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RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE CONTRIBUTION OF CATHOLIC MISSIONARIES IN THE SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT OF NKONGHO-MBO 1936- 2001: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

***Forka Leypey Mathew Fomine**

History Department University of Buea, Cameroon

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**Corresponding author:*
Forka Leypey Mathew Fomine

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ABSTRACT

Essentially, this article examines the contribution of Catholic Missionaries in the social development of Nkongho-Mbo from 1936 to 2001. 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, giving birth to French-speaking and English-speaking Mbo. This study is focused primarily on the Nkongho-Mbo people who belong to the, English-speaking sector of the large Mbo ethnic group. The paper argues convincingly that in the absence of Catholic missionaries who arrived Nkongho-Mbo indifferent bands, there should have been very little or no social developments in the area during the period under study (1936-2001). The Catholic missionaries did quite much in the domain of education, health and electricity provision. For example, the health centre that they established in Mbetta in 1964 significantly reduced mortality rate in the area. More so, the education offered by the same missionaries, both at primary and post primary levels aided in reducing the rate of illiteracy in the entire Nkongho-Mbo area. The provision of hydro-electricity by the missionaries was also very striking. Nkongho-Mbo area where the hydroelectricity was provided became an area of interest to the neighbouring ethnic groups. The electricity did not only chase away darkness in Mbetta in the night but it also served as an important source of power. The use of electricity-powered mills to grind food items like corn, ground nuts, pepper and other items became widespread in the area. This article concludes that the Nkongho-Mbo people benefited remarkably from the presence of the Catholic missionaries in their area from 1936 to 2001.

INTRODUCTION

This paper is about the activities of the Catholic Missionaries in Nkongho-Mbo, Nguti Sub-Division, Kupe Mwaneguba Division, Southwest Province, Cameroon, and the way such activities contributed to the social development of the area. The paper commences by situating Nkongho-Mbo in its geographical and historical context. This serves as a background for the better understanding of the subject. After presenting the geographical and historical background of the Nkongho-Mbo before the coming of the Catholic Missionaries, the paper goes further to illuminate the kind of social development the Catholic Missionaries carried out in the region. The paper discusses how the Catholic faith was introduced in Nkongho-Mbo, and the methods used to spread the faith. It describes the activities of the early converts who were the first Nkongho-Mbo natives from the coastal plantation to introduce the Catholic faith in the region. Since then, Catholic Missionary activities have been led and controlled by the Mill Hill Missionaries (MHM) and the Franciscan Sisters who arrived Nkongho-Mbo in 1964. Some of the social developments that the Catholic Missionaries

carried out in the area include the creation of educational and health institutions, and the provision of hydro-electricity.

Geographical background of Nkongho-Mbo: Nkongho-Mbo lies in a hilly rain forested countryside in Nguti Sub-Division, Kupe-Muanenguba Division of the Southwest Province of Cameroon. The region is situated between latitude 5°19' and 5°22' and 9°56' N. It occupies a surface area of approximately 4,493 square kilometers. The area is bounded to the north by Menoua Division, to the southwest by Littoral Province and to the West by Lebialem Division. It has a total population of about 21,367 inhabitants following the Nkongho-Mbo census conducted in the year 2000. Concerning vegetation, the region 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. The area is surrounded by hills except the villages of Batengbeng 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. The Nkongho-Mbo people who inhabit this diverse geographical setting also have diverse historical background.

Historical background of Nkongho-Mbo: There has always been a great contradiction relating to the claims of the origin of Mbo as an ethnic entity. Published and 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 Rutherford in 1923, the Mangen originated from Bangante. Assuming both Nkongwa and Mangen to be Bantus-speaking people, Rutherford 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. He further suggested that the trace of this migration was lost, and that it was only among the Mangen 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. Even though some lineages within the Mbo group claim different origin, many writers 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. 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 Bayang. 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.

