FRANCOPHONE CATHOLIC ACHIEVEMENTS IN IGBOLAND, 1883–1905

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I

When the leading European powers were scrambling for political dominion in Africa, the greatest rival of France was Britain. The French Catholics were working side by side with their government to ensure that they would triumph in Africa beyond the boundaries of the territories already annexed by their country. Thus, even when the British sovereignty claim on Nigeria was endorsed by Europe during the Berlin Conference of 1884-85, the French Catholics did not concede defeat. They still hoped that in Nigeria they could supplant their religious rivals: the British Church Missionary Society (CMS) and the other Protestant missionary groups. While they allowed the British to exercise political power there, they took immediate actions to curtail the spread and dominion of Protestantism in the country. Thus some of their missionaries stationed in the key French territories of Africa—Senegal, Dahomey, and Gabon—were urgently dispatched to Nigeria to compete with their Protestant counterparts and to establish Catholicism in the country.

Two different French Catholic missions operated in Nigeria between 1860s and 1900s. The first was the Society of the African Missions (Société des Missions Africaines or SMA), whose members worked mainly among the Yoruba people of western Nigeria and the Igbos of western Igboland. The second were the Holy Ghost Fathers (Pères du Saint Esprit), also called Spiritans, who ministered specifically to the Igbo people of southeastern Nigeria. The French Catholics, the SMA priests, and the Holy Ghost Fathers competed vehemently with the British Protestants, the CMS, for the conversion of African souls. Just as in the political sphere, the French and British governments competed ardently for annexation and colonization of African territories.

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In this paper I examine the origins, backgrounds, activities, and accomplishments of the early French-speaking missionaries who pioneered the spread of Catholic faith among the Igbo people of Nigeria between 1883 and 1905. Special emphasis is put on the reasons for the success of those French Catholic Fathers, considering that they worked under adverse political and religious conditions at the time when the British government had just annexed and colonized that part of Africa, and the British Protestants had started evangelizing there. The information contained in this article will be beneficial to scholars and intellectuals who are interested in the activities of the French Catholic missions that operated in Africa during the end of the nineteenth century and the turn of the twentieth century. Although both the SMA priests and Holy Ghost Fathers employed almost the same propaganda and strategies in competing with their Protestant counterparts, they had neither the same origins in Europe nor the same geographical areas of operation in Nigeria.

II

The Congregation of the Holy Ghost was founded in Paris in1703, during the feast of Pentecost. When its founder Claude-François Poullart des Places, a staunch Catholic and a lawyer by profession, felt a calling to train missionaries, he identified himself with the plight of a group of poor students who desired to be priests. With twelve of them he started up a Catholic religious society which later became formally known as "the Community of the Holy Spirit under the invocation of Mary conceived without sin." Poullart des Places taught the members of this community how to lead hard and austere life to be able to work as missionaries in distant countries. After the death of Poullart des Places in 1709 the Congregation continued to prosper and soon earned the recognition of the French government and the Papacy, as its members volunteered as chaplains in hospitals, schools, and prisons, and served as missionaries in the Far East, India, and North America. A few of the Holy Ghost missionaries moved to Africa, reaching Senegal in 1779.

Later the Congregation founded by Poullart des Places merged with the Society of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, another French Catholic society, then under the leadership of Fr. Francis Libermann, a Jewish convert. Libermann had founded the Society of the Immaculate Heart of Mary in 1841 with the help of two young Creole priests, Eugène-Nicolas Tisserant and Pierre-Louis-Frédéric Le Vavasseur, specifically for the purpose of emancipating and evangelizing black slaves and black race generally. He was later elected Superior of the society. Since his objective

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resembled that of Poullart des Places, he was requested by the Holy See to amalgamate his society with the Congregation of the Holy Ghost. This he did in 1848; and the united groups became known as Congregation of the Holy Ghost and of the Immaculate Heart of Mary. Their priests, the Spiritans, still called Holy Ghost Fathers, had Fr. Libermann as their first Superior General.

Libermann devoted all his energy and talents to the development of the African missions. He had already been involved in some missionary enterprises in Africa through the inspiration provided by an American Fr. Edward Barron, the first Catholic vicar apostolic of the Two Guineas. Libermann continued to be an admirer and a close associate of Barron, whom he readily helped to recruit French missionaries to sustain the African mission. After Barron withdrew from Africa and returned to America (where he died in 1853), Libermann became, until his own death in 1852, fully in charge of recruitment, training, and deployment of the Holy Ghost missionaries involved in the African mission. It was owing to his able leadership and exemplary life that the Congregation developed rapidly and experienced a tremendous success in Africa, particularly among the Igbo people of Nigeria.

