

## Contributions of Catholic Missionaries in the Economic Development of Nkongho-Mbo, Southwest Region, Cameroon, 1936-2000

Forka Leypey Mathew Fomine\*

Senior Lecturer, Department of History and African Civilisations, Faculty of Arts, University of Buea, Cameroon

\*Corresponding author: Forka Leypey Mathew Fomine

| Received: 05.03.2023 | Accepted: 11.04.2023 | Published: 30.11.2024 |

**Abstract:** This paper is primarily concerned with providing evidence that the Catholic Missionaries who introduced Christianity (Whiteman's religion) in Nkongho-Mbo in 1936 played a significant role in the economic development of the area. The paper argues that if the Catholic Missionaries did not set foot in the area, then the entire region should have remained as stagnant economically just as it was during the pre-Christian era. In the domain of agriculture the paper reveals that the Missionaries introduced new fruit trees such as mango, paw-paw (*Carica papaya*), oranges (*Citrus sinensis*) pineapples (*Ananas cosmosus*), guava (*Psidium guayava*), pear (*Persea Americana*) and lime (*Citrus aurantifolia*) fruits. They also experimented the cultivation of vegetables such as tomatoes, onion and yellow pepper. The cultivation of these food crops coupled with cash crops such as coffee, American oil palms and cocoa that were also introduced by the Missionaries helped to improve the nutritive diet of the entire Mbo populace, increased the income of the villagers, increased agricultural yields in the area and thus raised the standard of living of the people. The paper further illuminates improvement in trading activities, road infrastructure and the introduction of a radio telephone network in Nkongho-Mbo. The study also sheds light on the bee keeping that was introduced by Catholic Missionaries as it fetched honey-producers a fortune and thus improved their financial situation remarkably. To accomplish this study, three main sources of information were consulted including archival documents, sacred return records from Catholic Mission Mbetta, printed documents such as books, dissertations, theses and finally oral interviews.

**Keywords:** Religion, Economic development, Nkongho-Mbo, Cameroon, Catholic Missionaries.

### INTRODUCTION

There has been much confusion and debate about the extent of the group known as Mbo. What used to constitute Mbo as an ethnic entity was divided in 1916 following the defeat and ouster of the Germans from Kamerun and the partition of the territory by the British and the French. The line of partition divided the Mbo group. The decision to partition Cameroon was taken in London, following the cessation of hostilities in the former German territory. This gave birth to the French-speaking and English-speaking Mbo. The English-speaking Mbo is divided linguistically into the Nkongho-Mbo and Ngen districts. This study is focused essentially on the English-speaking Mbo chiefdoms which include Mbetta, Lekwe, Dinte, Njungo, Lebock, Tock, Mbenfeh, Nzeletete, Ngyientu, and Lebe.

This paper argues that the Catholic Missionaries who introduced the catholic faith in Nkongho-Mbo in the 1930s were the forerunners of economic development in the area. Once firmly implanted, they carried out many development projects

including the opening up of demonstration gardens and farms, water supply projects, hydro- electricity provision, as well as the construction of motorable roads. The Catholic Missionaries improved agriculture in Nkongho-Mbo by introducing new food crops and cash crops, animal husbandry and new methods of cultivation. These introduced crops generated the natives much income, thus reducing the level of poverty in the region. Such crops that fetched the natives much income include coffee, cocoa and American oil palms. This raised the standard of living of the natives. The Catholic Missionaries also carried out some construction works geared towards improving the road network in the area thus linking the region to other near-by communities.

This paper is segmented into seven parts. The preliminary part which is the first part presents the habitat and early history of Nkongho-Mbo people. It reveals that Nkongho-Mbo territory lies in a hilly rain forested countryside in Nguti Sub-Division, Kupe-Muanenguba Division of the Southwest Region of

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**Citation:** Forka Leypey Mathew Fomine (2024). Contributions of Catholic Missionaries in the Economic Development of Nkongho-Mbo, Southwest Region, Cameroon, 1936-2000. *Cross Current Int J Econ Manag Media Stud*, 6(6), 87-97.

Cameroon. The area is situated between latitude 5°19' and 5°22' and 9°56' N and occupies a total surface area of approximately 4,493 square kilometers. Nkongho-Mbo is bounded to the north by Menoua Division, to the southwest by Western Region and Ngen, and to the West by Lebialem Division. Concerning early history, the Nkongho are of Ngoe origin. The second part discusses the introduction of the Catholic faith in Mbo by three groups of people, including catholic practitioners, the Mill Hill Missionaries and the Franciscan Sisters from Shisong. In the third part the paper shows that the Franciscan sisters whose headquarters was in Shisong, Bui Division, opened the first Catholic Mission Health Centre in Nkongho-Mbo in 1964. The Health Centre was the brainchild of Rev. Father John Altink who was Mbetta Parish Priest at the time. The fourth part illuminates the efforts made by the Catholic Missionaries in improving agricultural activities in Nkongho-Mbo. The efforts had to do with the introduction of new crops, bee keeping and other. While the fifth and sixth parts are focused on the digging of a motor road in the area and the provision of hydro-electricity respectively, the seventh part deals with the introduction of a radio telephone network in the area.

#### **Habitat and early history of Nkongho-Mbo**

Nkogho-Mbo [1] lies in a hilly rain forested countryside in Nguti Sub-Division, Kupe-Muanenguba Division of the Southwest Region of Cameroon. The area is situated between latitude 5°19' and 5°22' and 9°56' N (Fomine, 2002: 5). It occupies a surface area of approximately 4,493 square kilometers (Fomine, 2006: 16). The area is bounded to the north by Menoua Division, to the southwest by Western Region and Ngen, and to the West by Lebialem Division (CMAM, file No 111/C., 1938). It has a total population of about 21,367 inhabitants following the Nkogho-Mbo census conducted in the year 2000 (N-MDS, 2000).

Concerning vegetation, the area under study is dominated by the equatorial rain forest. It also possesses several low and highlands. This has influenced the distribution of population in the region and settlement pattern. The area is surrounded by hills except the villages of Betengbeng and Sekange towards Elumba that are completely Low-lying. It is actually hilly around Lekwe-Eque, Banto and Dinte, with altitudes ranging from 300 metres to 1200 metres. Dinte is the highest point with an altitude of 1200 metres (Lekianko, 1995: 5). The Nkongho-Mbo people who inhabit this diverse geographical setting also have diverse historical background.