Marriage was one of those social institutions that existed before the coming of the Catholic Missionaries, wedded in with a lot of principles. It was the most apt means, by which individuals portrayed and defended maturity and wealth, obtained mutual support, procreated and reared children in the society. Four types of marriages could be identified in Nkongho-Mbo. Betrothal marriage as clearly put by Robert Brain was when a baby girl was betrothed at birth. This betrothal ceremony in Mbo involved the girl's parents, her marriage lords and her future husband. The procedure was that once a baby girl was born, the suitor presented himself to the mother and father of the child and offered a gift. If the gift was accepted, the suitor and the parents of the child clinched the deal. The gift constituted a traditional bitter chewing stick (*esega-mbock*) and a large log of dried fire-wood that the suitor took to the house of his would be mother-in-law. The next gift that followed was a jar of date palm wine (*mine-mbock*), which was imperative, and if she refused burning the log, the future engagement was cancelled. The most probable reason that could cause this was blood relationship being identified between the suitor and the future woman. From then until marriage was consummated, the husband-to-be was treated as a member of the bride's family, by helping in farm work, fetch fire-wood, contribute towards unexpected expenses and the building of houses or huts for his in-law when need arose. He also facilitated his marriage by giving the girl's maternal and

paternal kinsmen different gifts such as palm oil, meat and salt. This strengthened their friendship and the marriage bond. At the age of maturity, she was allowed to go for her first visit to her future father-in-law during which the husband-to-be was strictly forbidden to have sexual intercourse with her. On her return, she was given a goat while other provisions followed her subsequent visits. At the age of puberty, both families came together and a decision was taken to keep her in a confinement (*ekekwee*). According to written evidence, bride-wealth among the Nkongho-Mbo was paid in intervals on demand. Before the girl was exposed to the public from the confinement, and taken to her husband's compound, her family must have been satisfied with her bride wealth. The “D-day” was usually a market day, where she was removed, bathed, rubbed with camwood and dressed half-naked. She was then taken to the market and moved round, accompanied by some chosen young women from both families. In the market, bottled beer, date palm wine was drunk and much food eaten. From here, she was taken to the fiancé's compound. As they arrived, the bride was hidden until some compensation was made. In some cases, the husband's mother gave a “country knife” or few coins or bank notes before she was exposed to the crowd. The child who was born in this marital union pursued purely informal education, prior to the introduction of formal education in Nkongho-Mbo by the Catholic missionaries.

Education: Education in the Nkongho-Mbo like in most African societies before the penetration of the Catholic missionaries was informal in nature. There existed a popular belief which, according to Funteh: “for any society to be able to withstand the passing of time and its challenges, the elders have to teach the young the knowhow of their socio-cultural, economic and political activities” The type of education, which was given to the children in their early childhood, was by their parents and baby-sitters (brother and sisters). But when the child was still below the age 4, the baby-sitter was regarded as the most important teacher who taught the child how to communicate. From the ages of 4 up till maturity, his or her teachers in the family were mostly the parents. However, watching the elders, the child acquired many skills and began to act in the similar manner, and as Mair puts it, heavy emphasis was laid on sex and marital duties. The mother went along with the female children when engaged in their socio-economic responsibilities; this was the forum of teaching them how to perfectly undertake female related duties namely, cooking, house cleaning, childcare, and farming. In the same manner, the father taught the male children how to perform male related duties – hunting, fishing, nut harvesting, tapping and especially the tasks of future leadership both in the family and the community. Education was also in the hands of experts in basic skills; in most cases, if not all of Nkongho-Mbo chieftdom, vocational training like blacksmithing, traditional healing, thatching, carving, pottery and weaving were highly specialized, and to learn them the individual needed to exercise patience and respect. Furthermore, parents entrusted their interested children in the hands of professionals (in the case where the parents did not do these activities themselves) who trained groups and individuals in the various skills; certain requirements like fowl, goat, palm oil or palm wine and in some case money was given before the proper take off of the training which lasted for a given period of time, depending on the skill desired. This informal education was carried out besides several religious practices.

