



Universiteit  
Leiden  
The Netherlands

## **Voids of a dictatorship: Visual arts and literature in Equatorial Guinea**

Brus, A.B.

### **Citation**

Brus, A. B. (2021). *Voids of a dictatorship: Visual arts and literature in Equatorial Guinea*. s.l.: s.n. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3245181>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

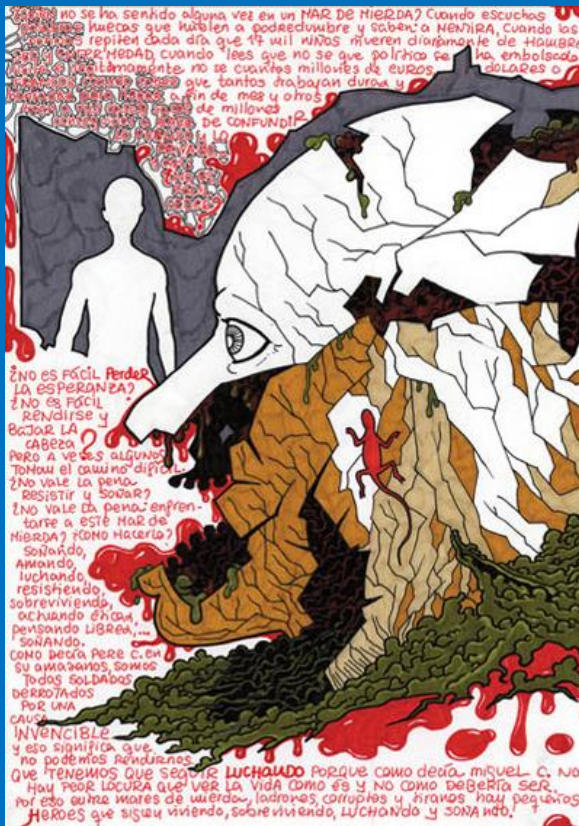
License: [Leiden University Non-exclusive license](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3245181>

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

# Voids of a dictatorship

## *Visual Arts and Literature in Equatorial Guinea*



Anita Brus

Cover illustration:  
Ramón Esono Ebalé,  
pages 4 and 6 *Mar de mierda*, 2010.









# **Voids of a dictatorship**

*Visual Arts and Literature in Equatorial Guinea*

Anita Brus

Edited by Rosemary Robson

A thesis submitted for the degree of doctor

Leiden University, Faculty of Humanities

November 2, 2021

© Leiden University/Anita Brus

**Supervisor:**

Prof. dr. L. Rodríguez Carranza

**Co-supervisor:**

Dr. H.F. Westgeest

**Doctorate Committee:**

Prof. dr. B.Y.A. Adriaensen (Radboud Universiteit)

Prof. dr. I. Brinkman (Universiteit Gent)

Dr. A.I. Churampi Ramirez

Dr. C. Soto van der Plas (Santa Clara University)

Prof. dr. C.J.M. Zijlmans

*To my parents who gave me the strength not to be afraid “to be the little that one is” (Alain Badiou)*

Y, al famoso ‘jamón y queso’ con sus imágenes y textos siempre agudos:

POLÍTICA

Una cuestión de INTELIGENCIA es.  
Y no es apto para CALENTURIENTOS.

👊 ÈiGí for ❤️



Ramón Esono Ebalé



## CONTENTS

### Acknowledgements

Preface.....	1
--------------	---

<b>Part I Research framework.....</b>	<b>7</b>
---------------------------------------	----------

<b>Chapter 1 Political History of Equatorial Guinea.....</b>	<b>9</b>
--	----------

Disinterest and Silence in the Colonial Period (1778-1968) .....	10
--	----

Nguemismo and Afro-fascismo under the Rule of Macías (1968-1979).....	12
---	----

Obiang: Oil and Emptiness in the Footsteps of Macias (1979 - Present).....	17
--	----

<b>Chapter 2 Visual Arts and Literature of Equatorial Guinea.....</b>	<b>21</b>
---	-----------

Literature.....	22
-----------------	----

Visual Arts.....	27
------------------	----

Motivation for choice of the works to be examined .....	34
---	----

<b>Chapter 3 Theoretical framework .....</b>	<b>38</b>
--	-----------

The relationship between politics and state.....	38
--	----

<i>Dissensus</i> .....	40
------------------------	----

<i>Eventual rupture</i> .....	43
-------------------------------	----

<b>Chapter 4 Methodology .....</b>	<b>47</b>
------------------------------------	-----------

Stories.....	48
--------------	----

Texts as a 'frame' and reflection of the story.....	50
---	----

Oral narration.....	52
---------------------	----

The autobiographical pact.....	53
--------------------------------	----

Narrative Fiction.....	54
------------------------	----

1. Story, narration and events.....	55
-------------------------------------	----

2. Narrator focus.....	56
------------------------	----

3. Role of the narrator.....	57
------------------------------	----

4. Characterization of the characters .....	59
5. Role of the reader .....	60
Images.....	62
Visual analysis in visual literacy.....	62
Visual analysis in relation to visual media.....	63
Visual analysis in relation to the theories involved in the image.....	64
<b>Part II Images - Voids in the Works of Esono Ebalé.....</b>	<b>67</b>
Preface.....	69
1. Drawings, such as 'walk for a walk's sake', around voids.....	70
2. Empty 'containers' in comics and cartoons.....	74
3. Metaphors and stereotypes in Ebalé's comics and cartoons.....	81
3.1 The metaphorical effect of some cartoons.....	82
3.2 The effect of stereotypes and comic conventions in <i>La pesadilla de Obi</i> .....	86
3.3 Interfaces with the Japanese <i>manga</i> comic and with African comics.....	97
4.1 Collage as 'dialectical montage' and 'subversive act'.....	103
4.2 Caricature as a 'subversive act'.....	108
1. <i>The role of the diabolical, sexual and carnivalesque</i> <i>in the Obiang caricatures</i> .....	109
2. <i>The Role of the Primitive in the Obiang caricatures</i> .....	113
3. <i>The Role of the feminine in Obiang caricatures</i> .....	116
5. The voids in the works of Esono Ebalé as a truth procedure .....	119
<b>Part III Stories</b>	
<b>- Voids in the novels of Ndongo-Bidyogo, Nsue Angüe en Ávila Laurel.....</b>	<b>123</b>
<b>Chapter 1 Donato Ndongo - <i>Poderes de la tempestad</i>.....</b>	<b>125</b>
Introduction.....	125



1. Ndongo's journalism and literary career.....	126
2. Literary contexts .....	128
2.1 Spain.....	129
2.2 Latin American literature and dictators .....	130
2.3 African literature and <i>Négritude</i> .....	132
3 <i>Poderes de la tempestad</i> .....	134
3.1 The story.....	135
3.2 The narrator.....	136
<i>Tú/yo</i> .....	136
<i>Narrator focus</i> .....	138
3.3 The structure of the novel.....	141
<i>Four paratexts</i> .....	141
<i>Mise en abyme</i> .....	143
<i>Oral influences</i> .....	144
3.4 The characters and circumstances .....	145
4 Ndongo's novel as truth proceedings .....	147
<b>Chapter 2 - María Nsue Angüe – Ekomo</b> .....	151
Introduction.....	151
1. Cultural and literary context.....	152
<i>Nsue Angüe as storyteller and writer of minor literature</i> .....	153
2. <i>Ekomo</i> .....	154
2.1 The story.....	154
2.2 The narrator.....	156
<i>Narrator focus</i> .....	156
2.3 The structure of the novel.....	158

<i>Metaphorical Preludes</i> .....	159
<i>Mise en abyme</i> .....	163
<i>Oral influences</i> .....	168
2.4 The characters and circumstances .....	169
3. Nsue Angüe's novel as truth procedure .....	171
<b>Chapter 3 - Juan Tomás Ávila Laure – <i>Arde el monte de noche</i></b> .....	175
Introduction .....	175
1. Cultural and literary context .....	177
1.1 Essays and <i>Cuentos Crudos</i> .....	178
1.2 Cultural context .....	179
1.3 Literary context .....	180
2. <i>Arde el monte de noche</i> .....	181
2.1 The story .....	182
2.2 The narrator .....	184
<i>Narrator focus</i> .....	184
2.3 The structure of the novel .....	185
<i>Paratext and autobiographical pact</i> .....	186
<i>Mises en abyme</i> .....	187
<i>The grandfather's mystery</i> .....	188
<i>The beating</i> .....	189
<i>Disappearance</i> .....	191
<i>Oral influences</i> .....	194
2.4 The characters and circumstances .....	196
3. Ávila Laurel's novel as truth procedure .....	197

<b>Part IV Ávila Laurel's novel as truth procedure.....</b>	<b>201</b>
BIOGRAPHY.....	209
ABSTRACT.....	220
CURRICULUM VITAE.....	225

## **Acknowledgements**

My former teacher Katalin Herzog has played a major role in all my studies. She inspired and guided me when I graduated from teacher training college as a teacher of drawing and art history, after which she encouraged me to continue my studies at the Academy of Visual Arts in Amersfoort. It was her idea to begin a PhD at a point in my life at which I needed to broaden my field of vision. Although our paths parted, I would like to thank her for all her help and enthusiasm during the long period that we shared a friendship that has brought me so much. I would also like to thank Luz Rodríguez Carranza for her enthusiasm and the expertise with which she guided me in the realization of this thesis. I still remember very well when I reported to her in Leiden with my initial idea that did not seem to fit into her first field of expertise. Yet we found each other in art and politics and I could not have been better off in this field with her as my promoter. The same applies to Helen Westgeest in her role as co-promoter and enthusiastic accompanist for the section on visual arts. I would also like to thank the LUCAS (Leiden University Center for the Arts in Society) of Leiden University that provided the opportunity for this research and its completion through a grant awarded to me.

I would also like to express my great thanks to visual artist Ramón Esono Ebalé who, besides through his images, also inspired me with his explosive personality during the time he was here to attend the exhibition of his work in Haarlem. My thanks also go to Juan Tomás Ávila Laurel and Donato Ndongo, whom I both know personally through their works and who were both important driving forces, especially at the outset of the research. Initially, this also applied to Benita Sampedro Vizcaya and Juan Ramón Arazadi Martínez, thanks to whom I was able to participate in the research group of the UNED (Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia) in Madrid, for which I also want to thank them. Finally, I would like to thank my family and friends; my brother Bert Brus and his wife, Marita Krukkert-Brus, who once saved me from a less than fortunate adventure in Africa, Rossana Hoogendoorn-Gagliano, Amira Armenta and Doro Blaisse with whom I have shared so much and also hope to share far more in our 'club literario', my best friend, Petra Schoenmakers, and my friend and ex-neighbor Ingeborg Putter to whom I can always turn and Marion Kleuters, my former English colleague in Schoonhoven with whom I am still friends, who helped me with the English translation and whom I follow in her writing as she follows me.



## Preface

As is the case in other African countries, we treat our presidents as if they were our fathers. [...] But the only thing that those – who consider themselves mere children of a father who rules them – have to offer in return is a vertical parliament in which the laws and decisions that come from the father are received by the children with thunderous applause.<sup>1</sup>

(Juan Tomás Ávila Laurel, 2005: 31-2)

It was during a lecture on Spanish language linguistics at the University of Amsterdam (UvA) in 2003 that I first became aware that Equatorial Guinea is the only Spanish-speaking country in Africa.<sup>2</sup> My curiosity about this country was aroused and I finally decided to visit it in 2010 on a hard-won tourist visa. Once I arrived in the capital Malabo, the restrictions of the regime soon became apparent: I was told that in order to travel onwards, I required a document that had to come from the minister himself, who, however, was elsewhere. A permit was also required for photography and the officer in charge, sitting in an empty ‘tourism office’, was usually having lunch during office hours. However, a delegation from the American company Military Professional Resources Inc. was based in the Sofitel, where I was staying.<sup>3</sup> They included a cultural attaché, who was happy to assist me with some cultural information about the country. He referred me to the Centro Cultural de España and Malabo (CCEM), where I came across a comic strip by Ramón Esono Ebalé (b.1977). I was struck not only by the detailed, colorful drawings of street scenes in Malabo, but also by the empty speech bubbles. Because all the members of the country’s tiny art and literature scene seemed to be concentrated on the same CCEM, it was not difficult to get in touch with Esono Ebalé and with Juan Tomás Ávila Laurel (b.1966), the only native writer still living in the

---

<sup>1</sup> “Como ocurre en otros países africanos, a nuestros presidentes les tratamos como papás. [...] Pero lo único que pueden dar unos que se sienten hijos del papá que los dirige es un parlamento vertical, en el que las leyes o decisiones vienen del papá y los hijos las reciben con atronadoras salvas de aplausos.” [own translation]

<sup>2</sup> Although the president has sought affiliation with French-speaking and Portuguese-speaking countries and the different ethnic groups in the country speak their own languages, Spanish has remained the official language. As in other African countries, Equatorial Guinea is characterized by diglossia in which people speak one or more indigenous languages (Annobones, Balengue, Baseke, Bisio, Bubi, Fang and Ndonge) plus Spanish as the official language and the nation’s lingua franca.

<sup>3</sup> This is one of the private companies contracted by the US government to deal with issues abroad, usually military matters. I was told that they were helping the president of Equatorial Guinea organize his military apparatus. An article about this type of company appeared in *The New York Times* with the following comment: “In the darker recesses of the world, private contractors go where the Pentagon would prefer not to be seen, carrying out military exercises for the American government, far from Washington’s view. In the last few years, they have sent their employees to Bosnia, Nigeria, Macedonia, Colombia and other global hot spots.” (Wayne, Leslie. “America’s For-Profit Secret Army.” *The New York Times*, October 13, 2002: 3/1)

country.<sup>4</sup> I met them at the CCEM, where they were also working at the time. I became better acquainted with their work and wondered how it related to a patriarchal regime that tolerates only thunderous applause from its “children”. This question was the initial impetus for this research which focuses on the visual art of Ramón Esono Ebalé and the novels of, successively, Donato Ndongo-Bidyogo (b.1950), María Nsue Angüe (1945-2017) and Ávila Laurel. The question resulted in what became the main thrust of this research: how writers and visual artists from Equatorial Guinea draw attention to the current situation in their country through their works.

The literature of Equatorial Guinea (unlike its visual arts) has been extensively researched, especially in Spain and the US. This certainly applies to the novels chosen for this study: *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.<sup>5</sup> Of these, Ndongo-Bidyogo’s novel is the most politically outspoken, recounting the atrocities that took place under the regime of the former dictator, Francisco Macías Nguema (1924-1979), often simply called Macías. By contrast, the novels of Nsue Angüe and Ávila Laurel tell stories about the local community (Annobón and Fang) without direct political references. Nsue Angüe is not only the only woman among these authors,<sup>6</sup> but is also distinguished by her non-critical attitude toward the current regime, and the fact that she spent most of her life in Spain. Unlike Nsue Angüe, Ndongo-Bidyogo and Ávila Laurel were critical of the regime, both in their literature and beyond, and were therefore forced into exile. Since Macías expelled all intellectuals from the country when he took office in 1968, Ndongo-Bidyogo has lived in Spain, where he works as a writer and journalist in Murcia. Ávila Laurel lives and works (partly) in Barcelona, after fleeing because he had gone on a hunger strike in protest against the regime in 2011.

With his outspoken caricatures of the current president, Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo (b.1942), Esono Ebalé is Equatorial Guinea’s most critical and politically active visual artist.<sup>7</sup> The country’s few other artists generally tend to operate more on the margins or

---

<sup>4</sup> During the two dictatorships almost all writers in Equatorial Guinea emigrated to Europe (Spain) or the US.

<sup>5</sup> I explain in more depth my motivation to use the selected works in relation to the theoretical framework in Part I, Chapter IV of this research.

<sup>6</sup> She is also the only author among them who is no longer alive; she died in Malabo in January 2017.

<sup>7</sup> When he was arrested in 2017, after daring to return to Equatorial Guinea, he called himself an “artist”. He was sentenced to six months in harsh conditions in Black Beach, a notorious prison in Malabo.



abroad (Spain) with a less outspoken oeuvre than that of Esono Ebalé, and I have therefore excluded them from my research.<sup>8</sup> Above all, I was fascinated by the empty speech bubbles in Esono Ebalé's comics that I suspected revealed something about his relationship with the regime. When I interviewed him about his work in 2014,<sup>9</sup> he said that these speech bubbles were indeed a response to the censorship that disqualified his texts, supposedly because of the number of spelling mistakes. So too did provocative titles such as *The Killers of My Intelligence*. Nevertheless, I wondered if this was the only reason, since he also left the speech bubbles (and other forms) empty in the comics he drew later, when he too was forced to leave the country because of his critical commentary on Ávila Laurel's hunger strike in the form of texts, collages and caricatures. From this arose the idea that also became the hypothesis of my research, that these voids (and "the political") exist not only in the images of Esono Ebalé, but also in literary texts such as those of Ávila Laurel. My research will therefore focus on voids in the visual art of Esono Ebalé and in the novels named above.

Concepts such as "the political" and "voids" will be defined in more detail in what forms the theoretical framework of this research, based on the philosophy of Jacques Rancière and Alain Badiou. As a prelude to their theories, in Chapter 3 of Part I, I shall briefly discuss what Aristotle writes in Book I of his *Politika* on various forms of government and Carl Schmitt's exposition of the political in *Der Begriff des Politischen* (1932). Like Aristotle, Schmitt defines the political as a closed system reserved for the state that excludes art and literature (as is also done by the regime of Equatorial Guinea that focuses almost exclusively on the economy and oil revenues). However, in his "Ten Theses on Politics" (2015), Rancière also points to Book III of Aristotle's *Politika*, in which he highlights the dilemma of those who rule and those who are governed. This category that both exists but simultaneously does not exist within the political system leaves room, Rancière postulates, for a rupture that he refers to as "dissensus" and with which the (closed) political system can be broken (*Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, 2015: 45). Rancière's dissensus theory is all the more applicable in an investigation into how visual artists and writers use their work to draw attention to the (political) situation in their country because it also relates to the visual arts and literature. In addition, Badiou's philosophy is highly enlightening because he points to

---

<sup>8</sup> However, Part I, Chapter IV of this research does include an overview of the visual arts in Equatorial Guinea.

<sup>9</sup> Brus, A., "'Injustice Makes Me Rowdy' – Interview with the African Cartoonist Ramón Esono Ebalé." *Frontally Nude*, 2014.

the voids present in the “eventual rupture” (similar to Rancière’s “dissensus”), that he believes initiate a truth procedure in art and literature (2006: 12, 2012: 287). Badiou’s theory can be used to investigate where there are voids in the works outlined above and how those voids offer an opening to a truth other than that of the country’s current regime (with which the link is also made to the political).

The chosen methodology focuses in the first instance on the stories (and not on the maker), in line with an oral narrative tradition in which, Ndongo-Bidyogo explains, there is no room for “art for art’s sake”, but in which, in his view, art consists rather of series of crafts with a specific social function and in which the stories form the social consciousness of the community through the narrator as a communication channel (2001: 133). Narratology, that in literature focuses on the story resulting from the events underlying certain actions, is a methodology that fits in with this. This is a branch of literary theory that consists of different schools of thought treated by Schlomith Rimmon-Kenan in *Narrative Fiction* (1983), that can be regarded as a narratological handbook. I have used this handbook to arrive at a narratological analysis of each of the selected novels that forms the basis of the third part of this research on stories. I have chosen several *differentia specifica* proposed by Rimmon-Kenan as a guideline, including history, story and events, the focalization and role of the narrator, the characterization of the characters and the role of the reader. Part of this narratological analysis is also an investigation of certain (literary) peripheral phenomena such as *paratext* (Genette) and *mise en abyme* (Dällenbach) that establish a relationship between a part of the text and the whole, with a view to pinpointing possible thresholds or interspaces. Through these thresholds and interspaces (between what is and what has not yet been), ruptures or voids can be traced through which the texts open up as a truth procedure (Badiou) and that allow the political to be demonstrated.

Texts open where there are gaps actively involving the reader in the story by calling on her to fill those gaps as she sees fit.<sup>10</sup> Walter J. Ong has pointed out that oral features, in the form of certain stereotypes, repetitions and contradictions, also involve the reader in the story. I have therefore used Ong’s *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the World* (1982) to find out exactly what these characteristics are and how they emerge in the various novels. In addition, in literature there can still be a certain covenant that the writer enters into

---

<sup>10</sup> This insight comes from Wolfgang Iser (in Rimmon-Kenan, 1983: 128).

with the reader when he lets his own voice as implied author resonate with that of the narrator.<sup>11</sup> In order to identify which mechanisms the author of each of the novels has used to strike such an alliance with the reader, I have included in this study what Philippe Lejeune says about this in *Le Pacte Autobiographique ou l'autobiographie en théorie* (1975).

Although texts (and stories) also play a role in Esono Ebalé's works, Part II of my research focuses on images. I have chosen a visual analysis that relates to the various components of the image (whereas a narrative analysis relates to the various components of the text), such as representation, shape, line, color, space, composition and so forth. The visual analysis will be complemented by research on theories related to artistic media, in which text also plays a role. This investigation will concern theories relating successively to drawings (Bryson), comics and visual stories (Eisner, Carrier, Pollmann, Schilperoord & Maas), collages and caricatures (Roth, Bakhtin, Van de Ligt, Garber, Hobeika). These theories provide insights into where and how certain elements in Esono Ebalé's images collide with each other, where and how the artist empties his images, and what the (political) effect is.

The research into the selected visual and literary works is preceded by an introductory part about the framework of the research. The first chapter of this volume describes the country's political history spanning three periods: the colonial period that lasted until 1968, when the country gained independence from Spain, and the first president, Macías, turned the country into a dictatorship. That seemed to have come to an end in 1979 with the coup led by his cousin, Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo, who, however, re-established a dictatorship that has lasted to this day. In the second chapter of this part, I give a general description of the history of the literature and the visual arts of Equatorial Guinea, with a further motivation for the selection of works to be researched. The theoretical framework and methodology, as briefly outlined above, will then be explained in more detail in Chapters 3 and 4 of this part. In the second part of the investigation, I examine Esono Ebalé's imagery. With the aid of a visual analysis based on various theories related to the image and the media used and the relationship with the theoretical framework, I attempt to expose voids in, successively, his drawings, comics and cartoons, collages and caricatures. The first section will examine how Esono Ebalé creates voids while drawing and which motifs he uses. Subsequently, in the

---

<sup>11</sup> Chatman, S., in Rimmon-Kenan, 1983: 87.

second section, I make an analysis of the comics and visual stories examining the empty shapes and speech bubbles (as “empty containers”). In addition, (in Section Three) I explore the role of the metaphor, the stereotype and the relationship with several comic-strip genres. In Section Four, I examine the collages and caricatures to determine to what extent and in what sense they can be seen as a “subversive act” towards the political system in Equatorial Guinea. At the end of this part, I discuss the additional, in-depth insights that the theoretical framework, introduced in Part I, offers in relation to the results of the visual analyses.