Concerning early history, there has always been a great contradiction relating to the claims of the origin of Mbo as an ethnic entity. Published and

<sup>1</sup> The use of Nkongho-Mbo and Nkongho in this paper all refers to the land and the people of the studied area.

unpublished sources reveal different information concerning the origin and migration of Mbo. Even within the Mbo group itself, there are significant differences in relation to the origin of different lineages. According to the assessment report written by J.W.C. Rutherford in 1923, the Mangan originated from Bangante. Assuming both Nkongwa and Mangan to be Bantus-speaking people, Rutherford [2] believed that their place of origin was in Northern Congo and their line of migration to their mountain homes was by way of the Lower Mubangai (Rutherford, 1923: 112). He further suggested that the trace of this migration was lost, and that it was only among the Mangan that memory of descent from plateau showed that movement had been from east to west.

There is enough justification to suggest that the Mbos are of Bantu-speaking origin. T. Eyongetah and R. Brian put it clearly that "in this region, we find important Bantus people: the Maka, Bakossi and the Mbos (Eyongetah and Brian, 1974: 4). Even though some lineages within the Mbo group claim different origin, many writers in the area are of the opinion that the Mbo as an ethnic entity originated from Ngoe. Other coastal ethnic groups of Cameroon that share this common ancestry with the Mbos are, Bafaw, Bakundu, Bakossi, Abo, Balundu, Balong, Bakaka and Bareko (Ngalame, 1995: 51). All these people claim a common ancestor - Ngoe - and take Manenguba area to the east as the cradle land of their origin. Ngoe is said to have originated from ancient Egypt. His migration took him to Libya and Central African Republic before arriving Cameroon.

According to tradition of origins, the Nkongho-Mbos do not have a common ancestor. Lekwe, Njungo and Lebock royal families claim to have originated from Ndungatete (Fidelis Fonkeng, interview, 10 November 2020). As they arrived Lekwe in Lower Nkongho-Mbo, Fonwung of Lebock continued to his present site. Meanwhile, Fonjungo and Fonven remained at Lekwe. But because of misunderstanding that almost led the chiefs to war Fonjungo migrated to Ngungalah in the Bamileke region. He later moved from Ndungalah to his present site, Njungo, because of abundance palm oil found in the area.

#### **The Genesis of Catholic Mission in Nkongho-Mbo**

Irrespective of the fact that Catholic Missionaries were the last to step foot on the Cameroonian soil, they championed the evangelisation process in Nkongho-Mbo. The Nkongho-Mbo natives

<sup>2</sup> Rutherford was a British Colonial Administrator who worked in the Mamfe Division in the early 1920s. He visited the Mbo area that in those early days was included in the Mamfe Division. Until this day, there are eyewitnesses in Mbo who are testifying that they saw Rutherford during their youthful days.

who returned home from the coastal plantations introduced Catholicism in the area around 1910. Three groups of people can be identified as having led the way for implantation and conversion of the faithful in the area. These were the Catholic practitioners, the Mill Hill Missionaries and the Franciscan Sisters from Shisong.

The first category, the early converts or catholic practitioners were a curious and interesting group to start this discussion with because these were the first Nkongho-Mbo indigenous people to seek job opportunities in the German plantations. While in the plantations, away from their homes, the Catholic faith was introduced to them. They received the faith with great enthusiasm and became baptised Christians. Upon completion of their various tenures of work at the plantation, these gentlemen did no longer stay long in the coast. They were filled with zeal to return to their birthplace and spread the recently acquired doctrine. Although these gentlemen were many in number, the conspicuous ones worth noting, though not in order of precedence, include Andrew Fonsa-Etoke, Paul Fotabong and Stanislaus Nkeng. Gabriel Ngwansang of the Bamenda Grassfields accompanied them voluntarily (Fomine, 2002: 90).

In 1911, these early converts of Nkongho-Mbo opened a small out station at Esegengong. With the little knowledge of the German Language, they were enthusiastic to impart the knowledge they had acquired to the rest of the Nkongho-Mbo people. They were also anxious to teach the natives about the new religious faith they had acquired from the plantation. They organised doctrine classes where they taught the catechumens in the German Language. The number of catechumens was not encouraging because few natives could hear or speak the German Language fluently (Michael Fotabong, Aged 81, interview, 22 November 2020).

In 1918, this same group opened a vernacular school where they taught doctrine classes in Lekongho [3]. The school was in two sections; section one was for the youths and section two for the adults. In section one they taught the youths how to read the Bible, sing hymns and recite morning and evening prayers. While adults were taught doctrine classes orally. Before leaving for Mamfe in 1923, the catechumens were tested, as they arrived Mamfe, they were again tested by the Rev. Father to find out if they knew doctrine very well before receiving Baptism. Andrew Fonsa-Etoke took the following Nkongho-Mbo natives, Boniface Fomelack, Boniface Fotabong, Mathew Equanya and Andrew Epah, where they were tested and given Baptism.

<sup>3</sup> Lekongho is the most widely spoken language in Nkongho-Mbo Area.

The activities of these early converts attracted Rev. Fathers to Nkongho-Mbo, especially when the Baseng Mission was opened in 1926 with a total of 110 catechists (O'Neil, 1991: 75). The outstations of Mbo were to be supervised by occasional visits from one of the fathers from Baseng (CMAMD, file No. 26/1923, NAB, 1923: 14). In 1928, the first Rev. Father William from Baseng, visited Nkongho-Mbo. During his visit, Andrew Fonsa-Etoke saw that majority of Christians were coming from Mbetta right up to Esegengong, he decided to seek permission from the Rev. father where another small mission station was opened at Eseguelong in 1928. Anthony Esuama, a native of Upper Nkongho, headed this small mission station (CMAM, file No. SRR, 1937).

