopt Négritude, black cultures and values. The group, led by Gerard Bissainthe, used the Spiritan Seminary Chevilly-Larue as meeting point. This was a boiling laboratory of theological thought under the influence of stories brought home by Spiritan missionaries working in Africa. They benefited from the editorial support and mentorship of a great man, the Senegalese Alioune Diop who led the Society of African Culture in Paris.

The movement initiated by this group would be a stimulus for the openness of the Second Vatican Council to different cultures. The same group formed the team that wrote Personalité africaine et Catholicisme (African Personality and Catholicism), a handbook Alioune Diop gave to African bishops present at the Vatican Council II. Tharcisse Tschibangu, Bishop emeritus of Mbujumayi, DRC, who was an expert at the Vatican II Council, testified that the lobby propelled and orchestrated by this group influenced the redaction of AG, 22 that foresaw that “from the customs and traditions of their people, from their wisdom and their learning, from their arts and sciences, these [young] Churches borrow all those things which can contribute to the glory of their Creator, the revelation of their Savior’s grace, or the proper arrangement of Christian life” (AG, 22). The Council also called for the emergence of theological speculation “in each major socio-cultural area.” Such theology will be rooted in the cultures of the people
as well as the universal Christian tradition in such a way that “a fresh scrutiny will be brought to bear on the deeds and words which God has made known, which have been consigned to sacred Scripture and which have been unfolded by the Church Fathers and by the teaching authority of the Church” (ibid.). African theologians later took the Council seriously and developed proposals in different disciplines of theology, which led to the dynamism of the Church in Africa today.

**Celebration of the Christian Faith.** Long before Vatican II officially authorized the integration of cultures, customs, and traditions in theological reflection (*AG*, 22), the use of vernacular languages in liturgy (*SC*, 36.3; 63a; 100) and the “adaptation of the Liturgy to the culture and traditions of peoples” (*SC*, 37–40), Spiritan missionaries took bold steps in the integration of the different languages of their peoples in the celebration of the mystery of faith.

The risks taken by the missionaries influenced several reforms done by the church. After 1900, the number of Latin hymns increased due to Pope Pius X’s *Motu Proprio, Tra le sollecitudini*, *On Sacred Music*, 22 November 1903. The Pope associated the universality of music with Gregorian Chant. However, Pope Pius XII’s Encyclical, *Musicae sacrae disciplina* (Dec. 1955, no. 70), happy with the work done by missionaries, encouraged them to promote religious songs among the people in such a way that they can “sing in a language and in melodies familiar to them.”

We have seen the enormous work done in the translation of songs into vernacular and the production of hymn books. As Jann Pasler, rightly stated, “This laid the foundation for the collection, transcription, and systematic use of not only indigenous texts applied to European religious hymns, but also indigenous-inspired music in the African missions. This meant experimenting with various ways local airs could be used to inspire religious sentiment, collaborating with indigenous composers, and creating new *recueils de cantiques.*”

Spiritan missionaries in the Lower Niger were so much involved in evangelization through songs. The people admired how the missionaries were able to use their local languages to transcribe songs. “What was crucial to capturing their interest was giving the prayers in the language of the country, singing the chants that they knew and understood.” With this, people came to church in large
numbers.

It is true that the missionaries sang what they knew, hence the songs were mostly of French or English origin, but that the chants were translated in local languages shows the effort made in translating the Christian message.

**Conclusion**

We have argued in this reflection that through the painstaking work of structuring vernacular languages and translation of church documents, Spiritan missionaries not only contributed to the development of the cultural identity and heritage of the peoples they encountered in West Africa, but also inaugurated what is today called *African inculturation theology*.

We have also demonstrated that the ground-breaking work of those missionaries influenced magisterial decisions of the church, especially Vatican II Council’s openness to the cultures, traditions and vernacular languages of different peoples.

This does not mean that the early Spiritans who evangelized West Africa were perfect. Intellectual honesty requires that their limitations also be noted and critiqued. Nevertheless, a closer examination of what the early missionaries really did puts a serious question mark on the *tabula rasa* theory, which bluntly declares that the missionaries destroyed African cultures and traditions.

No society prepares the future through the transmission of the failures of its ancestors. People from one generation to the other transmit the legends or what is noble in the memory of their ancestors. This helps young people aim at excellence. The failures of the past are however not denied, but wisdom demands that our predecessors be excused their limitations, because, as the Igbo proverb would have it, “the hand does not throw as far as the eye sees.”

When we retrieve our heritage positively, we are able to face the present challenges of mission. How seriously do the local churches take the development of indigenous languages? What efforts are made to pursue and deepen the inculturation of the Gospel and Christian worship in their different contexts, through the translation of the Bible, development of contextualized catechisms and publication of lectionaries and missals suitable for the liturgy? What is the connection between present day religiosity and the task of
inculturation, which aims at the incarnation of the Gospel message in a particular context, such that it can give life to a new creation? These are tasks for contemporary scholars of African inculturation theology.

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Abbreviations
AG Vatican II, Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church, Ad gentes.
SC Vatican II, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, Sacrosanctum concilium.

References

*Spiritan Anthology*, edited by Christian de Mare, with the collaboration of Joseph D’Ambrosio and Vincent O’Toole. Enugu, SNAAP Press, 2011


**Endnotes**


3I am very grateful to Fr. Roger Tabard, Spiritan general archivist, Paris, Fr. Brian O’Toole, Spiritan archivist, Ireland, and Fr. Trichet, SMA archivist, Rome for their collaboration and support.


5This is already the case in some known works, Nwosu, *The Catholic Church in Onitsha*; idem, *The Laity and the Growth of Catholic Church in Nigeria*.

6Some original works in this sense include: Forristal, *The Second Burial of Bishop Shanahan*; Ezeh, *Archbishop Charles Heerey*. 
9John Paul II, *Catechesi tradendae*, n° 53.
10See John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa*, n° 30-34.
17Koren, *Spiritans Nigeria Memorial*, 47.
18Ibid., 67.
19Ibid., 52.
202015.
21Ibid., 20, 37.
27ND IX, 330. *Spiritans Anthology*, 287 wrongly translated « Be African with the Africans. »
31Ibid.
33Sanneh, *Encountering the West*, 87.
34Ibid.
37Ibid., 1290.