Subsequently, in Part III, I employ a narrative analysis to examine where ruptures and voids occur in the stories of each of the three selected novels. I analyze the novels of Donato Bydiogo-Ndongo, María Nsue Angüe and Juan Tomás Ávila Laurel in successive chapters, each relating to the history and story, the role of the narrator, the structure of the novel, the characterization of the characters and circumstances and on the basis of the different narratologists, as quoted by Rimmon-Kenan. The analysis of the narrator and structure of the novel will also include the *paratext* (Genette), the autobiographical (Lejeune, Cohn), the *mise en abyme* (Dällenbach) and the oral (Ong). In the concluding section, Part 4, of the research, I give an insight into how the stories and images, and the ruptures and voids found in them, function as truth procedure (Badiou) that transcends and empties the ambiguous truth of a dictatorship.

## **Part I Research framework**



## Chapter 1 Political History of Equatorial Guinea

In his article in *Debats* (123/2 2014: 72-79), in which he sheds light on a “ubiquitous literature of Equatorial Guinea” and exposes the intertwining of the history of Spain (and Latin America) with that of Equatorial Guinea, Juan Tomás Ávila Laurel refers several times to the first sentence of Cervantes’ classic *Don Quixote* (1605-15), “En un lugar de La Mancha de cuyo nombre no quiero acordarme vivía un caballero de lanza en ristre...”<sup>1</sup> (“In a village of La Mancha, the name of which I have no desire to call to mind, there lived not long since one of those gentlemen that keep a lance in the lance-rack...”).<sup>1</sup> In this piece Ávila Laurel briefly summarizes that history: the time when the Portuguese first set foot on Annobón and Fernando Poo (now Bioko), Columbus discovered America (followed by Cortés and Pizarro) and Cervantes wrote his *Don Quixote*, to the time when Equatorial Guinea became independent in 1968. He describes the onset of a period in which the newly elected president, Macías, soon lost sight of the reason for that independence and adopted all the methods used by the colonizer “multiplied by ten” (2014: 76).<sup>2</sup> Equatorial Guinea became uninhabitable and, in Spain, Franco washed his hands of it by boycotting all news from the country and banning all writings about it.<sup>3</sup> In short, it became a country whose name people would rather forget, with greater consequences, Ávila Laurel claims than those in *Don Quixote*:

That the famous one-armed man did not want to say anything about the name of the La Mancha region in which Quixote lived does not have the same consequences as the information embargo on the old colony decreed by Franco and his closest lackeys. And it was no trivial matter, because that obfuscation of information that reigned over the young country was used by its alienated president to institute by law the most abject arbitrariness.<sup>4</sup> (Ibid.: 77)

Ávila Laurel writes that, as the first president, Macías, driven by some sort of inferiority

---

<sup>1</sup> Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote*, translated by John Ormsby. London: Penguin Classics, Kindle edition.

<sup>2</sup> “Ahí siguieron diciendo que eran un mismo país hasta que fueron pasando los meses y el presidente al que eligieron, que no había sido catequista por casualidad, se olvidó muy pronto de por qué se había pedido la independencia. Y cuando se lo echaron en cara, recuperó todos los métodos que había visto aplicar a los colonizadores y los multiplicó por diez. Entonces convirtió al país suyo en un sitio en el que no se podía vivir.”

<sup>3</sup> “[...] la metrópoli no quiso saber nada del nombre de un lugar del Golfo de Biafra llamado Guinea Ecuatorial Guinea.” (Ávila Laurel, 2014: 77).

<sup>4</sup> “Que el famoso manco no quisiera decir nada del nombre de la región manchega en donde residía Quijote no tiene las mismas consecuencias que el cerrojazo informativo que Franco y sus lacayos más allegados decretaron sobre su antigua colonia. Y no es tema baladí porque aquella obscuridad informativa que imperaba sobre el joven país fue aprovechada por su enajenado presidente para instituir por ley la más abyecta arbitrariedad.” [own translation]

complex and feeling threatened by any future rival who might harm him, committed murders in an eleven-year dictatorship that became a second dictatorship on August 3, 1979, when the president lost his power (Ibid.: 77).<sup>5</sup>

Because the literature and visual arts in this research relate to these two periods of dictatorship (that of Macías from 1968 to 1979 and that of Obiang from 1979 to the present), I place an emphasis on them in the description of Equatorial Guinea's history and politics. However, there are tendencies in those periods that have a longer history, such as Spain's historical lack of interest in its colony, linked to the Spanish colonial and neo-colonial mentality and all the atrocities of the colonial era and the independence that followed. These tendencies are evident in Donato Ndongo's *Historia y tragedia de Guinea Ecuatorial* (1977) and in other historical surveys, such as those by Alicia Campos, Gustau Nerín and Inbrahim K. Sundiata. These are studies chosen as the starting point for the following historical and political description, as well as Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), that explains, from both a political and psychiatric perspective, the violent process by which former colonies broke away from their motherland.<sup>6</sup>

#### *Disinterest and Silence in the Colonial Period (1778-1968)*

The island of Fernando Poo (now Bioko)<sup>7</sup> off the coast of Cameroon, historically inhabited exclusively by the Bubi people,<sup>8</sup> was discovered by the Portuguese in 1471. From 1594, they colonized it, together with the islands of Annobón and Corisco, as an adjunct to the slave trade. It was in Dutch hands from 1641 to 1648, after which it was again occupied by the Portuguese. In 1778 they signed the Treaty of El Pardo with Spain, under which Spain took

---

<sup>5</sup> “[...] se sintió inferior a todo futuro competidor [...]. Entonces, para no verse en desventaja, mató y mandó matar, de una edad para arriba, a todos los que por la razón de su humanidad superior le podían reprochar cualquier error. Fue lo que se llamó dictadura, un periodo de gobierno caótico que duró once años y una segunda que se inició cuando aquel primer presidente fue despojado del poder inicuo con el que se venía enseñoreando sobre todos los guineanos desde aquel 12 de octubre de 1968.”

<sup>6</sup> The back cover of *The Wretched of the Earth* states: “It was Fanon, himself a psychotherapist, who exposed the connection between colonial war and mental disease.”

<sup>7</sup> Names have changed since the discoveries in the Gulf of Guinea by the Portuguese in 1471; the island of Bioko was initially called Fernando Poo (after the Portuguese explorer). The capital Malabo was previously called Santa Isabel under the Spaniards and before that (among the English) Port Clarence.

<sup>8</sup> The Bubi people are still an important ethnic group in present-day Bioko, alongside the Fang and other ethnic groups who came to the island later to work on the cocoa plantations. The Fang were the main ethnic group of Rio Muni, mainland Equatorial Guinea, alongside the Ndowé, Bisió, Balengue and Baseke. In addition, there are groups of islanders referred to as Annoboneses (from Annobón), and Bengas (Corisco).



control of the islands and the piece of mainland that is now called Equatorial Guinea in exchange for territories in South America. Embarrassed by a failed expedition in 1783, during which its men were forced to flee from the natives, which it falsely attributed to disease in “one of the most unhealthy areas in the world” (1977: 24), Spain subsequently showed little or no interest in its new colony.<sup>9</sup> In *Historia y tragedia de Guinea Ecuatorial*, Donato Ndonga writes that the failure of this first expedition had a negative effect on Spain, that then did everything in its power to disavow its possessions in the Gulf of Guinea for years to come (Ibid.)

In *La última selva de España*, Gustau Nerín also points to the lack of interest on the part of Spain that, he claims, only really began to colonize Equatorial Guinea from the islands of Corisco and Elobey Grande in 1843, by establishing trading and mission posts there (2010: 13.14). Nerín claims that the colonization of the mainland began only in 1870, while the Germans and French (from Cameroon and Gabon) were present much earlier because of unclear borders and the Spanish absence. Nerín points out that Spain’s disinterest in its African colony was attributable to the increased focus on the sale of its overseas colonies of Cuba, Puerto Rica and the Philippines and later, in the first half of the twentieth century, Morocco:

For the Spanish, ‘Africa’ was synonymous with Morocco. Even many of the entities that were dedicated to promoting colonialism relegated Guinea in favor of Morocco. The army, the main promoter of the Spanish colonial adventure at that time, forgot Guinea, where there were no military glories to be reaped, and focused its efforts on Morocco, where the Africanist military accumulated medals and promotions. (Ibid: 37)<sup>10</sup>

Ndonga also points out that the Spanish lack of interest is also apparent in the virtual absence of administrative regulation until the early twentieth century (1977: 35).

Significantly, the original black population did not count for the colonizer.<sup>11</sup> This, Nerín argues, is apparent from the ethnographic articles published by missionaries in the first half of the twentieth century, describing the black population as “an amorphous heap of raw

---

<sup>9</sup> “una de las zonas más insalubres del mundo”, (1977: 24). [own translation]

<sup>10</sup> “‘África’, para los españoles era sinónimo de Marruecos. Incluso muchas de las entidades que se dedicaban a promocionar el colonialismo relegaban Guinea en favor de Marruecos. El ejército, principal promotor de la aventura colonial española en esa época, olvidaba Guinea, donde no se cosechaban glorias guerreras, y centraba sus esfuerzos en Marruecos, donde los militares africanistas acumulaban medallas y ascensos.” [own translation]

<sup>11</sup> As Fanon also describes: “The native is declared insensible to ethics; he represents not only the absence of values but also the negation of values. He is, let us dare to admit, the enemy of values, and in this sense the absolute evil. [...] At times this Manichaeism goes to this logical conclusion and dehumanizes the native, or to speak plainly it turns him into an animal” (2001: 32).

materials without soul, cohesion or energy for anything” (2010: 47).<sup>12</sup> Ndongso notes that the censuses counted only those members of the native population who were affiliated with the white settlers in the cities, while the rest were silence (1977: 34). He expresses the dehumanization and eradication of the native population and its consequences as follows:

As they are stripped of their being, their identity as a people, their tradition – past and future – not only is an attack being perpetrated on the culture of a people, but the ground is being fertilized, by placing Guinean blacks in an intermediate stage between the savage and the pack animal, for a methodical task such as that of cultural assimilation. The first step in the complex of underdevelopment has already been laid. (Ibid.: 37)<sup>13</sup>

The mainland of Río Muni, whose colonization lagged behind in comparison with Fernando Poo – Nerín calls Río Muni “la verdadera Cenicienta del pequeño imperio español” (the real Cinderella of the small Spanish empire) (2010: 38) – was regarded only as a supplier of Fang workers for the cocoa plantations in Fernando Poo (53). Unlike other mainland ethnic groups (the Ndowé, Bisió, Balengues and Basekes), the Fang were known to the Spaniards as hard workers (54). The Spanish bribed them or got them drunk in order to take them “voluntarily” and put them to work on the plantations (228). Nerín describes Fernando Poo’s plantations as “un infierno cacaotero” (a cocoa hell) because of the poor working conditions (230, 231).

#### *Nguemismo and Afro-fascismo under the Rule of Macías (1968-1979)*

In the course of the twentieth century, it appears that “el primer peldaño” (the first step) (Ndongo) had already been laid in “un infierno cacaotero” (Nerín) and that violence was inevitable. Ndongso believes that one step in this direction was that the colonial regime gave Spanish names to local places: Guadelupe (Mongomo), Valladolid (Mimbiles), Sevilla (Niefang) and Puerto Iradier (Kogo) (1977: 51). Education put an emphasis on Spain and, in the period under Franco, schoolchildren were made to stand to attention and exclaim in unison “Somos españoles por la Gracia de Díoos!” (We are Spaniards by the Grace of God),

---

<sup>12</sup> “[...] un montón amorfo de materias primas sin alma, cohesión y energías para ninguna empresa.” [own translation] Nerín refers, among other sources, to the *Almanaque de las Misiones de Fernando Poo* from 1924 and to the magazine *La Guinea Española* that was published during this period and in which stereotypes about “the black race in general” as “rats”, “lazy” and “man-eaters” occur.

<sup>13</sup> “A medida que se les despoja de su ser, de su identidad como pueblo, de su tradición – pasado y futuro –, no sólo se está perpetrando un atentado contra la cultura de un pueblo, sino que se está abonando el terreno, al colocar a los negros guineanos en un estadio intermedio entre el salvaje y el animal de carga, para un labor metódica como es la de la asimilación cultural. El primer peldaño, el complejo de incultura, ya ha sido construido.” [own translation]

“Falangista soy, falangista hasta morir o vencer” (I am a Falangist, Falangist until death or victory), and on Saturdays “Salve, Franco!” (Hail Franco), closing with “Viva España” (Long live Spain). Ndongo calls this cultural assimilation at gunpoint and writes that corporal punishment and psychological torment were the order of the day (66). Natives had to obtain permission and fill in forms to travel within their own country and, despite slavery having been abolished, laborers were “lent out” to be used free of charge on the plantations (67).

Resistance to the colonial abuses grew: in 1950 by a group called Cruzada de Liberación, led by Acacio Mañé Ela (c.1904-1959) and later, in 1952, a strike at the Banapé seminary (Ndongo, 73). The Spanish attempted to break the resistance by playing setting the different ethnic groups against each other: they portrayed the Bubi of the island of Fernando Poo and coastal inhabitants as intelligent and hard-working, hence their prosperity, and denigrated the more numerous Fang people of the mainland of Rio Muni as lazy and uncultivated, and consequently poor. The latter were therefore supposedly a danger to the population of Fernando Poo,<sup>14</sup> one against which the colonizer promised to protect them (74,75).<sup>15</sup> After Mañé was murdered in 1958 and his body was thrown into the sea (76), anti-colonial resistance grew and colonization also came under pressure in the late 1950s in part from the anti-colonial policy of the United Nations (UN).<sup>16</sup> Both Alicia Campos Serrano and Gustau Nerín point to the importance Franco attached to colonization and the Spanish presence in the region. In *De colonia a Estado: Guinea Ecuatorial, 1955-1968*, Campos Serrano refers to that presence as Franco’s “sagrada misión civilizatoria” (sacred civilizing mission) (2002: 30) and Nerín stresses Franco’s “hispano-tropicalismo”: a new colonial theory with which Franco pretended to the United Nations that Equatorial Guinea was not a colony but a province, in order to slow the process of decolonization (2010: 277). In spite of this, decolonization was ultimately unstoppable, several national political parties emerged

---

<sup>14</sup> Ndongo-Bidyogo points out that the Bubi people were the original inhabitants of Fernando Poo (later Bioko), but that, besides Fang people “imported” as laborers, other groups from Cuba, Sierra Leone and Liberia also came to the island as workers, who were granted special rights as “negros emancipados” and hence formed a “colonial aristocracy”. These *fernandinos*, descendants of people from Sierra Leone and Liberia enslaved by the British, controlled twenty of the hundred cocoa plantations in 1940 (1977: 56).

<sup>15</sup> While during the first half of the twentieth century mainly Fang people had been sent to the island from the mainland as manpower (Nerín, 2010: 53), Macías later also sent Fang people to Malabo to counterbalance the Bubi who had entered into an alliance with the Spaniards against island independence (and for a secession from the mainland): “To counter the Bubi-Spanish alliance, the president brought some 7000 Fang to Malabo” (Sundiata, 1990: 64).

<sup>16</sup> Alicia Campos Serrano points out in *De colonia a Estado* that Spain had acceded to the UN in 1955 and had an interest in improving its position in the UN that pursued a policy of decolonization (86, 99).

and the population voted for an autonomy that heralded independence in the election won by Francisco Macías Nguema in 1968.<sup>17</sup>

In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon states that decolonization is always a violent phenomenon and “a program of complete disorder” (2001: 27), pointing to the effect of oppression on the individual. Fanon argues that this justifies the individual’s existence by using violence as an outlet in self-destructive behavior that also targets his own kind: “The colonized man will first manifest this aggressiveness which has been deposited in his bones against his own people” (Ibid.: 40). For Fanon, the violence also has a cleansing effect for, in the violence, the individual is incited to action, through which, Fanon says, he is released from his despair and fear and regains his dignity (74).<sup>18</sup> He claims that the individual wishes to assume the place of the colonizer: “We have seen that the native never ceases to dream of putting himself in the place of the settler – not becoming the settler but substituting himself for the settler” (Ibid: 41).

It is striking how, once in power and completely detached from Spain, and after eliminating his political opponents,<sup>19</sup> Macías did almost exactly what the Spanish colonizer under Franco had done before him. Instead of “Salve, Franco!” and “Viva España”, Macías decreed that after every official performance the populace had to chant “Forward with

---

<sup>17</sup> This process is described in detail by Ndongo-Bidyogo in Chapters IV to VII of *Historia y tragedia de Guinea Ecuatorial*. In summary, it boils down to the fact that there were initially three parties; the first was the Movimiento Nacional de Liberación de Guinea Ecuatorial (MONALIAN), a continuation of the Cruzada e Liberación coordinated by the assassinated Acacio Mañé (74), followed by the Idea Popular de Guinea Ecuatorial (IPGE) (90) and the Movimiento de Union Nacional de Guinea Ecuatorial (MUNGE) (97). This resulted in the first autonomous administration with Bonifacio Ondó Edú (the leader of the MUNGE who had fled to Gabón) as president and Francisco Macías Nguema as vice-president (103). The MUNGE was portrayed in the Spanish press as civilized and cultured versus the MONALIGE as extremist and subversive, and the IPGE fell somewhere in between (124). Macías switched between all three parties and, although he was not favored by the Spaniards in the final elections prior to independence because of his anti-Spanish stance, he won these elections in 1968 with the support of all three parties, under the slogan “En marcha con Macías; unidad, paz, prosperidad” (Onwards with Macías; unity, peace, and prosperity). Equatorial Guinea became officially independent on October 12, with Macías as president. In 1979, after a coup d’état by one of his political opponents, supported by Spain – he eliminated all opposition and renamed the MONALIGE, PUNT; Partido Unico Nacional de Trabajadores (188).

<sup>18</sup> “At the level of individuals, violence is a cleansing force. It frees the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction; it makes him fearless and restores his self-respect.”

<sup>19</sup> Macías eliminated not only his foreign minister, Atanasio Ndongo Miyone, after his coup attempt, but also his previous competitor in the election (and previous vice-president under autonomy) Bonifacio Ondó Edú. Ndongo writes about this: “La verdad, se muere mucho, se muere demasiado en Guinea Ecuatorial. Seis años de independencia política han significado para los habitantes de este país practicante seis años de terror y de violencia institucionalizada. Desde la independencia, el régimen vigente sólo se ha dedicado a la eliminación física de la casi totalidad de sus adversarios políticos [...]” (Ndongo, 1977: 282).

Macías, always with Macías, never without Macías, everything for Macías” and the following:

DOWN WITH Colonialism, DOWN WITH Imperialism, DOWN WITH Neocolonialism,  
DOWN THE coups, DOWN WITH the ambitious, DOWN WITH technological colonialism,  
DONE WITH commercial colonialism, LONG LIVE the revolution. (Ndongo, 1977: 227).<sup>20</sup>

In addition, every schoolchild had to memorize the full name and titles of the president (Ndongo, 279), African names such as Nguema, Mbá and Ndongo were made compulsory and “imported names” such as Luis, Anselmo and Benito were banned (281). Reversing the changes made by the Spanish colonizers, places were again given indigenous names: Fernando Poo became Bioko and the capital, Santa Isabel, became Malabo.

The Macías regime also adopted the violent methods used by the ex-colonizer. Both Donato Ndongo in *Historia y tragedia* and Ibrahim Sudiata in *Equatorial Guinea, Colonialism, State Terror, and the Search for Stability* (1990), both point to what initially appeared to be a peaceful transfer. Franco called it “the result of a peaceful, friendly and constructive development” but it resulted in the elimination of political opponents on false charges and the flight abroad of many, including almost all Spaniards.<sup>21</sup> Ndongo puts the number of those killed under the Macías regime at 90,000 (293), whereas in *Equatorial Guinea, Colonialism, State Terror, and the Search for Stability*, Sudiata gives a much greater figure overall:

According to some, about one-third of the approximately 300,000 people of Equatorial Guinea were killed and another 50,000 fled abroad. In 1974 it was estimated that there were 60,000 refugees in Gabon, 30,000 in Cameroon, 15,000 in Nigeria, and at least 6000 in Spain (1990: 65).

The violence rekindled ethnic divisions previously fueled by the colonizer. As a member of the Fang people, Macías came from the rural Mongomo region in Río Muni, that was less developed than the wealthier and more urban island of Bioko (Ndongo, 113). Fanon paints a

---

<sup>20</sup> “En marcha con Macías, siempre con Macías, nunca sin Macías, todo por Macías” en “el colonialismo, ABAJO; el imperialismo, ABAJO; el neocolonialismo, ABAJO; los golpes de estado, ABAJO; los ambiciosos ABAJO; el colonialismo tecnológico, ABAJO; el colonialismo comercial, ABAJO; la revolución, ARRIBA.”

<sup>21</sup> Ndongo: “Se inauguraba así una forma más para deshacerse de los que el presidente consideraba enemigos políticos: fueron destituidos y encarcelados varios funcionarios, entre ellos los ministros de Industria y Minas, Pedro Ekong Andeme y Rafael Momo Bocara, respectivamente. Y en un simulacro de juicio celebrado semanas después, serían condenados a diversas penas de prisión, de donde ninguno ha salido y todos han muerto” (1977: 198).

neo-colonial picture in which the city dwellers were seen as traitors to the national heritage of the countryside. He argues that the rural people did not trust the urban population who dressed like Europeans, spoke their languages and often worked with them in the same region (89). Fanon's theory is that Macías's opposition to colonialism, neocolonialism and imperialism was attributed to his rural descent. Because of his rustic background, he favored his own group and region, that, Sundiata claims, was not regarded as a "triumph of Fang nationalism" within his regime, but rather as a triumph of his own clan from Mongomo (1990: 66).<sup>22</sup> Ndongo writes that the government and military apparatus consisted almost exclusively of those who came from Mongomo (221). He adds that simply coming from another area was reason enough to lose a job and never again find another. Important functions were divided among family members<sup>23</sup> and, in 1970, rival parties were replaced by the Partido Unico Nacional, that was later renamed Partido Unico Nacional de Trabajadores (PUNT), and the president proclaimed himself president for life (Ndongo, 213, 214/Sundiata, 67). Student protests in Madrid were met with public executions of relatives in reprisal and the president allowed a cholera epidemic in Annobón (Palagú) to run its course because he had no faith in the loyalty of the island's inhabitants (Ndongo, 228 / Sundiata, 68).