Besides, four other small mission stations were opened at Sekangha, Ngieze, Njungo and Lebock. These new mission stations increased the number of Christians and spurred the catechist - Fonsa-Etoke to constantly appeal to the visiting fathers for a main mission to be opened in the area with a resident priest. In 1930, the Parish priest of Baseng, V. Anthony visited the region and studied the possibility of opening a mission there. The Rev. Father had a fruitful discussion with Fonsa-Etoke and Stanislaus Nkeng who were the head Christians at the time. After the discussion, the Rev. Father promised them a parish with resident priests.

The first mission was opened in Mbetta in 1936. As the number of Christians increased, however, since there was no resident priest, the Christians spent important feast days such as Easter Sunday, first Friday devotion of every month and Assumption day at Ossing (CMAM, file No. SRR, 1937). The Christians of this area had to spend days and nights on the road, trekking through tortuous, to participate in such ceremonies. As time went on, the number of Christians attending religious feast days out of Nkongho-Mbo greatly impressed the Rev. Fathers. They then decided to always celebrate every first Friday of the monthly devotion at Mbetta-Mbo. Moved by the peoples' interest in God's word, His Lordship Bishop Peter Rogan (a great figure who opened the first Catholic Mission in Mbetta in 1936) who was the Bishop of Buea Diocese in 1925 in one of his sermons he said "if I give birth to a priest in the next year or so, I shall give him to the people of Mbetta" (Lekianko, 1995: 51).

The people of Nkongho-Mbo received this news triumphantly and waited impatiently for a speedy and safe delivery of this mission. Within six months, the Bishop announced that he had received two new priests, namely Fathers Mathew Nabben and Peter Jacobs. On 17 December 1936, Bishop Rogan appointed Father Mathew Nabben a resident priest to the newly opened Mbetta parish. He was later on joined by Father Peter Jacobs on 30 May 1937 and on October 1937, Rev. Father Anthony Von Amerigon followed

(CMAM, file No. SRR, 1937). The year 1936 was so important in the lives of the people of Nkongho-Mbo because it marked the establishment of a permanent mission station in their region and the establishment of the Mill Hill Missionaries in Nkongho-Mbo. These missionaries enhanced inter-chiefdom cooperation through evangelisation.

It has been stated that the process of evangelization started in Nkongho-Mbo as early as 1910. Once started, the spread of Christianity became rapid in the area. Between 1911 and 1922, the process of evangelisation in the area was handled primarily by the lay missionaries. These lay missionaries who were natives from the plantations opened up small outstations in parts of Nkongho-Mbo where they did intensive preaching. On important feast days such as the feast of Assumption, and Christmas Day, they prepared able-bodied Christians and catchments who could trek to either Dschang or Baseng, to go to these big mission stations and receive the sacraments. Between 1924 and 1936, the work of the catechists who worked in these outstations were occasionally supervised by the visiting Rev. Fathers from Baseng (CMAM, file No. SRR, 1936).

Another reason for the rapid growth of Christianity in Nkongho-Mbo area was the strategy adopted by the missionaries in opening up schools and churches simultaneously. The opening up of the first Catholic school in Mbetta in 1938 played a particular role. This enhanced the process of evangelisation as the word of God quickly diffused into the Bangwa, Ngen and Upper Nkongho areas, on the grounds that these were principal areas that sent pupils to the school during the first years of creation.

By the end of 1937 Fathers Nabben and Anthony Von Amerigon who replaced Father Jacobs, had made several tours round Nkongho-Mbo villages and preached the gospel to the people. These visits led to the Baptism of 60 adults, 30 children and 31 people who were about to die, (CMAM, file No. SRR, 1937) so that their souls will not perish but go straight to Heaven. In December 1937, Bishop Rogan visited Nkongho-Mbo and celebrated a Pontifical High Mass in the newly constructed church, which was then dedicated to and placed under the patronage of St. Theresa of the Child Jesus. This is the reason why the first church, the school and health center bear the name of St. Theresa. The visit of the Bishop gave new impetus to the religious work of the missionaries. They were spurred and went ahead to convert many people. In 1938, the number of catechumens increased from 120 to 276 with 11 catechists in different outstations. The number of Christians confirmed by Bishop Rogan that year was sixty-two and seven marriages were contracted.

The 1940s marked a turning point in the growth and activities of the church in the area as the

missionaries had succeeded to penetrate Upper-Nkongho. In 1942 the church of Njungo was constructed to serve the Christian population of Nzeletete, Mbenfeh, and Njungo itself. By 1946, the church of Lebock was also constructed. More outstations were later opened in the Bangwa area and precisely at Esoh-Attah, Lewoh, and Fonge. The Mbetta parish priest occasionally visited them. The opening of these outstations greatly increased the number of converts as the long distance-trekking from Lebang and Upper-Nkongho temporarily stopped. From 1940 to about 1953, the number of converts increased from 822 to about 2,509 under the supervision of three Rev. Fathers – Arrey Kerkohit, Cornelius Bokema and Steinnen (CMAM, file No. SRR, 1940). The total number of Christians who were confirmed by Bishop Rogan this same period was 1265.

In 1962, Charles Acha, the first Nweh native was ordained into the priesthood in Mbetta Parish. His ordination was followed by the consecration of Rev. Sister Rose Nkie Fotabong in 1964 and that of Rev. Sister Odelia, Mbong in 1968. In 1971, another significant event occurred, the first native of Mbo, Cornelius Fontem Esua, was also ordained into priesthood. Followed by Rev. Father Polycarp Fonjock in 1977, Elias Fonji 1978, and Fonsa Sebastian among others. In 1982, Rev. Esua was appointed to be the first Bishop of the newly created Kumbo Diocese. In the year 2006, this Bishop of Kumbo became the Archbishop of Bamenda Ecclesiastical Diocese. A position he occupies until this day. The consecration of these Mbo natives sparked off interest in the priestly vocation among the Mbo. The Catholic missionaries greatly improved the health situation of the Mbo. The missionaries did so because they were aware of the importance of population growth in the economic development of the area. They were also aware that if death rate remained as high as it was in the area prior to their arrival, then all efforts to improve the local economy will be abortive. The efforts of the Catholic Missionaries led to the opening of a health centre in Mbetta in 1964. Few years to the opening of the new health centre and in the subsequent years that followed, adequate health enhancement strategies were adopted by the missionaries.