Religious beliefs and practices: Polytheism made up the Nkongho-Mbo traditional belief system. They believed in the existence of the supreme God, *Ndem*. He was believed to be operating through other gods of the land like the *Belems* who acted as intermediary between God and the people. Ancestral worship was a common feature in their traditional belief system. The notion about the afterlife and the soul of the deceased reflected the social stratification. They believed that the soul of the chiefs, chief priests, diviners and that of the ordinary person had a different fate after death. While that of the chiefs, chief priests and diviners went to a blissful land in some faraway place, that of the commoners and the non-title holders died in the grave after burial. This explains why the ancestors were believed to be next to God, and that God used them to control the people's activities. So to appease God, '*Ndem*' whom they believed was the most Supreme being, the people made sacrifices and poured libations to the ancestors. The general health situation of the Mbo people was poor before the coming of the Catholic Missionaries and the establishment of a health center in their territory. Diseases that were common include, gonorrhoea, dysentery, diarrhoea, headache, fever, syphilis, measles, chicken pox, cough, meningitis, epilepsy and rheumatism. Infant mortality was common. Writing in 1923, Rutherford stated that: "Death of children seem to be most common at the infant age of two years. Digestive trouble was suggested in those early days to be a prime cause." Traditional doctors used roots, barks and leaves of trees for diagnosing, eliminating and preventing some of these illnesses. For instance, diseases such as gonorrhoea and syphilis, which were so rampant amongst adults, brought by the indigents from the coastal plantations, were treated with the use of herbs called *Nkemboh*. These herbs were stirred in water and the patient drank the liquid constantly until the infection was cured. Children who suffered from fever and headache were given palm kernel oil to leak; the same oil was used to treat children's convulsion, where a small quantity was rubbed on the child's armpit and anus. The traditional doctors used guava leaves, which were eaten raw to treat diarrhoea and dysentery. Despite all the efforts made by these traditional healers, there was still high mortality rate in the region, especially infant mortality. This was because diseases such as measles, chicken pox, meningitis, diarrhoea and epilepsy could not be cured efficiently by them. And so, the Nkongho-Mbo suffered terribly due to the absence of a hospital in their region. The nearest hospitals were found in Dschang and Mamfe. Some of the patients, who left Mbo for Mamfe or Dschang, are said to have died on the road due to long distance trekking. However, the arrival of the Catholic missionaries Nkongho-Mbo reversed this situation.

The coming of the catholic mission to Nkongho-Mbo:

Although Catholic Missionaries were the last to enter Cameroon, they championed the evangelisation process in Nkongho-Mbo. The Nkongho-Mbo natives 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 are a curious and interesting group to present because these were the first Nkongho-Mbo 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 and became

baptised Christians. Upon completion of their various tenures of work at the plantation, these people did not stay long in the coast. They returned to their areas of origin, in this case to the Nkongho-Mbo area. Some of these people are well known. They include Andrew Fonsa-Etoke, Paul Fotabong and Stanislaus Nkeng. Gabriel Ngwansang of the Bamenda Grassfields origin accompanied them. 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-Mbos. 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. In 1918, this same group opened a vernacular school where they taught doctrine classes in Lekongho. 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. 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. The outstations of Mbo were to be supervised by occasional visits from one of the fathers from Baseng. 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, 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. Besides, four other small mission stations were opened at Sekangha, Engueze, 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 opening of the first mission at 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. 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 said "if

I give birth to a priest in the next year or so, I shall give him to the people of Mbetta.” 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. 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 had different aims.

The aims of the catholic missionaries in Nkongho-Mbo: A lot of questions have been raised recently concerning the objectives of Christian Mission in Africa. More so, because of the multiplicity of religious sects and the dubious nature of some of them and their activities. When we look at missionary activities critically and objectively, we realise that their ultimate goal was humanitarian and moral, even if there existed some business behind it. Therefore, the Catholic Church like the other religious denominations in Africa was a philanthropic organisation, whose paramount aim was to implant Christianity and western culture. In the words of Rev. Father Mathew Nabben, the aim of their mission was to “preach the Christian faith, open churches, educate children in schools and to remedy health hazards that plagued the people of Mbo.” Another objective of the Missionaries was simply to make God known wherever he was previously unknown. They considered the Nkongho-Mbo as heathens who needed taming and transformation through moral education. This was to be done by spreading the Gospel and converting the Mbos from “pagans” to Christians. Furthermore, the Missionaries were puzzled by the health situation that plagued the people of Nkongho-Mbo given that Nkongho-Mbo is a forest zone which constitutes a favourable breeding ground for insects; tse-tse flies and mosquitoes which carry sleeping sickness and malaria among other diseases, were therefore, killing people at an alarming rate. Thus, the missionaries went out to eradicate this hazardous situation and this constituted one of their aims. When the MHM arrived Nkongho-Mbo in 1936 it did not take them a long time to understand the important role played by traditional rulers. These traditional rulers had powers and authority, had divine rights, with total political, social and economic, cultural and religious powers over their people. There, the MHM needed to establish a cordial relationship and sought the help of traditional rulers in order to fully implant Catholicism in Nkongho-Mbo. Being that Mbetta was considered the best place to establish first, the missionaries contacted the paramount chief of Mbetta - Fomelong, and revealed to him that, their mission to the area was to preach the Christian religion, open churches, educate children in schools and to help the sick. It was not difficult because the people already had a solid foundation on Christianity laid down by local converts so they accepted them to establish. The chief offered them a piece of land where the church, the Father’s house and the school were to be built. Therefore, the collaboration of the missionaries with the traditional ruler of Mbetta, led to the establishment of the first mission station there. From Lower Nkongho, the missionaries toured neighbouring villages. Around the 1940s they moved to Upper-Nkongho, contacted the paramount chief of Njungo and

