

**THE LEGACY OF PORTUGUESE CULTURAL INFLUENCE  
IN WEST AFRICA:  
the experience of 19th century Catholic missions**

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A study of place-names on a map of Africa will indicate the extent of Portuguese influence, especially along the coast of the continent. This influence stretches back to the fifteenth century when Portuguese explorers, spurred on by Prince Henry the Navigator, made their way down the coast of West Africa and gradually opened a sea route to India and the Spice Islands. The 'City of St. George', now known as Elmina Castle in modern Ghana, was established in 1482 and, led by great sea captains—Diego Cao, Bartholomeu Dias and Vasco da Gama—Portuguese expeditions progressively reached the mouth of the river Zaire (Congo), rounded the Cape of Good Hope in 1488, and continued up the east coast of Africa to Mozambique, Mombasa and Malindi, and thence to Goa in 1510.

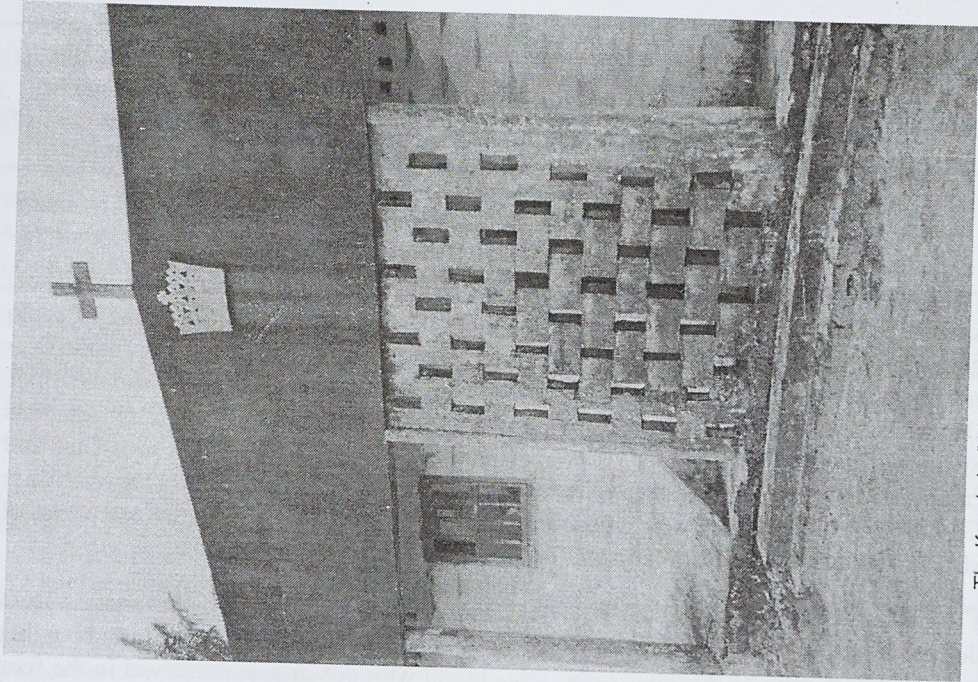
It is the west coast of Africa that interests us in this essay, specifically that section from Guinea-Bissau and the Cape Verde islands in the north to Capo Fria in northern Namibia in the south. A relic of Portugal's past association with this area is preserved in the four Portuguese-speaking countries of Cape Verde, Guinea-Bissau, São Tomé and Angola, but the place-names along the coast tell the full story. Casamance, on the border between Senegal and Guinea-Bissau, Cape Verga in Guinea, Cape Palmas in Liberia, San Pedro in Ivory Coast, Cape St. Paul in Ghana, Porto Novo in Benin, Lagos (originally Lago de Curamo) and a host of place-names in the Niger Delta (Forcados, Escravos, Ramos, as well as the San Nicolas, Santa Barbara, San Bartholomeo, and Sembriero inlets of the Niger) in Nigeria, as well as the name Cameroon<sup>1</sup> itself, all bear testimony to their Portuguese past. No wonder that President Lula da Silva of Brazil called the southern Atlantic Ocean "a Lusophone lake" when he visited a number of African countries in 2003. Apart from the West African coast, it is bounded on the north by Madeira and the Azores, on the west by Brazil, and on the south by the island place-name of Tristan de Cunha.