### **Good Health Enhancement Strategies**

The Franciscan sisters whose headquarters was in Shisong, Bui Division, headed the Catholic Mission Health Centre in Nkongho-Mbo. The Health Centre was the brainchild of Rev. Father John Altink who was Mbetta Parish Priest from 1957 to 1963. At the time, there was high infant mortality in Nkongho-Mbo area. The nearest hospitals to Nkongho-Mbo were in Dschang and Mamfe and there was no motor road (CMAM, file No. SRR, 1967). In 1959, Rev. Father John Altink revealed that it was at Mbetta that he had his greatest temptation in life. When he had to trek for four hours from Mbetta-Mbo to Foreke Middle in the

Bangwa territory to administer a pregnant woman the sacrament of Extreme Unction. Shortly after he had administered the last rite of the Church, the woman died but the baby in her womb was still alive. Rev. Father Altink said, he was tempted to operate the corpse and rescue the child. But he could not do so because there were no experts around and medical equipment. More so, the village was far from any imaginable hospital. From that day, he set his mind firmly on building a health centre in the parish.

In 1960, Father John Altink applied to the Cameroon Government for permission to build a health centre in Mbetta-Mbo. The permission was granted. By this time, the rate of infant mortality in Nkongho-Mbo and its environs was estimated to be 80 percent. With this permission granted, the site was then chosen to construct the health centre. From the start, a two-room house was constructed for that purpose for the main time. As time went on, the rooms were added. The local Mbo population assisted greatly in the construction. Mbo natives provided mud bricks, thatches and labour for the building of the health centre. After putting up the structure, there was no expertise to treat the patients, no medical equipment and no drugs. This prompted Father Altink to ask the government to provide a resident nurse.

On 10 July 1961, the government responded positively and sent a midwife called Margaret Obi (CMAM, file No. SRR, 1961). When she arrived Mbetta-Mbo, there was no house to accommodate her so Father Altink pleaded again to the local population and a small house was constructed for her. This lady worked well for the time being, but since she was not married, she soon became pregnant and left for Mamfe. In the same year, another midwife was sent, the same thing happened and she too left. Thus, the initial attempt to set an effective medical service in Nkongho-Mbo was strangled by total promiscuity. A ghost of a health centre stood in shame, hallowed, empty and without personnel.

In 1963, there was an outbreak of epidemic in Mbetta-Mbo in which people thought it was chicken pox, measles or dysentery. Many children died, very few who were taken to Dschang survived. Given this situation, Father Altink said, "if truly God exist in this place, then I promise the people of Nkongho-Mbo two things, a permanent medical personnel and a motor road." (CMAM, file No. SRR, 1963). He then wrote a letter to the medical officer at Mamfe on 4 April 1963, informing him and stressing that if immediate measures were not taken, to redress the situation, then many more children would die in Mbo. On 9 April 1963, the medical officer responded positively by sending drugs and instructions on how the Rev. Fathers were to administer them. Even though, there was success, health personnel were still highly needed. The Rev. Fathers who replaced Father John Altink turned their eyes to

Bishop Jules Peteers, who appealed to the Franciscan sisters at the Shisong Hospital for assistance. Within few weeks, the Bishop consented and announced the building of a convent. The Rev. Fathers applied for foreign aid and got a generous grant from MEMISA. Mbo villagers also contributed an amount of one thousand francs each and helped transport the building material from Dschang to Mbetta in Mbo territory.

In August 1963, the Bishop was informed that the convent was ready. He sent words immediately informing the Rev. Fathers that Rev. sisters were to be sent there very soon from Shisong hospital. In response, he caused the posting of Rev. sisters from the Shisong hospital to Mbetta. On 22 July 1964, the first two Rev. sisters, Innocentia Ngu and Clara Epeh arrived Mbo territory. They were accompanied by Bishop Jules Peteers, Rev. Father Herman Von Holf and Mother Asumpta. The Rev. Sisters started work in the health centre on 27 June 1964 (CMAM, file No. SRR, 1970). Within few years of hard work, the prevailing infant mortality rate started to dwindle and finally dropped to minimal. In the latter years, the Catholic Health Centre fought significantly in fighting against the sleeping sickness that plagued Mbo region.

In 1970, sleeping sickness that had earlier been discovered in Fontem by Dr. Nicasio Triolo in 1966 was also discovered in Mbo territory. The sleeping sickness (*Trypanosomiasis*) became a major health problem in the area. In 1974, the Ministry of Health of the United Republic of Cameroon was alerted, when hundreds of people were tested and found positive. A team of medical personnel was sent and the Catholic Mission Health Centre Mbetta was declared a sleeping sickness treatment center that same year. But the incidence of sleeping sickness kept rising and many deaths and permanent disabilities resulted from the disease itself and from the toxic effect of the curative drug ARSOBAL that was used to treat it. From 1974 to 1979, the nurses from Fontem Preventive Medicine Sector and the Government assisted the Mbo nurses in treating sleeping sickness. Five different tests were conducted, and three serological tests (Ntem Luke, Aged 62, Rev. Sister, midwife and matron of Catholic Mission Health Centre, Mbetta, 16 November 2020). One of the tests was read on the spot while two were read overseas. All zero positive patients were tested with two different diagnostic tests in order to identify *trypanosomiasis*. Traps sprayed with tsetse flies insecticides were put at strategic points in all Mbo villages, which helped to reduce tsetse flies population, and the sickness it transmitted.

When the assistance of Fontem nurses ended in 1979, another team came in. These were research doctors from London School of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene with their base of tsetse fly research laboratory in Bristol. Rev. Sisters Gisela and Hildegard led this team (CMAM, file No. SRR, 1980). On 11 May 1980,

the team together with Gregory Elad Esindege, a native of Mbo, introduced the Primary Health Care in Nkongho-Mbo (Gregory Elad Esindege, aged 52, interview, 7 November 2020). In April 1981, another volunteer Helen Doyle joined the team. They toured round the villages explaining details about Primary Health Care, promoting hygiene and sensitizing the people on how to totally eradicate the sleeping sickness disease. Many more local workers were employed by Dr. Dawson. Rev. Sister Xaveria and Mary Gribben later joined the team. In 1983, the team moved to Mbokambo still within Mbo territory, where diseases were so rampant. There, the children clinic center was established, which later rose to an aid post in 1985 and became a health center in 1996.

