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BOOK REVIEW

Africa and the New Face of Mission: A Critical Assessment of the Legacy of the Irish Spiritans Among the Igbo of SouthEastern Nigeria

By Charles A. Ebelebe, C.S.Sp, University Press of America, Reprinted in Nigeria by SAN Press, Enugu. Pp242.

One of life's great treasures is found in reading the mature reflections of a scholar. Such is the trusted volume, *Africa and the New face of Mission: A Critical Assessment of the Legacy of the Irish Spiritans among the Igbo of SouthEastern Nigeria* by one of the best up-to-date missiological scholars, Ebelebe. Setting the problematic, *What missionary theology informed the Irish missionary enterprise in Igboland and how does it relate to the mission theology of the Igbo church today?*, Ebelebe facilitates full access to Irish missionary endeavour in Igboland, allowing readers today to hear the voices of Shanahan and his colleagues intelligibly and powerfully as they spoke to past generations.

With characteristic insight, learning and wit, Ebelebe weaves the culture of his people in Chapter One before the stormy history of missiological enterprise in Igboland began. The chapter offers a richly rewarding analysis of how Igbo theology viewed God *in his creative power, his might or moral greatness and his providence* (p.2). This theology, in the mind of Ebelebe, informed the mind of his people where *good is rewarded and evil punished here on earth.* (p9). The author does not intend to sketch an unfamiliar landscape, so he informs readers about the circumstances and theologies that produced the Irish men. In this chapter, we read Irish colonial history, history of the congregation as well as Irish Spiritans and their history between 1900 and 1970.

Rarely does one find a combination of close attention to grammatical and syntactical features joined with literary sensitivity, and all of which aimed at missiological appropriation of the *sources of Irish Spiritan missionary theology in Igboland*

as Ebelebe exposes in Chapter Three. He constructs a compelling portrait of Libermann's influence on Spiritan Mission theology (p74), and supports it with some Church documents on missiology. Ebelebe's movement from Chapter Three to Four is sapiential instruction for missiologists. Here, Ebelebe narrates the tension between seminary formation and the apostolate, which, as in the case of the Irish, led to missiological conflicts. This chapter deals with hotly contested topics and is undoubtedly the volcanic centre of the book. Painstakingly researched, carefully argued, elegantly written, thesis supported by many bits of evidence with reasonable knowledge of the formation Irish Spiritans who came to Igboland went through, Ebelebe holds that problems inherent in Irish missionary formation ranging from poor and inadequate staff, to formation houses constantly moving, to poor curricula for studies were the deficiencies that served as incubators which fertilized the eggs of an apostolate that had as its goal to *dislodge the devil from his citadel in Igboland*.

With some morsels of credit given to the Irishmen, the lion's share of evidence obtained by Ebelebe suggests the Spiritans carried a hangover of superiority complex and refused to learn the Igbo language with the pretext that it is difficult. They procrastinated the training of indigenous priests to make way for the booming Irish vocations in the 1950s; had a condescending attitude towards Igbo culture, and were motivated by a surreptitious intention to prolong their stay in Nigeria.

The author's mastery of the subject matter is everywhere in evidence as he makes judicious use of Church documents on Mission Studies in Chapter Five, where an impressive array of materials are introduced for comparative purposes. These reinforce the guilty pronouncements earlier made on the Irish missionaries who were charged with failing to give the Igbo church an Igbo face. Ebelebe's proposed missiological refinements are cogently developed at the end of this chapter with inculturation as the alternative.

If Chapter One is time then, Chapter Six is time now. Here, Ebelebe combs the world of the Igbo today, and through the spectacle of missiology, sees how the Church has made good the mistakes of the past and makes projections as to how to improve those areas still creeping. Ebelebe opens fresh windows into Missiology. It is a utility for every Christian interested in the history of the Church not just in SouthEastern Nigeria but in Africa as a whole. It is a work that stimulates. The book, *Africa and the New Face of Mission: A Critical Assessment of the Legacy of the Irish Spiritans among the Igbo of SouthEastern Nigeria* is both laudable and debatable. It is laudable for the thought it contains, and debatable for the thought it provokes.