When the French Government founded posts in Gabon in 1839/42 for the purpose of suppressing the slave trade, some French Catholic priests of the Congregation of the Holy Ghost Fathers were given the opportunity to extend their missionary activities to that part of Africa. A few of them first arrived in Gabon in 1844. Gabon became the headquarters of their huge Vicariate of Upper and Lower Guineas (Two Guineas), which comprised almost the whole of west Africa. Fr. Jean-René Bessieux, who was in Gabon between 1844 and 1876, became the second vicar apostolic of the Two Guineas in 1849.

On 23 July 1885 Fr. Joseph Lutz, who had served as a missionary in Sierra Leone for about eight years, was appointed Superior of Niger Mission and given the responsibility of extending Catholic influence from Gabon to the Igbo people in neighboring southeastern Nigeria (Ekechi 1971:73). In November 1885 Fr. Lutz led a team of French Holy Ghost Fathers from Gabon into the Igbo hinterland. His missionary team, consisting largely of priests who were trilingual in Latin, French and English, consisted of himself, Frs. Johann Nikolaus Horne and Aimé Ganot, Br. Hermas Huck, and John Jacob. They arrived for the first time at Onitsha on 5 December 1885. (Ekechi 1971:73) Located in the east bank of the river Niger, Onitsha eventually became the headquarters of the Holy Ghost Fathers in the eastern Igbo land and even in Nigeria as a whole.

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Having said this, let me briefly recount how the SMA, the other French missionary group, established itself in Western Nigeria, and how a few of its priests arrived and worked at Asaba in the western Igboland, just across the Niger from Onitsha. The Society of the African Missions was founded in Lyon in 1856. It happened that before the contingent of the French Holy Ghost Fathers left Gabon for Nigeria, the SMA missionaries, who arrived in West Africa in batches in 1858 and 1861, had established their headquarters in Dahomey, and from there they had already extended their influence to Nigeria where they were stationed in Lagos (1862) and in some other Yoruba cities. In 1883—two years before the Holy Ghost Fathers reached Onitsha, Lagos became the SMA Nigerian headquarters, the administrative center of the Vicariate Apostolic of the Bight of Benin, which stretched from the Dahomey-Nigeria frontier to the Niger.

Since the SMA area of operation extended up to the west bank of the river Niger, it included the territory of the Igbo people living in the west of the Niger, but it did not include the main Igbo-speaking territory located east of the river, which was designated to be under the jurisdiction of the Holy Ghost Fathers. As a result the SMA priests limited their evangelical activities to the areas dominated by the Yoruba-speaking people: Lagos Colony, Egbaland, Ijebu-Ode, Ibadan, Oyo and Oshogbo, etc. Some of them—Frs. Pierre Piolat (who died in 1886), Filippo Fiorentini, Doran, Jules-Ambroise Poirier, and Carlo Zappa—established a mission in Lokoja in 1884 as a springboard for reaching and evangelizing the Muslims of central and northern Nigeria. A small number of SMA priests, under the leadership of Fr. Zappa, moved to and worked in Asaba area in the Western Igboland.

III

Within the two decades of their settlement in Onitsha, the Holy Ghost Fathers had firmly planted Catholicism, not only in that city but also in many other Igbo cities, including Aguleri, Nsugbe, Umuleri, Nteeje, Nando, Igbakwu, Anam, Nri, Awka, and Igbariam. Fr Lutz became the first Prefect of the Apostolic Prefecture of Onitsha. He was succeeded by Fr. Joseph-Marie Reling, who was assisted by Fr. Jean-Joseph Bubendorf (1896-98); Fr. René Pawlas (1898-1900); Fr. Léon-Alexandre Lejeune, aided by Father Cronenberger (1900-1905); and Fr. Jospeh-Marie Shanahan, the first Irish French-speaking Catholic to become the Prefect and Bishop of Onitsha (1905-31).