Regular seminars were opened for all health committee workers of aid posts of Tabongkwa, Etoodi and Ekwenzo, including eleven quarters in Nkongho-Mbo from 1984 to 1986. The aim of these seminars was to explain to the participants the role of village health committee, general health situation, nutrition promotion and the use of tsetse fly traps. From the time Rev. Sisters began work in the health centre up till 30 December 1985, the number of admission stood at 7,431 for infants and 8,642 for adults, given a total of 16,173 admissions. Further records also showed that since 1974, a total number of 6,564 people have been tested and retreated for sleeping sickness in Mbo territory. From 1992 to date, no sleeping sickness case has so far been registered in Mbo area, thanks to the efforts of the Catholic Missionaries. The killer disease has partially been eradicated. This has been one of the greatest achievements of the Catholic Missionaries in Nkongho-Mbo.

The increase of outpatients in 1999 could be attributed to the fact that the Catholic Mission Health Centre Mbetta was the only efficient health centre in Nkongho-Mbo, which attracted many patients. The number reduced from 463 to 378 due to the establishment of the State or Government Health Centre at Njungo and Essoh-Attah in the 1990s. However, Catholic Mission Health Centre Mbetta remained one of the most efficient centres in the region with eighteen workers.

The experts from the London School of Tropical Medicine greatly improved the nutritional situation of Nkongho-Mbo people as all households were advised to have a family vegetable garden and so they did. With all households having a vegetable garden where a variety of vegetables were cultivated, the rate of anaemia dropped drastically in the entire region. A drop in the number of anaemia cases also significantly reduced child mortality rate among the Nkongho-Mbo people.

It is obvious that an efficient and reliable health care system is an influential factor in establishing

a good and healthy economy. Improved local health care system introduced by the Catholic Missionaries improved the life expectancy of Nkongho-Mbo people. As life expectancy improved, the missionaries felt it necessary to improve the agricultural sector of the economy in order to keep the people busy. The first taken by the missionaries to improve the local economy of Nkongho-Mbo was the introduction of new crops.

### **Catholic Missionaries and Agricultural Activities in Nkongho-Mbo**

The Catholic Missionaries introduced new crops and farming methods in the Nkongho-Mbo area. In 1938, Rev. Father Richard who visited the area and other fathers helped in felling the trees that shaded the mission area. Here the Rev. Father set up gardens, which acted as model farms where new food crops and fruits were experimented. They planted new fruits trees such as mango, paw-paw, oranges, pineapples, guava, pear and lime fruits. They also experimented the cultivation of vegetables such as tomatoes, onion and yellow pepper on the garden. The Rev Fathers employed some natives as yard boys to take care of this garden. Some of these new crop species were later distributed to the converts and the non-converts by the yard boys who constantly stole them. This led to the quick spread of these new species in the region.

Still in 1938, Rev. Father Richard also introduced the rearing of bees. He planted certain species of trees around the mission yard where he placed a "wooden box" and rubbed the inside with a bit of honey that attracted the bees. With this idea, he became the best honey producer in the whole of Nkongho-Mbo. The local population became very enthusiastic about this opportunity and quickly joined in bee farming. The quality of honey produced was good and people were excited because honey was used as a curative medicine against convulsion and other diseases in children. Honey attracted people into Nkongho-Mbo to the extent that the natives of the neighbouring village flocked in to purchase in high quantity. It is said that the honey sales fetched the honey-producers a fortune and thus improved their financial situation remarkably. Rev. Father Richard also introduced horticulture, which was the planting of beautiful flowers like ntana and hibiscus around the mission compound.

In 1938, Anthony Etaben, a Catholic Christian and a native of Banyang from Mamfe area who was the cook of the Rev. Fathers in Mbetta, introduced the whitish variety of cassava in Nkongho-Mbo (CMAM, file No SRR, 1938). This added to the variety of food crops cultivated in the area. Within few years, the cassava, which was initially cultivated as a subsidiary staple, became a major staple crop. It did not only serve as a food crop, but its products such as garri, and water-fufu that were introduced later became important sources of income to the natives. Meanwhile, Hellene (a European lady) who was a World Health Organization

(WHO) worker introduced the reddish variety in 1978 when she visited the area. From this period, both varieties became one of the staple foods widely eaten in Nkongho-Mbo. Beside these food crops, the cash crops introduced by the Catholic Missionaries were more income generating.

In 1948, Rev. Father Cornelius Stellan introduced Robusta coffee in Nkongho-Mbo. He planted it around the mission compound where he is said to have hulled it locally, dried and consumed in tea. When he realised that the coffee was doing well on the fertile soils of the area, he advised the natives to nurse some of the coffee seedlings and transplant. For the coffee to properly diffuse, the early farmers who had acquired it nursed a considerable number of seedlings that they sold to farmers both within and without the Nkongho-Mbo area.

In the 1970s, Nkongho-Mbo farmers derived huge incomes from coffee sales due to the hulling mill that Rev. Father Henry Slott introduced in the area. In 1976, he hulled farmers' coffee, transported it to Melong and that fetched farmers a total sum of 12,000,000F CFA. One informant Michael Fotabong, who was one of the prosperous coffee farmers, testified to have earned a sum of 147,000F CFA from coffee sales that year. Another informant Albert Fortah testified to have earned a total sum of 220,000F CFA. Other prosperous farmers who also had high yields during the 1976 sales were namely Gregory Efu, Mathew Ebah, Bartholomew Fonkeng and Bartholomew Fogunzong. Some farmers who had low yields are said to have earned just 40,000F CFA." This huge income encouraged many farmers to plant more coffee.

Another important cash crop cultivated in Nkongho-Mbo was cocoa. Two varieties were cultivated, namely 'German' and 'American' cocoa. The precise year of the introduction of the 'German' variety remains a matter of dispute among informants, but eyewitnesses were of the opinion that the Catholic Missionaries introduced 'American' cocoa in the area in 1950. The missionaries introduced the 'American' variety because it bears faster than the 'German' variety.

