

BOOK REVIEW

Elochukwu E. Uzukwu. *Memorializing the Unsung: Slaves of the Church and the Making of Kongo Catholicism*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2024. ix + 234 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$124.95. Hardback. ISBN: 978-0-271-09698-8.

In *Memorializing the Unsung: Slaves of the Church and the Making of Kongo Catholicism*, Elochukwu E. Uzukwu documents the process of church-becoming from the mid-seventeenth to the end of the nineteenth century attributable in large part to the Catholic Christians in West Central Africa who are known as “Slaves of the Church.” Uzukwu begins by presenting the necessary historical background about early Catholicism in Kongo and general information about Kongolesse history. From this foundation, each of the four chapters expertly presents evidence in support of the author’s major claims: that Capuchin and Spiritan clergy, despite themes of freedom prevalent in Christian doctrine (e.g., “Christ has set us free,” Gal. 5:1) were products of the ubiquitous European ideology that represented slaves as subhuman; that the Capuchin and Spiritan missionaries made mistakes and committed crimes that stood in contravention to the guiding principles of their Christian doctrine; that the Slaves of the Church were an essential element of church-becoming; and that in order to accomplish this, the Slaves of the Church were quiet revolutionaries who rejected their position as infrahuman and stood as models for the Christian virtues of freedom and human dignity which the missionaries failed to fully achieve.

In Chapter One, Uzukwu turns his attention to the underlying proposition that wide acceptance by Europeans in both lay and clerical contexts, formed the basis for or even generated prejudicial attitudes toward and stereotypes about Africa and Africans. These prejudicial attitudes, woven throughout Enlightenment intellectualism, devalued African cultural understandings in favor of “universal” Enlightenment ideas about fraternalism, egalitarianism, and freedom. Once primed to negative assumptions about African peoples and cultures, Western Christians were easily deadened to the exploitation of Africa and Africans, expressed through the ultimate injustices of slavery writ large in brutal assaults against Black bodies. Uzukwu carefully depicts Kongolesse Catholicism as enmeshed with the Kongolesse state, culture, and economic concerns. It was only after the Age of Enlightenment began, with its attendant Eurocentrism, that Europeans started to assert that early Kongo Catholicism was at best inauthentic and at worst African fetishism.


Chapter Two presents a detailed history of Kongolesse Catholicism, with significant attention paid to the early Kongolesse Church as a lay-driven institution that thrived despite the endemic scarcity of ordained clergy. The dynamic

forces that facilitated church-becoming were literacy and innovative developments in theology and liturgy. Construction of the paramount Our Lady of Victory church within the recognized bounds of the ancestral burial ground in the Kongoles capital seamlessly preserved the Indigenous Kongoles spiritual past with its Catholic present and future. The development of the Kongo catechism further bound the local past to the universalizing construct of Catholic Christendom until the pernicious rise of the Atlantic slave trade weakened the church and the Kingdom of Kongo.

Chapter Three explores the grievous reality of the Atlantic slave trade and its effects on church-becoming and the social tendencies that undergirded the assembling of individuals into communities. The Capuchins, and later the Spiritans, fully engaged with the Atlantic slave culture, owning and making use of a category of slaves known as Slaves of the Church, which negatively impacted the process of church-becoming. Under the watch of the Capuchins, the Propaganda Fide missionizing mission not only condoned but took an active part in the misery and dehumanization implicit in the enslavement of Africans. This stance by the Church diminished its authority in moral matters and engendered resistance on the part of the enslaved.

Chapter Four documents the response of the enslaved to the unprecedented violence, misery, and dehumanization of enslavement within the context of the Atlantic slave system. Specifically, Uzukwu examines the slaves' rejection of the social reality of enslavement by reinterpreting the concept of freedom and claiming it as their own. Although the Capuchins embraced abolitionism as early as the seventeenth century, the Spiritans failed to do so, maintaining their stubborn denial of the humanity of the enslaved until the mid-nineteenth century. Spiritan doctrine emphasized that the enslaved should obey their masters in all things. Spiritan slaves, however, rejected this bastardization of the Christian gospel and reasserted their freedom through flight from Christian villages. In doing so, they led the way for a revision of the perceived role of the Spiritan missionaries as supervisors or benefactors.

This volume is impeccably sourced and expertly narrated in a way that is insightful, engaging, and eminently readable. Uzukwu deftly weaves archival documents composed in many voices into a cohesive whole that more than achieves his goal of memorializing the unsung. Throughout his work, Uzukwu leans into his expertise as both a researcher and a Spiritan priest and delivers a meticulous examination of the Capuchins, Spiritans, and the Slaves of the Church who refused to accept their inhumanity or unfree status and thereby reformed the very Church that had held them enslaved.

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