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Interview: Up River in French Guiana

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Up River in French Guiana

Edward Okorie, CSSp has returned to French Guiana after a two-year sabbatical in Toronto

How did you come to be a missionary in French Guiana?

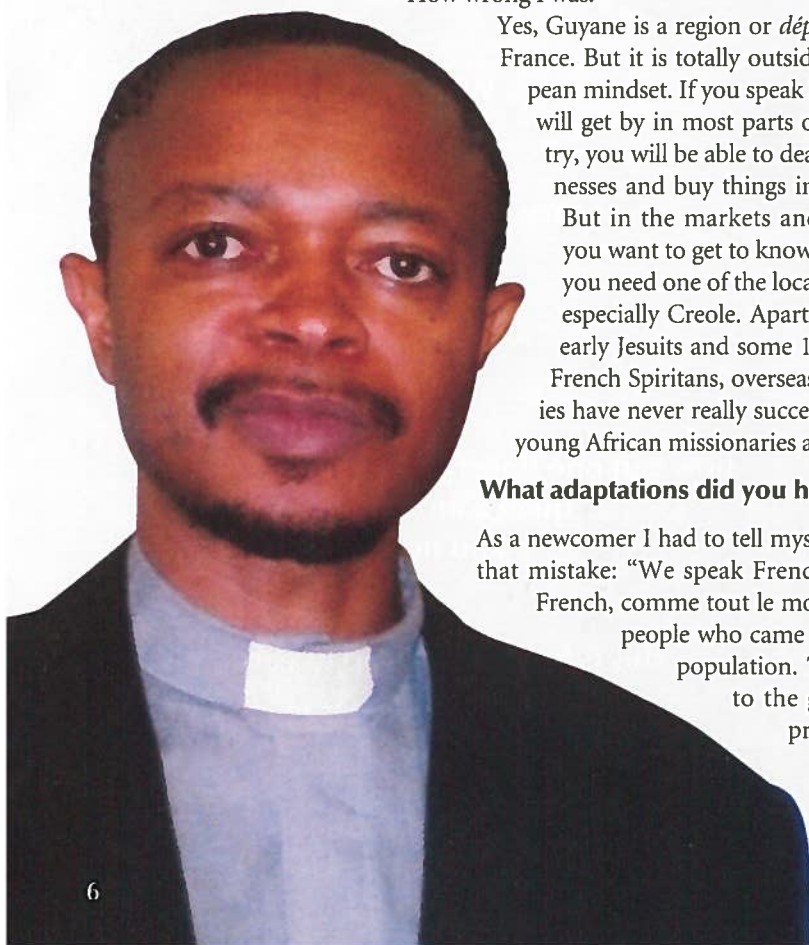
I studied theology in France and learned to speak French, so when the first Nigerian Spiritans were being sent as missionaries to South America I found myself posted to the only French-speaking country on that continent. In France they talked about Guyane as another region of France, which just happened to be 8000kms away. So I thought of going on mission as somewhat similar to going from Paris to Bordeaux.

How wrong I was.

Yes, Guyane is a region or *département* of France. But it is totally outside the European mindset. If you speak French, you will get by in most parts of the country, you will be able to deal with businesses and buy things in the stores. But in the markets and villages if you want to get to know the people, you need one of the local languages, especially Creole. Apart from a few early Jesuits and some 18th century French Spiritans, overseas missionaries have never really succeeded in mastering these languages. Today, however, a number of the young African missionaries are doing their best to become more fluent in them.

What adaptations did you have to make in your early years there?

As a newcomer I had to tell myself that this was not France overseas. The French Spiritans had made that mistake: "We speak French and anyone who wants to speak with us should learn to speak French, *comme tout le monde*, like everybody." They stayed in their houses and welcomed the people who came to them. They saw their ministry as directed to the French-speaking population. They became chaplains to the staff at the big prisons or ministered to the government functionaries. They presumed that they were going primarily to people of French origin. They were surprised when the Nigerian Spiritans arrived and started visiting the people in their own homes and villages. "Why are you going to those people?" was a common question. There are accounts of earlier Spiritans



accompanying explorers into the interior of the country and baptizing people. But their permanent residence was in the main centres of French language and culture. They seldom ventured up river.

Describe some of your journeys up the Maroni River.

Because we knew that a large proportion of the population lived up river, the Nigerian Spiritans set out to survey this area and report on what was needed. Over the years we developed in Apatou something resembling a contemporary parish — an “out-post” from which to travel up and down the river establishing other communities. In the interior of French Guiana travel is always by river. In the beginning we had to rely on the services of local boatmen. Only gradually did we learn to paddle our own pirogues.

I remember one particular Easter in Apatou. A young boatman was to take us from the Easter Vigil ceremony in one village to another village for Easter Sunday Mass. Both he and his family were active members of the local Christian community. Early Easter Sunday morning we came to his house at the appointed hour. We waited and waited and waited while he slept on and on and on. He had been at the Vigil ceremonies and had joined in the village celebrations that followed. On Easter morning there was no sign that he would either awake from his slumber or arise from his sleep. Maybe he had celebrated a bit too much. All around us in fact there was a calm silence as the whole village slept in.



Pirogues are used to travel on the Maroni River.

I remember saying to myself, “Easter Sunday morning and no one is awake. No, it’s not possible on a morning like this.” I was imagining the hustle and bustle, the laughter and noise, the streams of people going to Mass in Nigeria, the merry-making. Here everyone was asleep. “What’s going on? Why bother? No one’s interested. No one’s even awake. We’ve had our Easter Vigil, let’s go back to the house and celebrate a quiet Easter Sunday Mass.”