For the 'American' cocoa to properly diffuse, the missionaries patiently taught the natives how to nurse the seedlings and transplant. When the Nkongho-Mbo natives realised that the cultivation of 'American' cocoa was more lucrative than the 'German' type, they gave priority to its cultivation. In the 1960s, black pod diseases became so destructive to the extent that the missionaries decided to organise cocoa schools in villages to teach, demonstrate and assist farmers to overcome their organic problems" (CMAM, file No SRR, 1960).

The lessons were so successful that six farmers bought their own spraying cans and preventive

medicine against the black pod diseases. Farmers were also taught new agricultural methods, notably intensive agriculture, where one crop could be planted on a piece of land, leading to high yields. Income generated from coffee and cocoa farming swelled the purchasing power of the peasant farmers in particular and the state revenue as a whole. This in turn fostered the trend of development of Nkongho-Mbo area. Peasant cash crop farmers used their money to pay their hospital bills, children fees, buy food items, cutlasses, household utensils and other varieties from the market.

The price of coffee and cocoa has always been fluctuating and when this happens, the purchasing power of the peasant farmers is affected. Such a change is always reflected in the socio-economic development of Nkongho-Mbo area. This is possible since commercial farming has an impact on the production and marketing of food crops. Logically, we see that the local markets, which are concerned in the marketing of food crops, will be affected. In 1982, the cocoa sector witnessed an increase in price and this trend continued until 1986 when the economic crisis [4] plagued this sector (Nkenganyi, 2001: 44). Cocoa production fell as many farmers became discouraged and some abandoned their cocoa farms. In 1994, the devaluation of the CFA currency also affected this sector negatively as prices of inputs doubled without a corresponding increase in the price of cocoa. Within the Nkongho-Mbo, peasant farmers gave priority to the production of oil palms.

<sup>4</sup>During the 1970s and early 1980s, the economy of Cameroon experienced a boom. After 1985, the economy was affected by the world economic recession of the time. The recession manifested itself in several ways. For instance, many industries were closed down in the country, there was widespread unemployment, the government closed down many unprofitable commercial enterprises like banks, inflation rate increased, cash crops cultivation was almost abandoned, farmers suffered irregular of their crops, government reduced national budget, the internal and external debts of Cameroon increased, there was spread poverty in both urban and rural areas in Cameroon, many schools and hospitals became poorly equipped as government reduced expenditure on them and the government also reduced expenditure on out of station allowances. The recession came about as a result of both internal and external factors. Some of the internal factors were as follows: the country was affected some ills like corruption, bribery, embezzlement, and extravagance, capital flight, lack of accountability by some government officials, high defence expenditure by the government and the ghost town phenomenon. Some external factors that led to the economic recession had to do with the 1994 devaluation of France CFA, the imposition of Structural Adjustment Program on the government of Cameroon by the World Bank, a drop in the price of crude oil in the mid-1980s, and the collapse of the communism in Eastern Europe.

From the beginning, local palm oil processing had been the main occupation of the Nkongho-Mbos. Two species of oil palms grow in this area, namely the wild oil palms that grow in the area since time immemorial and the American' oil palms that were introduced by Rev. Father Martin Muma in 1985. Rev. Father Muma introduced the 'American' oil palm because it takes a shorter duration for those palms to bear fruits as opposed to the wild species that bear after several months. Another reason was because oil palms have multiple functions. They are used for making soup, cooking fat, local broom and the shell is used as fuel. They also serve as cattle meals. The consumption of palm wine and palm oil in local markets is often very high.

It was due to the above reasons that Rev. Father Muma opened a large American oil palm estate about two miles from the mission. Within a few years, some peasant farmers realised that the American palms were doing well, shorter in height and easier to harvest as opposed to the wild oil palms. They contacted the Rev. Father, and some of the seedlings he had nursed were sold to these farmers. These farmers started nursing the seedlings too, where some were sold to farmers both within and without Nkongho-Mbo region. The American palms quickly spread in the area, and today, many youths of Nkongho-Mbo area are seriously engaged in the American oil palm cultivation. Some of them have opened many hectares of farms for themselves. The Catholic Missionaries did not only introduced new crops in Nkongho-Mbo, they equally introduced new species of domestic animals such as Guinea pigs, rabbits, pigs and fowls. These animals were reared principally for marketing.

In the early 1990s, Rev. Father Jude Thaddeus Mbi introduced the modern piggeries in Nkongho-Mbo. He reared a good number of piggeries, which he usually slaughtered and sold periodically to the natives and non-natives." That marked the beginning of modern piggeries rearing, as a good number of natives imitated him. This also helped improve the natives nutrition and generated the mission an enormous sum of money. The natives who transported the pigs during the rainy season earned some money from the Rev. Father due to the bad state of roads. It is evident to deduce that, the new species of crops and animals that were introduced in Nkongho-Mbo by the Catholic Missionaries, greatly improved the living standard of the natives. Most of them could send their children to school and pay their hospital bills without much difficulty. The massive production of these crops led to trade transactions in the entire region (Fonkeng-Esua Christopher, Aged 60, interview, 8 November 2020).

The trading and commercial activities improved by the Catholic Missionaries had profound impact on Nkongho-Mbo economy. Before the arrival of the Catholic missionaries, the Nkongho-Mbo had

difficulties in dealing with the colonial currency. For instance, after the defeat of the Germans in the First World War, the German Mark remained in use until after 1922 when it was prohibited as a legal tender in both British and French Cameroon. The Mark however remained the currency in use in Nkongho-Mbo until 1923. But with the introduction of the British currency in the area, it created another new problem where the traders found it extremely difficult to trade with the neighbouring villages. Worst of all, between those in the British and French side across the colonial frontiers, where different currencies were in circulation. This problem was solved, thanks to the arrival of the Catholic missionaries, where some of them taught the local population how to use the British pounds, pence and shillings. Even though the missionaries taught the Nkongho-Mbos the use of British currency, they still went ahead to discourage long-distance trade between the Nkongho-Mbos, Banyangs and the Ndungalah people. This was because of many kilometres that the local traders usually covered on foot for many days. Also, these local traders were often badly treated in the French zone whenever they went there for trade transactions. These were some of the reasons why the missionaries advised them to stop this long-distance trade because it was not really beneficial. The Rev. Fathers instead encouraged the natives to trade within the chiefdoms and the Bangwas of Essoh-Attah and the Ngwatta who were closer to them. Also because they were both using the same currency (British currency).