established friendly relations with him. After the missionaries had explained the aim of their mission, they were given a warm reception. Fonjungo offered them a piece of land where the church, school and the Father’s house were to be constructed. By 1942, the church of Njungo was constructed. The chief convinced his subjects to supply labour and building materials for the construction. From here, the missionaries moved to Lebock where they met chief Fowung of Lebock. Even though it was not all that easy, the chief later on accepted the missionaries implantation – where he offered them a piece of land for the building of a church and a school. By 1946, the church of Lebock was constructed. Hence, the foundation of the Catholic Church in Nkongho-Mbo was laid as a result of the missionaries relying on the traditional rulers. The early missionaries in Nkongho-Mbo used the catechists as agents of evangelisation. Before the arrival of missionaries in Nkongho-Mbo, there were already some Mbo natives who were acting as catechists by preaching the Catholic doctrine to the natives and interpreting the Bible to them. For this reason, when the missionaries came, they continued to use these local practitioners to easily spread the Gospel. Rev. Father Nabben decided in 1937 to send Fonsa-Etoke to Baseng to be trained as a catechist and teacher, because it was discovered that he was more intelligent. Meanwhile, Stanislaus Nkeng and Gabriel Ngwazang remained in the parish assisting the Rev. Fathers. The training of these natives was probably because the priests were limited in number. Added to this, the numerous villages of Nkongho-Mbo and the poor means of communication necessitated the training of lay evangelists. Besides, these catechists had a better knowledge of the different villages and knew more about the customs of the people, thus were better placed to convert them. As a result, the missionaries relied heavily on the catechists so as to evangelise Nkongho-Mbo. Hence, the important role played by the catechists in spreading the new religion cannot be doubted. These catechists worked with in different areas of Nkongho-Mbo and were the liaison between priests and the congregation. Their functions included, giving doctrine to children and adults and assembling the people for prayers every morning and evening. In the absence of the priests, they conducted services in the place of Sunday mass. Helping to settle minor disputes amongst Christians and by baptising those in danger of death in the absence of the Rev. Father. In short, the catechists were auxiliary workers of the missionaries. They were chosen among the best Christians and were usually the first to go into non-Christian villages, opened small chapels and taught the children the Bible and inspired adults to become Christians. More so, the two priests together with their catechists – Andrew Fonsa-Etoke, Stanislaus Nkeng and Gabriel Ngwazang worked extremely hard to convince the Nkongho-Mbos, its environs to abandon the African traditional religion and embrace Christianity. But by 1937, Father Peter Jacobs left because of ill health and was replaced by Rev. Father Anthony Von Amerogen. These missionaries used both the local language and Pidgin to ease communication and evangelisation among Christians.

Evangelisation: It has been stated that the process of evangelisation 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. 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 preaching the gospel to the people. These visits led to the Baptism of 60 adults, 30 children and 31 people who were about to die, so that their souls will not perish but go 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. Theresia of the Child Jesus. This is the reason why the first church, the school and health center bear the name of St. Theresia. 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 catchments 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 Essoh-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. 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, Elias Fonji, 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.

Health: 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 Dschang and Mamfe and there was no motor road. 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 hospital. 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. 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.” 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 Assumpta. The Rev. sisters started work in the health centre on 27 June 1964. 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 sick that plagued Mbo region.

The fight against sleeping sickness: 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. 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. On 11 May 1980, the team together with Elad Gregory, a native of Mbo, introduced the Primary Health Care in Nkongho-Mbo. 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- 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. Besides improvement in health, the Catholic missionaries also improved literacy rate in Nkongho-Mbo through the building of Catholic schools.