Eventually — it seemed like hours — our boatman rose up, we got to our village, prepared everything, assembled the people, and celebrated Easter with them. Nothing splendid, very ordinary in fact, but that’s

where they were that year and we joined them. It had its own joy, much less exuberant than we would have liked.

So the ability to “go with the flow” is important for a missionary?

Yes. What happens in a big way in other places may happen in a very low key up river. We have to walk at their pace and not immediately push them beyond where they are. We must live in their world and join them where they are. In the mission you slow down to be with people, you don’t walk too fast, too far ahead of them.

What would you consider to be three or four important approaches for a missionary?

You arrive, put down your luggage and your baggage — the theological theories you carry with you. You go out to meet the people where they are, you learn their language, you mix with them. They will teach you many things.

The word you are going to proclaim is already there waiting for you: the word of love, of sharing life together, the word of mutual respect. With their help and your respect for their way of doing things, you discover that word and continue to share it with them. You allow yourself to be adopted by them; you are born anew among them. You find the sacraments among them too — in a different format. As you celebrate the liturgy with them you shake off certain foreign rituals and language. You try to adapt to the local situation.



Indigenous American Indian children in French Guiana.

What attracts the people in French Guiana to Christianity?

Jesus, above all else. But that depends on how we present this man Jesus. Among them, the love that Jesus came to preach is already present.

They have a great sense of solidarity, of helping one another. They need each other as they go about everyday living. When there is no public transportation system you get a ride in whatever vehicle comes along. You ask if you can join whatever person or group is going your way.

As Spiritans we come and live together, share life and mix with them in humility, and at times in humiliation as we display our ignorance of their language or customs.

Sometimes I hear myself saying, "There's nothing really that they haven't got, nothing that we bring to them." Yes, we bring them church and that's important, but the essence, the essentials are already there. Take their funerals, for example. In our western world someone dies and is buried within four or five days and almost forgotten except by their immediate family or friends. Among them the whole village mourns. There is a series of ceremonies and the loosing of bonds — all the

things we rarely reach. For them resurrection means going to live with their ancestors. Even when a great person dies — the chief of a clan or a good-living local person — the people give them all they need to live in the land of the dead: clothes, tent, and utensils. Not all funerals of Christians are church funerals, only those for people who want to be buried in that way. They

You go out to meet the people, you learn their language, mix with them. They will teach you many things.

need a positive sign that the person died normally and was a good person. If not, they throw him or her into the forest without burial. The church never agrees with that. We also need to study the meaning of some of their funeral practices — the ritualistic dancing around the corpse, for instance: what does it really mean? We have put together a ritual that combines local and traditional church rites.

Do many of them become Catholic?

The church there is at least 300 years old, from about 100 years after Columbus came to that part of the world. So you find well-established parishes especially along the coast. In the interior you have a situation of first evangelization among people who have hardly heard the gospel.

We have inherited the problem of oversacramentalization — block administration of the sacraments with rigid rules. Polygamy is very prevalent among them in their matriarchal family setup. A woman seeks out a man whom she might marry. He then comes to live with her and her existing family. They may live together for a long time without any marriage ceremony that the church would recognize. In Suriname the Catholic missionaries have a more open attitude to this issue.

You are a Nigerian missionary. How does that strike you?

As Nigerian Spiritans we have discovered that we are missionaries who have to go outside our own country. When I was four or five I knew many priests who were my father's friends. I remember asking one of them, "What you have come to do in Nigeria, is it possible for me to do that too in some other places?" "Yes, sure you could do that," he replied. "Why not?" That was one of the roots of my vocation. Several Nigerian Spiritans would tell you the same story: "You have come to us. Is it possible for us to go to others? Can we join you?" The missionary venture is a two way one, but the pace at which Spiritans in Nigeria multiply and then go elsewhere is somewhat spectacular. It had to happen.

Are you looking forward to going back to French Guiana?

I have spent all my missionary life there. I'm glad they've called me to come back. I left part of my heart with those people who welcomed me so warmly. I needed a break from my role as leader of the Spiritan group there and I am deeply grateful to the Province of TransCanada for allowing me to spend my sabbatical leave among them. At Regis College I found myself in a theological laboratory where I came to know what is possible in the pews. In Guiana the bishop is planning a new missionary team for the river ministry. As part of that team I hope to put into practice some of what I have learned. ■

Spiritans in French Guiana

- 1775 First Spiritans arrive to work among the American Indian people and the African slaves.
- 1790s French Revolution's oath of submission divides Spiritan priests, some of whom were exiled
- 1807 Napoleon suppressed the Spiritans in France and overseas French territory
- 1817 Spiritans return to Guiana, reopen Indian missions and found new parishes
- 1851 First of Father Libermann's Spiritans arrive. They were accused of being too much in favour of the Blacks and too liberal in admitting them to the Eucharist and marriage. Their work took them to the Indian missions, the leprosaria, the centres for liberated slaves, and the gold miners.
- 1880s French government secularized schools. Spiritans opened parochial schools. Local governor expelled the Spiritans.
- 1925 Vatican names a Spiritan as Prefect of Guiana. On his arrival he found only five active priests and two Catholic schools. Formal separation of church and state in France prevented any more expulsions of Spiritans.
- 2006 Eighteen Spiritan priests who operate nine parishes in the populated coastal area as well as two mission stations in the interior of the country.