The introduction of Communauté Financière Africaine (CFA) Franc that squeezed out the use of the pound sterling in 1962 opened the Nkongho-Mbo to the outside world, where they traded with relative ease. Again, this period coincided with the moment when the cash crops introduced in Nkongho-Mbo had started producing high yields. This is the reason why Rev. Fathers once again encouraged trans-frontier trade, where they themselves transported the produce of the local population to Melong for sale. Within few years, some of the villagers copied this example from the Rev. Fathers and started carrying their produce to Melong themselves. Their constant trading with the Francophone Mbo (Ngwatta, Santchou and Melong) and the quantity of coffee, cocoa and palm products that the farmers of Nkongho-Mbo were able to produce and sell, was so encouraging that, it attracted the attention of the private license buying agents from other areas to Nkongho-Mbo. Traders started coming in from the above mentioned areas and from the Bamileke region to buy produce directly from Nkongho-Mbo. The result of these commercial developments in the 1980s and 1990s was the emergence of new business elite in Nkongho-Mbo.

This new group of businessmen comprised Lucas Forka-Ngoh, James Nkong, Victor Tumbu, Augustine Fonji, Bellami Fontem-Mekangha, Augustine Tumbu and others. These traders opened



small provision stores where they sold imported goods. In 1996, Rev. Father Mbi also opened a provision store for the sales of articles such as kerosene, rice, soap, maggi cube, fresh fish and others. The Rev. Father encouraged the Nkongho-Mbo traders not to be buying goods only from Santchou and Melong, but to go further to other towns like Kumba and Douala where imported goods were sold at cheaper rate. These easy movements of commercial activities in and out of Nkongho-Mbo were because of the good motorable road that was dug in the area from the 1960s, through the effort and support of the Catholic Mission.

### **Development of Road Infrastructure**

The Catholic missionaries also showed a lot of interest on road construction because this was an important aspect of economic development, as R. B. Bunnet clearly puts it: "The effective development of commerce and trade on a regional, inter-regional or international mainly depends upon efficient transport and communication system" (Bunnet, 1973: 330). As earlier mentioned that before the arrival of the Catholic missionaries, the Nkongho-Mbo had no motor road but footpaths. It was difficult for the Rev. Fathers to preach the word of God within and out of Nkongho-Mbo. Also, with the increasing production of cash crops in the area, a motor road was needed for the transportation of these products to where they were to be sold. For this reason, the Catholic missionaries were bent to dis-enclave the area.

In December 1960, Rev. Father John Brummelhuis arrived Mbeta parish in Nkongho-Mbo region. During sermon on 25th December 1960, he said: "one of the greatest handicaps to the development of Nkongho-Mbo was the lack of a motorable road. He put forward that missionaries would have more converts if the area was opened to the outside world. I therefore promise the Nkongho-Mbo people, that within few years, they will hear the sound of a vehicle".

In March 1961, Father Brummelhuis decided to target the road from Ndungalah to Upper Nkongho-Mbo, which was to reach Lower Nkongho-Mbo in due course. The Rev. Father rightly anticipated that for this giant project to be realised, a huge sum of money was needed. He decided to rally the local population of Nkongho-Mbo and reminded them about his earlier promise of dis-enclaving the area. The local population was happy and thus responded positively. Each adult male contributed the sum of 2,000F CFA while females contributed the sum of 1,000F CFA each. This money was collected and given to the Rev. Father who hired a caterpillar that dug the road from Ndungalah to Lebock in 1964.

As the road got to Lebock, at the boundary between Upper and Lower Nkongho-Mbo, money got finished and so the project terminated. The natives were once again asked to contribute, but the local population

of Upper Nkongho-Mbo refused to contribute on the grounds that the road had reached their area. Rev. Father Brummelhuis faced some difficulties to continue the road right down to Lower Nkongho. This was because the Fontem-Dschang road project was already on progress. This wonderful work of Rev. Father John Brummelhuis made the local population to nickname him as 'Father John-the-Road'. (Kungang, 2003: 45) From this period up till 1966 that Father John left, no attempt was made again to continue the construction of the road.

When Rev. Father James Doland visited Nkongho-Mbo in 1968 where he met Father Tom Towmey the parish priest, they decided to continue the works of Father John-the-Road, which was intended to construct the road from Lebock to Lower Nkongho. As they were still making up their plans, Rev. Father John Molena another resident priest came in 1969. By this time, the Singem people had dug their road right up to Basekwe, a neighbour of Lower Nkongho. The Rev. Fathers discovered that it was easier to construct the road from Basekwe to Lower Nkongho than from Lebock.

In the same year, the Rev. Fathers and the people of Lower Nkongho negotiated with the Kumba Community Development (herein after referred to as KCD) and a motorable road was dug from Basekwe to Dinte in 1971. In 1978, the road was dug right down to the Mission centre. From 1978 to 1999, the motorable road had not reached Lekwe chieftdom, the only landlocked area remaining in Lower Nkongho-Mbo. In 1999, Chief Fonven Andrew Ekesangha of Lekwe village appealed to the Rev. Fathers and the entire population of Lower Nkongho, for the extension of the road from the terminus to his palace. The eight-kilometre road was finally completed in the year 2001 where it was dug right to the chief's palace. With the dis-enclavement of the area, development in trade and preaching of the Gospel increased tremendously. Many traders came in with Lorries to buy cocoa and palm oil in great quantity. The construction of these roads linking Nkongho-Mbo with her neighbours also eased communication in the entire region.

### **Unprecedented Provision of Hydro-electricity in Mbeta in 1996**

Another important development brought to Nkongho-Mbo area by the Catholic Missionaries was the establishment of a hydro-electricity in Mbeta in 1996. At first the Catholic Mission depended on thermal electricity as a source of power. Thermal electricity could not supply enough energy to the indigenes of the area. So light was only used by the mission and the health centre. In most cases, it was not used every day because of the high cost of petrol. Rev. Father Thaddeus Mbi initiated the idea of a hydro-electricity in Nkongho-Mbo area. The largest river in the area, river *mekooh*, which was nearer to the mission

was surveyed and realised that it was adequate for the purpose of generating the hydro-electricity. Rev. Father Mbi then contacted the Buea diocese in 1992 where Bishop Pius Awa gave him the permission to go ahead with the project. A huge sum of money was raised from the Buea diocese, Mbetta main mission, outstations and the natives.

