

The Trans-Saharan Missions to Northern Nigeria

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Abstract

It is often assumed that the opening of the mission station in Shendam in 1907 was the first attempt to bring the Catholic faith to the region north of the rivers Niger and Benue. The purpose of this article is to draw attention to the earlier attempts to bring the Christian Gospel to the peoples of Northern Nigeria and from the north, crossing the Sahara Desert. It deals with two such journeys which are well documented, but little known until recently, when the research was carried out; and a possible third journey which is shrouded in controversy. It shows that the Sahara Desert does not constitute the natural barrier between the 'two Africas' that is sometimes portrayed.

1. Introduction

It is frequently believed that the Sahara Desert constitutes an impenetrable barrier to trade, travel and commerce between North Africa and the rest of that continent. When this assumption is accepted it is easy to conclude that North Africa belongs to the Mediterranean region and has little in common with the rest of Africa. The long history of the Roman provinces of Mauretania, Numidia, Africa (i.e. Tunisia), Tripolitania, Cyreniaca and Egypt, and the present cultural configuration, adds weight to this presumption and so North Africa is often linked to the Middle East in a single socio-cultural region. Such an understanding, however, serves to belittle the variegated reality and long history of Africa as a continent, north and south of the Sahara Desert. It can at times go so far as to presume that sub-Saharan Africa had no known history or culture until it was 'opened up' by the first European explorers (Diego Cao, Bartholomeu Dias and Vasco da Gama) who sailed south from Portugal in the late fifteenth century, hugging the coast of Africa, and so pioneering the sea route to India and the East Indies.

With this mindset, it is seldom realised that the Sahara developed its present arid condition only during the past three thousand years and that, in addition to the 'highway' provided by the River Nile in the east, there were well-frequented camel-caravan trade routes linking North Africa with the 'Sudan' – the region of the Blacks – even before then. The word Sudan is the Arabic for Black. Thus the Western Sudan is taken to cover West Africa as far as the Hausa States, while the Central Sudan covers the Lake Chad basin (Borno, Baghirmi and Wadai in Tchad Republic). The history of the extension of Arab/Berber rule in Morocco to the south, followed by the powerful and prosperous kingdoms south of the Sahara Desert in the early second millennium -- Songhai, Mali and Ghana in the Western Sudan, Borno/Kanem in the Central Sudan, and Ethiopia in the Eastern Sudan – has been well documented (Hogben, 1967, pp. 21-51); and their riches were soon coveted by the Great Powers of the day: Portugal, Great Britain, France and the Ottoman Empire.

2. Trans-Saharan Missionary Outreach

The same mindset, described above, can also becloud our approach to Church history and result in a stunted picture of African Christianity. Thus, in the case of Nigeria, the origins of the Catholic Church are usually located in the early missions established in Lagos (1862), Onitsha (1885) and Shendam (1907); and apart from a passing reference to the early Portuguese missions to Warri and Benin City, the story of the present flourishing Church is seen to begin in the second half of the nineteenth century, coinciding with the imposition of colonial rule. Even if more space is allowed to the early Portuguese missions, they too are linked to the opening up of West Africa from the ocean rather than the efforts made to bring the Good News across the desert from North Africa to the Sudan. The purpose of this article is to outline this **trans-Saharan missionary outreach**, which preceded the penetration from the coast and was spearheaded by the Congregation of Propaganda Fide in Rome after its foundation in the year 1622.

The documentation for this trans-Saharan missionary impetus is to be found in the archives of Propaganda Fide in Rome, rather than in Lisbon, London or Paris, with some material also coming from Franciscan sources in Italy and Tripoli (Bergna, 1924 and Filesi, 1975, pp. 856-858). The basic research on this subject, from the above sources, was carried out by the late Dr. Richard Gray, of the School of Oriental and African Studies in London. In

1967 he published 'Christian Traces and a Franciscan Mission in the Central Sudan, 1700-1711' in the *Journal of African History* Vol. VIII, 3 (1967) pp. 383-393, and that opened the door to further research. It is the latter theme of Gray's article – the 'Franciscan Mission in the Central Sudan' which caught my interest, as the intended destination was the Kingdom (or Sultanate) of Borno, where I worked as a Catholic missionary from 1960 to 1988. In fact, three Prefects (all Franciscans, of a reformed branch of the Friars Minor) were successively appointed by Rome to head this mission but only one of these actually arrived in Northern Nigeria. This was Fr. Carlo Maria di Genova, who in 1710 was awaiting a passage for a similar mission to Ethiopia.