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While the Holy Ghost Fathers were expanding and consolidating their influence in eastern Igboland, the SMA missionaries under the leadership of Fr. Zappa were doing the same thing in western Igboland. Formerly based at Lokoja, Fr. Zappa moved down to Asaba in 1894 after he was appointed the first Prefect Apostolic of the Upper Niger. He established four parishes with resident priests at Issele-Ukwu, Igbuzo, Ogwashi-Ukwu, and Onitsha Oloma. Although he was not enthusiastic about educating his African converts (Ayandele 287-88), he constantly encouraged his fellow French-speaking missionaries to learn the Igbo language so that they could preach to Africans in the language they would understand. It was for this very reason that he wrote an Igbo-French dictionary, *Dictionnaire ibo-français*, which he based on the Ika-Igbo dialect.

The first francophone missionaries to work among the Igbo people of Nigeria published three important reference books on Igbo language, namely: 1) an Igbo grammar (*Grammaire Ibo*) in 1899, an *English, Ibo and French Dictionary* in1904, and an Igbo-French Dictionary (*Dictionnaire ibo-français*) published 1907. The *Grammaire Ibo* was published by Fr. Aimé Ganot, a French national and one of the earliest members of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit and Immaculate Heart of Mary stationed at Onitsha. Ganot was not only a committed missionary, but also one of the best-trained linguists of his missionary team. In addition to being well versed in English, French, and Latin, Ganot was knowledgeable about philology, historical linguistics, comparative grammar, and phonetics. He was therefore well prepared before studying Igbo or writing an Igbo grammar.

Ganot wrote the grammar not as textbook for teaching Africans, but for teaching Igbo to future French missionaries. His stated main purpose was to enable French missionary beginners to avoid the painful experience of their predecessors who started to study the indigenous language with neither books nor teachers. According to him,

> the relief from this book will be very important because, with a few exceptions, the first years in Africa are by far the most important, from the point of view of the Apostolate. Does not one of these years in life duration at times worth as much as five, ten or even twenty years spent on European soil? It is therefore my wish that, before embarking on religious mission in a distant region, the missionary be given some ideas of the foreign language he might speak one day, and that he made as much rapid progress as possible in this very important study. (Ganot 1899: 2)

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Ganot confessed that his grammatical notions were a fruit of some long and laborious research. They never resulted from the work of any native Igbo-speaker for though indeed intelligent, the Black has never formulated the rules governing his language. He doesn't even know if those rules exist. A testimony to this fact is the most brilliant young pupil in our Onitsha Mission, who, when he heard for the first time about 'Ibo grammar', cried out with a mixture of curiosity and surprise: 'I never knew that one can also have an Ibo grammar!'

The *English, Igbo and French Dictionary* written by several Holy Ghost Fathers and published in 1904, was the first Igbo reference book of its kind ever published. Contrary to popular belief, the *English, Igbo and French Dictionary* was not written or published solely by Father Ganot. According to its title page, this trilingual dictionary was produced by "The Fathers of the Holy Ghost" of the "Roman Catholic Mission Onitsha, Southern-Nigeria." The *Dictionnaire ibo-français* (Igbo-French Dictionary) was written by Father Zappa of the SMA, in collaboration with an Igbo convert, Jacob Nwaokobia (Isichei 1973:149). Originally called *Essai de Dictionnaire Français-Ibo ou Français-Ika*, this dictionary was first published in 1904.

IV

Despite some errors and inaccuracies, both in their reports about the Igbo people and their analysis of the Igbo language, the French Catholic missionaries made some outstanding contributions to the development of the Igbo language, because they were the first to attempt to select a dialect for the standardization of Igbo, as well as the first to identify and mark the Igbo inherent tone, to write a comprehensive grammar of Igbo, to produce a manual for teaching Igbo as a foreign language, to design a comprehensive Igbo orthography, and to publish a trilingual dictionary involving the Igbo language.

With a very few exceptions, the choice of any "standard dialect" of a given language is made arbitrarily. For one accident of history or another, only one dialect of any given language sees itself chosen, privileged, and developed to the point that its features are designated as the standard which the speakers of the other dialects of that language must learn and use well in order to be regarded as the correct users of the language. Some well-known world languages had their standard dialects selected arbitrarily in that way. For example, the Standard British English is the dialect of the English spoken in southeast England, just as in France the Standard French is the dialect of French spoken in Paris and its surrounding areas.

