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## Leegten van een dictatuur: beeldende kunst en literatuur in Equatoriaal Guinea

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis is about how writers and visual artists from Equatorial Guinea demand attention for the current (political) situation in their country through their work; a country that is a former colony of Spain that gained independence in 1968, with Francisco Macías Nguema as the first president to turn the country into a terrifying dictatorship. This seemed to come to an end in 1979 with the coup of his cousin Teodoro Nguema Mbasogo, who, however, re-established a dictatorship and was enriched by oil revenues in the 1980s. Intellectuals fled the country in large numbers during the first Macías dictatorship, but continue to do so today because of the deplorable living conditions and censorship under Obiang, who has run the country as a family business since taking office. This (political) situation is set against its historical background in chapter 1 of the first part of this research.

The body of this research consists of the works of the most prominent writers and the most politically outspoken artist in the country. These are the novels *Los poderes de la tempestad* (2015) by Donato Ndongo-Bidyogo, *Ekomo* (2008) by María Nsue Angüe and *Arde el monte de noche* (2009) by Juan Tomás Ávila Laurel in addition to the drawings, comics, collages and caricatures of visual artist Ramón Esono Ebalé. The extent to which these writers and this visual artist express themselves politically (in their works) differs. However, my research does not focus on their personal political statements, but on *the political* aspect in their visual art and literary works, which has been examined on the basis of some theoretical concepts of Jacques Rancière and Alain Badiou. These concepts – *dissensus* (Rancière), *eventual rupture* and *void* (Badiou) – form the theoretical framework of this research as set out in chapter 2 of part I. Rancière uses the concept of *dissensus* for the rupture that occurs when art breaks with the closed system of the state ('police') that leaves no room for the part that is present within the society as a whole, but at the same time forms a "part with no part", because it is not heard. According to Rancière, art is political as soon as it reveals through a rupture what was previously not visible. That rupture or *dissensus* is an extension of what Badiou calls an *eventual rupture* in the situation, where art 'empties' that situation and thus offers space for what he calls a *truth procedure*. Based on these concepts of Rancière and Badiou, voids have been searched in the works of the writers and visual artist from Equatorial Guinea, with which these works create a rupture in the dictatorship that is

thus also being emptied. The hypothesis of this research is that both in literature and in visual arts of Equatorial Guinea there are voids that are emptying the dictatorship of that country.

In order to detect these voids in the literary works, a narratological analysis has been chosen according to various currents within narratology as discussed by Schlomith Rimmon-Kenan in her handbook *Narrative Fiction* (explained in chapter 2 of part I). An important part of this narratological analysis with regard to this research into the ruptures and voids present in the novels are the parts that deal with *gaps* (Iser), *mise en abyme* (Dällenbach) and *paratext* (Genette). What Wolfgang Iser (in Rimmon-Kenan's *Narrative Fiction*) says about *gaps* can be related to Badiou's voids; namely that the 'holes' present in the text leave room for the reader's own interpretation. We do not know what that interpretation is (because every reader can give a different interpretation to a text), just as we do not know what the interpretation will be of Badiou's voids that offer an opening to a different truth than the one up to now (in the situation) was true. A *mise en abyme* (as a reflection of the whole story or as a pivot point in a story) can also offer an opening, just as *paratext* (a motto, assignment or other form of frame of a text) can contain a certain message as a key (and opening ) to the entire text. Because there are also certain stereotypes, repetitions and contradictions present in the texts studied, the oral aspects were also examined (Ong). And, in order to make the link to the reader (and to the author), the role played by *the implied author* was examined (Rimmon-Kenan), as well as the pact that the author enters into with the reader (Lejeune).

Parallel to the narratological analysis of the literature, runs the visual analysis of the visual arts of Esono Ebalé. In order to investigate where there are voids in his works, these were analyzed both separately (on the basis of various visual elements) and in categories according to the applied artistic media (drawings, comics and picture stories, collages and caricatures), whereby theories related to these categories have been deployed. This concerns the theory of the creation process of a drawing (Bryson), definitions of cartoon metaphors in comics (Schilperoord and Maes), various practical as well as philosophical views on comics (Eisner, Carrier, Pollmann), views on the collage as 'dialectical montage' (Rancière) and as 'subversive act' (Hobeika) and the caricature as subversive act and 'discharge of the gut' or 'crossover' (Bakhtin, Garber).

Each of the chapters of the examined works ends with a summary of the ruptures and voids found in the images and stories that make these images and stories function as a truth

procedure according to Badiou's view. With regards to the works of Ramón Esono Ebalé (part II of the research), it appears that in his drawings he 'walks around voids' (Bryson). Voids gain in strength in those drawings as the lines around them condense. Another process in his works, especially in his collages and caricatures, is the emptying of meanings by replacing forms. By casting the figure of Obiang in a different form in his caricatures, for example that of a devil, beast or woman, he not only places him in a different role, but also empties him of his (dictatorial) status. It can also be argued that Esono Ebalé in his comics and visual stories purifies figures that often stand outside the story as marginal characters, thus reinforcing their innocence. Purification is also reinforced by a fully drawn environment, filled with numerous motifs with mostly symbolic and metaphorical references. Purification takes place as well in the drawn spaces of his comics (especially in *La pesadilla de Obi*) by omitting color, details and text. As a result, the emptiness of those spaces (for instance where it concerns a torture chamber or hell) becomes even more tangible, making torture in the dictatorship all the more tangible, as does the censorship in the emptiness of the speech bubbles. The speech bubbles have therefore not only been left empty because the regime censored the text, but also because of what they do not show and what actually gains expressiveness as a result. As a result, the viewer/reader is more involved in the image and story, especially where one is, as it were, sucked into the story of the comic through protruding parts in empty spaces.