3. From Tripoli to Katsina: 1710 - 1711

Accompanied by **Fr. Severino da Silesia**, a fluent Arabic speaker from Bohemia, Fr. Carlo Maria joined a camel caravan from Tripoli heading for Murzuq in the Fezzan (southern Libya) in June 1710. From there they joined another caravan, that of a wealthy pilgrim returning from Mecca whose destination was "Accades [i.e. Agadez], gate and key of the Negro kingdoms". No further word was received in Tripoli of these intrepid missionaries and their fate would have remained unknown had it not been for "Hajj Milad, a Moorish merchant of Tripoli, a close and faithful friend of Fr. Carlo, who had accompanied him to the Fezzan and on to Accades". On 10th October 1712 he reported, "with obvious grief", to Fr Francesco Maria di Sarzana, superior of the Franciscan mission in Tripoli, how they had died. Let me now give the story verbatim, translated from the Italian, as given in Gray's article.

Prevented from proceeding to Bornu on account of the 'great dangers of that route, they set out from Agades [also spelt Agadez] with a small caravan of eight other traders in a south-westerly direction, in order to enter the 'kingdom of the Sudan'. The sole survivor of this caravan on his return to Agades told Hajj Milad how, after arriving safely in Cassina (Katsina), one of the party had developed an illness from the 'malignant and pestilential waters' which made 'the body swell like those who have the dropsy'. Fr. Carlo [who had some medical expertise] had tried in vain to operate, but ended by catching the infection himself and died eight days later. The ruler of Katsina seized Fr. Carlo's belongings and, in reply to the remonstrance of Fr. Severino, admonished him to become a Muslim. The lone missionary refused this iniquitous proposal', and soon caught the same disease, dying thirteen

days afterwards, in August 1711, according to Fr. Francesco (Gray, 1967, p.387).

A footnote identifies this Fr. Francesco as the above-mentioned Mission Superior, Fr. Francesco Maria di Sarzana, and he passed on the information from Tripoli to Propaganda Fide in Rome on 14th October 1712. His report was first published in English in the *Quarterly Review* and was quoted by R. Hallett in *The Penetration of Africa, Vol. 1, 1965, pp.102-103*. And so, thanks to the lone survivor of the camel caravan which brought the two missionaries from Agadez to Katsina, a Muslim, we know the fate of the first Catholic priests to come to Northern Nigeria. Let us remember too that their destination was **the Habe or Hausa kingdom of Katsina**, (now based in Maradi, Niger Republic), and not the Fulani emirate set up by the *Shehu*, Uthman dan Fodio in 1806.

4. Bro. Pieter Farde, 1688: Fact or Fiction?

It is possible, but in my view highly unlikely, that another Franciscan religious brother, **Pieter Fardé**, a liberated slave, passed through Gobir, a region which included the far north of the present Sokoto State, even earlier than this – to be precise, in 1688. According to his letters, written in Flemish Dutch and translated into English, he was taken as a slave to Agadez and from there, after converting some 200 slaves to the Catholic Faith and suffering incredible hardships, he was allowed to proceed to 'Gobel' (Gobir), from where he intended to make for the fort of Elmina on the coast (in modern Ghana). The late Fr. Joseph Kenny O.P. was impressed by these documents, and in 1982 he sent me a copy (in English) of Fardé's adventure. I did not question their authenticity at the time; but later, the then Head of the Dept of History in the University of Maiduguri, Dr. Porter (with whom I had shared the documents) told me that, in his opinion, the story was largely a fabrication.

In a word, while Porter accepted that Fardé has spent time as a slave in North Africa, and possibly had arrived in Agadez, he put down the rest of his incredible adventure to a vivid 'make believe' imagination – similar to Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, a fabrication made for personal gain or some other hidden motive. I discussed the matter with Porter and was convinced that his critical appraisal was correct. I communicated this to Fr Kenny who, it seems, left the matter an open question. However, in his book *The Catholic Church in Tropical Africa 1445 – 1850* (Ibadan, 1983, p. 87), he cautioned that “there are serious questions about Fardé's accuracy or even veracity”. My

copy of the Concise Oxford Dictionary (1990, p. 1363) gives 'truthfulness, honesty' as the prime meaning of 'veracity', and that, I believe, is an accurate description of this work.

I was pleased to read recently, therefore, that Kenny had also unearthed a much earlier (1875) dismissal of Fardé's work as 'an ingenious literary trick' (*a translation of the French original*), although it provoked a reply from a supporter of Fardé's authenticity (Akubor and Akinwale, 2014, p. 6). Given this ongoing controversy, one cannot conclude that the Franciscan Brother ever got to Sokoto, or speculate that he may have preached the Gospel there. To my mind this episode is best left as a curious distraction in any serious history of the Catholic Church in Northern Nigeria.