The building of catholic schools in Nkongho-Mbo: When the British Government took over the administration of a portion of former German Kamerun in 1916, many primary schools were opened in the Southern Cameroons with course duration of two years. In 1937, the British under the mandate administration opened a primary school in Fotabong. The first teacher was Andrew Epah, with an enrolment of eighteen boys and six girls. The school went up to standard two. The courses taught were writing, reading, English composition, arithmetic and physical education. The Catholic Mission School that was opened in Nkongho-Mbo in 1938 by the Catholic Missionaries later on dominated this school. Rev. Father Matthew Nabben who had been in Nkongho-Mbo since 1936, taught of beginning a school in the region in 1937. He obtained permission from Bishop Rogan and from the mandate administrators who supported the idea. Once permission was granted, he started by erecting two classrooms using sun dried bricks and roofed with thatches. The school began fully in 1938. At the beginning, enrolment was not very encouraging. It started with twenty-four pupils, twenty-two boys and two girls. Girls were few because it was a common practice in the area for girls to marry at very early age. The first teacher who taught in the school was Fonka Shank Lawrence. The missionaries discovered that for them to win a large number of converts, they needed to give free gifts in order to attract pupils to the school. This in effect attracted a lot of children to the school. This also motivated parents who were not interested in education to also send their children to school. The failure to give school pupils similar advantages is said to have been one of the reasons why the Fotabong School collapsed. Pupils came from all over neighbouring villages and attended the school in Mbetta. Within the first years, the pupils from Upper-Nkongho who attended the school were Sylvester Tazanu, Fotoh Patrick and Freyan Michael. From the Bangwa area, those who attended the school were Nojang Michhael, Khumba and others. Those from Elumba were Cirri Elad Ngwa, Stephen Ewungwa, Vincent Shumba, Sua Banabas, Alexander Asongwe, Athanasius Esongwa and Simplicious-Mathias Ekerum. Those from Lower Nkongho were Andrew Fobisong, Etimbi Vincent, Dorothy Etoke Atabong and Elad Mathias. The major problem that preoccupied the Rev. Fathers was how to accommodate the non-native pupils. This emanated from the fact that those pupils who did not have relatives to co-reside with, had to trek for many hours over night to attend school. This inevitable increased the rate of absenteeism. In order to reduced this, a two-room dormitory was constructed in 1940, one room to serve for boys and the other to serve for the girls. The school ended in standard three, after which the pupils continued their primary education in Mamfe. In 1946, standard four was added to the school, in 1954, standard five was added, and in 1958, it went up to standard six - the terminal standard. A substantial number of pupils enrolled in Catholic School

Mbetta from 1938 to 1960. Between 1940 and 1960, Catholic Missionaries opened many primaries in Nkongho-Mbo and its environs. Some of the villages where schools were opened are Njungo, Lebock Tock, Tabongkwa, Ekwenzo, Foreke Down, Foreke Middle, Foreke-UP, Fontem and Elumba. Even though the opening of these schools affected the enrolment at Catholic School Mbetta, it was a great achievement made by the Catholic Missionaries in other areas. This did not only stop the tedious journey that pupils used to cover from other regions to Mbetta in the Mbo territory, but also reduced the number of pupils who were willing to attend school but were unable because of long distance. From 1938 to the 1950s, nine primary catholic schools were opened in Nkongho-Mbo. Due to the huge demand of academic needs, the Catholic missionaries embarked in the provision of post-primary education to Nkongho-Mbo students.

Post-primary education in Nkongho-Mbo: In 1992, the Catholic Missionaries expanded their activities into post primary education with the opening of a domestic science centre by Rev. Father Jude Thaddeus Mbi. In principle, the school was to lay emphasis on home economics. In principle, the following subjects were on the curriculum – cookery, mother and childcare, French, English, weaving and religion. But in practice, the school taught subjects in general education such as Physics, chemistry, geography, mathematics, history, English language, English literature, French language and others. The college had an initial enrolment of forty-two students with a staff of six. Hippolitus Fotabe headed the school as the pioneer principal, assisted by Fotabong Chrysanthus. This was a remarkable development in the history of Nkongho-Mbo. Unfortunately, within two years, the college was closed down because students could not pay the huge sum of fees that they were demanded. Another reason why the college shut its doors is that parents who had children in the college told the Rev. Father in hard terms to give the college a name that reflected the quality of education offered in it. Since the Rev. Father refused to explain his reasons to the parents, many parents decided to withdraw their children from the college. In 1995, a government secondary school opened its doors in Njungo, another village in Mbo region. When in 2000 the first batch came out with a good result, the Catholic Missionaries once again were motivated to open a secondary school in Mbo territory. Thus in 2001, Rev. Father Peter-Paul with the help of Bishop Cornelius Fontem Esua, decided to open a Catholic College known as Bishop Francis College Mbetta. Its initial enrolment was small but as years have gone by, a steady increase has been noticed. This increase in the number of students led to the employment of more teachers from five to eight. The first principal was Mary Gorethy Nkie who headed the college for a year. In 2002, Aaron Foma replaced her as the new principal. Today, the principal of the college is Roland Ekenya. Education has been one of the fundamental benefits of the Nkongho-Mbo from the Catholic Missionaries in their area. The opening of schools from the primary to the secondary levels is gradually eradicating illiteracy in the area. The early Nkongho Mbo natives who pursued Catholic education in the 1940s, 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, have developed the interest on Catholic education to the extent that most of them presently prefer to send their children to Catholic primary schools and Catholic colleges. Western education has produced a good number of educated elite in Mbo region. Another social development that Catholic Missionaries carried out in Mbo that is worth mentioning is the provision of hydro-electricity.