Ndongo claims Macías had no ideology at all (129) and Sundiata calls Macías's political view "a curious blend of anti-colonialist rhetoric and Machtpolitik" (70), although he had a certain admiration for Franco and in his speeches called Hitler "the savior of Africa". He also admired African leaders such as Idi Amin, Haile Selassie, Mobutu Sese Seko, Marien Ngoubi and Jean-Bedel Bokassa. Gradually, he also sought more and more contact with Cuba and the then Eastern Bloc countries and signed treaties with the Soviet Union and China (Ndongo, 225/ Sundiata, 73).

Fanon sees the political and economic impotence of the post-colonial rulers as a problem of an underdeveloped middle class:

---

<sup>22</sup> "Macías Nguema's victory was the conquest of one member of one segment of an ethnic group. The dictatorship was not so much a triumph of Fang nationalism as it was a triumph of the president's hometown category. [...] His power was based in the Mongomo district, especially among members of the Ensangui clan."

<sup>23</sup> In her thesis, *Form and Function of Non-Linguistic Calls in Human Infants*, Naomi MacLeod points to the patriarchal system of the Fang: "The family, which is held in the highest regard, usually has one heroic male ancestor as a focal point for organization. Society is organized according to tribe, clan, lineage and family, with a strong sense of community" (11). Macías favoring of his own province and clan could therefore also be explained by this patriarchal Fang tradition.



The national middle class which takes over the power at the end of the colonial regime is an under-developed middle class. It has practically no economic power, and in any case it is in no way commensurate with the bourgeoisie of the mother country which it hopes to replace (119,120). [...] They are completely ignorant of the economy of their own country (2001: 121).

Ndongo believes that Macías plunged his country farther and farther into isolation not only because of a lack of economic power, but also because of his sick and tormented mind (293). The period under Macías has also been referred to as “nguemismo”, a variant of the more general term *afro-fascismo*.<sup>24</sup> This period was brought to an end on August 3, 1979, in a *coup d'état* staged by his own nephew, Lieutenant-Colonel Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo that has gone down in history as “El golpe de la libertad” (the strike for freedom).<sup>25</sup> Macías was arrested on August 18, 1979, imprisoned in the port city of Bata and executed October 1.

*Obiang: Oil and Emptiness in the Footsteps of Macias (1979 - Present)*

In his lecture, “Guinea Ecuatorial en el cincuentenario de su independencia: Qué independencia?” (Equatorial Guinea and the Fiftieth Anniversary of its Independence: What Independence?), delivered at the conference *50 Aniversario de la Independencia de Guinea Ecuatorial* (50th Anniversar of the Independence of Equatorial Guinea), organized in 2018 by the Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia (UNED) in Madrid, Donato Ndongo-Bidyogo questioned the nature of the country’s independence.<sup>26</sup> He called it “un fracaso colectivo” (a collective failure), “cincuenta años de constant pesadilla” (fifty years of constant nightmare) and “medio siglo de mentiras difrazadas y esperanzas frustradas” (half a century of covered-up lies and frustrated hopes). In short, Ndongo stated that the misery under Macías did not end with the coup in 1979: instead of bringing liberation, independence had brought only daily insecurity, fear and misery under an ever-more-apparent oppression

---

<sup>24</sup> Mbaré Ngom traces these terms to Max Linger-Goumaz: “[...] el presidente electo Francisco Macías Nguema suspendió todas las garantías constitucionales e impuso un proyecto monolítico, étnico y excuyente, que el crítico Max Liniger-Goumaz (1983) denominado afro-fascismo y, en su variante guineana, lo llamó 'nguemismo'" (2010:29).

<sup>25</sup> Sundiata cites the protests over late payment of salaries by Macías and the executions that followed as an impetus for this; On June 4, 1979, five members of the National Guard were executed for asking for their wages. One of those five was the brother of Lieutenant-Colonel Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo (1990: 74).

<sup>26</sup> Canal UNED. [<https://canal.uned.es/video/5b3cb9b1b111f7c148b4567>]

and an ever-more-sophisticated cruelty.<sup>27</sup> Ndongo calls both Macías and Obiang “products” of Mongomo, regarded as the most backward area of Río Muni,<sup>28</sup> and points out that this is “una oligarquía incapaz por su ignorancia” (an oligarchy incapable by ignorance). Ndongo is convinced that Macías did not replace European (colonial) culture with the African culture he propagated, but with “la nada” (nothingness) and hence emptiness. He claims that Macías’s return to an “authentic African culture” was motivated solely by hatred of whites, without his regime being able to “evaluate, develop, and update the meaning and function of certain ancestral traditions.”<sup>29</sup> Ndongo says that Obiang promotes “African culture” without practicing it.<sup>30</sup>

That Obiang’s new regime was (and still is) in many respects a continuation of the old is an idea shared by Ibrahim Sundiata:

The new government promised both change and continuity. Its ideology was vague and its connections to the previous government obvious. The Mongomo ‘clan’ retained its prominence and acted at points as a brake on the head of state. Relatives of Macías Nguema and functionaries in the old government remained in place (1990; 76).

In his lecture (also at the UNED in 2018 on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of Equatorial Guinea’s independence), Sundiata takes a closer look at the period he refers to as Obiang’s “neocolonialismo petrolero”.<sup>31</sup> He points out that, since large quantities of oil were discovered off the coast of Bioko by ExxonMobil and other US oil companies in 1992, Equatorial Guinea has been Africa’s sixth largest oil producer and has the highest gross national product of any African nation. Its population could be one of the richest on the

---

<sup>27</sup> “La independencia ni fue ni es nuestra liberación; la incertidumbre, la zozobra, la miseria siguen siendo nuestras preocupaciones cotidianas ante una opresión cada vez más nítida, ante una crueldad cada vez más refinada.” (Ibid.)

<sup>28</sup> In his lecture he points out that Mongomo is one of the last colonized districts (with a traumatic past in the confrontation with the whites), that the first school was founded there in 1939 for more than 600 children and that this is one of the most culturally deprived areas. He states that the two presidents from this area have suffered from an inferiority complex and lack the capacity to run a modern state (Ibid.).

<sup>29</sup> “La evocación romántica de ese pasado [Macías] intentaba esconder, en realidad, su propia tosquedad; porque, incapaces de evaluar siquiera el significado o la utilidad de las terminadas tradiciones, tampoco crearon las condiciones para desarrollar y actualizar esos saberes ancestrales. No sustituyeron la cultura europea por la cultura africana, sino por la nada [...]” (Ibid.). Ndongo refers in this regard to “perverted tribalism” with the example that Macías banned western vaccinations and medicines and ordered people to rely on “curanderos y plantas del bosque” (medicines and forest plants), causing many to die unnecessarily.

<sup>30</sup> Certainly, after the oil discoveries, the regime has become more western oriented: the president and his son spend oil revenues on luxury goods in Europe and the US.

<sup>31</sup> Sundiata’s lecture was entitled *De colonialismo español al neocolonialismo petrolero* (From Spanish Colonialism to the Neocolonialism of Oil) and can also be viewed on Canal UNED. [<https://canal.uned.es/video/5b47099db1111f752b8b4567>]



planet, he says but, in reality, the majority live on less than 2 dollars a day. Although Obiang saved the country from his uncle's terror, and 'el golpe de libertad' is celebrated every year as a day of national rebirth, in his lecture Sundiata maintains that there has been no end to the authoritarian regime: "Macías is dead, but the personality cult is still alive and the repression has continued, albeit in a less extensive form".<sup>32</sup> He cites the statement of the American organization Freedom House that named Equatorial Guinea, alongside Libya, Myanmar, North Korea, Sudan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, as the "worst of the worst". Despite this, the US brushed aside the assault and torture charges of the early 1990s,<sup>33</sup> an oversight Sundiata said was caused by growing economic (oil) interests. Sundiata claims that the revenues earned from oil are also spent hiring American companies for propaganda purposes, while all criticism of the regime is dismissed as "criticism of Africa".<sup>34</sup>

In his article "Theodorin's World" (*Foreign Policy*, 2011), the journalist Ken Silverstein also points to the extravagant spending and corrupt practices of Obiang's eldest son, vice-president and potential successor, Teodoro Nguema Obiang Mangue (b.1968), nicknamed Teodorín, with no obstruction from the US "so as not to offend an important oil partner".<sup>35</sup> The spending patterns and corrupt mentality of the president and his son tally with what Fanon says about the African bourgeoisie in general, a group that he calls the "get-rich-quick middle class":

This bourgeoisie, expressing its mediocrity in its profits, its achievements and its thoughts, tries to hide this mediocrity by buildings which have prestige value at the individual level, by chromium plating on big American cars, by holidays on the Riviera and weekends in neon-lit nightclubs (2001: 141).<sup>36</sup>

<sup>32</sup> "Obiang salvó la república del terror de su tío; la caída de Macías, 'El golpe de la libertad' se celebra cada año como un día de nacimiento nacional. Sin embargo el régimen autoritario no terminó. Macías ha muerto, pero el culto de la personalidad vive. [...] La represión continuó, pero de forma menos errática" (Canal UNED: Ibid.).

<sup>33</sup> The indictment was brought by US Ambassador John E. Bennett who served as Ambassador to Equatorial Guinea from 1992 to 1994. He was forced to leave the country after being declared "persona non grata" by Obiang and after death threats against him (Sampedro Vizcaya, Palabras, 2:76).

<sup>34</sup> "La idea es que criticar al gobierno es criticar a África, y el gobierno puede decir; somos África, criticándonos es criticar toda África" (Sundiata, Canal UNED).

<sup>35</sup> "And yet no formal action against Teodorin has been taken, despite an investigation whose stated goal, according to one of the Justice Department documents, was to shut down the flow of money into the United States 'obtained through kleptocracy' by the Obiangs. Why? U.S. officials declined to discuss the ongoing cases on the record or speak harshly about Equatorial Guinea; it certainly appears to be the familiar story of a U.S. government unwilling to offend an important oil partner — the same coddling that has produced such stellar results in the past with Saudi Arabia and other energy-rich, democracy-poor Middle East allies" (Silverstein, 2011).

<sup>36</sup> In October 2017 Teodorín was sentenced by the High Court in Paris to a three-year suspended prison sentence and a fine of €30 million. An apartment that he had bought for €25 million in 2005 was also confiscated. [<https://www.dw.com/en/french-court-finds-african-playboy-teodorin-obiang-guilty-of-embezzlement/a-41146626>]

However, in *Diccionario básico, y aleatorio, de la dictadura Guineana* (2011), Juan Tomás Ávila Laurel claims that Obiang wants to erase all traces of past misery as quickly as possible by impressing with prestige projects, such as huge palaces, highways through the jungle, ports and airports of dubious profitability and possessions acquired abroad that in no way benefit the people (2011: 36).<sup>37</sup> This compulsion stems from what Ávila Laurel calls a “Cinderella complex”: wanting to get rid of the stigma of poverty, that he believes affects not only Obiang, but the majority of the population of Equatorial Guinea (Ibid.).<sup>38</sup> In order to change this situation, in his *Diccionario básico* Ávila Laurel makes some recommendations under “Normas de la solvencia electoral” (Rules for electoral solvency) (42), but also points out under “Partidos políticos de la oposición” (Opposition political parties) that these “normas” make no sense without freedom of the press and the monitoring of electoral fraud (41). In their lectures both Ndongo and Sundiata emphasize that the opposition, now mainly led by the Convergencia Para la Democracia social de Guinea Ecuatorial (CPDS), to the ruling party the Partido Democrático de Guinea Ecuatorial (PDGE), must come up with a clear plan or program.<sup>39</sup> Sundiata argues in his UNED lecture that more people abroad are needed to prepare for the future, not just by dreaming about democracy but by coming up with a plan to prepare a platform and program, emphasizing the role of language and culture:

“To unite as a nation, you need the language, Spanish, and a distinct culture, for example, using art, music and dance to make the country stronger.”<sup>40</sup>

---

<sup>37</sup> “Con los ingresos, el dictador quiso borrar de un plumazo aquellas huellas [de aquella miseria] y ordenó la construcción de obras grandiosas de dudosa utilidad. Las ganas de impresionar son grandísimas en el tirano y en sus ansias de sacudirse el pasado ceniciento no ha ahorrado nada: palacios grandiosos, carreteras de doble carril en medio de la selva, puertos y aeropuertos dudosamente rentables, y los bienes adquiridos en el extranjero para dar muestras de una magnificencia que ni por asomo está al alcance del pueblo.”

<sup>38</sup> “Pero las necesidades del sacudirse el estigma de la pobreza no sólo atenazan al dictador Obiang [...], sino que la mayoría de los guineanos comparten este complejo de cenicienta.”

<sup>39</sup> In Equatorial Guinea, opposition exists only in theory. There are several opposition parties, but they have no influence and exist more as a diversion. There is no free press, dissidents are punished, and there are no checks on electoral abuse (Ávila Laurel, 2011: 41). The opposition takes place almost exclusively abroad (Spain).

<sup>40</sup> “Para unirse como nación se necesita el idioma que es el español y la cultura que es diferente, por ejemplo usar el arte, la música, la danza para hacer el país más fuerte” (Canal UNED). [own translation]

## Chapter 2 Visual Arts and Literature of Equatorial Guinea

Simultaneously with the exhibition *Making Africa – A Continent of Contemporary Design*, held at the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao in 2016, visual artist Desiderio Manresa Bodipo (b.1979), from Annobón, exhibited his paintings in a hotel in Malabo, the capital of Equatorial Guinea.<sup>41</sup> None of his works nor those by other visual artists or designers from his country were on display in Bilbao.<sup>42</sup> Despite increasing attention in Europe being paid to African art and literature, artists and writers from the former Spanish colony are little known, either in Spain or elsewhere. The reason for this has been addressed by writers and literary scholars, but no such attention has been paid to the lack of foreign knowledge of Equatorial Guinea's visual artists.

One obvious explanation for this ignorance would lie in geographical factors, the size and fragmentation of the country and the image of Equatorial Guinea as a remote and exotic country.<sup>43</sup> It is located in the Gulf of Guinea and is relatively small, with an area of 28,051 square kilometers, consisting of the mainland, Río Muni, with the largest city of Bata, the island of Bioko, with the capital Malabo, and a number of smaller islands, including Corisco and the Annobón Islands, located far off the coast. Lola Aponte and Eliza Rizo indicate the geographical distance between Equatorial Guinea and the Spanish-speaking world and stress a fragmented history that they believe led to linguistic isolation (2014: 745, 746).<sup>44</sup>

In her essay “Rethinking the Archive and the Colonial Library: Equatorial Guinea”, Benita Sampedro Vizcaya aims to undermine the attribution of Equatorial Guinea's isolation to what she calls “an approach of two interrelated clichés” (with regard to the language and

---

<sup>41</sup> Desiderio Manresa Bodipo studied painting and ceramics at the Centro Cultural Hispano-Guineano until it closed, after which he trained himself further as a visual artist and graphic designer.

<sup>42</sup> Manresa Bodipo also decorates objects and in that sense could also be regarded as a designer. It can be noted that, although *Making Africa* was mainly focused on design, photo collages and comics were also shown here; perhaps because the division between visual art and design cannot be made so clear for many African artists.

<sup>43</sup> In his essay “Recepción y problemas de la literatura de Guinea Ecuatorial” (*África hacia el siglo XXI*), José Ramón Trujillo claims that Spanish Guinea was seen as a distant, exotic colony that, compared to the North African countries, never posed any major problems (2001: 529).

<sup>44</sup> “Bordeado por países francófonos, sus autores han visto un aislamiento lingüístico que ha limitado, hasta cierto punto, su reconocimiento del continente africano. [...] En este contexto, los escritores de Guinea Ecuatorial han asediado jantanto com su his historiado jantanto de países hispanohablantes mediante textos en los que se perfila una historia coherente [...]” Aponte and Rizo point to the various colonizing powers that preceded the Spaniards and the arbitrary borders: “Varias capas colonizadoras se sedimentan sobre este país cuya geografía, por arbitrario establecimiento de fronteras coloniales, resulta igualmente fragmentada. [...] Así, entre los siglos XV y XX la historia de los guineanos se vio marcada por proyectos coloniales de portugueses y británicos, para finalmente ser colonizada por España” (746).

size of the country) (2008: 341).<sup>45</sup> She questions these ideas that she believes stem from a colonial perspective and argues for “a critical look at the past, and its legacies, from a historically motivated and politically committed position.” (Ibid.) To this end, she believes the categories need to be redefined:

In rethinking spatial categories, this strategy will allow a reading of history (and literary and discursive historiography) not from a single, fixed, geographical and conceptual cartography – be it linguistic, ethnic or otherwise – but according to multiple maps, simultaneously unfolded [...] (Ibid.).

## Literature

To date, most of the research on literature from Equatorial Guinea has been conducted at universities in Spain and the United States.<sup>46</sup> An important support to this existing research was the first comprehensive anthology of literature from the country, *Literatura de Guinea Ecuatorial (Antología)*, edited by Ndongo and Mbaré Ngom, that appeared in 1984, with a reprint in 2000. An updated and expanded edition, *Nueva Antología de la Literatura de Guinea Ecuatorial*, edited by Mbaré Ngom and Gloria Nistal, was published in 2011. It includes novels, stories, poetry and plays divided into five sections: The Traditional Literature of Equatorial Guinea, Cultural Creation and the Colonial Situation, National Literature and Dictatorship: The Years of Silence, Guinean Literature after the First Dictatorship, and Literature of Equatorial Guinea of the Twenty-First Century.<sup>47</sup>

---

<sup>45</sup> “Equatorial Guinea has conventionally, and often uncritically, been approached under the sign of two interrelated clichés. On the one hand, the linguistic ostracism derived from being the only nation state in Africa in which Spanish is the official language is often invoked as a defining and essentializing condition. On the other, its limited territorial extension and demographic density (some 28,050 km and fewer than 1 million inhabitants) has been seen as the *raison d’être* for the country’s invisibility, even within on the continent itself.”

<sup>46</sup> Mbaré Ngom points to the fragmented nature and deterritorialization of Equatorial Guinea's cultural reality since Obiang's coup: “Nearly 20 years after the Golpe de libertad (Freedom Coup), cultural reality in Equatorial Guinea remains mediated by fragmentation. The vast majority of writers still operate from trans-territoriality. Equatorial Guinean cultural creators continue to search for national identity [...]. In Equatorial Guinea, literature appears to be a leading platform for developing and voicing national identity. Marked by deterritorialization and dislocation on one hand, and cultural ethnic heterogeneity on the other, it is diverse, open to influences, and mediated by tension” (2011: 352). Perhaps it is not just that the literature from Equatorial Guinea is ‘fragmented’, so is the research.

<sup>47</sup> This *Nueva Antología* has been expanded by two sections, *Literatura tradicional de Guinea Ecuatorial*, and *La literatura del siglo XXI de Guinea Ecuatorial*. Gloria Nistal justifies the inclusion of “textos de la tradición oral” (texts of the oral tradition) in the first section because these are threatened with extinction in certain areas of Equatorial Guinea: “Esa literatura oral no ha desaparecido, aunque en determinadas zonas de Guinea Ecuatorial se encuentra seriamente amenazada de extinción” (Ngom and Nistal, 2012: 49).

This subdivision partly corresponds to the generations distinguished by Joaquín Mbomio Bacheng and recorded by Marvin Lewis: “The Elder Generation (colonial period 1900-1968),” “the Exiled Generation (1968-1985)” and “the Contemporary Generation (after 1985)” (2007: x, xi). Lewis also refers to José Fernando Siale Djangani who describes the literature of Equatorial Guinea in three stages: the “euro-africanista” (Euro-African) stage, the stage of the “revindicación ideológica y búsqueda de la identidad nacional” (ideological vindication and a search for national identity) and the stage of “los neo-independistas con su externalización y pluralidad” (the neo-independents, with their externalization and plurality) (2017: 4). In this last stage, writers refuse to be tied to any particular place or ideology, with the capital Malabo as the central point from which a “literary renaissance” would take place in what might be called a “Malaboan boom” (Ibid.).<sup>48</sup>

My research focuses on writers from the postcolonial period after the first dictatorship, that is, the writers of the diaspora, the “Exiled Generation” and the “Contemporary Generation” (in Mbomio Bacheng’s classification), since almost all writers since the independence of Equatorial Guinea in 1968 have emigrated to Spain or elsewhere and still reside there because of the political situation (dictatorship) in their own country. As a guideline for a description of the way in which literature has developed in Equatorial Guinea, I have chosen the overview and explanation given by Mbaré Ngom in his introduction to *Nueva Antología de la Literatura de Guinea Ecuatorial* plus a few other pieces by him.

Like Ndongo-Bidyogo (to whom he refers in this introduction), Ngom emphasizes the “cultura bantú” (the Bantu culture), “la oralidad” (the oral culture) and “la hispanidad” (the Spanish-speaking world) as binding factors between the different ethnic groups (*Nueva Antología*: 18,19). The written literature, that exists mainly in Spanish,<sup>49</sup> arose when *La*

---

<sup>48</sup> “We are now in the third stage, according to Siale, which is [quote Siale] ‘... la de los neo-independistas con externalización y pluralidad, que se caracterizaría por una globalización territorial de fuentes de la literatura guineana (Malabo, Bata, Madrid, Yaundé, Barcelona, París, EEUU, etc.) y un renacimiento literario desde la ciudad de Malabo, el auge malabeño a través de la pluma de autores que de lejos saben algo de la independencia nacional, y que perciben con ojos y oídos muy Neo-independistas.’” Lewis summarizes Siale’s view as follows: “For Siale, the “neo-independista” writers exemplify the transnational character of Equatoguinean literature. Malabo remains the creative crucible, but the diaspora has spawned a generation of writers not bound by geography or ideology.”

<sup>49</sup> The earlier literature overview of Ndongo-Bidyogo and Ngom is supplemented in *Nueva Antología de la Literatura de Guinea Ecuatorial* by Ngom and Nistal with the chapter “Literatura tradicional de Guinea Ecuatorial”, in which oral texts that are occasionally in both Spanish and in the original language are included. Gloria Nistal notes in this *Nueva Antología* that the testimonies of ethnic groups were initially taped and transcribed, after which they were translated into Spanish or published in bilingual editions (2012: 50).

*Guinea Española*, a magazine published by missionaries since 1903, devoted an issue to *Historias y Cuentos* (histories and stories) in 1947 with an appeal to the students of the Roman Catholic mission and seminars to submit stories. However, over time the traditional texts based on oral culture submitted also increasingly took on a personal stamp through a change in the structure and style of the story or through the addition of elements that were part of the European literary tradition (*Nueva Antología*, 24,25).