Another frequently ignored aspect of its cultural legacy is the persistence of the Portuguese language along the West African coast, long after the Portuguese had been displaced by the superior power of Britain, Holland and France. Portuguese was for long, much more than French or English, the language of commerce and exchange and, it must be added, the

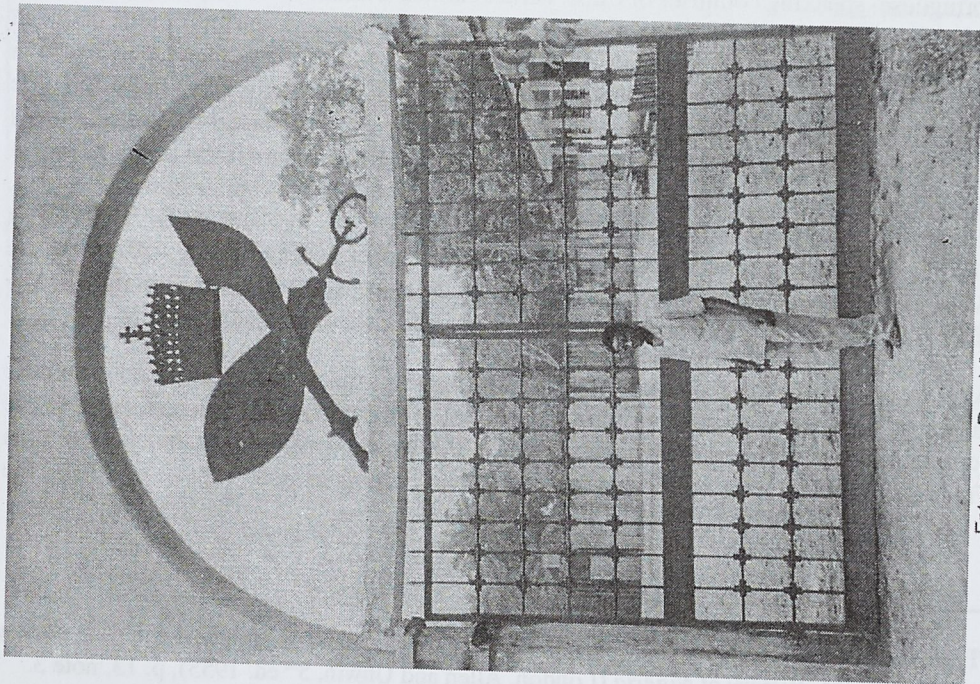
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<sup>1</sup>From the Portuguese Camarões, 'prawns', owing to their plentiful supply in the river of that name. A. Burns, *History of Nigeria* (London, Allen and Unwin, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. 1955), p. 13, note 3.





The Kapela in Old Warri (burial place of the Olus)



Entrance to Royal Compound, Old Warri



language of the slave trade.<sup>2</sup> It was only when the colonial 'scramble for Africa' began, at the time of the Berlin International Conference of 1884-1885, that the rivalry between European nations led to the propagation of their own cultures and languages.<sup>3</sup> Had West Africa developed along different lines, guided by commercial rather than political interests, it is quite possible that the Portuguese language would have become so entrenched that it could not have been displaced—and Nigeria would be a Portuguese speaking country today!

### Ouidah, Warri and Elmina

There are two other factors that strengthened the position of the Portuguese language in West Africa in the second half of the nineteenth century. The abolition of the slave trade was followed by the repatriation of thousands of slaves from the 'new world'. Many of these came from north-east Brazil, especially the area around Bahia, and they tended to settle in places where there was a Portuguese presence, even if it was associated with the slave trade. One such place was the town of Ouidah<sup>4</sup> in the present Benin Republic. The section of the coast, from the River Volta in Ghana to the Niger Delta, was in fact known as the 'slave coast', as distinct from the 'gold coast', the 'ivory coast' and the 'grain coast' to the west. The Portuguese maintained a fort, the Castle of St. John the Baptist (S. João Baptiste de Ajuda), in Ouidah and it was administered as part of the colony of São Tomé. Although never a large town or centre of commerce, Ouidah assumed an importance far beyond its size in the early colonial period and since the Portuguese language was the normal means of wider communication there, that language was gradually diffused over the surrounding area.