Hydro-electricity: Another important social development brought to Mbo people was the establishment of a hydro-electric power in Mbetta. The thermal electricity that was already in use in the area, but used exclusively by the missionaries could not supply enough energy to the indigents of the region. So light was used only by the mission and health centre. In most cases, the Missionaries themselves did not even use it every day because of the high cost of petrol. Rev. Father Mbi initiated the idea of a hydro-electricity. The main river in the area, river *mekoh*, which is nearer to the mission was surveyed and realized that it was adequate for the purpose of generating the hydro-electricity. Rev. Father Mbi then contacted the Buea Diocese in 1992 where Bishop Awa gave him, the permission to go ahead with the project. A huge sum of money was raised from the Buea Diocese, Mbetta main station, outstations and 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 was completed. On 7 August 1995, at about 7 30 pm, the technicians steamed the light and the whole area partially became daylight to the eyes of the natives. About three-quarter of the local population went out of their houses to thank the Rev. Father for what he did to them. The patients who were admitted at the Catholic Mission Health Centre, and used to pass their nights with bush lamps at times, or sometime 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 25,000 FCFA per person. The electricity brought another new developments, the introduction of a large electric powered mill in 1996 by Rev. Father Mbi used for the grinding of maize since maize is one of Nkongho Mbo staple crops. The Mbo highly appreciate maize porridge cake and bean cake during funeral celebrations. Mbo natives showed a lot of enthusiasm in what the Rev. Father did. Large quantity of maize that initially was impossible to grind manually was done with the big electric powered mill at very low cost, thanks to the Catholic Missionary – Rev. Father Jude Thaddeus Mbi.

Conclusion

This paper has revealed that the activities carried out by Catholic missionaries in the field of development depended to a larger extent on the services needed by the Mbo population. The developments have gone a long way to improve or ameliorate the living standards of the people in the area. As far as social development is concerned, in the domain of health, a lot has been improved upon for instance, by employing more trained nurses, more additional beds and increments in the number of rooms in the health center. The partial eradication of the killer disease (sleeping sickness) in Nkongho-Mbo is one of the important achievements of the Catholic Missionaries. This has greatly reduced mortality rate in the area. Also the education offered in the area by the Catholics both at primary and post primary levels has reduced the rate of illiteracy in the region. The Catholic missionaries encountered some problems in the course of carrying out their development projects in Nkongho-Mbo. The prominent among the problems was that of road maintenance. The native neglected road maintenance to the extent that, missionaries had to adopt the strategy of punishing the absentees of community work to pay the sum of two thousand francs (2000) CFA each to the president in charge of community development. Those who refused to pay were trapped at the Catholic Mission Health Center during consultation or admission where the money was

deducted from their bills. Another problem has been that of finance. The catholic mission has not been able to raise enough money to carry out more development projects in the region. Furthermore, catholic education, (both at primary and secondary levels) that people used to prefer in the region is on a decline. Out of the four primary schools that were opened in Nkongho-Mbo, only one is now functioning – Catholic Mission Primary School Mbetta. The others have been taken over by the state. For the Catholic Missionaries to successfully develop the area the natives of Nkongho-Mbo (both the elite and home based) should increase cooperation with the missionaries as the missionaries have proven beyond doubt that the region cannot easily be developed socially without their contributions. Moreover, Catholic education is dying down because of low salaries that Catholic schoolteachers earn and the increment in school fees. There is the need for the Catholic Mission to see into this problem. A possible solution will be to increase teachers' salaries and moderate school fees in order to make it affordable to the parents of the pupils. Also, those Nkongho-Mbo natives who have resisted Christianity should be converted in order to increase the Christian population. Some of those Christians who have withdrawn from the Catholic church should go back. A significant increase in the Christian population will generate the Catholic mission more income and probably increase the number of development projects that the mission would like to carry out in the area.

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