In 1953, during the colonial period, the first novel written by a writer from Equatorial Guinea, *Cuando los combes luchaban* (*novela de costumbre de la Guinea Española*) by Leoncio Evita Enoy, was published, followed in 1962 by *Una lanza por el boabi* by Daniel Jones Mathama. Although both novels are quite different in subject matter and background,<sup>50</sup> neither writer is critical of colonial rule in these novels. Ngom argues that this distinguishes the literature of writers from Equatorial Guinea from African literature in general and, in particular, from that of the French-speaking writers of the 'Négritude' movement.<sup>51</sup> The reason he gives is that this stemmed from the isolation caused by colonial Spanish politics and a lack of (cultural) exchange between the different European colonies, compounded by the lack of Spanish translations (*Nueva Antología*: 27). But when it did come later, the 'Négritude' also did not stimulate a response from writers from Equatorial Guinea, as witnessed by the poem *Cántico* that Donato Ndongo-Bidyogo wrote in 1974 (*Olvidos*, 2016: 58-61).

The period of the first dictatorship, that followed the colonial period in which the two first novels by writers from Equatorial Guinea were published, is summarized by Juan Tomás Ávila Laurel as a time in which only a handful of writers without proper education and support, if they do not had already died a premature physical or spiritual death at the hands of

---

<sup>50</sup> Ngom states that, as a detailed description of the customs and rituals of the *combes*, Evita Enoy's novel follows the literary tradition that characterized the first African texts written in European languages (*Nueva Antología*, 28). In contrast, in *Una lanza por el boabi* Daniel Jones precisely criticizes these customs and rituals (in this case of Fernando Poo's indigenous groups) through a narrator who denies his African descent and is full of sympathy and admiration for colonial system: "En ningún momento, el narrador da la impresión ni se considera africano. Su visión es externa, distante y tensa cuando se refiere al universo nativo. Sin embargo, la simpatía y la admiración desbordan cuando describe el universo colonial, leegando el narrador a referirse a España como la 'madre patria'" (Ibid.: 29).

<sup>51</sup> The 'Négritude' movement consisted of a group of (black) writers from different personal, political and disciplinary backgrounds who opposed colonialism. This group included Léopold Sedar Senghor (Senegal), Frantz Fanon (Martinique), Aimé Césaire (Martinique) and Léon Gontran Damas (French Guiana). Nor did such a movement get off the ground in Spain, because the writers who had emigrated to Spain, unlike the French writers, did not necessarily settle in the capital Madrid. Moreover, Madrid was not a cosmopolitan city like Paris and lacked a cultural infrastructure (Ngom, "La literatura africana de expresión castellana", 2010: 24,25).



Macías, barely managed to survive.<sup>52</sup> Mbaré Ngom writes that, under the rule of the first dictator Macías Nguema, Equatorial Guinea was turned into “un gigantesco campo de concentración” (a gigantic concentration camp), with Macías venting his anger on all intellectuals and everyone working in the cultural sector, systematically prosecuting and eliminating them (*Nueva Antología*, 28). In these “años del silencio” (years of silence), it was doubly quiet, for there was not only silence and censorship in Equatorial Guinea, but also in Spain to where the writers had emigrated and where General Francisco Franco had everything related to Equatorial Guinea declared ‘materia reservada’; a ban on all news from Equatorial Guinea (Ibid.: 30). The most famous writers belonging to the Exiled Generation (Lewis) were Donato Ndongo-Bidyogo, Francisco Zamora Lobo and Juan Balboa Boneke. A few stories by them appeared at that time, sometimes under pseudonyms,<sup>53</sup> but they mainly wrote poems in which they, as Ngom describes it, “lloraron la tierra violentada y perdida” (wept for the country that had been violated and that was lost) (Ibid.: 31). In *De Guinea E. a las literaturas hispanoafricanas*, Ngom illustrates the division and uprooting of the writers in exile with a text by Juan Balboa Boneke who wrote in the prologue to his book *Dónde estás Guinea*:

Who am I? I was wrenched from what was my reality, my existence, my culture [...]. I am not from here, nor from there. And when I do find myself, it turns out that in this society I have become a stranger to my brothers (my village) because, when it is all said and done, I feel misunderstood, nor do I understand.<sup>54</sup> [own translation]

The *coup d'état* that ended the first dictatorship in 1979 was initially followed by a considerable cultural revival in the following period.<sup>55</sup> In 1981, the Centro Cultural Hispano-Guineano in Malabo was established, the annual magazine *África 2000* and the monthly *El*

---

<sup>52</sup> “Con el miramiento clasista y racista de los creadores del Patronato de Indígenas y la poca formación que subsistió en el tiempo del primer periodo de la dictadura, de la Guinea Ecuatorial no pudieron sobrevivir más que un puñado de escritores, ya sea por muerte prematura por no haber recibido una formación sólida, ya sea por muerte física por caer bajo el pico atroz de los sicarios, ya sea por muerte metafísica por dejar tierra propia y no haber podido encontrar en la ajena el apoyo necesario para acometer tarea tan económicamente poco generosa como la literaria.” (Ávila Laurel, *Debats*, 123/2: 78)

<sup>53</sup> Donato Ndongo wrote his story, *La travesía*, under the pseudonym Francisco Abeso Nguema (*Nueva Antología*, 372).

<sup>54</sup> ¿Quién soy yo? Se me ha arrancado de lo que era mi realidad, mi existencia, mi cultura [...]. Ni soy de aquí, ni soy de allá. Y cuando me descubro a mi mismo resulta que para mis hermanos (mi pueblo), soy un extraño en esta sociedad porque no acabo de sentirme comprendido, porque no acabo de comprender (2010: 30).

<sup>55</sup> Ngom calls it “un renacimiento bastante espectacular” (*Nueva Antología*, 25). In “Historia y crítica de la literatura hispanoafriicana” (also in *Nueva Antología de la Literatura de Guinea Ecuatorial*) José Ramón Trujillo links the period from 1982 to 1990 and calls the following period “la madurez” (maturity) and from 1990 to 2000 “los años de la esperanza” (the years of hope) and from 2001 “la nueva escritura guineana” (881, 882).

*Patio* were published and there was established a radio station (*Nueva Antología*, 34,35). Among the various novels published during this period were *El reencuentro, el retorno del exiliado* (1985) by Juan Balboa Boneke, *Ekomo* (1985) by María Nsue Angüe and *Las tinieblas de tu memoria negra* (1987) and *Los poderes de la tempestad* (1997) by Donato Ndong-Bidyogo.<sup>56</sup> The number of poets also expanded, among them Juan Tomás Ávila Laurel, who also writes plays.<sup>57</sup> However, Ngom claims that women from Equatorial Guinea remain the great absentees in this cultural revival, although he does mention some names such as Guillermina Mekuy, Remei Sipi Mayo and Paloma del Sol (*Nueva Antología*, 38).

In the period of the current generation, that is also referred to as “la nueva escritura guineana”,<sup>58</sup> Naomi McLeod states that a critical tone adopted by a generation of writers whose work mainly focuses on the current situation in Equatorial Guinea and – in contrast to the previous generation – not so much on “a European Other” (2012: 31).<sup>59</sup> Aponte and Rizo add an extra dimension to this by pointing out that a new, more cosmopolitan-oriented generation is also emerging, such as the young writer, poet, actor, dramatist and theater maker Recardo Silebo Boturu, whose literary work bears witness to his social commitment and on the local level he is also “in constant dialogue with globalizing forces” (2014: 753).<sup>60</sup> In summary, they argue that, in the current literature of Equatorial Guinea, writers try to make sense of a “fragmented past, a frustrated democratic dream and a grotesque, globalizing reality” (Ibid.).<sup>61</sup>

In the *Journal of Spanish Cultural Studies*, Sampedro Vizcaya agrees with her claim that the stories of contemporary writers from Equatorial Guinea undermine existing ideas by

<sup>56</sup> Balboa Boneke’s novel is autobiographical and tells the story of the trauma and uprooting of an exile who returns to his country after years of absence. Ndong’s novel *Los Poderes de la tempestad* (with a similar theme to Boneke’s) is part of this research, as is Nsue Angüe’s novel.

<sup>57</sup> In *Nueva Antología* (parts of) a number of theater plays have been recorded; *Los hombres domésticos* and *El fracaso de las sombras* by Juan Tomás Ávila Laurel (613-25, 841-51), *Antígona* by Trinidad Morgades Besari (626-32) and *El hombre y la costumbre* by Pancracio Esono Mitogo (633-645).

<sup>58</sup> Description by José Ramón Trujillo (*Nueva Antología*, 882).

<sup>59</sup> “The deeply critical tone of these works is primarily concerned with the current situation in Equatorial Guinea. Unlike the previous generation, the expression of identity is rarely in relation to a European Other.” (Continuing with the phase that accompanied the “Malabo boom”)

<sup>60</sup> “Finalmente, un pilar importante en la vida cultural de Guinea Ecuatorial lo provee la obra del joven Recaredo Silebo Boturu. Este poeta, dramaturgo, narrador, actor y director teatral ofrece en sus libros *Luz en la oscuridad* (2010) y *Crónicas de memorias anuladas* (2014, en prensa) una línea comprometida con la justicia social, pero no solo a nivel de lo local, sino en constante dialogo con las fuerzas globalizadoras.”

<sup>61</sup> “En suma, la literatura de Guinea Ecuatorial, como en términos muy generales (y ciertamente de manera incompleta) puede verse aquí, intenta dar sentido a una pasado colonial fragmentado, a un sueño democrático frustrado, a una grotesca realidad globalizadora.”



rewriting the colonial past, as it were (9/3, 2008: 353). She mentions *La carga* (1999) by Juan Tomás Ávila Laurel as an example, saying that it is a novel that opens the door to a specific colonial moment placed in a different light because this novel finishes with a certain colonial conceptualization, with which a new image can be 'built'.<sup>62</sup> Ngom asserts that memory serves as a “platform” to denounce violence against the population of Equatorial Guinea (*Palabras*, 1, 2009: 106).

## Visual Arts

Everything that has to do with culture and art vanishes in Equatorial Guinea. Equatorial Guinea, in terms of art, is still a limited country. There are no art galleries or rooms and there is no shop where you can buy painting requisites.<sup>63</sup> [own translation]

(Desiderio Manresa Bodipo, *Revistart*, 2016)

The fact that little or no research has been done on contemporary visual art in Equatorial Guinea might also have to do with the lack of resources and exhibition opportunities, indicated by Manresa Bodipo (in the quote). As a result, there are few artists working professionally in Equatorial Guinea – Manresa Bodipo does paintings in addition to a job as a technician employed by an oil company – and almost all of them have been educated in the Spanish cultural centers in Malabo and Bata.<sup>64</sup> Only these cultural centers offer courses and organize exhibitions that are subsequently written about by employees without an art historical background.<sup>65</sup> This criticism also applies to others who have written about the rare instances of visual art in the country in a single catalog, newspaper or on the Internet. Their

---

<sup>62</sup> “The narratives by contemporary Guinean writers tackling the archive in order to rewrite their colonial past, engaging with its uses and abuses, are numerous. Juan Tomás Ávila Laurel’s *La carga* (1999) may serve as one good example of a novel attempting to open a door to a specific colonial moment. The archive in this novel would be both what it contributes to build (as a sort of edifice) and what it contributes to exorcize (as a kind of colonial imaginary).”

<sup>63</sup> Todo lo que tenga que ver con la cultura y el arte, se esfuma en Guinea Ecuatorial. Guinea Ecuatorial, en cuanto al arte, sigue siendo un país limitado. No hay salas o galerías de arte, y no existe ninguna tienda donde se pueden adquirir materiales de pintura.

<sup>64</sup> There are two Spanish cultural centers in Equatorial Guinea: the CCEM (in Malabo, since 2003) and the CCEB (in Bata, since 2001). They are part of a series of Spanish cultural centers in different Spanish-speaking areas run by the Agencia Española de Cooperación Internacional para el Desarrollo (AECID; the Spanish government). These cultural centers, furnished with an exhibition space and library, organize cultural activities in the fields of literature, film, music and visual arts. They also provide language courses and publications. The ICEF (Instituts Culturels d'Expression Française) is also active in Malabo and Bata and organizes similar activities, but is less prominent because French is still not a common language in Equatorial Guinea.

<sup>65</sup> Among the '*colaboradores*' (employees) mentioned at the front of the CCEM magazine *Atanga* there is no one with an explicit art-historical or visual background.

pieces often do not rise above the anecdotal and clichéd, a shortcoming that also makes it difficult to place the works of the artists concerned in a professional context.<sup>66</sup> Nevertheless, a few visual artists with a certain professional status can be mentioned, most of whom have exhibited both in and outside Equatorial Guinea.

Among them is the sculptor Leandro Mbomio (1938-2012), born in Evinayong (Río Muni), who has also been associated with Picasso, presumably because his works contain Cubist elements themselves also eventually borrowed from African masks (Fig.1.1,1.2).<sup>67</sup> Mbomio studied art in Bata and moved to Madrid in 1960 to take art and ceramics courses there. He received several grants and awards, had numerous exhibitions in various European countries and in the US<sup>68</sup> but, after a few years long stay in Spain, returned to Guinea where he held important cultural functions under Obiang from the early 1980s. Yet another lesser-known sculptor is Fernando Guema Medja (1963-2008), born in Malabo, but Fang and self-taught, whose sculptures (made from branches gleaned from the jungle that he later processed) have been exhibited in the cultural centers of Equatorial Guinea and some cultural institutions in Spain, mainly after his death.<sup>69</sup> There are also several painters whose names are mentioned, including Guthy Mamae (1941), Ricardo Madana Mateo (1965) and (Mene) Desiderio Manresa Bodipo (1979), all from Annobón. Their paintings often contain symbolic

---

<sup>66</sup> This applies, for example, to the piece about a painter who is introduced in the *Afro-Hispanic Review* by Almudena González-Vigil as Papá Luis and whose work is presented only in an anecdotal and clichéd context, without titles and dates (28/2, 2009: 349-356).

<sup>67</sup> Referring to Mbomio's death, the official website of the government of Equatorial Guinea states: "Mbomio Nsue, born in Evinayong, was known throughout the world as 'the black Picasso' for his unique creativity, that led him to show his art throughout the world."

[<https://www.guineaecuatorialpress.com/noticia.php?id=3203>]The digital news site Asodegue (Solidaridad Democrática con Guinea Ecuatorial) links Mbomio not only to Picasso but also to the Négritude movement of Leopold Sedar Shengor: "Durante muchos años fue el 'benjamín de Picasso y de Shengor' o un elemento imprescindible 'en la integración de la negritud'." [<http://www.asodegue.org/LMescultor.htm>]

<sup>68</sup> This information is taken from a catalog that came out for an exhibition at Galerie Rottenburg in Madrid from 8 to 31 October 1974 (the publisher of this catalog is missing; it does contain several pieces, quotes and overviews with only two names: Denys Chevalier and Joaquin Castro de Beranza).

<sup>69</sup> Fernando Nguema's works were exhibited in the Spanish cultural centers of Bata and Malabo in 2010 and 2011, in 2016 at the Casa África in Las Palmas in Gran Canaria and in 2017 at the Museo Nacional de Antropología (Anthropological Museum) in Madrid. As a Fang and because of the character of his works, he is repeatedly associated with the forest and jungle in the texts that have appeared about his person and work that refer to him as "el artista que salió del bosque" (artist emerging from the forest), for instance, the headline of the article that appeared in *El País* at an exhibition of his works at the Casa de África.

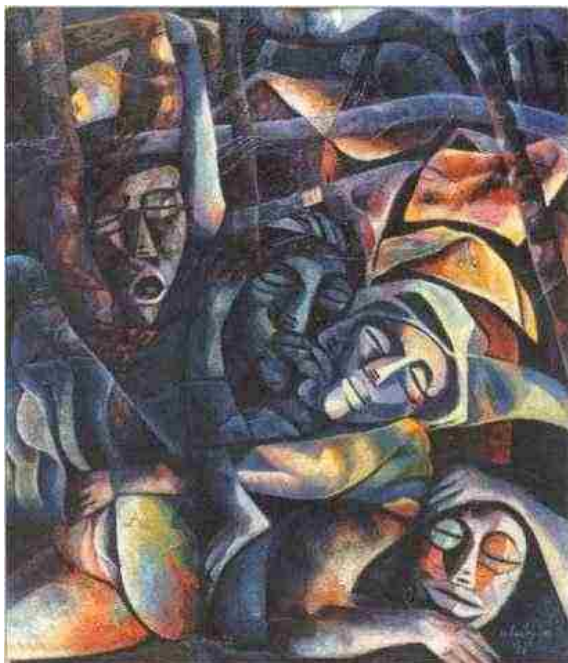
[[https://elpais.com/elpais/2016/11/26/africa\\_no\\_es\\_un\\_pais/1480160346\\_144035.html](https://elpais.com/elpais/2016/11/26/africa_no_es_un_pais/1480160346_144035.html)]



**Afb. 1.1** Leandro Mbomio,  
*Integración tribal 3*, (date unknown)  
Bronze.



**Afb. 1.2** Leandro Mbomio,  
*La Moreneta. Ayingono*, (date unknown)  
Wood.



**Afb.1.3** Guthy Mamae,  
(title, date unknown).



**Afb.1.4** Ricardo Madana Mateo,  
(title, date unknown).





However, most of his works have no direct political link nor do those of the other two painters mentioned. Guthy Mamae (Fig.1.3), from an earlier generation, fled to Madrid and Barcelona where he (as well as Mbomio) attended art courses and exhibited. In addition to courses in the cultural centers in Guinea, Ricardo Madana Mateo (Fig.1.4) also attended art courses in Cameroon and Gabón. He exhibited his works (besides paintings also sculptures) in the Basque Country, among other places.<sup>72</sup>

In addition to the sculptors and painters mentioned, there are a number of artists who work with other (combined) media such as photography, textiles, performances and various drawing and collage techniques, digital and non-digital. These include the photographer Arturo Bibang (1971), the actor and visual artist Pocho Guimaraes (1951) and the cartoonist/caricaturist Ramón Esono Ebalé (1977). Born in Basupú (Bioko), Plácido Bienvenido (Pocho) Guimaraes<sup>73</sup> studied art in the Soviet Union and in Spain, where he also participated in various painting/music/dance and theater projects in the 1970s and 1980s. However, since 2010 he has lived in Equatorial Guinea again and he makes textile objects that he imbues with meanings derived from his Bubi background in certain (ritual) dances and performances (Fig.1.6, 1.7 ).<sup>74</sup> Photographer Arturo Bibang, born in Bata of a Spanish father and Fang mother, also studied photography in Spain (Madrid), where he worked as a fashion photographer and photojournalist for various Spanish newspapers and magazines. He also left for Guinea in 2009, where he exhibited his series *Mujeres* (Fig.1.8) in the Spanish cultural centers of Bata and Malabo in 2010. He takes mainly black and white photo series of people in different situations, landscapes, buildings and different spaces (occasionally in color), both in Equatorial Guinea and in Spain and he has participated in various European and African photo exhibitions with them.<sup>75</sup>

Ramón Esono Ebalé (alias Jamón y Queso), born in 1977 in Nkoa-Nen Yebekuan (Río Muni), attended courses at the (French and Spanish) cultural centers in Malabo and was also an illustrator, graphic designer and comic artist at the CCEM. Here he also had his first

<sup>72</sup> [[https://www.diariovasco.com/prensa/20070214/altourola/urretxu-ricardo-madana-mateo\\_20070214.html](https://www.diariovasco.com/prensa/20070214/altourola/urretxu-ricardo-madana-mateo_20070214.html)]

<sup>73</sup> His full name is: Plácido Bienvenido Malabo Mutariobo Guimares (Pocho is a nickname).

<sup>74</sup> Pocho Guimares speaks about his work in his lecture *En busca de la luz* that was part of a seminar with a series of lectures given on the occasion of the *50 Aniversario de la Independencia de Guinea Ecuatorial* (the fifty years of independence of Equatorial Guinea) organized by the CEAH (Centro de Estudios Afro-Hispánicos) of the UNED in 2018. In this lecture he says that his 'carpets' contain symbolic elements that are part of a game or ceremony, in which they come loose from the wall. He speaks about "textiles in motion" and relates the colors and shells in his textile objects to masks and objects (such as shells) with which the Bubis of Bioko decorated their bodies in the past and which they used as amulets in certain rituals.

[<https://canal.uned.es/video/5b434869b1111ff12d8b4574>]

<sup>75</sup> The various series can be seen on his webpage. [<https://www.arturobibang.com/>]

exhibitions, but he was soon also showing his comics and visual stories (Fig.1.9) at art manifestations and festivals in other African countries, Europe and the US. In 2011, he left Equatorial Guinea for Paraguay where he lived until he returned to his home country, where he was arrested for caricatures of the president he had drawn earlier, in August 2017. He subsequently spent six months in Black Beach Prison in Malabo, from which he was eventually released under political pressure from Spain, the foreign press and social media. Today he lives and works alternately in Spain and Latin America.<sup>76</sup>

Hardly any research has been done by academics on the works of these artists. Although some research has been done at UNED in an interdisciplinary group dealing with Equatorial Guinea.<sup>77</sup> Benita Sampedro Vizcaya, a lecturer in colonial studies at Hofstra University (New York) and a member of this research group, gave an introduction to Pocho Guimaraes' lecture at UNED<sup>78</sup> and wrote an article about this artist that consists of a biographical summary in the Spanish digital magazine *Fronterad*.<sup>79</sup> The lecture by Stefania Licata, also at the UNED seminar in 2018, on *La Pesadilla de Obi*, a comic strip by Ramón Esono Ebalé, is more in-depth.<sup>80</sup> In it she focuses on what she calls “el proceso neocolonial de la novela”, in which she provides an analysis of the comic that she believes not only demythologizes the main character (Obiang), but also exposes the inefficiency of a system related to the former colonial regime. However, the analysis is limited to this one comic strip and does not include other works by this artist.

<sup>76</sup> The time he spent in Latin America, besides the situation that became untenable for him and his family as a result of his critical attitude to the regime, also has to do with the positions of his wife, Eloisa Vaello Marco, at the Spanish cultural centers in Asunción (Paraguay) and El Salvador (San Salvador).

<sup>77</sup> Since 2013, the Faculty of Humanities of the UNED in Madrid has been conducting interdisciplinary research on Equatorial Guinea in the research group Estudios Afro-hispánicos pluridisciplinarios.

[<https://estudiosafrohispanicos.wordpress.com/>] The UNED cooperates with the Universidad Nacional de Guinea Ecuatorial (UNGE) in Malabo, Equatorial Guinea.

