

FRANÇOISE UGOCHUKWU, LE PAYS IGBO DU NIGERIA, PRÉFACE DE GRAHAM FURNISS. PARIS, L'HARMATTAN, 2011, 349 P. (ISBN 978-2-296-12961-0)

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This book, published in 2010 (with a preface by Graham Furniss), is more a compilation of articles than a study built around a circumscribed theme, except for one person's experience in a given region, in this case the Igbo country of Nigeria. Each text marks a milestone or dimension in the rich career of its author.

Françoise Ugochukwu discovered this world after the Biafra war (1970). She literally fell in love with it and decided to make a life for herself, master the language and become, so to speak, an Igbo. Now living in the United Kingdom, she has been travelling back and forth between Nigeria and Europe since 1996 and has taught for almost a quarter of a century at Nsukka University, an academic model for the Federal Republic of Nigeria and beyond.

Françoise Ugochukwu explains in her introduction that it was driven by the desire to "explore" this "culture [she] espoused", as nebulous as the dense forest of the river delta that shelters it may be, that she will eventually clear two paths: the first will take the road of the literary imagination of the oral tradition, the second will take the crossroads of the Protestant and Catholic Missions present since the end of the 18th century.

There are several angles of approach to be defended in this heterogeneous book. One cannot resist the pleasure of going back with the author to the incredible life stories of the Saros, slaves, especially Igbo slaves, sold and shipped to America in the 1830s, but finally rescued from the slave ships by British abolitionist cruisers and landed in Freetown, the capital of Sierra Leone, which had been created by philanthropic societies to receive freed, revolted or freed slaves. There they were converted and educated, so that, after being reduced to the lowest ranks, some of them returned as pastors or priests to the country of their parents, of whose language they had retained sufficient knowledge to undertake the translation of the Bible. Like the Reverend J. C. Taylor, "born and brought up in Sierra Leone, son of former slaves apparently born in Bonny, in the far south of the Igbo zone"

(p. 33), former exiles came to preach the good word to those who had betrayed them.

Françoise Ugochukwu shows that this missionary influence, which generates the Igbo identity (a “nation among nations”), explains the almost generalized bilingualism of this community. Indeed, this community, which today has 25 million members (source: Cia World Facebook), corresponds to one of the most literate populations in the world, with a literacy rate of over 90%. This phenomenon is reflected in numerous local initiatives aimed at making school and university accessible to the greatest number of people: Françoise Ugochukwu reminds us that “many schools have been built thanks to the contributions of entire villages” (p. 57).

This is followed by a resonance of Igbo stories and biblical narratives, reminding us that, in fact, the one would not exist without the other, since Igbo cultural identity - and its nationalist counterpart - developed in the hollow of missionary work, which itself drank from oral literature to find images and symbols, as cultural translations of biblical universality.

This last aspect of the author’s viewpoint is debateable if we are to consider that the traditional African religious universe has always had its autonomy independently of the contact with the world of the Bible. Furthermore, at some points, one regrets a lack of problematisation, which would have helped the reader to better discern the common thread linking the chapters of this work. Nevertheless, this book has the immense merit of breaking the silence that surrounds the Igbo Nation of Nigeria, which is not much known (in France and elsewhere), but whose major geo-strategic situation - supported by the excellence of its inhabitants - will undoubtedly lead it to play a primordial role worldwide in the years to come.