Ouidah had an earlier connection with Brazil in the person of Francisco Manuel da Souza, a notorious Brazilian slave dealer who came to Ouidah in 1810 and, having fathered dozens of children, died there in 1857. He and his copious progeny are the subject of a superb historical novel by Bruce Chatwin, *The Viceroy of Ouidah*.<sup>5</sup> Although abandoned for some decades in the nineteenth century, the Portuguese re-established their control over the fort in 1865 and exercised some control over the neighbouring countryside. This was not sufficient to outweigh the claims of France—who had taken control of Porto Novo nearby—to Dahomey (the present Benin Republic) at the Berlin Conference of 1884 and

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<sup>2</sup>Since Portugal continued slave trading long after it was abolished by Great Britain in 1807 and, at a later date, other European powers.

<sup>3</sup>This is clear from T. Pakenham, *The Scramble for Africa* (Abacus, 1991), which covers the period from 1876 to 1912.

<sup>4</sup>Also spelt 'Whydah' in the early days, Ouidah was known as 'Ajudah' to the indigenous population and this, in turn, became 'Aguda' to the people of Lagos.

<sup>5</sup>Jonathan Cape, 1980. Picador paperback, 1982.



the fort of St John the Baptist remained an isolated Portuguese outpost, administered from Sao Tome', until after Dahomey gained its independence from France in 1960.<sup>6</sup>

As mentioned above, the return of so many ex-slaves from Brazil and the special position enjoyed by Ouidah served to strengthen Portuguese culture and the use of its language along the coast of West Africa, especially on the 'Slave Coast' between the River Volta and Warri. Warri had, in fact been an important Portuguese settlement, administered from Sao Tome' from the early sixteenth century to about 1800, when the Portuguese effectively abandoned it. Known at first as the 'City of St. Augustine' (it was evangelised by Portuguese Augustinian missionaries) and later as 'Sant Antonio' (the name given by the later Capuchin missionaries), Old Warri (also known as 'Big Warri' and Ode Itsekiri) is today no more than a village, but it does have many interesting relics of its Portuguese past.

When I visited it in November 1992, I was shown the site of the old mud church, still known as 'Satone', a corruption of 'Sant Antonio'. In the Itsekiri royal compound there is a small building, where the skulls of the Olu (the title of an Itsekiri king) are buried. It is known as the 'Kapela' - a word easily recognisable as 'chapel'. The local teacher who was my guide<sup>7</sup> was able to give me a number of words of Portuguese origin which are still in common use among the people of Old Warri: *kukaiyo* (spoon), *farina* (flour), and *assete* (plate: could this be French?). The people seem to be aware of their proud history and in the modern city of Warri one finds 'Dom Domingos Secondary School'. Dom Domingos was in fact an early Christian king of Warri, and it was he who incorporated the cross into the Itsekiri regalia<sup>8</sup> on his return from Portugal in 1610.

Other Portuguese relics have been found in Elmina (in modern Ghana), as well as a distorted form of Catholicism,<sup>9</sup> even though the Calvinist Dutch expelled the Portuguese as early as 1637, never to return. It helps to underline the impact made by the early Portuguese explorers and missionaries in West Africa and the persistence of their culture, which emanated from São Tomé, Elmina, Ouidah, Warri and even Benin City - which was

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<sup>6</sup>It was finally annexed by Dahomey on 1 August 1961 and the small Portuguese garrison was expelled. After a period of decay the fort was restored in the early 1990s and is now a tourist attraction.

<sup>7</sup>His name was Johnson Ofofi. The full story of my visit was published in *Orita* (Journal of Religious Studies, University of Ibadan), Vol. XXVI (1995), pp 78-89, "Sixteenth Century Augustinian Missions Revisited".

<sup>8</sup>A cross adorns the crown of the Olu of Warri. It is placed over two crossed swords, reminiscent of those of the Oba of Benin. There is also a cross over the entrance to the *kapela* in 'Big Warri'.

<sup>9</sup>R. Wiltgen, *Gold Coast Mission History, 1471-1880* (SVD Publications, Techny, 1956). The work is particularly well documented. cf, also Lamin Sanneh, *West African Christianity* (New York, Orbis, 1983).



first visited by Portuguese missionaries in 1515. As noted above, the Portuguese language continued to be used along the coast until late in the nineteenth century and, according to Buchi Emecheta, any white man in the Onitsha area was known among the Igbo as a 'Fotugize', i.e. Portuguese.<sup>10</sup> Throughout southern Nigeria today one hears the words 'piccaninny' or 'pickin', 'palaver' and 'dash', all of which are of Portuguese origin ('dash' being derived from *das*, meaning 'will you give?')<sup>11</sup>