<sup>78</sup> Sampedro-Vizcaya gave the introduction to the lecture En busca de la luz by Pocho Guimaraes, that can also be followed on Canal UNED. [<https://canal.uned.es/video/5b434869b1111ff12d8b4574>]

<sup>79</sup> Sampedro Vizcaya, B., “Pocho Guimaraes, un artista guineano que trata que los tapice bailen”. *Fronterad*, revista digital, 3/8/2018. [<https://www.fronterad.com/pocho-guimaraes-un-artista-guineano-que-trata-que-los-tapices-bailen/>]

<sup>80</sup> Stefania Licata is a teacher of Spanish Language and Literature at Stony Brook University (New York) and Converse College (South Carolina) and a researcher focusing on Afro-Hispanic postcolonial studies. Like Sampedro Vizcaya, she is affiliated with the research group at UNED in Madrid. Her lecture can also be followed on Canal UNED. [<https://canal.uned.es/video/5b3dcfd0b1111ff4588b4567>]





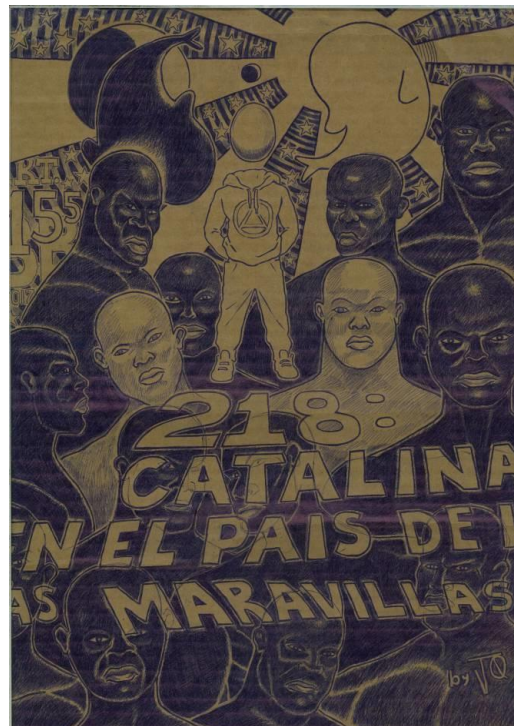
**Afb.1.6** Pocho Guimaraes, *Mama Labios*, (date unknown).



**Afb.1.7** Pocho Guimaraes, *Tapiz*, (date unknown).



**Afb.1.8** Arturo Bibang, *Reina* (from the series *Mujeres*), 2010.



**Afb.1.9** Ramón Esono Ebalé, *Catalina en el país de las Maravillas*, 2015-18, 2018. (Part of a series of drawing in this project about an imaginary, futuristic empire).

## Motivation for choice of the works to be examined

In *Debats*, Juan Tomás Ávila Laurel states that writers from Equatorial Guinea are the only people able to publicize what is going on in that "little and forgotten place" of Equatorial Guinea.<sup>81</sup>

But the only ones qualified to do it, those who have found a small place to make themselves heard, are the writers. They are the only people who can introduce a different meaning into literature. All in all, is there any reason to criticize the fact that the few actors in Guinean literature have felt the obligation to speak of their place of origin, about the stories and people who haunt them and raise the question of why the rich embrace a dictator who is simultaneously destroying their lives?<sup>82</sup> [own translation]

However, judging by the collage of the writer that Ramón Esono Ebalé posted on social media after the writer fled his country following a hunger strike in 2011 (Fig.1.10), one might wonder whether, as Ávila Laurel argues, it is the duty only of writers to draw attention to what is happening in their country. The collage shows a double portrait of Ávila Laurel looking down on the viewer, on the left as a bright red devil and on the right as a white angel, under the heading "Yo sólo conozco a un Juan Tomás Ávila Laurel" (I only know one Juan Tomás Ávila Laurel). In this way Esono Ebalé powerfully reveals both the controversy surrounding the rebellious writer (that is still at work) and his solidarity with that writer. This images reveals that publicizing the situation in the country is not the sole prerogative of writers, but that there is also a role for visual artists in this. Hence my research concerns literature and visual arts from Equatorial Guinea.

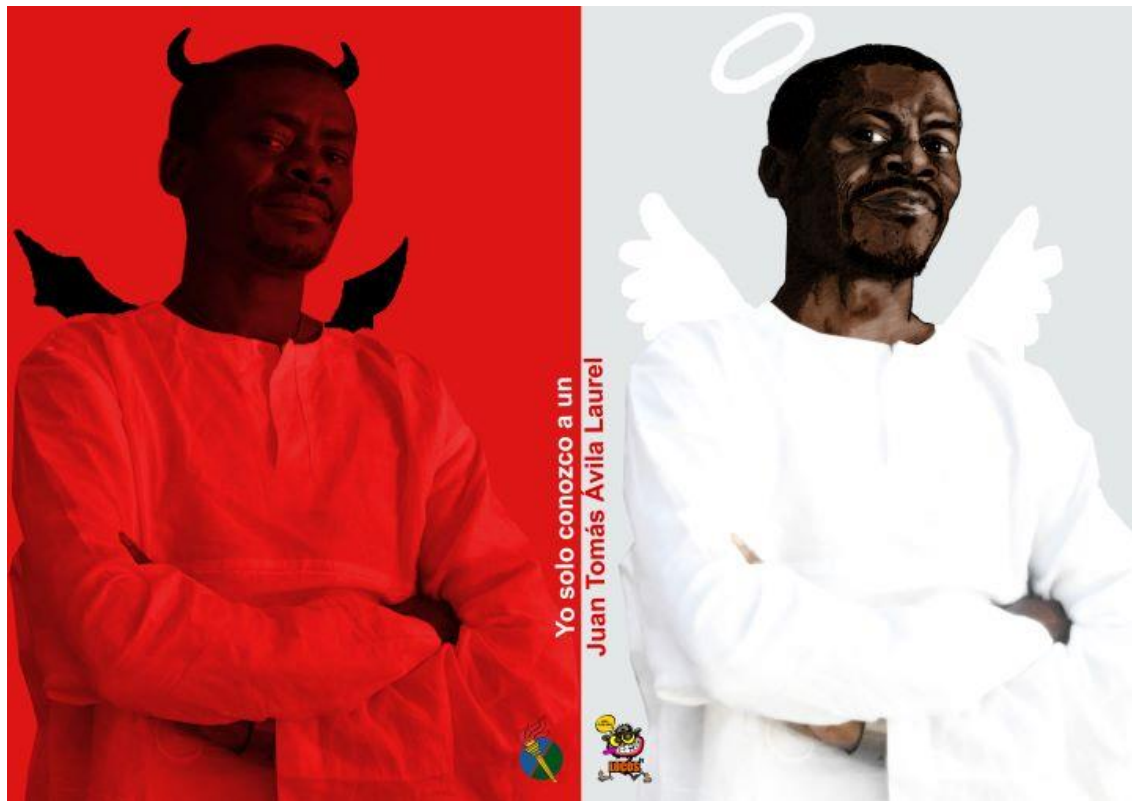
It should be noted that, as the research progressed, the focus shifted from the question of how writers and visual artists from Equatorial Guinea are perceived (by others) to how they see themselves through their works and in relation to the political and social situation in their country and elsewhere (Spain and the US). As a result, the theoretical framework of the research has also shifted from 'postcolonial criticism and colonial discourse' to a political and

---

<sup>81</sup> Referring to the first sentence of Cervante's *Don Quixote* (see 1.3)

<sup>82</sup> Pero los únicos capacitados para hacerlo, los que han agenciado un pequeño lugar donde hacerse oír, son los escritores, los únicos que pueden hacer que esto de la Literatura cobre otro sentido. Según todo lo expuesto, ¿hay alguna razón por la que se puede hacer un mal gesto ante el hecho de que los pocos actores de la literatura de Guinea tengan la obligación de hablar de su lugar, de sus historias perseguidos y perseguidores, y del por qué los ricos de ahora se dan este abrazo con el dictador que carcome sus vidas? (2014: 77- 8)





**Afb.1.10** Ramón Esono Ebalé, *Yo sólo conozco a un Juan Tomás Ávila Laurel*, 2011. Digital collage.

philosophical framework.<sup>83</sup> The main question here is how the stories and images of the writers and visual artists from Equatorial Guinea ‘empty’ and break open the current political situation in that country (placed in a historical perspective).

Ramón Esono Ebalé’s visual work is the most (politically) outspoken, expressed in the numerous caricatures he has made of Obiang and in other politically engaged portraits such as that of Ávila Laurel (Fig.1.10). In addition, he shows the community of Equatorial Guinea in politically inspired visual stories, with or without a text. Wherever he places texts with individual images, these are also politically charged, such as [a fragment of] his text with a socio-political caricature (Fig. 1.11), in which he shows himself with a penis as a burning PDGE torch.<sup>84</sup>

<sup>83</sup> See theoretical framework.

<sup>84</sup> The burning torch is the emblem of the PDGE, Obiang’s party.

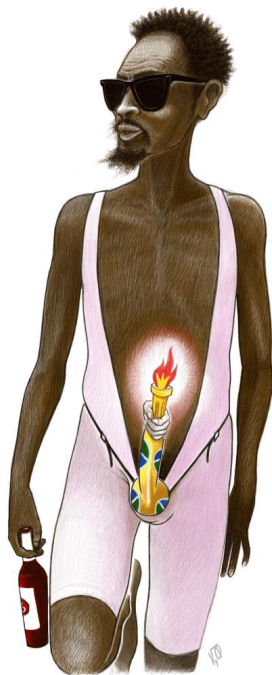


Fig.1.11 The regime must fall. Whatever the cost. It is a criminal regime in every sense. Their "Democratic" allies know this. All the people know this. And whoever claims the contrary might fall with them. Point.<sup>85</sup> [own translation]

In an investigation into the (political) rift in the works of writers and visual artists from Equatorial Guinea, the choice of the work of Esono Ebalé is therefore an obvious one.

From the literature of Equatorial Guinea, Donato Ndongo-Bidyogo, María Nsue Angüe and Juan Tomás Ávila Laurel have been chosen because they each play a prominent role in this literature; Ndongo-Bidyogo belongs to the early generation of writers who has lived in Spain since Macías, Nsue Angüe as the only woman of that generation but who also spent most of her life in Spain and Ávila Laurel of a later generation, one of the few active writers who (also when he wrote his novel) was still living in the country itself, until he also had to move to Spain under Obiang.

Their novels chosen for this research are set in the Macías period and are written in the first person, but with a different angle and (partly) from a different (tribal and gender) background. Ndongo Bidyogo's *Los poderes de la tempestad* (2015) describes the situation in the country under Macías, as encountered by a lawyer who returns to his country with his

<sup>85</sup> El régimen debe caer. Cueste lo que cueste. Es un régimen criminal a todas luces. Lo saben sus socios "demócratas". Lo sabe el pueblo llano. Y quien diga lo contrario, que caiga junto a ellos y punto.

The fragment is part of Esono Ebalé's text entitled *El arte de la manipulación* (the art of manipulation) that was placed with the drawing on the Radio Macuto site, La Voz de los Sin Voz (the voice of those without a voice) on November 30, 2019.

family to visit his relatives and is hoping to be able to do something as a lawyer; an expectation that turns out to be a painful deception. *Ekomo* (2008) by Nsue Angüe and *Arde el monte de noche* (2009) by Ávila Laurel are distinguished from the novel by Ndong-Bidyogo in that in both novels the political situation is not as paramount as are the customs and traditions in a mythical period borrowed from an oral narrative structure. Set in the mainland Fang culture, *Ekomo* is about a number of rituals and prophecies that eventually lead to a woman's journey with her husband, Ekomo, in search of a way to heal of his injured leg, during which she also looks back on her youth as a dancer. *Arde el monte de noche* is the story of a man who looks back on his childhood on the far offshore island of Annobón, on which the (remaining) islanders have to battle to survive virtually isolated from the mainland. They can seek some comfort in local rituals and customs, but also have to endure a number of 'evils', hunger and suffering.

The hypothesis of this research, stating that there are voids in the works of the selected visual artist and writers from Equatorial Guinea based on a (political) necessity and indicating a (political) rupture, assumes that this is the case in both the visual arts and in literature. The theoretical framework and the methodology chosen to investigate where the ruptures and voids are located in the works will be explained in the following two chapters.

## Chapter 3 Theoretical framework

Equatorial Guinea is a sham democracy that actually functions as a police state. In my research I shall investigate whether and in what way the visual artist and the writers make their demand for (political) attention resonate in a regime that excludes them as the 'enemy'. To what extent are there clashes in their works that draw attention to a community other than the one that sets the standard for them? To what extent do they present a new world in their works by using the hypothesis of pretending that something about which we do not yet know if it is true has already become truth?<sup>86</sup> These research questions arise from concepts borrowed from theories of Carl Schmitt, Jacques Rancière and Alain Badiou and, in so far as they are relevant to my research, are set out below.

### The relationship between politics and state

Aristotle begins Book I of his *Politika* by pointing out the importance of the state that “represents the highest form of community and pursues the highest good” (Russel, 1981: 183). Just as, Aristotle argues, a hand ceases to be a hand (assuming its expediency) when the body is destroyed, an individual cannot fulfill his destiny without being part of the state (Russel, Ibid.). Aristotle distinguishes three good and three bad kinds of government. The good ones are the monarchy, aristocracy and constitutional rule (Russel, 186) The bad ones are tyranny, oligarchy and democracy. Aristotle claims that the tyrant strives for riches and a king for honor; the tyrant employs mercenaries for soldiers and the king has subjects. Tyrants are usually demagogues who gain their power by promising the people to protect them from the notables. Once in power, if they are to retain it, the emergence of someone of extraordinary merit must be prevented, if need be by execution or murder. He must do everything that can unite people and forbid all education, because this can give rise to hostile feelings (Russel, 188). Oligarchy and democracy are also among the bad kinds of government because, in Aristotle’s view, in an oligarchy the rich rule without any consideration for the poor, while in a democracy the needy rule without regard for the interests of the rich (Russel, 186).

---

<sup>86</sup> Badiou, A., in De Bloois and Van den Hemel, 2012: 55.

In his text *Der Begriff des Politischen* (The Concept of Politics), published in 1932, Carl Schmitt, like Aristotle, equates the state with politics. He calls the state “the political condition of a people organized within territorial boundaries” (2001: 57). Schmitt argues that the moral, the esthetic and the economic within that state have their autonomous activity exempt from political significance (62). Politically, he refers to the distinction between *friend* and *enemy*, in which “the political enemy need not be morally bad or aesthetically ugly” and nor does he need to act as an economic competitor; in fact, according to Schmitt, it might be beneficial to do business with him, just as, conversely, “what is morally bad, aesthetically ugly, or economically harmful may not necessarily be the enemy” (63). Like Aristotle, Schmitt views the state as an “essential political entity” that can openly dispose of people's lives (78). Schmitt claims the state pits itself against other states that, by definition, are considered (potential) enemies. Anyone who does not acknowledge this governing principle, places himself outside the political collectivity (Schmitt, 84). This leads to the conclusion that an individual who does not acquiesce in this idea of the enemy of the state cannot engage in politics.<sup>87</sup>

In “Ten Theses on Politics” (in *Dissensus on Politics and Aesthetics*), in Thesis 1 Rancière refers to Aristotle's *Politika* Book I in which Aristotle distinguishes between different forms of government, as well as to Book III that deals with those who “partake in the fact of ruling and at the fact of being ruled” (2015: 35). In Aristotle's city-state, those who are ruled are exempted from domestic duties and that, Rancière argues, amounts to a reduction pure and simple of the political to the state (36), in other words, to an interpretation of the state, comparable to Schmitt's. However, in Thesis 1, Rancière also points out the ambiguity of Aristotle's definition of the subject (*politès*) as a participant (*metexis*) in the action (*archein*; to rule) and the one who undergoes the action (*archesthai*; to be governed). In Thesis 2, Rancière describes the political as “a paradoxical form of action” (37). Here he is citing Homer's heroes with an equal share in the power of the *arche*, while *archein* means who is leading the way, pointing out that only one person can lead the way, after which the others can only follow (38). Rancière, as he points out in Thesis 8, says that therein lies the paradox from which the political flows. Essentially this amounts to the manifestation of a

---

<sup>87</sup> In Equatorial Guinea, this applied to an extreme degree under Macías (by whom Spain was considered an enemy), but it now also applies to Obiang, who pretends to the outside world to run a multi-party system (as a democracy) but, in reality, suppresses all opposition in his own country. Schmitt postulates that the state loses its power when, as a result of internal contradictions, party politics gains the upper hand over “common external contradictions with another state” (2001: 67).

political rupture or *dissensus* and "as the presence of two worlds in one" (45). He explains this in Thesis 7, in which he contrasts the political with the "police" as a "symbolic constitution of the social" (44). Rancière states that the essence of the "police" is that it does not leave any void or supplement for that part that is present within society as a whole, but is not part of it, because it is not heard. There is politics as soon as that part (that exists but does not count) intervenes in the visible and the sayable (44, 45). Rancière rebuts that the political is not determined by the state (Schmitt), and says that those who 'are there and at the same time are not' engage in politics when they do make their voices heard and become visible, so that their world penetrates into an already existing world.

In a democracy, Rancière posits, there is a complete absence of any qualification of leadership.<sup>88</sup> Therefore, in Thesis 3, he sees democracy as an exceptional situation in which no oppositions can function and in which there is no principle for the dividing up of roles (39). Democracy crosses the logic of the *archein* (the legitimacy of government) and is therefore, as Rancière claims in Thesis 4, not a political regime (Ibid.). He recognizes a category that is both inside and outside the political system and can assert itself through a political rupture. Schmitt sees no room for this argument because he sees areas such as religion, culture, education, economy as 'neutral' and non-state within the state and, in that sense, non-political, because only the state carries out politics. Schmitt's theory postulates that a group or individual is always part of the state and, contrary to Rancière's idea, can never engage in politics because that would place them outside the state.

## *Dissensus*

In the eighth thesis of his "Ten Theses on Politics", Jacques Rancière refers to the distinction that Aristotle makes in Book I of his *Politika* between those who suffer or, in a certain state of mind, only make noise outside public space and those who possess *logos* within that public space. Rancière points out that Aristotle associates *logos* with the just and the unjust (as well as the good and the bad) in the community of the *aisthesis* contrasted with the *phôné*, suitable only for expressing feelings of pleasure and displeasure (2015: 45). According to Aristotle —

---

<sup>88</sup> In Thesis 3, Rancière refers to Plato's qualifications of leading and being led. Those who lead, according to Plato, do so on the basis of age (such as the elderly rather than the young), natural superiority (such as the strong over the weak) or knowledge (those who know above those who do not know). Rancière's idea of democracy is based on Plato's idea that democracy implies a complete absence of any legitimacy to rule.

and Rancière — only those who possess *logos* and who are within the *aisthesis* are seen and heard. Rancière claims that in the political world what was previously invisible and inaudible becomes visible and audible. *Dissensus* is central to this; not as a confrontation between interests or opinions but as something that makes visible that which had previously no reason to be seen and now brings worlds together (46).<sup>89</sup>

Rancière argues that poetry<sup>90</sup> (poetry as fiction) plays an important role here because it implies (fictional) action. Because daily life is interwoven along the way by imitation or mimesis, poetry is also political. It differs in its action from history in which, he says, only a “reproductive and meaningless life” takes place (164).<sup>91</sup> Rancière points out the hierarchy of “higher” and “lower” genres of imitation that have resulted in the noble roles and actions of kings, alongside roles reserved for the common people. He refers to the difference in language use linked to those roles that were equated in the mid-nineteenth century by, among others, Flaubert with a radical egalitarian principle, in which, he argued, the ‘aristocratic’ stylistic absolutization went along with the ‘democratic’ principle of indifference (Ibid.).<sup>92</sup> He clarifies this on the basis of ‘mute pebbles’ and ‘mute letters’; pebbles and letters that are ‘deaf-mute’ in the sense that anyone, no matter who, can find them and use them as they see fit. With this disappears the contrast between those who speak and those who only produce sound (and between those who act and those who only live). Rancière says that literature will also focus on those who should not read. He argues that, when the hierarchical system is eliminated, an entire regime of meaning collapses in the nineteenth-century literature of Flaubert and Balzac (166-7).<sup>93</sup>

In one of his texts, that has been included in *L'inconscient esthétique* (*Aesthetic*

---

<sup>89</sup> “It consists in making what was unseen visible; in making what was audible as mere noise heard as speech and in demonstrating that what appeared as mere expression of pleasure and pain is shared feeling of a good or an evil. The essence of politics is *dissensus*. Dissensus is not a confrontation between interests or opinions. It is the demonstration (manifestation) of a gap in the sensible itself. Political demonstration makes visible that which had no reason to be seen; it places one world in another [...]”

<sup>90</sup> The original French terms have not been chosen here, the terms from the English translation having been preferred.

<sup>91</sup> “Poetry is fiction. And fiction is an imitating of acting men. We know that this poetic principle also was a political principle. [...] Poetry, Aristotle said, is more ‘philosophical’ than history, because poetry builds plots binding events together as a whole, while history tells events, as they evolve. The privilege of action over life distinguished those who act from those who do nothing but ‘live’, who are enclosed in the sphere of reproductive and meaningless life.”

<sup>92</sup> “The ‘aristocratic’ absolutization of style went along with the ‘democratic’ principle of indifference. It went along with the reversal of old hierarchy between noble action and base life.”

<sup>93</sup> Rancière cites Balzac's novel *Le curé de village* as an example of “a fable of democracy and literariness”, in which the protagonist, who should never have read a book, suffers the catastrophic consequences of a book she accidentally encounters and reads (166). (Rather like *Madame Bovary* as well).



thinking),<sup>94</sup> Rancière also points to forms in which the differences between high and low have been eliminated or reversed, something which he believes is caused by the esthetic regime that has broken the connection between the subject and the way in which it is presented (2007: 49). He calls this an esthetic revolution (a break with the prevailing hierarchy in the arts) that precedes the technical revolution of photography.<sup>95</sup> He argues that the technical revolution comes after the aesthetic revolution, that is primarily characterized by the attention paid to daily life; initially in pictorial and literary form and only later photographically and cinematographically (50). Rancière describes the esthetic revolution as the abolition of an ordered whole of connections between the visible and the sayable, knowledge and action, activity and passivity (93). In *Le destin des images (The future of the image)*,<sup>96</sup> he elaborates on this idea in the “dialectical montage” that is a result of a dialectical method he believes applies the power of the chaotic to creating what he describes as “small machines of the heterogeneous” (2010: 62). Rancière envisages such a machine creating collisions through fragmentation and the division and distribution of elements that attract each other, or vice-versa, by bringing together and linking heterogeneous and incompatible elements. As an example, he mentions the surreal 'meeting between a sewing-machine and an umbrella on the dissecting table'<sup>97</sup> and, following Walter Benjamin, also the militant photomontages created by John Heartfield (63).<sup>98</sup> He argues that the collisions caused by such "machines" can evoke a disruptive force that draws attention to the power of another community that imposes a different measure in which, Rancière insists, lies an absolute reality of desires and dreams. In the chapter, “The Paradoxes of Political Art” in *Dissensus. On Politics and Aesthetics*,

---

<sup>94</sup> For my research, I have used the Dutch translation *Het esthetische denken*; this concerns the text included in it under the heading “On mechanical arts and the rise of the nameless”, taken from the original text; Jacques Rancière, “L'inoubliable”, in Jean-Louis Comolli and Jacques Rancière, *Arrêt sur histoire*. Paris: Center Georges-Pompidou, 1997.

