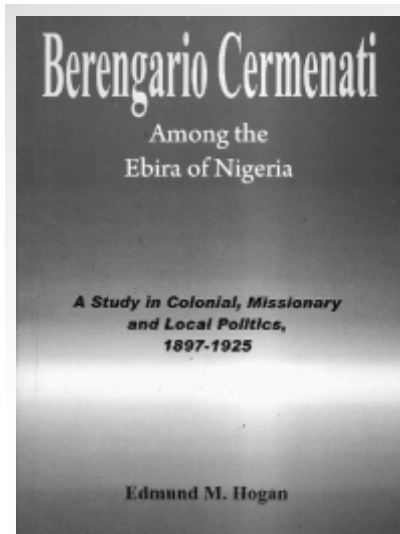


Book Review



Berengario Cermenati Among the Ebira of Nigeria: A Study in Colonial, Missionary and Local Politics, 1897-1925

Author: Edmund M. HOGAN

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Reviewer: Raymond HICKEY, OSA

I came across the name Cermenati so often in perusing the old copies of *the Catholic Church Directory for Nigeria* that I developed a mighty curiosity about him. He was mentioned as the first missionary in faraway Sokoto Diocese, even though he seemed to have been stationed in Lokoja -- and even further south, in Agenebode, on the Niger north of Asaba. Nothing had been written about him, however, and it took time to fill in the missing pieces. As a result, I had a partial and rose-tinted image of this man, whom I admired greatly as a model pioneer missionary. It came therefore as a distinct shock to read the full unabridged story of Berengario Cermenati, as put together by Fr Edmund Hogan SMA.

This is no 'rose-tinted' romantic tale of a heroic missionary who fearlessly brought the Good News to distant horizons. He did that all right, as SMA Visitor in the Prefecture of Western Nigeria, travelling long distances by river barge and canoe, bicycle and the newly-opened railway from Baro on the River Niger to Minna, Zungeru, Kaduna, Zaria and Kano. He did so however as a complex and difficult character whose frenetic activity seems, at least from Fr Hogan's study, not to have been balanced by a deep spiritual life. There is scant reference in his diaries (as given here) to time spent in prayer and reflection - to accompany his undoubted apostolic activity. It was, I believe, this lack which led to the bizarre conduct and excesses he resorted to in times of adversity. That is my own

conclusion but it is based on the facts as presented by the author. I had to admit, however reluctantly, that my erstwhile hero had very definitely feet of clay.

Fr Hogan's own assessment of Cermenati, given in a brilliant 'Afterword' which ends his study, is that his ultimate failure to win the Ebira people for Christ was due more to "unruly feelings and emotions, in particular his extreme (and irrational) distaste for secular authority, his tendency to demonise it and regard it as a conspiratorial force bent on the destruction of his mission and his Church, if not his person"; than to "the presence of a fatal character flaw" (p. 223). Hogan also alludes to this flaw in the Preface, where he states: "The missionary of our story may have been experienced and dedicated, but he was also deeply flawed; and this contributed greatly to his undoing" (p. xvi).

It seems clear that Cermenati was driven by a strong and compulsive missionary spirit, but his object was "less the service of a community than the conquest of a people". He failed to achieve his goal - the Ebira people are today predominantly Muslim - and, from the account of his final years in Togo and in Vichy France, he was reduced to "a shadow of his former self and he died [in 1942] a pathetic if not a tragic figure" (pp. 223-225). His life is a sobering example of what can happen when a missionary is driven by the Gospel as an ideology rather than a divine gift.

This book does not tell us much about Cermenati's exploits in the Far North of Nigeria. That was not the author's intention, as he makes clear from the book's title: *Berengario Cermenati among the Ebira of Nigeria*. One must turn elsewhere for that, to the recently published *From the Niger to the Sahara*, by Fr Edward O'Connor SMA (2009), but even here only the bare facts of Cermenati's travels are given (pp. 16-19). The two biographical studies of the early SMA missionaries, *SMA Missionaries in Northern Nigeria* by the same Edward O'Connor (2007) and *We will Remember Them*, by Fr Peter McCawille SMA (2011), likewise confine themselves to the bare essential bio-details of Cermenati's life. Little is known of his missionary activity in the north-west zone or the fruit, if any, of his work there. For example, did he learn Hausa, or understand the importance of the language? Did he ever meet Dr Walter Millar, the eminent Anglican translator of the Holy Bible, who was then based in Zaria? What part had he in the opening of the mission in Zaria (which was under Lokoja) in 1921? There is indeed space for another study of this missionary.

Hogan's work is that of a professional historian. That is clear from the copious end-notes which accompany the text. He did his homework before putting pen to paper. The only inaccuracy I could find was the statement that Carlo Zappa was one of those who founded the mission in Lokoja in 1884 (p. 4). That honour goes in fact to Frs Poirier, Piolat and Fiorentini, SMA (*Gantly, Mission to West Africa*, vol. I, 395-399), while Zappa and Andrew Dornan (the first Irish priest to serve in Northern Nigeria: he died in Lokoja in August 1885) arrived in Lokoja more than

a year later (Higgins, *Kindling the Fire*, 3). It is also a plus that Hogan does not shirk from giving his own assessment of the man, Cermenati. Having studied the written evidence so meticulously, nobody would be better equipped than he to do so: yet many historians want to stick to hard facts and are loath to express an opinion on their subject. Not so Hogan, and the book is all the richer for that.

For those who belong to the Hausa-speaking cultural area of the North, and who see the former Kabba (which was handed over by the SMA to the Canadian Spiritans and became a Prefecture in February 1955) and Mid-West Provinces as extraneous to their 'world', there may be some disappointment with this work. Hogan's book does however serve to underline the historical unity in the development of the local Church, from its bases in Lokoja and Asaba to the far North-West of the country.