Edmund M. Hogan


_Berengario Cermenati among the Ebira of Nigeria_ presents a narrative “thick description” of the events related to the controversial trial, “Rex versus Ibrahim” that took place during the colonial era in Nigeria. The trial involved charges of oppression and corruption leveled by one colonial administrator against the traditional ruler created by the British government to run the Native Authority in Igbarra (Ebira) Division in Kabba Province. Many Ebira, or Igbarra as they were called during the colonial era, contested the authority of Ibrahim Chugudo Onoruozia, before that moment a government messenger, when he was established as head of the Igbarra Native Authority in 1918. These and other Igbarra also challenged the British decision to grant Ibrahim the right to call himself the “Atta” or traditional ruler of the Igbarra in 1922, in part because the position had never before existed and the title was in fact borrowed from the title of the ruler of the neighboring people, the Igala. Opposition to Ibrahim came to a head in 1923 when Major Thomas Budgen, then temporarily serving as the Resident, or chief colonial official in Kabba Province, brought charges against Ibrahim for corruption. At that point a number of Igbarra came forward to add complaints about the exploitative nature of Ibrahim’s rule. For a moment it appeared that Ibrahim would be forced from office. But then Captain Felix Byng-Hall, the substantive or appointed Resident of Kabba returned from leave. Byng-Hall was the administrator who had nurtured Ibrahim and guided the assumption of the authority Ibrahim now was being accused of abusing. If Ibrahim fell, Byng-Hall’s stature would have been compromised. So Byng-Hall took over the investigation of the charges and subsequent trial held before a colonial magistrate. Ibrahim was convicted only on one minor charge for which he paid a fine. Reaction among the Igbarra to Ibrahim’s acquittal turned violent, with two Africans dying in a revolt over the issue of Ibrahim’s right to collect taxes. Byng-Hall used the suppression of the revolt as an opportunity to destroy the opposition to Ibrahim.

Prominent in that opposition was Father Benegario Cermenati, an Italian who was a member of the Catholic missionary order, the Society of African Missions (SMA). Father Cermenati was a complicated man who combined an evangelist’s dedication to the promotion of Catholic Christianity with a crusader’s determination to search out and destroy the enemies of the Catholic Church. Cermenati’s instincts were displayed once, years before the confrontations connected with Ibrahim, when Cermenati wrote a letter to one colonial
administrator threatening physical violence for the administrator’s jailing of an African catechist on charges that the catechist had defamed the administrator’s character. Later, after he discovered that the catechist was a bigamist, and had indeed written the letter for which he was incarcerated, Cermenati wrote a letter of apology to which there was no response.

Cermenati’s initial relationship with Ibrahima had been positive. At that time the district officer in charge of Igbarra Division was Captain J.F.J. Kirkpatrick, who in his own way was as ardent a crusader for Catholicism as Cermenati. With Kirkpatrick’s prompting, Ibrahima had agreed to the building of a Catholic mission house and school in the town of Okene, and promised Native Authority support (labor) for the construction of the buildings. Kirkpatrick was later forced out of the Colonial Service, however, and once he disappeared from the scene, Ibrahima began to go slow in the fulfillment of his promises. To make matters worse, during the time when Ibrahima was under censure from Bugden, the mission house, such as it existed in Okene, was burned down. Cermenati assumed that Ibrahima was behind the arson, commissioned as payback for Cermenati’s role in organizing Catholic Igbarra opposition to his rule. Cermenati was also incensed that the colonial government declined to cover the cost of rebuilding the Okene mission station house. Cermenati became very public in his opposition to Ibrahima, writing letters to various officials, and sitting front and center in the latter’s trial before the colonial magistrate. Thus Cermenati’s status in the province became compromised when all the court did was slap Ibrahima on the wrist. Letters were already being exchanged between colonial officials and Cermenati’s superiors before the revolt that followed Ibrahima’s acquittal. Since the Igbarra who revolted displayed a sophistication that colonial officials were convinced could not have been innate to country folk, some white man had to have guided them. Cermenati must have been that white man. For that reason he was expelled from Nigeria.

The story behind Ibrahima’s trial has been told by a number of historians including Robert Heussler (The British in Northern Nigeria) and J.M. Okonjo (British Administration in Nigeria, 1900–1950 – a Nigerian View). Hogan does a remarkable job of using the personal diaries and papers of key participants, most notably, Father Cermenati, but also of Felix Byng-Hall, to add historical context to what previous historians have written. Hogan’s literary achievement deserves some acknowledgment. Like a master mosaicist, Hogan used short bits from his documents like tiles to construct his narrative. What Hogan reveals following this method are the human dimensions and costs of what in the past has been mostly treated as a bureaucratic skirmish between Bugden and Byng-Hall.