<sup>95</sup> Rancière takes this as a critique of Walter Benjamin's essay *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner Technische Reproduzierbarkeit* (Artwork in the Age of Its Technical Reproducibility). In this essay, Benjamin points to the disappearance of the aura of a work of art in its technical reproducibility. Benjamin's argument is that the technique of reproduction separates the reproduced object from the realm of tradition: “By multiplying the work of art, it replaces the unique existence with the serial existence of the work of art” (13).

<sup>96</sup> The Dutch translation *De toekomst van het beeld* was used for this study.

<sup>97</sup> Taken from Surrealism; photo by Man Ray after De Lautréamont's well-known line “as beautiful as the chance meeting of an umbrella and a sewing-machine on a dissecting table”.

<sup>98</sup> The idea that a clash takes place in a paste-up that undermines the existing (political) order has already been suggested by Walter Benjamin. In *Das artwork im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*, Benjamin points out how the fragmentary images of his time have been critically used in John Heartfield's photomontage depicting a dead butterfly emerging from a caterpillar. Benjamin says that this photomontage exposes the 'natural course' of the history of the Weimar Republic, revealing the rise of Hitler and National Socialism.



Rancière indicates that the arts lend themselves to the clash or dissensus that they associate with the political because the arts neither give lessons nor have any destination (2015: 148).

### *Eventual rupture*

Alain Badiou begins his 1989 text, entitled Samuel Beckett: *l'écriture du générique et l'amour*,<sup>99</sup> about the Irish playwright Samuel Beckett, with one of his poems (written in French):

*Flux cause*

*Que toute chose*

*Tout en étant,*

*Toute chose,*

*Donc celle-là,*

*Tout en étant*

*N'est pas.*

*Parlons-en.*<sup>100</sup>

In the image of the flow in Beckett's poem, in which Beckett, Badiou argues, connects Heraclitus with the dark,<sup>101</sup> there also seems to be a core of Badiou's theory that the thing can be simultaneously where it is and where it is not, making it as it were, continue to exist. While in *Disagreement. Politics and philosophy*, Rancière sees the political of 'that which is and at the same time is not' as a 'gap' to be filled between the political community and those outside it (being there and at the same time not being because they are not heard) (1999: 38),<sup>102</sup> in his preface to *Logiques des mondes. L'Être et l'événement*, Badiou speaks about "truths as incorporeal things which, like the poet's consciousness, become and linger 'between

---

<sup>99</sup> Text delivered in the context of the Conférences du Perroquet in 1989 (Badiou, "L'écriture du générique: Samuel Beckett", Conditions. In Bloois en van den Hemel, 135).

<sup>100</sup> *The flow is occasion/That every thing/Although it is/Every thing/So this here/Also this here, though/It is/Not is./Let's talk about it.* Translation included in "Het schrijven van het generieke: Samuel Beckett" (Writing the Generic: Samuel Beckett"). (ibid.)

<sup>101</sup> Heraclitus of Halicarnassus; Greek philosopher (540 BC-480 BC). He is credited with the saying: "Everything flows, you cannot step into the same river twice".

<sup>102</sup> "The proletarian declaration of membership, on the other hand, makes the gap between two peoples explicit: between the declared political community and the community that defines itself as being excluded from this community. 'Demos' is the subject of identity of the part and the whole. 'Proletarian' on the contrary subjectifies the part of those who have no part that makes the whole different from itself."

the emptiness and the pure event" (2006: 12).<sup>103</sup> For Badiou, the point is about that continuous emptiness in which things continue to exist and not, as he himself describes in an interview with Joost de Bloois and Ernst van den Hemel, about the isolated “sparks of history” as with Rancière (Bloois and Van den Hemel, 62). Badiou maintains that this emptiness contains *truth* that takes place according to a *truth procedure*, to which he links the concepts 'Idea', 'event' and 'situation'; concepts that he explains in more detail in “*L’Idée du communisme*”, *L’Hypothèse communiste* (2009/2012: 279-97).

By 'Idea' Badiou means 'an abstract addition of three basic elements: a truth procedure, a participation in history, an individual subjectification. [...] An Idea makes it possible for the individual to understand that his participation in a singular political process (his entry into a body of truth) is in a sense also a historical decision" (282). Badiou associates the "Idea" with the word "Communism" that, in his view, cannot be a purely political designation because for the individual, whose subjectification it bears, it links the political procedure with something other than itself (283). However, before going into greater detail on the Idea and the Idea of Communism, Badiou explains what he means by 'event'. He argues that the 'event' is a rupture in the normal order of bodies and languages, as it exists for a specific situation (286).<sup>104</sup> By 'situation' Badiou means the 'State' or 'state of the situation', or “the system of facts that limits the possibility of the possible” (2012: 287). Badiou's event is a creation of new possibilities; it opens up possibilities/opportunities that would not be possible from the 'State' or 'state of the situation' and, as an *eventual rupture*, can be compared to Rancière's *dissensus*. Badiou's *eventual rupture*, however, consists of a series of events to which, unlike Rancière, he links a *truth procedure*. By *truth procedure* or *truth*, he understands “a permanent organization, in a situation or a world, of the consequences of an event”, adding that “an essential coincidence – the coincidence of its eventual origin – is part of every truth” (Ibid.). In Book V of *Logiques des mondes*, Badiou explains this coincidence as something suddenly released in that moment; as fleeting beginnings of what had previously seemed not to exist. As the ultimate example of this, he

---

<sup>103</sup> “En nos mondes, tels quels, procèdent des vérités. Elles sont, ses vérités, des corps incorporels, des langages dépourvus de sens, des infinis génériques, des suppléments inconditionnés. Elles deviennent et demeurent susmendues, comme la conscience du poète, ‘entre le vide et l’événement pur’.”

<sup>104</sup> With regard to previous explanations of the 'event', Badiou refers here to *L’être et l’événement* (1988), the *Manifeste pour la philosophie* (1989), *Logiques des mondes* (2006) and to *Second manifeste pour la philosophie* (2009) (2012: 286).

mentions the uprising of the Paris Commune on March 18, 1871, in which the people unexpectedly managed to capture the guns of the National Guard and take control of the city. Badiou points out that, until then everything had seemed settled, without any possibility of a ruling popular power but then suddenly and seemingly fortuitously appeared in "the situation" of the moment, making what seemed impossible possible (2006: 386).<sup>105</sup> Badiou hypothesizes that the change takes place in the trace of that event and the event that occurs in the moment (by chance), in which he attributes (in *Book I of Logiques des mondes*) an important role to what he believes is the *loyalty (fidélité)* of the subject (2006: 58);<sup>106</sup> the subject who is faithful to the consequences (trace) of the disappearing event in the new situation, that is, to the *truth procedure* (Ibid.).<sup>107</sup>

Badiou sees art (just as science, love, politics) as a *truth procedure*, in which it is not a matter of a particular truth (the individual does not matter), but a truth that lies in all (art) works together. In "Art et philosophie", *Petit manuel d'inesthétique*, Badiou cites Brecht's theater, in which, he says, an illusion is placed at a distance from itself, creating a space in between and through which "the extrinsic objectivity of the truth can be shown (2005/2012: 94)". He mentions the importance of the epic dimension because, in the interspace of the play, it "shows the *courage to truth*" and thereby constitutes "a therapy against cowardice for the *truth*" (Ibid.). Badiou argues that a work of art in itself is neither a truth nor an event, but is a subject of an artistic procedure or "a subject point of an artistic truth" (Ibid.: 101). Badiou argues that a *truth* is ultimately an artistic configuration, set in motion by an event that usually consists of a group of works of art that together form an *eventual rupture* (102).

In summary, it can be said that Badiou thinks that there is a kind of undercurrent in art that we cannot see, it exists and at the same time does not exist, in which man (subject) and object coincide (in the event) and this forms the void as that which cannot be represented in a situation, yet underlies every situation and from which *truths* are produced time and again. Those *truths* must be fought for and Badiou says this requires courage to counter the sluggishness inherent in the current neoliberal era. He speaks about "global capitalism that almost consciously aims to generate a general lethargy according to an ideology that only

---

<sup>105</sup> "Le site '18 mars', pensé comme objet, est subversion des règles de l'apparaître politique (de la logique de pouvoir) par l'être-support '18 mars', où est distribuée l'impossible possibilité de l'existence ouvrière."

<sup>106</sup> Under the heading 'Référents et opérations du sujet fidèle'.

<sup>107</sup> Badiou postulates that the subject coincides with the *truth procedure*: "Dire 'sujet' ou dire 'sujet au regard d'une vérité' est redondant. Car il n'y a de sujet que d'une vérité, à son service, au service de son déni, ou de son occultation."

amounts to 'live without ideas'" (in Bloois and Van den Hemel, 2012: 60). Badiou states that a life without ideas is the same as remembering that the world is washed-out and then wondering how we can counteract the lack of energy (Ibid.: 60,61).

In his essays, collected in *Le Siècle (The Twentieth Century)*, in which he looks back on the last century, Badiou deals concretely with the meaning and role of the subject with regard to the event. In this disquisition he argues that the subject that "does not belong to the order of what is, but of what happens" might sacrifice itself to a historical cause that transcends it because, as he sees it, the individual is nothing in him/herself (2006: 331).<sup>108</sup> While Rancière emphasizes the principle of equality along which the rupture takes place, apart from rebellion,<sup>109</sup> Badiou is all about advocating brotherhood and courage. In *The Twentieth Century* he refers to a fragment of the *Ode marítima* (Ode of the Sea) by the Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa (heteronym for Alvaro de Campos), that, Badiou says, indicates the condition of "collective nomadism" (2006: 161), that he identifies as amounting to breaking away from the familiar and established. From this extract, Badiou concludes that the individual only becomes a subject if he manages to overcome his fear of and innate aversion to prisons, but even more so the fear of losing all identity and being robbed of the time-bound routine. In his view the poem (and the century) is a call for courage, because fear stiffens the individual and makes the individual impotent: "Not so much the fear of oppression and sorrow as the fear of no longer being the little one is, no longer to have the little that one has" (161,162).

---

<sup>108</sup> "Since the subject's being is a lack of being, this bond inevitably implies that only by being absorbed in a project that transcends him can an individual hope to assign to himself some subjective reality. The 'we' assigned in that project is the only really real, subjectively real for the individual who carries that project. Frankly, the individual is nothing."

<sup>109</sup> In his essay *Avant-gardes* (part of *De twintigste eeuw (The twentieth century)*, 2006), Badiou states: "Rebellion' means that when we experience the extreme of negative excess, the certainty remains that we can change the sign. Resignation, on the other hand, is mere acceptance of the inevitable and insurmountable character of sorrow. [...] Rebellion is the spark of life (that is, the pure present), completely independent of its chances of changing or not changing the factual situation that determines it" (Bloois and Van den Hemel, 2012: 120,121). In this argument, he contrasts rebellion with the resignation of the 'priest', "today the voice that whispers and roars everywhere, is the voice of politicians, essayists and journalists".

## Chapter 4 Methodology

With their works that are often rooted in an oral tradition and in which the community is encouraged to take action by instigating change, both the visual artists and the writers from Equatorial Guinea tell stories.<sup>110</sup> The author (and narrator in the oral tradition) puts himself at the service of the story, so that attention is concentrated on that story and not on the author as a person. An oral methodology and a methodology based on narratology that focuses on the story that evolves from events underlying certain actions are appropriate. In the introduction to *The Theory of Storytelling and Stories*, Mieke Bal defines narratology as “the theory of narrative texts”, describing that theory as “a systematic set of generalizing statements about a certain part of reality” (1990: 16). She then states that, although the corpus consists of narrative texts, the question is what are their characteristics when they are delineated:

What does this corpus of narrative texts consist of? At first glance, this seems clear: of novels, novellas, short stories, fairy-tales, newspaper reports and such. But, whether motivated or not, we create boundaries and these boundaries are not the same for everyone. For some people, comics are part of the corpus, for others they are not. [...] Anyone who does regard comics as narrative texts is using a broader concept of the text. For him or her, a text does not necessarily have to be a language text. After all, comics also use a different, non-linguistic drawing system, that of the image. The other uses a more limited understanding of the text, and for such a person only language-text is text.<sup>111</sup> [own translation]

Following their definition by Bal as 'narrative texts', Esono Ebalé's comics could also be examined using a narratological method, were it not for the fact that his work also consists of stand-alone (digital) drawings and collages in which, alongside the political, the caricatural also plays a major role. In order to examine the theoretical framework in which there are voids in the works and what are the strategies for which these voids offer a (political) opening, a method has been chosen to look at the works of Esono Ebalé that relates to the various components of the image, as well as to the texts used with the image. The images will

---

<sup>110</sup> In his essay “Literatura moderna hispanófono en Guinea Ecuatorial” (in *Jornadas de Estudios Africanos*), Donato Ndongo points to the African oral cultures in which the narrator shaped the moral consciousness of society that immersed listeners in both reality and fantasy, making the word turn into a proposal for action and means of change (2001: 133).

<sup>111</sup> Waaruit bestaat nu dat corpus van verhalende teksten? Op het eerste gezicht lijkt dat duidelijk: uit romans, novellen, korte verhalen, sprookjes, krantenverslagen, en dergelijke. Maar we leggen grenzen, al of niet gemotiveerd, en die grenzen zijn niet voor iedereen dezelfde. Voor sommige mensen behoren strips tot het corpus, voor anderen niet. [...] Degene die strips wel als verhalende teksten beschouwt hanteert een ruimer tekstbegrip. Voor hem of haar hoeft een tekst niet persé taaltekst te zijn. In strips wordt immers ook van een ander, niet-talig tekensysteem gebruik gemaakt, namelijk van het beeld. De ander hanteert een beperkter tekstbegrip, en voor zo iemand is alleen taaltekst een tekst (1990: 17)

be examined by making a visual analysis of the artistic media used, supplemented by theories related to the image and the visual arts. In summary, an interdisciplinary method has been chosen in which the visual analysis relates to the image and the visual arts (supplemented by theories involved) and the narrative analysis to the story and literature.

## Stories

All in all, ever since I have been diving into the history, psychology, into the culture of the Guineans, that is like saying into my own subconscious, to try to find and explain the Equatorial Guinean man. This is why I have been interested in becoming a writer from a very early age, so as [to be able] to explain to myself as well as to the others, why we are the way we are and not otherwise.<sup>112</sup> [own translation]

In this quote, from an interview with Mbaré Ngom (2008: 188), Ndongso Bidyogo indicates that he wanted to become a writer in order to “dive into his own subconscious” and by doing so he also hopes to meet “*el hombre guineano* and explain to him”. His novel *Las tinieblas de tu memoria negra* (which together with *Los poderes de la tempestad* is part of an intended trilogy) could, from his perspective, be an autobiography of present-day Equatorial Guinea. In the same interview, the writer mentions this as the reason he omitted the concrete name of the main character as well as concrete place names in Equatorial Guinea. His mission is to stimulate the reader in general and specifically readers from Equatorial Guinea to think:

In any case, it will be an autobiography of the current society of Equatorial Guinea, if one can speak in these terms, and this will explain why the main character is nameless, nor does it concern a concrete place in Guinea and so forth, as a proposal to Guineans themselves and to the reader in general, to reflect on our existence as a people.<sup>113</sup> [own translation]

The fact that Ndongso Bidyogo reveals he wants to get to know himself *through* his compatriots is emphasized in the first quote by letting the *I* (*buceo, mi propio subconciente*)

---

<sup>112</sup> En definitiva, desde entonces buceo en la historia, en la psicología, en la cultura de los guineanos, que es como decir en mi propio subconciente, para tratar de encontrar y de explicar al hombre guineano. Por eso, desde muy joven me interesó ser escritor, para poder explicarme a mí mismo y a los demás por qué somos como somos y no de otra manera.

<sup>113</sup> En todo caso sería la autobiografía de la sociedad guineana actual, si se puede hablar en estos términos, y ello explicaría que el personaje principal carezca de nombre, ni localización concreta dentro de Guinea etc., como propuesta de reflexión para los propios guineanos y para el lector en general, sobre nuestra existencia como pueblo. En todo caso sería la autobiografía de la sociedad guineana actual, si se puede hablar en estos términos, y ello explicaría que el personaje principal carezca de nombre, ni localización concreta dentro de Guinea etc., como propuesta de reflexión para los propios guineanos y para el lector en general, sobre nuestra existencia como pueblo (2008: 189).



change into *we* ("*por qué somos como somos*"). In addition, in the second quote, the writer also includes the anonymity of both the protagonist's character and the places [in his novel], in order to prompt the reader with whom he shares "*nuestra existencia como pueblo*" as writer and narrator to put on their thinking-caps. This approach by the narrator (with a particular purpose in mind), the narrative instances *I* and *we*, the characters, place and so forth is limited to an interpretation extracted from the text and can therefore be called a narratological methodology.

Narratology is seen as a branch of literary theory in which the text is no longer regarded as a derivative of the author, but as a meaningful whole in its own right (Korsten, 2002: 250).<sup>114</sup> A structuralist model applied here focuses on relationships between parts of a structure in which the text acquires meaning through related signs (Ibid.). In the period from 1966 to 1980, the French structuralists – including Barthes, Genette, Greimas – were decisive in giving a pivotal impetus to narratology as a methodology.<sup>115</sup>

An author-centered method is, as already indicated, not appropriate to community-oriented works (part of the hypothesis in this research). Ndong-Bidyogo opposes a conception of his novel as an autobiography (Odartey-Wellington, 224)<sup>116</sup> and, if the autobiographical link were to be made by critics, it would be an "autobiography of the community" (see quote above). Therein also lies the (political) community-oriented focus that the writer asks of the reader, while he puts himself out of play as a writer, or, in Roland Barthes' idea, "declares dead".<sup>117</sup> This is why the choice has been made for a methodology that focuses not only on the story and the text but also on the role of the reader. In all three novels to be investigated,

<sup>114</sup> Korsten places this in a historical context and mentions the shift from the 19th-century interest in genesis, that things would emerge from each other, to the focus on relationships between parts of a structure within the social sciences, sociology, psychology and language- and literary studies. [The idea is borrowed from the natural science, especially physics].

<sup>115</sup> This claim is taken from the essay "Narratology" by Jan Christoph Meister; he distinguishes a "classic" phase from 1960 to 1980 and later phases in which narratology has been described as theory, method and discipline (*Handbook of Narratology*, 623-631).

<sup>116</sup> "Mis novelas no son autobiografías. [...] Pero sí, tiene que ver con una generación. Es decir, es una generación de guineanos la que ha vivido esas cosas."

<sup>117</sup> "[...] a text is composed of many different writings that come from several cultures and enter into a dialogue with each other or parody or contradict each other, but there is a place where this multiplicity comes together and that place is the reader and not, as has hitherto been said, assumed the author. [...] the birth of the reader will be possible only through the death of the author." Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author."

[[https://www.dbnl.org/tekst/\\_ras001198101\\_01/\\_ras001198101\\_01\\_0003.php](https://www.dbnl.org/tekst/_ras001198101_01/_ras001198101_01_0003.php)]

Korsten situates Roland Barthes with Poststructuralist semiotics and *Close reading of New Criticism* – as an approach to literature in the 1970s and 1980s (317). Korsten argues that a detailed reading of the text is linked to social structures through which the reader is regarded as a socially determined subject (278).

there is a narrator who seems to be the witness of different events. Narrative analysis can be used to check whether the narrator seems credible to the reader, that would make the story 'true' for the reader and so that 'truth can be done' (Badiou).<sup>118</sup> A narratological analysis can help to clarify the structure of the novels to be investigated in which stories from an oral storytelling tradition often appear side by side or as 'story within a story', told by more storytellers and from different narrative perspectives. This literature is also characterized by numerous repetitions, lyrical passages and the use of stereotypes. Where these different elements originated, how they relate to each other and make a meaningful contribution to the 'voids' present in the novels<sup>119</sup> will be examined both on the basis of the story of the novel as a whole and on the basis of certain peripheral phenomena that Gérard Genette calls *paratext* in *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* and Lucien Dällenbach's concept *mise en abyme* in *The Mirror in the Text*. The link to the oral tradition, in which the autobiographical aspect also plays a role (although Ndong-Bidyogo relates this to the community rather than to itself), will be explored through employing insights from *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the World* by Walter J. Ong and *Transparent Minds* by Dorrit Cohn, *The Distinction of Fiction* by Dorrit Cohn and *Le Pacte Autobiographique ou l'autobiographie en théorie* by Philippe Lejeune. Nevertheless, Schlomith Rimmon-Kenan's *Narrative Fiction* has been chosen as the handbook and starting point for the narrative analysis because in it Rimmon-Kenan clearly summarizes the main lines of narratology of what are known as Anglo-American New Criticism, Russian Formalism, French Structuralism, the Tel-Aviv School of Poetics and the Phenomenology of Reading (1983: 5). These include Chatman and Forster (Anglo-American), Propp and Uspensky (Russian), Greimas, Genette and Bremond (French), Iser (German), Rimmon-Kenan herself (Israeli) and Bal whose theory is based on Genette's.

### *Texts as a 'frame' and reflection of the story*

In the preface to *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, Genette calls the (text) elements

---

<sup>118</sup> Focalization is an important 'manipulative' tool because it determines who the reader can observe or with whom he/she can empathize (Bal, 124 / Korsten, 253).

<sup>119</sup> This elicits a reference to the theory of Wolfgang Iser that will be explained in greater depth in this chapter under *Narrative Fiction; 5. The role of the reader*. Iser (and with him also Rimmon-Kenan) points to 'gaps' in a text that are filled by the reader. These holes could also be considered voids, parallel to Badiou's theory of voids (see the theoretical framework of this research).



that are “on the threshold of the text” and are therefore both inside and outside the text, *paratext*. He points out that a literary text is rarely presented “in an unadorned state” (1997: 1) but is accompanied, for example, by the author's name, title, a preface and illustrations, as a kind of framing of that text. His argument is that this ensures the presence of a text (and its reception as a book) in the world (Ibid.). *Paratext* can therefore be understood as that which 'is on the threshold and at the same time is not' (Rancière, 1999: 38) or space (Badiou, 2005/2012: 94) and thereby contributes to the visibility of the text, as well as the (political) ideas present in the text. Genette calls *paratext* = *peritext* + *epitext* (Ibid. 5), in which *peritext* refers to elements directly related to the text, such as the title, the preface and certain references, and *epitext* to elements around it, such as interviews, publicity and reviews. Genette claims that elements belonging to the *paratext* emanate a message such as “a paratextual message, whatever it may be” (1997: 4). Where in the works of the authors from Equatorial Guinea a *paratext* is found and how this *paratext* relates to the overall text will be also examined.