Rev. Father Mbi brought electricity technicians from Shisong, Bui Division, who started the project. The natives supplied sand and stones, within two years, the project were completed. On 7<sup>th</sup> August 1995 at about 7: 30 p.m., the technicians steamed the light and the whole area partially became daylight. About three quarter of the local population went out of their houses to thank the Rev. Father for what he did to them (Augustine Tumbu, Aged 60, interview, 10 October 2020).

The patients who were admitted at the Catholic Mission Health Centre Mbetta, used to pass their nights with bush lamps at times or sometimes in absolute darkness, were then able to use the light that was generated by the hydro- electricity. The light was distributed to the natives who lived around the Catholic Mission after paying a sum of 25, 000F CFA (Augustine Foligwe, aged 58, interview, 10 October 2020).

The electricity brought new developments. The introduction of the electric-powered mill in 1996 by Rev. Father Mbi, used for the grinding of maize. Since maize till date remains one of the Nkongho-Nbo staple foodstuffs. Maize and beans cakes were usually appreciated during funeral entertainments in the area. The natives showed a lot of enthusiasm in what the Rev. Father did to them. Large quantities of maize that were initially impossible to grind manually were done with the machine at very low costs. The natives who lived around the mission area used the power generated by the electricity to run their bars where they sold many bottles of beer per day. This fetched them huge sums of money.

### **Introduction of Radio Telephone Network**

In olden times, locally carved wooden drums were the principal communication instruments used for the delivery of messages in the entire Nkongho-Mbo region. Those who did not use the drum probably as a result of long distances had to trek for many hours or days in order to relay their messages in appropriate areas. Although there was a motorable road in the area in the 1970s and 1980s, there was no stand-by transport vehicle that could always transport people in times of emergency. The only vehicle that was always readily available was that of the Rev. Fathers. Being that it was very costly to fuel, people rarely hired it for transport and communication purposes.

In the mid-1980s, the Bishop of Buea Diocese, Bishop Pius S. Awa extended the Buea radio telephone network to Nkongho-Mbo. The reason for extending the radio network to Nkongho-Mbo was to solve communication problem in the area. This is because not only the natives of the area were facing this problem, the Rev. Fathers and Rev. Sisters as well faced it. Even though the Rev. Fathers had a stand-by vehicle, the vehicle at times had a break down or insufficient fuel. Within this period of breakdown if the Rev. Fathers also had an emergency problem to solve out of Nkongho-Mbo, they had to cover the long distance by trekking. Therefore, if the Bishop had to extend this radio telephone network to this area, it was to help remedy this situation.

During the installation of the radio telephone network, the Bishop was accompanied by some Rev. Fathers and some technicians from Buea who were responsible for the practical installation of the radio telephone network in Nkongho-Mbo. They arrived Mbetta in a helicopter and received a hilarious welcome. The radio network was installed linking Nkongho-Mbo with other areas of the Southwest Province where Catholic mission stations were located, like Fontem, Kumba, Bangem, Nguti and others. The radio telephone network served the entire population of Nkongho-Mbo and her environs such as Foreke Down, Njoagwi and even part of Ngen. The radio was used in making obituary announcements and other emergency cases. Fortunately for the natives, the Rev. Fathers demanded very minimal amount of money merely for compensation purposes.

The few difficulties the villagers encountered in relation to the radio telephone network was the inability of some Rev. Fathers to sort out the various individuals to whom the messages were channeled to. But this particular obstacle was overcome following the introduction of mobile phones in Cameroon. From the year 2000 to 2001 only Father Ibeagha had a mobile phone in the whole of Lower Nkongho-Mbo. In the case where an individual needed to send an urgent message to the town, what he required to do was simply to contact the Rev. Father get his mobile phone and compensate him just for the number of minutes that he used. This recent development eased the communication system in Nkongho-Mbo.

### **CONCLUSION**

The primary motive for the establishment of Christian missions in Africa was of course religious. Africa was viewed by the Europeans as one universal den of desolation and misery, partly because of slave trade. Africa was therefore a point of focus or attraction for European missionaries who wished to save the souls of Africans rescued from slavery by converting them to the Christian faith. In Cameroon, some of these missionary societies started establishing themselves even before the German colonial occupation. The first

Christian Mission to establish in Cameroon was the English Baptist Mission, which was later, followed by the American Presbyterian Mission and later, the Basel Mission. The Pallotine Catholic Missionaries were the last to set foot on the Cameroonian soil.

Although the Catholic Missionaries were the last to set foot on the Cameroonian soil, they were the first to reach Nkongho-Mbo territory in the mid-1930s. These Catholic missionaries paid close attention to the economic life of the Nkongho-Mbo people. They carried out a lot of economic development projects. By introducing new species of food crops such as pawpaw, oranges, mangoes and vegetables, this helped to improve the nutritive diet of the Rev. Fathers and the natives as well. Cocoa, coffee and American palms that were also introduced in the area, increased the income of the villagers, thus raising their standard of living. Trading activities in and out of the villages were also encouraged especially when the new cash crops started producing high yields. Most prosperous farmers started carrying their products out of the village for sale, which eventually led to the emergence of new businessmen in Nkongho-Mbo. Much was also done in the domain of roads that eased the movements of people in and out of the region. Farmers could then transport their produce with relative ease. Also, the introduction of radio telephone network facilitated the sending of messages.

For the Catholic Missionaries to successfully develop Nkongho-Mbo area, the natives of the area (both the elite and the home-based) should increase co-operation with the missionaries, as the missionaries have proven beyond doubt that the region cannot easily be developed economically without their contribution. In view of the motor road project, the Cameroonian Government should do something about because this region has been totally neglected by the government since many years. Also, those Nkongho-Mbo people who have resisted Christianity in general and Catholicism in particular should be converted in order to increase the Christian population. Some of those Christians who have withdrawn from the Church should go back. A significant increase in the Christian population will generate the Christian mission more income and probably increase the number of economic development projects that the mission would like to carry out in the area.

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