### Catholic Missions on the Slave Coast

When the first Catholic missionaries of the modern era (19th century) arrived in West Africa, they found a number of Portuguese speaking Catholics in some of the villages along the coast. These had maintained their Catholic faith without an ordained clergy, although in some cases there had been sporadic visits from priests stationed in São Tomé. After a period of initial confusion over jurisdiction (because of the Patroado granted by Pope Alexander VI to the Portuguese<sup>12</sup> in 1493), the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith allocated the area between the Niger and the Congo rivers to the French Spiritan (CSSp) missionaries, with headquarters in Libreville, while the area stretching west of the Niger as far as the Volta River went to the Society of African Missions (SMA), also of French origin.<sup>13</sup> This is the area that corresponds with the old Slave Coast, the main point of interest in this essay.

The first SMA missionaries were directed to the only known town on the coast, namely Ouidah, and Frs. Borghero and Fernandez arrived there in 1861. Since the Portuguese fort was unoccupied at the time they appropriated it and made use of its chapel, which was serviceable. The Catholics were known as 'Portuguese' or 'Ajudas' to the people of Dahomey, and from the beginning Portuguese was the language of the mission. This practice continued, by extension, even after other Missions were established in Porto Novo (1864), Lagos (1868). By then the former was part of the French protectorate of Dahomey while the latter had been occupied by the British. In both cases the colonial authority soon began to insist that their language be used in schools, but it took many years before this directive was fully implemented. The mission in Agoué (Togo) followed the three noted above about 1876, again among Portuguese-speaking Catholics, and Elmina was opened

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<sup>10</sup>In her novel *The Slave Girl* (Collins, 1977), set in the Asaba-Onitsha area at the end of the 19th century.

<sup>11</sup>*Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary* (ed. 1977), p. 328.

<sup>12</sup>Cf. Stephen Neil, *A History of Christian Missions* (Penguin, 1964), pp. 141-142.

<sup>13</sup>Known as the Vicariate of Dahomey (1860), it became that of the Bight of Benin in 1870. A Prefecture of Dahomey was created in 1883, thus paving the way for a Vicariate of Ouidah in 1948 and the present Archdioceses of Lagos (1950) and Cotonou (1955). *Annuario Pontificio*, 2005 (Vatican City).



in 1880.

The late Fr. Patrick Gantly SMA has done the research on the early Catholic SMA missions in West Africa, and the fruit of his labour (which is the basis for the above information) was published privately in 1991.<sup>14</sup> What follow here is the references I have been able to glean from this work—taken from the correspondence and reports of the early missionaries—on the language question in their apostolate, with another pertinent quotation from a different source.

Fr Borghero (in Ouidah, 1862): “When the school is fully organised the French language will be taught but, for the present, and until we have learned the native language, Portuguese is the only language necessary.”<sup>15</sup>

Fr. Courdioux (diary, Ouidah, 1862): “He is also learning the native language, using the Wolof alphabet to translate parts of the catechism. But the language in general use is Portuguese and Borghero thinks that, for the present, a knowledge of this language would suffice” (I, 70).

Ouidah Mission, 1863: “Unable, for the first time to make new Christians, and left with Portuguese-speaking adults who were Christians only in name” (I, 147)

Fr. Cloud to Fr. Planque, 1869: “Whydah station was well run now, although the introduction of French in the school, as in Porto Novo school was ‘a monstrous and regrettable innovation’. Borghero, Cloud said, had been right in maintaining that the vernacular was Portuguese, that is, until such time as the African language was needed” (I, 171)

Cloud to Planque, concerning the Sisters in Porto Novo, 1869: “But they could achieve little because they did not know Portuguese. They are embarrassed when the parents of their pupils call on them” (I, 172).

Cloud to Planque re Lagos, 1869: “The question of the vernacular, he advised Planque, should be clarified: he was still studying Portuguese, but he would also need to know English” (I, 173).

Fr. Courdioux to Planque, re Lagos (1872): I now want five Sisters, two or three speaking

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<sup>14</sup>*Mission to West Africa* (2 vols, pp 432 & 373), Society of African Missions (SMA), Rome, 1991. The sources are indicated but the work lacks an index, and since a chronological sequence is not always followed, it can be difficult to locate a desired topic.

<sup>15</sup>Gantly, Vol. 1, p. 56. The sources for subsequent quotations from this work are indicated in the text: most of them come from the SMA archives in Rome, which are indicated in the book's endnotes.