The novels by the Equatorial Guinea writers chosen for this study contain stories and lyrical elements that may or may not be embedded in the text; as *paratext*, taking Genette's definition, or as *mise en abyme*. Lucien Dällenbach defines the *mise en abyme* in *The Mirror in the Text*, first used in a text by André Gide, as an internal mirror that reflects the whole of the story through a simple, repeated doubling (1989: 36).<sup>120</sup> In the *mise en abyme*, Dällenbach argues that a reflection occurs as an apparent (or paradoxical) doubling of the whole, in which a retrospective or prediction can also be hidden; something that takes place between the 'already' and the 'not yet' and can therefore form a rupture in the text (67). Dällenbach's *mise en abyme* theory will be used to examine whether and where in each of the novels there is a *mise en abyme* as a possible rupture or pivot in the text as a whole. Where the *mise en abyme* does occur and gives structure to the story will also be investigated, either by splitting it into two centralized pivots or by using it as a repeating *leitmotif* with a possible reference to the plot of the story (Dällenbach, 70,71).<sup>121</sup>

<sup>120</sup> Dällenbach points out that André Gide (1869-1951) used the concept *mise en abyme* in a text in 1891 as a concept borrowed from heraldry; as figure 'en abîme' in the center of a escutcheon that is combined with other figures, but that it does not touch any of those figures.

<sup>121</sup> Dällenbach states that the fact that the *mise en abyme* can be studied in itself as a reflection of the text and as an element that can give structure to the story makes it both an object and a subject of interpretation: “The *mise en abyme* is thus both presupposed by the preceding text and presupposes the succeeding text, is both the object and subject of interpretation, and finds in this central position a platform on which the reading of the text can pivot” (70).

## *Oral narration*

Taking Walter J. Ong's *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the World* as a starting point the oral characteristics in the novels and what meanings can be derived from them will be examined. Ong mentions the Hebrew word *dabar* that means both 'word' and 'event' and hence implies a form of action (1982: 32). The oral lends itself more to action and dynamics, Ong postulates, because the spoken word penetrates us more deeply than seeing and therefore also accumulates more power and strength (this would tally with the idea of [political] action of Rancière and Badiou). Ong hypothesizes that sound cannot be heard without power and dynamics (Ibid.), but these dynamics (and volatility) also inevitably mean that different mechanisms are at work in the oral than in a written text. In order to be able to remember the spoken text, aids such as rhythm, repetition of certain formulas in the form of fixed expressions (clichés) and proverbs/sayings are scattered throughout the narration (34).

Besides these points, Ong lists numerous characteristics that arise from remembering a text as well as from interaction with the audience, speaking and listening. In oral texts, as well as the many repetitions, there are contractions and superfluous references that lead to clichés (the brave soldier, the beautiful princess), a preference for outspoken or bizarre characters (heroes, monsters, cyclops) and certain contradictions (heroes versus villains, good and evil) (70). These are elements that provide guidance in the story but, Ong argues, their presence also has to do with the communication in which the audience in the oral tradition is often challenged by slander, mockery in a current context (focused on the present) and “an enthusiastic description of physical violence” (1982: 44). In this context, there is little distance between the narrator and the audience because, Ong says, sound (unlike the visible text) brings together: “Sight isolates, sound incorporates. [...] By contrast with vision, the dissecting sense, sound is thus a unifying sense” (Ibid.: 72). This idea ties in with the community-oriented literature of African writers, and writers from Equatorial Guinea in particular, as they associate themselves as individuals (subjects) with something other than themselves as a “political procedure”.<sup>122</sup>

In *Transparent Minds*, Dorrit Cohn points to another aspect that can also be related to the writers from Equatorial Guinea, whose works contain elements derived from an oral

---

<sup>122</sup> This ties in with Badiou's idea that the individual is nothing in him/herself; that, in the subjectification of the word 'communism', the individual links the political procedure to something other than himself (Bloois and Van den Hemel, 283).

tradition, but belong to written literature. In the chapter “From Narration to Monologue”, she discusses what she calls “the ambiguities between writing and speaking, between audience-address and self-address [...]” (1978: 176). She discusses this ambiguity on the basis of the stratification in Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*, in which Dostoevsky and his narrator move on different narrative levels and may or may not address an (imaginary) audience.<sup>123</sup> This type of analysis proposed by Cohn will be used to examine whether such ambiguity also exists in the novels of the writers from Equatorial Guinea, begging the question of how they resolve this ambiguity.

### *The autobiographical pact*

In *Le Pacte Autobiographique ou l'autobiographie en théorie*, Philippe Lejeune asks whether the narrator appears credible to the reader and whether or not 'truth' happens through the novel<sup>124</sup> has to do with the 'covenant' that the writer may or may not enter into with the reader (1975:28). In this alliance, Lejeune identifies a number of possibilities related to the relationship between the author's name and that of the narrator, that he elaborates in a diagram (Ibid.). The first possibility is that the narrator's character has a different name to that of the author, thereby precluding an autobiography. The second possibility is that the narrator's character has no name; Lejeune states that this is the most complex situation because, in this case, everything depends on “la pacte conclu par l'auteur” (Ibid.: 29), in which three possibilities can be distinguished; this could be a. what he calls the “pacte romanesque”, in which the autobiographical is outsourced to another narrator, b. what he calls the “pacte zero”, where the narrator has no name, there is no pact of any kind (neither “romanesque” nor “autobiografique”) and the reader has to rely on the names of other characters and the circumstances, c. because of what he calls the “pacte autobiographique”, in which the author has declared himself to be identical to the narrator, but without a name (Ibid.). The third possibility is that the name of the narrator's character is the same as that of the author and, in this instance, this is an autobiography that excludes any form of fiction (30).

---

<sup>123</sup> “The narrative presentation in this story thus consists of at least three superimposed layers: a written record in its alleged format; a spoken and audience-directed discourse in its pervasive speech patterns; a silent self-address in the true meaning of its verbal gesture. The underground man writes as if he were thinking, but he thinks as if he were addressing others.” (*Transparent Minds*, 177)

<sup>124</sup> Referring to Badiou's truth procedure.

Lejeune posits that there is no difference between an autobiography and an autobiographical novel: “Comment distinguer l'autobiographie du roman autobiographique? [...] il n'y a aucune difference” (1975: 26) because it would be the same processes. Dorrit Cohn contradicts this in *The Distinction of Fiction*, in which she argues that whether or not we are dealing with a fictional autobiography makes a difference to the relationship between the reader and the character of the narrator. When it comes to the reader's assessment, she calls the distance between writer and narrator in the first person (and hence also his reliability) variable, the fact that makes the fictional autobiography a different experience from the real autobiography (1978: 34).

### *Narrative Fiction*

The novels of Ndongo-Bidyogo, Nsue Angüe and Ávila Laurel are narrative texts that fit Schlomith Rimmon-Kenan's definition of "narrative fiction" as "the narration of a succession of fictional events" (1983: 2). In her introduction to *Narrative fiction*, Rimmon-Kenan writes that her overview is not organized according to 'schools' or individual theorists, but is instead grouped around the “*differentia specifica* of narrative fiction (for example, events, time, narration)” and that therefore it brings together multiple aspects, borrowed from more theories (Ibid: 5). In this introduction, she also discusses a number of these “*differentia specifica*” on which the distinction between ‘story’, ‘text’ and ‘narration’ is based (3).<sup>125</sup> In her definition, a ‘story’ consists of a succession of events that are put into words as narration in the text, as narrative fiction; as “the narration of a succession of fictional events” (2,3). In addition, Rimmon-Kenan points out that the events do not necessarily have to be told in chronological order and that they are related to "the characteristics of the participants dispersed throughout" (Ibid.), so that all items of the narrative content are filtered through "some prism or perspective ('focalizer')” (Ibid.).

The novels by the writers from Equatorial Guinea selected will be examined using the method suggested by Rimmon-Kenan. The emphasis will be placed on those elements related to the story, narration and events,<sup>126</sup> the focalization of the narrator as well as his role and

---

<sup>125</sup> Rimmon-Kenan indicates that she bases this on the distinction between *histoire*, *récit* and *narration* in *Figures III* by Gérard Genette (1972: 71-6).

<sup>126</sup> Here Mieke Bal's translation is taken from Genette's *histoire* and *narration* as history and story, in which Bal sees history as "substance processed into a story, defined as a series of events". (Ball, 1990: 20)

position in relation to the story and the narration, the characterization of the characters in the narration (including their stereotypical character or not) and the role of the reader.

### *1. Story, narration and events*

Rimmon-Kenan postulates the story of a novel is an abstraction and construct that is not directly available to the reader (1983: 6). In order to make this story available, it must be approached, even if it is not, as raw, undifferentiated material whose individual components can be examined in their “potential of forming networks of internal relations” (6,7). As components of which the story is an abstraction, Rimmon-Kenan mentions the specific style of a text, the language and the sign system that underlies what she calls the “narrative grammar” (7-9). This might involve surface structures and deeper structures on both language and narrative level (10). Rimmon-Kenan then goes on to discuss different models of ‘deep narrative structure’ (11)<sup>127</sup> and “surface narrative structure” (13) and (for those belonging to the latter category) makes a distinction between narrative and non-narrative texts. The decisive element is the presence or absence of a story (and events): “The presence or absence of a story is what distinguishes narrative from non-narrative texts” (1983: 15).<sup>128</sup> An attempt will be made to pinpoint where in the novels to be investigated the events that ‘propel’ the story as actions can be distinguished from the ‘non-narrative’ descriptions. Rimmon-Kenan also considers time and causality in the connection between events and as the ‘plot’ of the story (17), citing the models of Vladimir Propp (20-2) and Claude Bremond (22-7). Propp investigated Russian fairy-tales in which he perceived constant elements as ‘function’, as a result of certain actions. On the other hand, Bremond’s model always gives two options for actions, so that the functions are not fixed and events can always go in two directions (24-5). This model does not therefore assume a fixed pattern of action beforehand, meaning that it can provide more insight into the actions and the structure to the narratives that determine the story of each of the novels under investigation. As a tool by which to investigate and describe

---

<sup>127</sup> According to her, the most important models are those of Lévi-Straus (1958) and Greimas (1966, 1970, 1976); with Rimmon-Kenan not mentioning that both Levi-Straus and Greimas adopted this form Chomsky (as the basic axiom of structuralism and formalism).

<sup>128</sup> Rimmon-Kenan believes that histories and descriptions can be mixed up: “However, non-story elements may be found in a narrative text just as story elements may be found in a non-narrative text. A novel may well include the description of a cathedral, and the description of a cathedral, say in a guide book, may include the story of its construction” (15).

the 'plot' and story, the Bremond model as described and explicated by Rimmon-Kenan has therefore been chosen.

## 2. *Narrator focus*

Rimmon-Kenan uses the term 'focalization' (following Genette and Bal) for the 'prism', 'perspective' or 'angle of vision' through which a story is told in the text, without the narrator also needing to be the focalizer (72). The narrator can also represent what another person sees or has seen: "Thus, speaking and seeing, narration and focalization, may, but need not, be attributed to the same agent" (1983: 73). In doing so, she points (following Bal) to the role of the focalizer who, as subject, focuses on something or someone as an object (75).<sup>129</sup> Under "types of focalization" and "facets of focalization" she discusses, among other ideas, the position that the subject can take as focalizer with regard to the story and what influence can be exerted by perception, psychological and ideological facets and how these facets interact. (75 - 86).

Referring to Bal, Rimmon-Kenan points to the internal or external position the narrator as a focalizer can assume in relation to the story, a role she believes can determine the experience of the narrator: "External focalization is felt to be close to the narrating agent, and its vehicle is therefore called 'narrator-focalizer'" (1983: 75).<sup>130</sup> With regard to the perceptual facet of space and time, Rimmon-Kenan (referring to Uspensky) links a 'bird's-eye view' and the ability to see into the present, past and future to the external narrator (because he can overlook anything beyond space and time in history) versus the limited view, restricted to the present, of the internal narrator (78-80). Rimmon-Kenan defines the perception facet as "the focalizer's sensory range" and the psychological facet as "his

---

<sup>129</sup> There is a difference of opinion between Bal and Genette about the concept of a 'focalizer'. Bal says about this: "The book I have most opposed to is *Figures III* by Gérard Genette. [...] Genette describes focalization on the basis of the distinction between the narrator and the person with whom the perspective lies. When you realize from which point of view the story is told, you can make an explicit distinction between the focalizer, who gives the vision of the story, and the identity of the person who articulates the vision. The word "narrative perspective" wrongly suggests that the narrator's voice and gaze coincide. That is certainly not always the case." (Bal in "The choice of Mieke Bal." *De Academische Boekengids* 52 (*The Academic Book Guide* 52, Sept. 2005: 20-21) Because I want to leave it open provisionally (and want to investigate) whether or not "the voice and the gaze of the narrator" coincide in the novels of the writers from Equatorial Guinea, I have chosen the focalizer as a separate entity, in line with Bal's view.

<sup>130</sup> Bal says the following about internal and external focalization: "When the focalization rests with a character who occurs in history, we could speak of *internal* focalization. Parallel to the terminology surrounding the narrator, we can then use *external* focalization to indicate that an instance outside history functions as focalization." (Bal, 1990: 119)

[focalizer] mind and emotions" (1983: 80), that also exposes a difference between the external and internal focalizer; Rimmon-Kenan's point of view is that the external focalizer has unlimited cognitive knowledge (is omniscient) and is neutral on the emotional level, while the internal focalizer has limited knowledge and is subjectively colored on the emotional level (80,81). There is also the ideological facet that, Rimmon-Kenan says, is often linked to the 'norms of the text' and that (referring again to Uspensky) "consists of 'a general system of viewing the world conceptually', in accordance with which the events and characters of the story are evaluated" (1983: 82-3). She argues that the ideology of the narrator-focalizer is decisive and all other ideologies present in the text are tested against this ideology of the narrator-focalizer placed in the 'higher' position. However, Rimmon-Kenan does acknowledge that, in more complicated cases, "the single authoritative external focalizer" can also give space to different ideological positions that are wholly or partly in conflict with each other (83).

### *3. Role of the narrator*

In the chapter "Narration: levels and voices", Rimmon-Kenan discusses the role of the narrator on the basis of a model devised by Seymour Chatman (87), in which the narrator, whether fictitious or not, is linked to the real author and the implied author (as also the narratee as a fictitious or non-fictional 'hearer' is linked to the real reader and the implied reader). However, she rejects Chatman's idea that every text has an implied author (and an implied reader) but only an optional narrator (and narratee) (89). Her argument is that there can be no implied author without a narrator and that, without the presence of a narrator, an implied author would have to be "depersonalized":

My claim is that if it is to be consistently distinguished from the real author and narrator, the notion of the implied author must be de-personified, and is best considered as a set of implicit norms rather than as a speaker or a voice (i.e. subject). It follows, therefore, that the implied author cannot literally be a participant in the narrative communication situation (1983: 89).

A text can therefore implicitly contain norms without the author's voice literally resounding in it. Rimmon-Kenan (contrary to Chatman's view) claims that there is always a narrator: "In my view there is always a teller in the tale, at least in the sense that any utterance or record of an utterance presupposes someone who has uttered it" (Ibid.).



That the narrator also recounts an event in a certain relationship to the story is explained by Rimmon-Kenan in terms of “temporal relations” (90). She cites four possibilities classified (by Genette): if something is told after it has happened (1); if something is told before it happens (for example, as a prediction) (2); if something is told while it is happening (for which Rimmon-Kenan quotes a fragment in the second person) (3); and, when the telling and acting are not simultaneous but follow each other in alternation, narration is of a ‘intercalated’ type (4) (90,91). She also points out the duration of the narration (telling time) in relation to story, a point she says is often neglected because most stories are traditionally told as if they were happening simultaneously to the narration (91). Rimmon-Kenan suggests that this will be different in the case of “narratives in narratives” but, she argues, these are more the exception than the rule (91). However, novels by African writers do seem to contain ‘narratives within the narratives’ with one or more narrators as a rule, a fact that makes the ‘temporal relations’ quoted by Rimmon-Kenan assume an extra importance in this research.

The narrator might be a narrator *of* the story, to which, Rimmon-Kenan says, the foregoing refers, but she points out that a narration can also be told *in* a story (92). There are different levels of storytelling and in them the level of the story can be indicated by the term *diegesis* (Genette). Above this *diegesis* level of story, this theory postulates, is the *extradiegetic* level. Rimmon-Kenan argues that the level of narration to which the narrator belongs, the extent to which he participates in the story, his visibility and his reliability are crucial factors if the reader is to understand story and determine their attitude towards it (95). Referring to Genette, she discusses different types of storytellers and their relationship to the narration or story they are telling; both *extradiegetic* and *intradiegetic* narrators can be present or absent (that is, visible or invisible) in the story they are telling, with a narrator who does not participate in the story being called *heterodiegetic* and a narrator who does participate in the story called *homodiegetic* (97). By doing following this line, Rimmon-Kenan also raises the issue of the reliability of the narrator, where a reliable narrator is authoritative with regard to “the fictional truth” and an unreliable narrator gives cause to be “suspect” (101). She gives the main reasons for unreliability as “the narrator’s limited knowledge, his personal involvement, and his problematic value scheme” (Ibid.). By contrast, an extradiegetic narrator, especially if he is also *heterodiegetic*, is very probably reliable, she states (104).

#### 4. Characterization of the characters

Turning to Barthes' 'death of the author', Rimmon-Kenan discusses what she believes to be a 'character declared dead' by various modern writers and contemporary (structuralist) theorists.<sup>131</sup>

Character, then, is pronounced 'dead' by many modern writers. Nails are added to its coffin by various contemporary theorists. Structuralists can hardly accommodate character within their theories, because of their commitment to an ideology which 'decenters' man and runs counter to the notions of individuality and psychological depth [...]. (1983: 30)

She summarizes the two problems she sees raised by "the mode of existence of character" under the heading "People or words?" (31), in which "mimetic theories" characters are equated to "people" and in "semiotic theories" (structuralist theories) to "words" (33). She herself argues that these two divergent views can be related to different aspects of "narrative fiction", stating that the characters can be derived from the text as well as from the narration and story: "In the text characters are nodes in the verbal design; in the story they are – by definition – non (or pre-) verbal abstractions, constructs. Although these constructs are partly modeled on the reader's conception of people and in this they are person-like" (1983: 33).

As an extension of "people or words", Rimmon-Kenan suggests, this is also about "being or doing" (Ibid. 34).<sup>132</sup> Her point of view is that a character-like "being" predominates in more psychological narratives and a character-like "doing" in "a-psychological" action narratives (36). She points to Propp's distinction of characters and their roles according to their actions (34)<sup>133</sup> and to Greimas' scheme in which actants can be both characters and objects (as sender or receiver, helper or adversary, subject or object), determined by the action (35). Rimmon-Kenan shows both how characters can be derived from a text and how they can be classified (36-42). In their classification, (applying Forster's theory) she discusses the distinction between 'flat' characters and 'round' characters (40). Flat characters are described as caricatural types, in their purest form constructed around just one single idea or

---

<sup>131</sup> By 'modern' and 'contemporary' is meant the twentieth century and the time in which *Narrative Fiction* came out.

<sup>132</sup> Taken from Mieke Bals *Mensen van papier. Over personages in de literatuur* (People of paper. On characters in literature) (1979).

<sup>133</sup> "Thus, Propp subordinates characters to 'spheres of action' within which their performance can be categorized according to seven general roles: the villain, the donor, the helper, the sought-for-person and her father, the dispatcher, the hero and the false hero."

property that can be expressed in a sentence without developing their character. 'Round' characters are the opposite; they are imbued with more than one quality and do develop over the course of the story. Rimmon-Kenan makes the comment that sometimes a flat character also does undergo a development, while a round character can also stand still in development (41). She goes on to point out the possibility (according to Uspensky's theory) of constructing allegorical figures, caricatures and types around a (predominant) characteristic, such as a name, a certain characteristic that is elicited either from other properties or a characteristic that is connected to a particular group (Ibid.). Rimmon-Kenan states that characters with few (complicated) characteristics and who do not develop are often "minor" with, for example, a function that serves the social environment of the main character (Ibid.). The opposite to this is the "fully developed characters" who offer space for the penetration into the 'inner life' (42).

### 5. *Role of the reader*

In order to check whether the reader is actually encouraged to think about "nuestra existencia como pueblo", as Ndong-Bidyogo intends in his novel, the role of the narrator will also be examined alongside that of the text and the reader. Rimmon-Kenan points to both an Anglo-American and a French structuralist tendency that treats the text as a more or less autonomous object that forms in a reciprocal relationship with the reader (1983: 118). In "The text and its reading", she cites the following quote from Wolfgang Iser: "A text can only come to life when it is read, and if it is to be examined, it must therefore be studied through the eyes of the reader."<sup>134</sup> She adds: "Just as the reader participates in the production of the text's meaning so the text shapes the reader" (Ibid.). She argues this means (referring to Umberto Eco) that a text that a reader 'chooses' also projects a certain image of the reader, thereby making the reader implicit in the text: "The reader is thus both an image of certain competence brought to the text and structuring of such a competence within the text." (Ibid: 119) Just as there can be an implied author, there can also be an implied reader or narratee.<sup>135</sup>

<sup>134</sup> Iser, W., in Rimmon-Kenan, 1983: 118.

<sup>135</sup> In an earlier chapter, Rimmon-Kenan points out (basing herself on Chatman's theory) that the narratee can also be *extradiegetic* or *intradiegetic* and therefore may or may not be visible in the text, and a greater or lesser degree of reliability is associated with this (105 ).

Rimmon-Kenan also pays attention to how delays and gaps in a text can keep the reader reading (126-130). Examining gaps, she again refers to Iser who claims that no story can be told in its entirety, implying that there are always and inevitably gaps or holes in the text that determine the dynamics of the story as the reader fills these gaps:

Indeed, it is only through inevitable omissions that a story will gain its dynamism. Thus, whenever the flow is interrupted and we are led off in unexpected directions, the opportunity is given to us to bring into play our own faculty for establishing connections – for filling in gaps left by the text itself.<sup>136</sup>

Rimmon-Kenan elaborates on this with reference to various literary scholars (besides Iser also Perry, Sternberg, Eco, Miller). She points out that gaps can occur where coherent models (frames) collide and raise questions for the reader. In this context, this can also refer to gaps such as hermeneutic or information gaps (129). Furthermore, a gap she argues, can be temporary or permanent and relate to both future (*prolepsis*) and past (*analepsis*). A temporary gap is again filled by the reader somewhere in the text and a permanent gap remains open throughout the text, but the reader is only conscient of this afterwards. The effect [!] of gaps is especially important to my research because, as Iser postulates, that what is said in the literature is given meaning by what is not said and is subsequently filled in, in the mind of the reader (Iser, 1980: 111 ).<sup>137</sup> However, we do not know what that interpretation is because we cannot look inside each other's heads, therefore, Iser concludes, we remain invisible to each other to a certain extent, also leaving gaps open as “no-thing” (108). Consequently, Iser's theory of the functioning of gaps in literature ties in with Badiou's of voids in (visual) art.<sup>138</sup>

The reader has also been discussed in connection with, among other topics, the focalization of the narrator (in which an external focalizer is closer to the reader, Rimmon-Kenan posits), the reliability and credibility of the narrator (related to his position with regard to the narrative, his knowledge, personal involvement and values) and the interpretation of

---

<sup>136</sup> Iser W., in Rimmon-Kenan, 1983: 128.