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In Nigeria, the Oyo and Kano dialects are considered to be the standard dialects of Yoruba and Hausa. In case of Igbo the French Catholic Fathers were the first to select and promote the Onitsha dialect of the Igbo language as a basis for standardization of this language. After comparing more than twelve Igbo dialects they were familiar with, they decided to base their grammar and trilingual dictionary on the "dialect of Onitsha", which Ganot believed "would be called out one day to be the standard for all others." (Ganot 1899:6)

In his *Grammaire Ibo* Ganot adopted what he called the "method of analysis and decomposition." He began with the description of the sound system of Igbo, which makes his approach very modern. Indeed, Ganot was the first known European linguist to do a detailed scientific study of Igbo tones or Igbo sound system. His analysis and marking of Igbo tones are by far more scholarly, more accurate, and more detailed than those of his predecessors. Although he did not clearly represent in writing the non-Latin based Igbo vowel letters, he nevertheless was the first to assign tone marks or diacritics to each of the five universally recognized vowel letters (a, e, i, o, u), which are used in writing both English and French. In his section on Igbo phonetics he assigns, to each of the Igbo "a e i o u" vowels three distinctive tone marks, arguing that Igbo has three distinctive tones (or tonemes): high, low, and what he erroneously called "Igbo nasal tone." He showed that Igbo does not have French or English equivalents of a, e, i, o, u, but rather tonal variants of these vowels, which he represents with acute and grave accents (at high and low tone levels), plus a third tone which he shows with a dash (-) placed on the top of each vowel.

Ganot's *Grammaire Ibo* was the first comprehensive Igbo grammar ever written. Indeed, his ambition was no less than to produce the first completely descriptive grammar of the Igbo language. He stated in the preface of the book (Ganot 1899:1-2) that he continued his writing from where his French colleagues stopped, without owing anything to any German or English-speaking linguist who had studied Igbo before him:

> There exists already a little grammar of Ibo written by J.F. Schon; although that work was incomplete, it is worthwhile to mention that it was the first of its kind that has ever appeared. Nevertheless, having been written in English, that grammar was of no use to me personally, not only because it consists only of some general appreciations but also because I consider it to be some how hazardous. J.F. Schon's book therefore was not helpful to me; I did not have it in my hands when I started this present work. Rather I was guided by the studies of my Catholic colleagues: Rev. Fathers Lutz, Lecuyer, and especially Rev. Father Pawlas who is at present the Apostolic

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> Prefect of the Lower-Niger Missions. The part of Ibo grammar that remains unexplored has to do with the conjugation of verbs. I have tried to fill this gap by myself, based on the constant practice I have had on Ibo for nearly three years.

Since the aim of Ganot was to write a book that would benefit other French people who needed to learn Igbo, he designed his grammar book in such a way that it could serve as an instructional manual for teaching Igbo as a foreign language. The following are the techniques he adopted in order to achieve this goal:

1/ He started from the known to the unknown. For example, he adopted the terminology of French grammar and French parts of speech. This is certainly an "artificial approach," but it could be of help to French students of Igbo.

2/ Wherever necessary, he compared and contrasted what his readers knew already in French with the grammatical features that are typically Igbo or the similarities that exist in Igbo and French.

3/ As in French, he made very practical use of verb conjugation, at times assigning many characteristics of French verbs to Igbo verbs; which of course was not right, but not necessarily worse than not attempting to do so at all.

4/ He included sections for a "French-Igbo lexicon" and an "Igbo-French lexicon," which were the first of their kind (Ganot 1899:148-203)

5/ Finally, his grammar included a series of recapitulative exercises at the end of a number of its sections or chapters. (Ganot 1899:90-111, 141-47). These were mainly translation exercises in which readers (i.e., French students of Igbo) were required to translate sentences and texts from Igbo into French, and vice versa.

V

In their *Lumières sur l'Afrique* the Holy Ghost Fathers give a succinct description of the rigorous preparatory training they gave their prospective missionaries in Europe before sending them to Africa. These would-be missionaries were trained in their seven European seminaries: one called, "French Seminary," established in Rome under the directorship of the Vatican; three set up in Paris, Saint-Ilan close to Saint-Brieuc, and Alsace-Lorraine; and the remaining three, situated in the border villages of Neufgrange, Blotzheim, and Saverne. Catholic priests were the teachers in all those establishments, and their primary goal was to give their future

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missionaries an education that would facilitate their undertakings in foreign lands.