English, and a capable Superior, knowing English and Portuguese" (I, 221).

Comment by Gantly on the situation in 1879: "He [de Bresillac] would have found himself in Whydah in the midst of Portuguese-speaking emancipated slaves, nominal Catholics, and their descendants. That was what his missionaries had found, not only in Whydah, but in Porto Novo, Lagos and Agoué... Missionary work became largely a matter of learning Portuguese, ministering to the Brazilians and setting up schools, mainly for their children" (I, 322).

Fr Deniard, with regard to Lagos, in 1872: "Many people, he added, to whom the missionaries spoke in Portuguese, replied in their own language. Preaching in Portuguese, as they had been doing, reached only a small number" (I, 322).

Lagos, 1874, re mission schools: "The Lagos colonial government had been giving a subsidy of £200 per annum, but had made the teaching of teaching of English compulsory" (I, 326).

Bro, Michael Fagan re Lagos schools, 1883: "The girls sang songs in English, French and Portuguese" (I, 327).

Planque to Chausse, re Porto Novo (1884): "Once the Protectorate was solidly established, the schools would have to become French. But the change should not be made too quickly: the language of commerce would gradually become French and then there would be a demand for French in the schools" (I, 342).

The above quotations from Gandy's work are corroborated by another from Ellen Thorpe's well-known *Ladder of Bones*. In writing of the redoubtable Mère Veronique, the Catholic Sister who served in and around Lagos for more than fifty years (1873-1924), she quotes her, with reference to the first Sisters to teach English, as follows: "It was very difficult for them. They spoke Portuguese very well, but hardly knew a word of English".<sup>16</sup> This clearly shows that the first French Sisters in Lagos learned Portuguese rather than English.

### **A Living Link with Portuguese Culture**

The repatriated slaves in Lagos, most of whom were Catholic, were proud of their Brazilian culture and their Catholic religion. Known as 'Agudas', they also clung tenaciously to the Portuguese language and used it a mark of their identity.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>*Ladder of Bones* (Jonathan Cape, London, 1956), p. 156.

<sup>17</sup>In much the same way the Catholics of central Goa (India), in the quarter around the cathedral, have clung to the Portuguese language, even though 44 years have elapsed since the territory was incorporated into India (in 1961).



A Protestant in Lagos at that time used English, a Catholic used Portuguese; it was as simple as that. With the passage of time English, as the language of the colonial administration, won out, but some use of Portuguese persisted into the twentieth century. This was possible since the 'Agudas' had their own closely-knit quarter on Lagos Island, sometimes known as 'Portuguese Town'.<sup>18</sup> According to the Catholic priest, Mgr. Pedro Ayodele Martins, who was born in Lagos in 1910, and is now aged 95, his parents used occasional Portuguese expressions, "especially when they swore"! In 1996 he gave me the background to his family history,<sup>19</sup> which I now recount.

"My grandfather was Domingo Martins, from Bahia in Brazil. He came to Ouidah where he made his fortune as a slave trader. I myself have seen women with a capital 'M' branded on their chest and back, indicating their owner - i.e. Martins. Domingo had many wives and casual concubines, but he kept a list of all his children. One of these was my 'Uncle Pedro', after whom I was named. I still have a copy of his last will and testament, written in Portuguese".

"My grandfather Domingo returned to Bahia as an old man [possibly soon after the abolition of slavery there, in 1888]. I have visited his house there, known as 'Casa Grande'. The Yoruba religion is strong there - it is similar to 'Stella Maris' - but it is in no way Christian. The Brazilians in Lagos were very tough people. Look at 'Martins Street': all the houses are of Brazilian architecture. There were also the children of casual unions, known as the 'bastados'. Fr. Alfred Martins of Ibadan (now Bishop of Abeokuta) has a genealogy of his own family background. The legitimate 'Martins' came from Ouidah. I visited the Portuguese fort there before 1960, and I saw cups and plates embossed with the letter 'M'. I also identified a snuff-box given by Domingo Martins to the British explorer Burton. It is now in the British Museum".

"Porto Novo was the 'new port', coming after Ouidah which had no real port. The village of Ikorodu [now part of Lagos] is also of Portuguese origin. It means the "4th lake or lagoon" in Portuguese. There is also the village of 'Ajuva' near Badagry: that comes from the Latin *Adjuvet nos Deus* - 'May God help us'.