5. A Link with Heinrich Barth?

Such a history should begin with the Mission to Borno organised by the missionary Congregation of *Propaganda Fide* in 1700-1711, as outlined above. With regard to that mission, which ended in Katsina rather than Borno, I would like to add an observation from an article of mine on this subject, published in 1985:

One is tempted to ask whether any possessions or relics of the visit of Carlo Maria and Severino have survived in Katsina. After so many years, and in view of the rigour of the climate, it is unlikely that anything has survived. There is, however, an intriguing reference which Heinrich Barth gives on 6 August 1851 concerning Katsina. While in Katsina, Barth "received information of a large 'Christian book', bound in leather, with edges and lock made of metal, in the possession of a Pullo [Fulani] in the town; but no one could tell me whether it was a manuscript or print, and although I offered to pay for a sight of it, I never succeeded in my object." (Quoted by A.H.M. Kirk-Greene, *Barth's Travels in Nigeria* (London, 1962:18) Barth conjectured that it may have been one of the books which Clapperton, when dying [in Sokoto in 1827], told Lander to leave behind rather than take with him to England. But Barth would not have known of Carlo Maria's death in Katsina, and **it may be that the sacred book was a Latin missal which the two missionaries had brought with them and used for the celebration of Mass** (bold print added). The missals printed in Italy after the reforms of the Council of Trent were usually very well bound, with hard leather covers, and they did in fact last for centuries. ("Filippo da Segni's Journey from Tripoli to Kukawa in 1850", *International*

Journal of African Historical Studies (Boston, USA): Vol. 18, 1, 1985, p. 149).

6. Fr Filippo da Segni: 1850

Be that as it may be, by 1851 we have reached the age of reliably-documented history of the Western and Central Sudan. A year earlier, another Franciscan priest, **Father Filippo da Segni** set out from Tripoli across the Sahara Desert to visit a Maltese Catholic family who had settled in Kukawa, the capital of the Borno/Kanem Empire. It followed the erection of the Apostolic Vicariate of Central Africa by Propaganda Fide in 1846, a vast new mission field stretching from Lake Chad to the Nile Valley which would be tilled especially by Saint Daniel Comboni and his followers in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan. It was also the start of the Golden Age of the (European) exploration of the interior of Africa (c. 1850 – 1900). Padre Filippo's journey to Borno however was a private affair, undertaken only for pastoral motives, and it would have remained unknown to posterity had it not been for a member of the Italian Geographical Society, Tommaso Trincia, who submitted the priest's account of his journey for publication in their Journal in 1870. ("Viaggio del Padre Filippo da Segni da Tripoli di Barberia al Bournou nel 1850", *Bollettino della Società Geografica Itakiana*, 1870:137 – 150).

A year spent in Rome in 1975-76 gave me the opportunity to locate this article, translate it into English and have it published in 1976 ("The first visit by a Catholic priest to Borno in 1850", *Savanna*, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, Vol 5 No 1, June 1976, pp. 45 – 54). It is a simple and edifying story of a good priest, which makes no pretension to scholarship and is of scant scientific interest. Padre (or rather Fra, as a religious priest is usually referred to in Italy). Filippo refers to Kukawa as Borno, just as the Kanuri living outside Maiduguri still refer to that city as Borno (or Yerwa). He was well received by the reigning Shehu of Borno, Umar – the eldest son of the great Shehu Laminu, the saviour of Borno in the war with the Fulani in 1808. Padre Filippo had brought a Mass Box with him and he attended to the spiritual needs of the Lanzon family. After twenty days in Kukawa, he joined another caravan heading for Tripoli and was joined by two sons of the Lanzon family, Paolo and Carmelo, who then settled down in Tripoli.

It may be added, as an intriguing postscript, that on his return journey from Kukawa in April 1850, Padre Filippo crossed paths somewhere in the Sahara Desert with the celebrated German explorer, Heinrich Barth. Barth

who left Tripoli on 2 April 1850, heading for Kano, via Murzuq, Ghat and Agadez, would then move on to Kukawa in April 1851. Blissfully unaware of each other's existence, Barth makes no reference to Filippo in his published account of the journey (or indeed the Lanzon parents, who had also intended to return to Tripoli and may have done so before Barth arrived in Kukawa).

7. Subsequent Research

A Maltese missionary, Bro. Michael Buttigieg fsc, a De la Salle brother, who was stationed in Maiduguri Diocese in the early 1980s and with whom I shared my research on Filippo da Segni, took up the trail of the Lanzon brothers in Tripoli. His research, based on data he received from the Secretariat for the Missions of the Franciscan Friars Minor in Lombardy *[where the Archives in Tripoli had been transported in 1969, for greater security in view of the situation in Gaddafi's Libya]*, showed that Paolo married a certain Maria Cassar in Tripoli and that they had five children (born in 1852, 1854, 1856, 1859, and 1862), all of whom were baptized in Tripoli. The other brother, Carmelo, married a widow and there is no mention in the Baptism Register of any issue (From the paper, "A Journey through the Sahara from Tripoli (Libya) to Kukawa (Nigeria) in 1850 to visit Maltese Family: Lanzon", by Bro. Michael Buttigieg fsc. It was delivered to the *Melita Historical Society* in Malta in November 1986).