In addition to intellectual, moral, and religious instructions the seminarians received training in different types of professions and crafts that might be useful to them in their new environments in Africa. Many of them, especially the young Catholic Brothers, not only became missionaries, but also well-trained masons, carpenters, blacksmiths, electricians, gardeners, cooks, and mechanics. Physical education was equally important. Thus strolling, sports, and manual labor were among their regular activities because of the belief that robust health is indispensable to the success in a foreign mission. At the end of this rigorous premissionary education and training in France and Rome, the newly-minted Holy Ghost Fathers and Brothers were required to undergo a consecration send-off ceremony, during which they would make a vow of loyalty to their mission.

Most pioneers of the francophone missionaries in Igbo land were well-trained linguists, with a sound knowledge of contemporary linguistic theories, and a strong competence in French, English and Latin. That was not surprising at all. Since their foreign mission field was located in a British colony of west Africa, they needed to be proficient in English to be able to communicate with the British and their English-speaking Africans, and to be able to teach English in their mission schools. Moreover, they had to know Latin, traditionally used as a liturgical language. Their background in linguistics and comparative grammar facilitated their studying and learning of the native tongues of the regions they went out to evangelize.

Whereas there was usually rivalry between the French Catholics and British-led Protestants, there was mutual understanding and cooperation between the SMA and the Spiritans. Formerly based in Dahomey, the SMA later established their Nigerian headquarters at Lagos in 1883. The two French Catholic missions recognized and respected each other's areas of jurisdiction. They did not encroach on each other's territories, even while they were freely encroaching on territories belonging to the Protestants in Asaba, Onitsha, and elsewhere. Moreover, whereas the French SMA activities were targeted at the Yoruba people, as well as on the Igbo living in the west of the Niger, the evangelical work of the Holy Ghost Fathers was focused on the main Igbo-speaking territory located in east of the Niger. As a result there was never any conflict between the two Catholic groups.

Conversely, rivalry between the French Catholic groups and their Protestant missionary counterparts was always very energetic, and stimu-

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lated the French Catholics to use education as an instrument of evangelization. At the beginning of their ministries among the Igbos, the Holy Ghost Fathers and the SMA had completely different attitudes towards the education of the natives. Fueled by the religious rivalry existing between them and the Protestants in Onitsha area, the Holy Ghost Fathers never hesitated to use education as a central instrument of evangelization. The quality or sincerity of conversion was not their major concern. Provided they could supplant the Protestants, what mattered most to them was the the numbers of converts they amassed through building schools for the natives.

On the other hand, the SMA, under the prefecture of Carlo Zappa, was very skeptical about the role of schools in evangelism. Zappa believed "that the children who attended mission schools for material reasons were unlikely to become devout Christians" (Isichei 1973:155). Having discerned that most of his Igbo converts were more interested in pursuing education for reasons other than for developing themselves spiritually, he became vehemently opposed to building schools for them, arguing that "the true purpose of education, from Christian viewpoint, was to develop the moral and spiritual fibres of the converts" (Ayandele 1966:287-88). Nevertheless, because of their desire to match the Protestants, the SMA missionaries later showed more enthusiasm for the education of Igbo children.

Ekechi (1971:75) notes that free medical care was given to the natives as a means of converting them to Catholicism:

> The medical care which the Catholic missionaries gave was by no means entirely without ulterior motive. Pruned of its human trappings, the dispensing of medicines and gifts was conceived to influence the people to accept the Catholic religion; nor were medicines given to the sick without any obligation from the recipient. As a condition for treating the children, the missionaries demanded that they be baptized first. Such a condition was imposed, they explained, in order that the children did not die in sin. The fact is that these missionaries hoped that these children would eventually become converts to the Catholic religion! the Catholic missionaries fully recognized that the approach they had adopted was "a powerful means of evangelization."

Based on the practical training they received in Europe, the French missionaries started, as soon as they got settled in Africa, to encourage the natives to learn different types of trade and crafts, including tailoring, masonry, carpentry, shoemaking, sewing, and knitting. They also taught

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the Igbo people new ways of farming and gardening; and some they trained to be catechists and teachers. In so doing, they were guided by the suggestions of Libermann who recommended that missionaries give pedagogical instructions to those Negroes who are "capable of becoming teachers and catechists; and that training in agriculture, crafts and trades" be given to the rest (Koren 1958:174). The material help and training given the Igbo by the French Catholics made them feel that the French wanted only to promote their welfare. No surprise then that many of them became Catholics because of this reason, and not because they really believed in the Catholic doctrines.