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<sup>18</sup>The expression is used by Richard Ammann in *Lagos Walking Tours* (Riverside, Port Harcourt, 1994), p. 25. In this case, however, it would perhaps be more accurate to speak of 'Brazilian Town'. The term 'Lusitanian' could also be used, in an inclusive sense, to embrace the cultures of both Portugal and Brazil.

<sup>19</sup>16 January 1996. I was a neighbour of Mgr. Martins, on Victoria Island (where he still resides) at the time. Ordained priest for the Archdiocese of Lagos in 1943 he served most of his life as an Army chaplain. Mrs Irene Lynch (wife of the then Irish Ambassador to Nigeria) included a "Biographical Profile of Mgr. Pedro Ayodele Martins" in *Let's Talk it Over*, an anthology of his radio talks (*under the titles, 'Uncle Pedro' and 'Let's Talk it Over'*) she edited in 2001.



"The first Mass in Lagos was celebrated in No. 12 Taiwo St, near Tinubu Square. The house belonged to my mother's family. She was Elizabeth de Souza. Sadly, the place is now in ruins: it is a sacred place, I would not allow my family members to sell it".

We also have the account of the first Catholic community established by Fr Francesco X Borghero SMA in Lagos in 1863. It reads as follows:

The primary pool of congregants for the new church were Portuguese-speaking returnees or emancipated slaves, *emancipados*, from Portugal, Brazil and Cuba. Lagosians had a name for these people, *popo*, which was derived from the Portuguese word *papae*, a reverential word for men. Thus, the church was called *Popo Aguda*. These *emancipados*, including their offspring, came back with added value, i.e., as skilled artisans. Most had also learned to read and write the Portuguese language, so that when the British administrators, after 1861, 'decreed' English as official language they would make the transition more easily than the natives.<sup>20</sup>

I wonder if Mgr. Pedro Martins is the last living link with Lagos' Portuguese legacy. His mother was a de Souza: a fairly common name on the coast from Ouidah to Lagos. The best-known member of that family in recent times was perhaps Monseigneur Isidore de Souza, Archbishop of Cotonou from 1991 to 1996. He was born in Ouidah in 1934 and was ordained coadjutor bishop of Cotonou in the church of the Immaculate Conception there in 1981.<sup>21</sup> A commemorative plaque recalls the tercentenary of the church, which was made a minor basilica in 1989. The Archdiocese of Cotonou was, in fact, known as the Apostolic Vicariate of Ouidah prior to its erection as diocese in 1955.

Other Portuguese and Brazilian names can be seen on the plaque of benefactors in the entrance porch of Holy Cross Cathedral, Lagos. Apart from Mgr. Pedro Martins, many other well-known families in Lagos bear Portuguese names: the da Silva, da Rocha, Perreira, Marinho and, of course, the Martins families. A novel written by a Brazilian author, Antonio Olinto, *The Waterhouse*, is based on the history of the da Rocha family and the life of the Aguda community in Lagos.<sup>22</sup>

The Portuguese/Brazilian family names are jealously guarded and, as with Mgr Pedro Ayodele Martins, they often go side by side with a Yoruba name. For example, the present

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<sup>20</sup> Albert Ngene, *Anthony Cardinal Okogie: a man for all seasons* (Lagos, 2005).

<sup>21</sup> " *LEglise Catholique en Afrique: Occidentale et Centrale* (P. Louis Fromy, Oeures Pontificales Missionnaires, 1998), p. 79.

<sup>22</sup> Ammann, *op. cit.*, p. 52. Among the many photos in this book are 'The Waterhouse' and the 'Elias da Silva House', another fine example of Lagosian-Brazilian architecture.



(2005) Deputy Governor of Lagos State is a Femi Pedro, while the former Secretary of Lagos State government (1999-2003) was a Babarinde da Silva.

The Portuguese/Brazilian legacy is, therefore, in no danger of being overlooked or of disappearing into the mists of history. It is alive and well and Nigeria even shares a maritime border with Portuguese-speaking Sao Tomé and Príncipe'. Indeed, the two countries share resources in exploiting their rich petroleum deposits in the Gulf of Guinea. Together with Benin Republic (Ouidah), Togo (Agoué), and Ghana (Elmina), they form a region that owes much to 'Magna Lusitania' in forging its cultural identity.



**Bust to the last Olu, Erejuwa II, Old Warri**