From a non-specialist perspective, it is laudable because Ebelebe delivers his promise. He promises to be our guide to discover the legacy of Irish missionary endeavour and this is accomplished with considerable skill. With typical thoroughness, he has produced an exceptionally valuable work which successfully puts together the threads of Irish evangelism in Igboland and establishes a benchmark for further investigations along these lines. The organisation of the book is quite excellent. Each chapter begins with a good recap and a compass that tells the reader the itinerary. At the end of each chapter, the reader looks back across a well constructed schema which reflects the author's mind. The notes, bibliographical coverage and indexes are quite impressive. He navigates his way through the maze of African, European and American sources with maximum ingenuity.

This is a serious and sensitive theological investigation of what is the most successful missionary enterprise of the Holy Ghost Congregation in Africa. As expected of this kind of work, there is considerable room for debate. I question whether the arguments advanced in the book are capable of bearing the load placed on the main title of the work: *Africa and the New Face of Mission*. Even though the book has as its subtitle *A Critical Assessment of the Legacy of the Irish Spiritans Among the Igbo in SouthEastern Nigeria*, I expected a glance at the missiological profile of

Irishmen in other parts of Africa before an in-depth analysis of that of Igboland. These building blocks would have been sufficient to pass a verdict on those who came to Igboland, but this expectation suffered a cruel disappointment. The treatment of *A Brief History of the Spiritans* (p37) was a shock to the reviewer. Three sentences out of five on the history of a congregation that existed more than 300 years before the publication of this work is a poor advert of the Holy Ghost Congregation.

A potential harvest could also be garnered from scrutiny of Shanahan's Missionary Training in Chapter Four. Here, Ebelebe advocates a fascinating but highly speculative assessment that Shanahan was trained *to do nothing from purely natural motive, ...the smallest breach of the rule was met with a hard penance and perfect interior motivation was demanded* According to Ebelebe, Fr. Grizard was novice master for 22 years, and a lone opinion from Fr. Tony Geoghegan is used to pass judgment on him and Fr. Shanahan. What if Fr. Tony Geoghegan's observation is a monumental distortion of historical facts? I think that Ebelebe was sometimes too hasty to conclude. Ebelebe further suggests that *Shanahan was never gifted with any remarkable intellectual abilities and for the rest of his life, felt a certain inadequacy in matters of theology* (p90). The ground for this position is weak as there is no naratological foundation on Shanahan's intellectual abilities. Ebelebe continues walking alone in a one way street with another hypothesis that the intellectual poverty in Shanahan has been inherited by the Igbo Church notwithstanding the numerous doctoral degree men among her clergy. This is a sterile submission. The reviewer is informed by it, not persuaded by it. How can a *lack of intellectual curiosity* that is inherited like Original Sin drive someone to doctoral degree?

Ebelebe may find relatively few readers even in Igboland who sympathize with his submission that *The Irish Spiritans knew that many of the diocesan clergy were eyeing their positions in the plum parishes and schools and that evacuating from Igboland on account of the war would provide these priests with an opportunity to actualize their longing to displace them for good.*



(p108). This runs contrary to the numerous testimonials in History of Evangelization of South Eastern Nigeria that show that dozens of Irish Missionaries died in the bush (where there were no parishes) from mosquito bites, cholera and other related diseases.

Ebelebe has incensed the scholarly world with a work that is destined to be the corner stone for Missiology in Igboland, and these minor criticisms do not, in anyway, take anything from it. It is a work of great erudition and ingenuity. The book ranges over a multitude of missiological issues upon which a short review can hardly be just, and the fertility of Ebelebe's mind brings a welcome freshness to the subject. One could wish that Ebelebe expands the scope of his skills with another volume in which he would apply his method beyond Igboland.

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