The French Catholic priests also played the role of peacemakers and defended the cause of the oppressed natives. As a result they were often invited as arbitrators when dispute arose among the natives. Ekechi notes they subtly intervened in disputes between the natives and the Royal Niger Company, which was using force to suppress the Africans for revolting against the company's repressive economic and political policies (Ekechi 1971: 232-34). Such intervention yielded the desired result, for Fr. Bubendorf acknowledged that the local people appreciated it, and consequently were willing to provide lands for Catholic mission stations "as long as they were seen as not directly connected with the Royal Niger Company. For the CMS, on the other hand, which abjured any intervention and more or less relied on the Company instead of the local grants, the future was full of difficulties" (Ekechi 1971:234).

The French Catholic priests opened orphanages and refugee centers and offered all sorts of gifts to both the needy Protestants and pagans as a strategy for enticing them into joining the Catholic Church. They lured Protestant children to Catholic schools by offering food, clothes, and other things to them. Although this led to bitterness, and hostility and an outcry on the part of the the authorities of the British Church Missionary Society (Ekechi 1971:76), the French missionaries saw nothing wrong with their action, which they justified on the ground that they were doing the work of mercy by providing help for the poor Protestants.

Their religion-based strategies consisted mainly of their religious propaganda, embellished religious worships and rituals, praying for dead natives, building churches, and training native catechists and teachers. Through all these measures, which led to a steady influx of Igbo people into various Catholic establishments, the French missionaries eventually got more adherents in many Igbo cities than their British Protestant counterparts who had arrived there before them.

It is true that their primary objective was to spread Catholicism among the Africans. Nevertheless, they could make no significant progress unless

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they could break the language barrier existing between them and their host regions. Between 1885 and 1905, virtually all the French-speaking missionaries resident in Igboland studied Igbo, not only for the reasons given above but also for the purpose of teaching it to their compatriots who would like to join them in the evangelization of Africa.

VI

The French Catholic missionaries in Nigeria were staunchly supported by the Papacy and by different centers set up in France and other parts of Europe for the promotion of African missions. For example, the trilingual *English, Igbo and French Dictionary* published in 1904 by "The Fathers of the Holy Ghost" of the "Roman Catholic Mission Onitsha, Southern-Nigeria," was printed in Europe by the "Missionary Printing Office of the Sodality of St. Peter Claver at Salzburg, Austria." The Sodality of Saint Peter Claver was a Catholic organization founded as an auxiliary Society of African Missions in 1894, under the auspices of Leo XIII. The Sodality operated under the Sacred Congregation of the Propaganda in Rome, and the Holy See granted it the decree of approbation in 1902, with a mandate to take every possible measure to help the Catholic African missions in the task of saving Africans and procuring freedom for slaves. The Sodality was composed, firstly, of women (female auxiliary Missionaries of Africa) who devoted themselves exclusively to the service of the African missions and lived together in common in the centers of the work; secondly, of non-resident members who devoted themselves to the ministry as far as their family responsibilities permitted them; and thirdly, of enthusiasts of both sexes who made small annual monetary contributions. The Sodaliiy promoted religious conferences and other meetings, made sacred ornaments, and collected offerings and encouraged prayers for the African missions.

The Sodality also supported the French missionaries through implementation of various writing projects related to their evangelism. In addition to printing works such as grammar books and dictionaries written on African languages for the benefit of Catholic missionaries, the Sodality wrote and published bulletins in different languages in order to arouse interest in the Catholic African missions and to publicize the labors and successes of the missionaries. Prominent among such bulletins was an illustrated monthly periodical entitled *Echo d'Afrique* which was published in French, German, Italian, Polish, and Bohemian. By these means the publication of *English, Ibo and French Dictionary* was given a wide publicity in Europe.

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VII

In this paper I have tried to give a short presentation on the history and achievements of the the SMA and Holy Ghost missionaries who operated in Igboland between the 1880s and 1905. Despite some errors and inaccuracies in their analysis of the Igbo language, those priests made some outstanding contributions towards the development of this language. They had very limited knowledge of both the Igbo territory and the Igbo people, yet they were able to set up many Catholic parishes and to build a considerable number of churches in the Igbo hinterland in less than two decades. They employed many different strategies in order to supplant Protestantism. Even if they did not succeed, it is evident that in their efforts, the French Catholic missionaries and their successors made more converts; established more schools, hospitals, convents, and churches; and trained more local teachers, catechists, nuns and priests in Nigeria alone than in all the other countries of Africa combined.

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