My research in Rome, in 1975-76, led me to conclude that Padre Filippo, who was shy and reserved by nature and who lived a quiet life in communities of his Order following his return to Italy in 1852, did not wish to divulge his exploit to others. This would explain why there is no reference to his journey to Borno in the Franciscan archives in Rome, formerly in Tripoli. Another article on Padre Filippo, published in *L'Osservatore Romano* in 1981, reiterated this point, noting also that no other document about his journey has come to light since then (*L'Osservatore Romano*, 14 October 1981, "Un Italiano nel Sahara. Fra Filippo da Segni, apostolo in Sudan", by Salvatore Bono. He quotes from Bergna's work (1924): "L'archivio della Missione non da alcuna luce su tale viaggio"). I speculated as to this silence on such a significant journey as follows: "Why is it that there is no [known] reference to such a historic journey either in the archives of the Sacred Congregation or of his own Order?. In his work, published in Tripoli in 1924, Bergna wrote: "About the year 1851 [*sic*, not 1850: i.e. after Filippo's return from Kukawa] Fr. Angelo da S. Agata commissioned Fr. Filippo da Segni to undertake an exploratory journey to the Fezzan. He was a member of the

Roman Province, well versed in Arabic and blessed with a great spirit of sacrifice. But the Mission archives give no information about such a journey" (Bergna, 1924, p. 143). Was this another project, proposed because of Fra Filippo's earlier known exploit of travelling to Borno and returning safely, but which was not carried out?

It seems that we shall never know the answer. We do know however, that Padre Filippo, after he returned to Italy in 1852, was posted to Montefortino and served in other communities of the Reformed Friars Minor in and around Rome. Always listed as 'Church organist', and never again connected with Tripoli, he was transferred to the convent in Frascati in 1888; and there he died, aged 72, on 16th August 1895 (Archivio Francesco Ripa, 1888, p. 234 and 1899, pp. 108-120). Tracing his footsteps, I went on a 'pilgrimage' to Frascati with a fellow Irish Augustinian about 1982, seeking to locate his burial place. We walked from the Catacombs of San Callisto outside Rome, following the *Via Appia Antica* all the way to Frascati, and were well received by the Franciscan Friars there. Unfortunately the old convent had been bombed during the Second World War, we were told, and they had no information as to the burial place of Fra. Filippo. And so the aura of reserve and secrecy has followed our hero to his grave.

8. The Twentieth Century

As far as I know, there were no further trans-Saharan Catholic missions to the Hausa/Fulani and Borno sultanates in the pre-colonial period. In 1907 the first SMA missionaries north of the rivers Niger and Benue arrived in Shendam, coming from the coast and using the waterways: the Niger, the Benue and its tributary, the Shemankar. And so began a new Chapter in the History of the Catholic Church in Northern Nigeria. The post-1907 period has been well documented (Gantly, 1991; O'Connor, 2009; Hickey, 2010). The trans-Saharan route was not, however, completely abandoned by missionaries. When I was stationed in St Patrick's, Maiduguri, from 1960 to 1964, many French missionaries arrived there, having crossed the desert from Algiers to Kano, either by mammy-wagon or in the small Citroen *deux-chevaux* van, then much in vogue. Heading for missions in northern Cameroon or southern Tchad, they would regale us with stories of their crossing of the desert and their visits to the *L'hermitage* of Blessed Charles de Foucauld on the Hoggar plateau. Blessed Charles was beatified by St. John Paul II in 2005, his 'spirituality of the desert' has inspired a number of religious institutes, of whom *Les Petis Freres* and *Les Petites Soeurs* are the best known.

Some Irish missionaries in Nigeria also made the journey home, using the same route. One of these, Fr Fionbarra O Cuilleanáin SMA, published his account of the journey in Gaelic, *An Bother Fada go Tamanrasset, about 1982*. Another priest, Fr Michael Walsh OSA, crossed the desert at least twice (1982 and 1988), in both directions, on his sturdy Honda motor cycle. I had planned to make the crossing with a missionary colleague by public transport in 1978, but ill-health did not permit it. All of this, obviously, took place before the rise of Muslim fundamentalism in Algeria (the FIS) in the early 1990s. In recent years this has been followed by even more vicious extremist movements in northern Mali (Azawad) and the Lake Chad basin (Boko Haram), that have effectively put an end to trans-Saharan travel for Christian missionaries: and so it has remained until the present.

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