The ruptures and voids found in the novels (in part III of the research) emerge through an analysis of the story, the narrator, the focalization of the narrator, the structure of the novel (with the *paratext en mise en abyme*), and the characters and circumstances. In Donato Ndongo's *Poderes de la tempestad*, the *paratext* (mottos and dedication) is a *mise en abyme* of the testimony to the community that makes up the novel as a whole, underpinning both necessity and pain in *the thorn that penetrated where it will come out again* as a closing line on a last (empty) page. In the novel, pain stands for all or nothing and in that sense (with the poetic rule in which it is expressed) can be understood as an emptiness in which truth occurs (Badiou). This also applies to the voids in the novel where there is the difference in focus and level of narration between the *you* and *I* narrator and where there are empty stereotypes in the characters.

The pain of the narrator Nnanga in *Ekomo*, the novel by María Nsue Angüe, also leaves a 'hole' in the story, where she says she is "between a little sun and a little shadow" at the beginning and end. By burying (and touching) her deceased husband Ekomo, she performs

an act that breaks with her community which also incorporates *the political* (Rancière) and with which she shows to that community that she is no longer afraid to be “the little that one is” (Badiou). She also performs this act by surrendering to the dance with which she surrenders to “la locura de la nada” (Mester), in other words, to nothingness or emptiness, like Nfumba’a, who returns from Europe and who goes into the jungle against all prohibitions. The fact that the author also commits herself to this nothing is evident from the message (*paratext*) of the novel addressed to her old friend Nnanga, with the same name as that of the narrator, a name which also means “mother of all women”. Through that name, the author’s voice also resonates in the dance and musicality of the lyrical parts of the text. In doing so she places herself, *jugando a ser bantu* (playing a bantu), also in a border area “between a little bit of sun and a little bit of shade” and her role extends beyond that of *la abuela cuentacuentos* with which she identified herself in interviews.

Unlike the other two novels, in *Arde el monte de noche*, the novel by Juan Tomás Ávila Laurel, there is no reference to or reflection of the story in the *paratext*. This story, set on the island of Annobón, far off the coast, is told with many circumferential movements from the child/adult focus by a storyteller who looks back on the daily life on his island and on events from his youth. Critics write that by means of this novel, Ávila Laurel wrote back his island (where he grew up himself) in history, as a counterweight to an unambiguous identity imposed by the government (Lewis, MacLeod). However, my research has shown that the (political) power of the novel does not lie in the first place in that, which would reduce the novel too much to *history* (Rancière), but in that which remains open in the novel as *poetry*. What remains open are a number of mysteries (related to the grandfather, a certain cult, and certain disappearances) that, in conjunction with a series of evils, circulate around the fire coming from the mountain (as pivot in the novel), making a political break in the situation. With this novel, Ávila Laurel sets in motion a truth procedure that also breaks open the existing (political) history of the island and Equatorial Guinea.

In the end, in addition to *ruptures* and *voids*, concepts such as *necessity*, *courage*, *fidelity* and *in-between spaces* proved to be leading in my research, in addition to the more specific concepts related to visual art and literature. In the concluding part IV of the research, on the basis of these concepts which may or may not be common, I summarize where in the various works there are (political) ruptures and voids that make these works into a truth procedure

which offers an opening to a different truth than that of the current regime in Equatorial Guinea.

One conclusion, based on the distinction made by Rancière between *history* and *poetry*, is that the literature of Equatorial Guinea has so far been interpreted by quite a few researchers as *history*, as such often as binary, by placing colonial versus neo-colonial; the traditional countryside versus the modern city or by emphasizing the relationship between the sexes. In my research, however, I examined the individual works as *poetry* that does not fill in gaps (binarily), but leaves them open. It has turned out that the writers and visual artist each in their own way and through their work draw attention to the (current) situation in Equatorial Guinea, but that this is based on corresponding forces that make each of the works political. These corresponding forces are located where the image or story is broken open, creating space for something new. In the novel by Nsue Angüe, the story is broken open where the protagonist steps outside himself, as it were, in (the emptiness of) dance and poetry. This is accompanied by pain, where the lawyer's testimony in Ndong'o's novel is accompanied by the pain of the thorn going out in the same place where it went in. Pain also underlies the deserted islanders who row to nowhere or without moving forward in Ávila Laurel's novel, plagued by all kinds of evils. And the pain is also expressed in the emptiness of the torture chambers, suffering figures, empty speech bubbles and texts in the works of Esono Ebalé. However, like Ndong'o in his novel, he uses the grotesque and caricatural in the stereotypes that fit his direct political message to the regime.

The conclusion of my research is that the power of all works and what makes them special is determined by what the voids found in them reveal and open. This appears to concern empty (intermediate) spaces in both literature and visual art (which also include certain stereotypes and metaphors), which have an intensifying effect on the work as a whole, and which actively involve the reader/observer in the work. Although what is emptied differs per work, it can be concluded that the torture, disappearances, evils and pains exposed in the voids create a (political and eventual) rupture that offers an opening into what is and at the same time what is not yet there, and what Badiou describes as a truths-in-the-making. This means that these works set in motion a truth procedure that transcends the (closed) truth of the current dictatorial regime and thus also empties the dictatorship. In the confrontation with the voids in their works, the makers have had the courage to be the little that one is (Badiou), while remaining loyal to themselves as well as to their community. The force with which they

focus on the current community and political situation of Equatorial Guinea through their art and literature will also work through as a truth procedure in the future.