<sup>137</sup> “What is said only appears to take on significance as a reference to what is not said; it is the implications and not the statements that give shape and weight to the meaning. But as the unsaid comes to life in the reader's imagination, so the said ‘expands’ to take on greater significance than might have been supposed: even trivial scenes can seem surprisingly profound” (Iser, 1980: 11). According to Iser, only when the reader bridges the gaps in the text does communication begin: “Whenever the reader bridges the gaps, communication begins. The gaps function as a kind of pivot on which the whole text-reader relationship revolves” (Ibid.).

<sup>138</sup> See the theoretical framework of this research.

the characters; Rimmon-Kenan points out that flat characters are easier for the reader to remember than are round characters.

## *Images*

### *Visual analysis in visual literacy*

In the research into images, there is, among other discussions, an international debate about how visual perception can be improved. The term visual literacy has been devised for this. This term was first used in 1969 by John Debes (1914-1986) during a conference in which a search was made for a method to communicate with others, not only through the image, but also by making the word look better (Fransecky and Debes, 1972: 7).<sup>139</sup> *Visual Literacy: A way to learn – A way to teach*, published by Debes and Fransecky in 1972, besides being a manual for teachers, also became a starting point for a field of research involving scientists from different disciplines. Joanna Kedra says that the discussion focuses on whether or not a visual and a grammatical 'literacy' run parallel. Meanwhile, she claims the definition of visual literacy has also changed because of a shift in a focus on different target groups and a changing context, for instance, as a result of the rise of digital mass media (Kedra, 69). In addition, there was a growing interest in broader visions of perception such as an embodied experience, in which watching is assumed to be a bodily experience rather than just an isolated visual experience (Ibid.). Contending this view, some researchers have averred that visual literacy mainly concerns the ability to interpret and understand images. In general, improving visual literacy involves certain skills related to formal characteristics (such as, for example, line, shape, light, color, arrangement) and culturally determined image conventions; however, as a kind of grammar in which these formal components do not relate to each other in the same way as the systematic rules of grammar in language (Kedra, 77).

---

<sup>139</sup> "Visual Literacy refers to a group of vision-competencies a human being can develop by seeing and at the same time having and integrating other sensory experiences. The development of these competencies is fundamental to normal human learning. When developed, they enable a visually literate person to discriminate and interpret the visual actions, objects, and symbols natural or man-made, that he encounters in his environment. Through the creative use of these competencies, he is able to communicate with others. Through the appreciative use of these competencies, he is able comprehend and enjoy the masterworks of visual communications."

In a general sense, visual analysis, as a basic skill required for visual literacy, like narrative analysis, focuses on the relationships between parts of a structure. For my research, that focuses on the individual works, I shall use visual and narrative analysis as parallel systems, in line with the view within visual literacy that considers visual and grammatical structures as parallel systems. The methodical relationship is there in the uncovering of structures; just as narrative analysis discloses the structure of the text, visual analysis can reveal the structure of the image that is given meaning by related visual elements such as plane, line, shape, light, color, space and composition. In Esono Ebalé's images, however, there is also often a text, there as both part of the image and as complementary to and more or less separate from the image. Therefore, his images can also be accepted as an embodied experience in the text. The images will therefore be analyzed not only on the basis of the above-mentioned and image-related characteristics, but the texts placed in them or attached to them will also be appraised from the aspect of any (culture-related) meanings they might be derived.

#### *Visual analysis in relation to visual media*

In the visual analysis, a distinction will be made between the various artistic visual media used. Hilde Van Gelder and Helen Westgeest hypothesize that a medium is more than just a technique and means by which to represent a fragment or idea derived from the visual world; in the introduction to *Photography Theory in Historical Perspective. Case Studies from Contemporary Art*, they argue that the medium used not only gives us insight into how this medium works, but also reveals how we perceive and understand the world around us (2011: 5). This will lead to a mutual influencing between the subject and the medium in which the subject is depicted:

How does “a photograph” (rather than, for instance, a painting) influence the meaning of the subject and contents? More generally, what insights do photographs provide in how societies construct reality? Gaining insight into the working of a medium means understanding how we deal with the world around us. (Ibid.)

In addition to the physical components – tools and materials – different media, Van Gelder and Westgeest go on to argue, also imply different processes that play a role in mediating. This view stresses that it matters which artistic medium is chosen to represent and understand the world around us. In this research I have therefore opted for an image analysis based on

the artistic media used that will be subdivided into drawings, comics and cartoons and (digital) collages and caricatures.

However, in the works there is also a blurring of the boundaries between the artistic media, for example, in which the artist combines (digitally) drawn fragments with photographic images. Van Gelder and Westgeest are adamant that artistic media refer not only to what comes from outside, but also to themselves so that, when different media are mixed, the identity of each medium must also shift or change; the process is to some extent comparable to the mutability, as defined by sociologists and psychologists, of human identity (5,6). However, the focus in my research will not be on the (identity of) the artist, but on his works that have a 'hybrid' character what involve mixed media. In this hybrid form (that is also discussed in photography), Van Gelder and Westgeest see a reflection of the blurring of boundaries in how we live today: “That photographers borrow from and combine their work with elements from other media may well be as a reflection of how we viewed live today” (2011: 3).<sup>140</sup> In her introduction to *Slow Painting. Contemplation and Critique in the Digital Age*, Westgeest also points out the role of the viewer in (digital) collage culture. Besides the fact that this culture implies an expansion of the traditional media, the viewer also broadens his own associations through what she calls the slow processes of observation (2021: 11). By making a distinction in the methodology between the different media and how they are mixed together, it is also possible to determine where Esono Ebalé sets such associations and processes in motion in the viewer with his works.

### *Visual analysis in relation to the theories involved in the image*

Specific theories related to the image and the artistic media will also be included in the image analysis. These are the theories of Norman Bryson (on drawings), Will Eisner, David Carrier and Joost Pollmann (on comics), Joost Schilperoort and Alfons Maas (on visual stories) and Nancy Roth, Mikhail Bakhtin, Erik van de Ligt, Marjorie Garber and Noelia Hobeika (on

---

<sup>140</sup> They refer to Rosalind Kraus, who in this context refers to a *post-medium era* in which media are disconnected from their history (2011: 3). Van Gelder and Westgeest, however, say that this is not so much a disconnection as a rediscovery of certain media in relation to their history: “As we demonstrate in this volume, however, hybrid forms of photography may draw attention to characteristics of the various media involved, rather than merely negate medium issues, and often such forms indeed lead to media reinvention in relation to their history” (Ibid.).



collages and caricatures). These theories will be related to the theories in the theoretical framework that deal with a (political) rupture (Rancière, Badiou) and *voids* (Badiou).

Norman Bryson's idea of a drawing like "A Walk for a Walk's Sake" (2003: 149), as the direct result (in the moment) of a line going across the paper as 'a walk for a walk' will be used to probe how Esono Ebalé fills in areas in his drawings, as opposed to what he leaves open in those drawings. On the basis of an image analysis of aspects such as representation, form, color, spatial representation and composition, an examination will be made of how meanings can be derived from his drawings, with the focus on where there are 'voids' as opposed to what in his drawings is 'full'.

Esono Ebalé's comics will be explored using the comic analyses of Will Eisner, Joost Pollmann and David Carrier. Whereas in *The Aesthetics of Comics*, Carrier takes a more philosophical and art-historical approach,<sup>141</sup> Eisner and Pollmann focus on specific features such as the design of the text and of the frames, as well as the number of frames and their positioning within the page layout, the shape of the speech balloons and choices of the line, spatial representation, composition and so forth. With the help of these analyses and the theoretical framework, an investigation will be launched into what the empty shapes and figures in Esono Ebalé's comics are and how they open the story.

Whether a connection can also be made between empty figures and the stereotypes and metaphors present in the comics will be examined using the method devised by the communication scientists Joost Schilperoord and Alfons Maas in their research into metaphors in political cartoons. In their chapter, "Visual metaphoric conceptualization in political cartoons", in *Multimodal Metaphor*, they point out the specific role that metaphors play in (political) cartoons, because they imply a critical attitude toward a specific socio-cultural situation, event or person (2009: 215). This also reveals how Esono Ebalé uses his comics and visual stories metaphorically with a view to underlining a particular (social or political) rupture and change.

In most of the (digital) collages to be researched, opposing or 'colliding' elements come together as, for example, in the photomontages of John Heartfield who called this

---

<sup>141</sup> Carrier cites *Art and Illusion* by Gombrich and *Connections to the World: The Basic Concepts of Philosophy* by Danto as the works underlying his treatise: "My dual concerns, art-historical and philosophical, thus run through the entire book" (2000: 3). He underlines his divergent approach (compared to those of other comics researchers) as follows: "Although there have been various semiotic accounts of comics, no one has identified the specifically philosophical problems posed by comics. The theorizing developed in this book is closer to Gombrich's than to the semiotic theories that became fashionable in the American art world in the 1980s" (Ibid. 5).

"lying and telling the truth" (Pachnicke and Honnef, 1992: 14). Herein lies the link to what Rancière describes as the "dialectical montage", in which "incompatibilities" occur and in which, he argues, a political break is rooted (2010: 62-74). In order to discover the political nature of the 'rupture elements' in Esono Ebalé's collages and caricatures (two categories that overlap in his work), a relationship will be made with Heartfield's photomontages and with some theorists about Heartfield's work as well as collages and caricatures generally (Nacy, Roth, Noelia Hobeika).

The theories of Mikhail Bakhtin and Marjorie Garber will be used in the Obiang caricatures that depict the president in all sorts of primitive or sexually oriented adventures. Bakhtin's theory will be employed to investigate the role of popular laughter and the 'discharge of the gut' in Obiang caricatures. Garber's theory will explore the role of the feminine and "crossovers" in this. These theories will be used to examine how the artist renders the president 'politically harmless' in his caricatures; in which the political or eventual rupture could lie in which 'truth' takes place.

## **Part II Images**

### ***Voids in the Works of Esono Ebalé***



## Preface

Le vide: nom propre de l'être: 'Vide' indique la défaillance de l'un, le pas-un, en un sens plus originaire que le pas-du-tout. [...] Le nom que je choisis, le vide, indique précisément à la fois que rien n'est présenté, nul terme [...].

(Badiou, 2006: 69)

The first comic I saw in Malabo in 2010, drawn by the visual artist Ramón Esono Ebalé (1977, Nkoa-Nen Yebekuan),<sup>1</sup> entitled *Los Asesinos de mi inteligencia* (the killers of my intelligence), is part of a 2008 booklet published under the same title by the CCEM/B with three other short comics.<sup>2</sup> Besides the appealing title, the detailed drawings of everyday situations in Malabo – the artist's home base where he was still residing at the time – stood out, as did the consistently implemented empty speech balloons. Later I discovered that voids are present not only in the speech balloons of Esono Ebalé's comics, but that (for example) there are also 'holes' in the fully drawn sheets of his drawings of suddenly appearing, unfilled, empty figures.

The empty forms in his drawings and comics often go hand in hand with certain stereotypes and cartoon metaphors. The question is how the stereotypes and the specific metaphorical images play a role in this: are these principally contrasting visual elements in opposition to the empty forms and speech balloons or is there also an emptiness in those images? The first two sections of this chapter will examine where and how voids manifest themselves in the 'worlds' drawn by the artist, and what (political) rupture can be associated with this. In the third section, a more specific examination will be undertaken on the basis of the metaphorical effect of some cartoons and the effect of stereotypes and certain comic conventions in the comic strip *La Pesadilla de Obi*. A relationship will also be established between Japanese *manga* comic and African comics.

The question is whether and to what extent the idea of emptiness also applies to Esono Ebalé's collages and caricatures (Fig. 2.20 to 2.34). At first glance, these seem to be more

---

<sup>1</sup> For his personal background and works, see his website [<http://jamonyqueso.co/>].

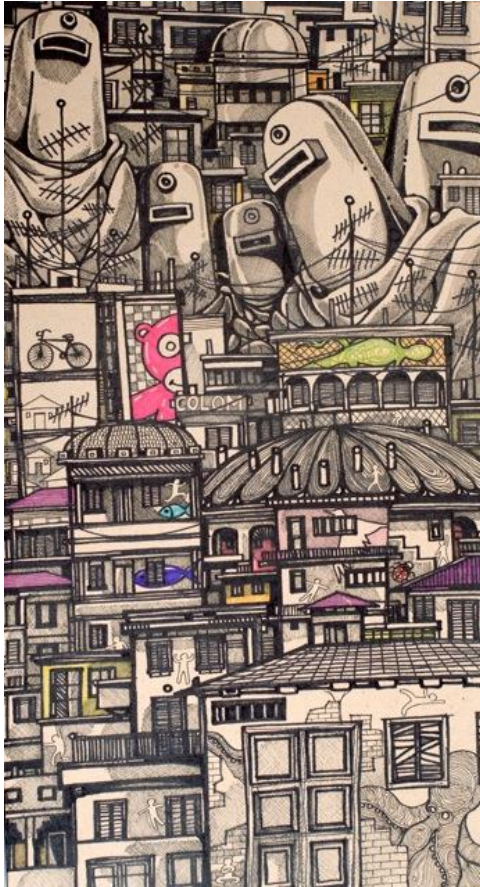
<sup>2</sup> The other comic strips included in this booklet are *Votez, encore et encore* (2007) (Fig. 2.6), *Le Plan B* (2006) and *El despertar de Ayoko* (2006). With these short comics (only 3 to 5 pages each), Esono Ebalé has participated in festivals in Africa, Italy, France and the Ivory Coast. He has also won prizes with *Votez, encore et encore* and *Le Plan B*.

meaningful images in which incompatibilities are unfolding, with a reference to the political situation and leaders in Equatorial Guinea. However, voids can also be understood as forms that are 'emptied' by substituting other forms. Therefore, in my research into images I shall therefore study several forms of emptiness and 'emptying'. What ruptures, voids and forms of emptying are hidden in Obiang's collages and caricatures and to what extent do these procedures make the collages/caricatures into a “subversive act” is the subject of the fourth section. The various analyses (of the drawings, comics, collages and caricatures) will ultimately provide insight into the sense in which Esono Ebalé's works function as a 'truth procedure', as defined by Badiou.

## **1. Drawings, such as 'walk for a walk's sake', around voids**

Esono Ebalé's drawing *La casa de Carlos Colombiano*, from the series of drawings at *Desde el séptimo balcón*, seems especially full (ill. 2.1). However, if you look closely, in the stacking of the interwoven robotic figures and façades of houses, chimneys, antennas, cuddly toys, animal figures and a bicycle, you can see a number of minuscule empty human figures cut out or outlined in the gray shading. Their emptiness, like the emptiness of other open areas in this drawing, exists by the grace of the filling of a surface consisting of a fine-mesh network of thin and thick lines, with the occasional shade or color accent. An unfinished pen drawing shows how Esono Ebalé works with this type of drawing (Fig.2.2); it seems that he builds up the various elements of the performance in every detail as he draws. The open area at the top left of this drawing in the making shows faint pencil lines probably of an underdrawing, but the final pen drawing appears to be the result of what Norman Bryson describes in *The Stage of Drawing: Gesture and Act* as “A walk for a Walk's Sake (2003:149). Bryson believes that a drawing arises from a movement that leaves lines from a certain point in different places on a blank surface. He is referring here to the Swiss artist Paul Klee who compared the forward movement of lines with “a walk for the sake of the walk” in the early twentieth century (Ibid, 149).

Bryson emphasizes that, in oil paintings, lines (and areas) disappear under different layers, while the drawn line lies directly and indelibly on the surface, this means that the drawing, in contradistinction to a painting, is created far more in the here and now and in that sense is



**Afb.2.1** *La casa de Carlos Colombiano*, from the series '*Desde el séptimo balcón*', 2013.



**Afb.2.2** Drawing in the making.



also closer to the viewer.<sup>3</sup> Bryson also says that in European art the plane of a painting can be understood as all-over, where every centimeter of the canvas has to be covered, while that would not be the case in a drawing, or much less so. Nevertheless, Esono Ebalé also fills his drawings all-over, even though these drawings are also the result of a process of creation in the here and now. However, that 'full' is present not only in his work as a 'walk' over the surface, in which he seems to 'step over' or 'appears to walk around' certain voids (empty figures), he also fills his drawings with very various motifs derived from various 'worlds'. In his essay, Bryson mentions examples of different worlds from which a drawing can arise. He compares William Blake's drawings, that he believes arose from Blake's 'visional world',<sup>4</sup> with those of Alexander Cozens, who created his drawings from spots according to a standardized procedure.<sup>5</sup>

More principles seem to apply to Esono Ebalé; his texts and drawings show that, like Blake, he tries to get in touch with another (visionary) world; a world that he compiles from elements derived from (European) art history and visual culture, popular or not, as reflected in magazines and on the Internet. On his Facebook page,<sup>6</sup> he places paintings by Hieronymus Bosch next to images of Pharaohs or comic book heroes and drawings by internationally known (comic) artists. In their fullness, but also in the use of certain motifs such as the strange combinations of people and objects such as bird cages in *Dictadores o Mar de Mierda* (Fig.2.3), some of his drawings are reminiscent of paintings by René Magritte and Hieronymus Bosch (Fig. 2.4 and 2.5).

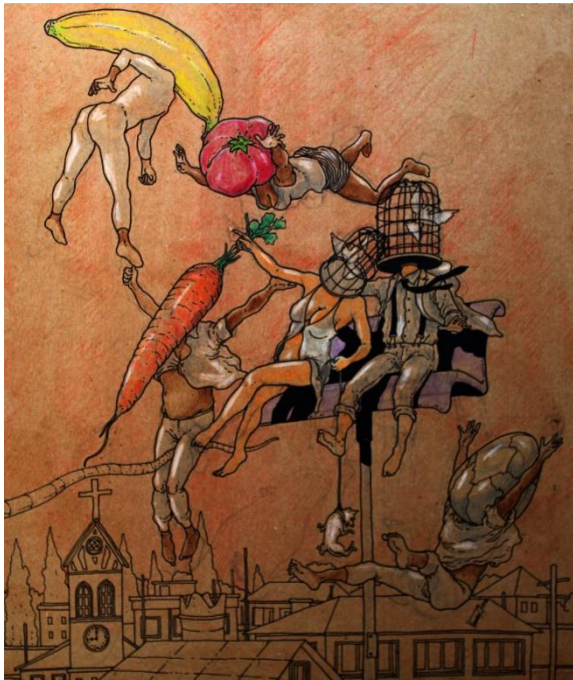
All in all, it can be seen that in his 'walk for a walk's sake' (Figs 2.1 and 2.2) Esono Ebalé fills his drawings where he 'walks' all over the sheet or where he adds figures such as a banana, carrot or birdcage (Fig. 2.3), emptying forms where he walks, as it were, around

<sup>3</sup> "If painting presents Being, the drawn line presents Becoming. [...] Line can no more escape the present tense of its entry into the world than it can escape into oil paint's secret hiding places of erasure and concealment. This fundamental condition can bring it, therefore, much closer to the viewer's own situation than can the image in paint" (150).

<sup>4</sup> "For Blake, the hallmark of truly visionary is that it cannot be assimilated to conditioned and habitual modes of thought. The visionary image must seem to emerge, not from within the self or from mundane patterns of thinking, but from outside the self, as ecstatic communication. The vision seems to be dictated by another, supernatural being that guides the pencil, in the same way that the man who taught Blake painting in his dreams guided Blake's brush" (Bryson, 2003: 157). [William Blake (1757-1827) was an English draughtsman, painter, writer and engraver]

<sup>5</sup> "If drawing always involves a dialectic or competition between the artist's self and the externality of drawing, Blake – like Cozens – cultivates the idea of externality. But drawing-as-externality is harnessed and redirected: it is no longer the externality of social conditioning and convention, the standardization of procedures that is Cozen's – and the academy's – common currency, but the externality of the vision that appears before the artist's clairvoyant inner eye" (Ibid.). [Alexander Cozens (1717-1786) was an English landscape painter]

<sup>6</sup> This Facebook page has since been deactivated.



**Afb.2.3.** Drawing from the series  
*Dictadores o Mar de Mierda*, 2013.



**Afb.2.4** Magritte, *De therapist*, 1937



**Afb.2.5** Jeroen Bosch, *De Garden of Earthly Delights*, +/- 1590.

them to leave them open or where he takes away certain forms by superimposing other forms. In short, Esono Ebalé creates voids precisely through what he fills and uses these voids in his drawings, in Bryson's view take place in the 'here and now', to make direct contact with the viewer, who is prompted to think about what has been left out.

## 2. Empty 'containers' in comics and cartoons

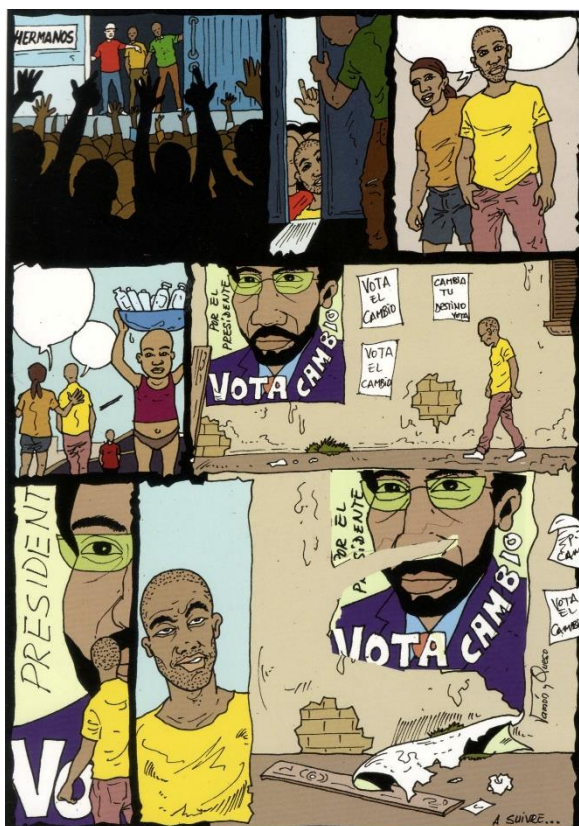
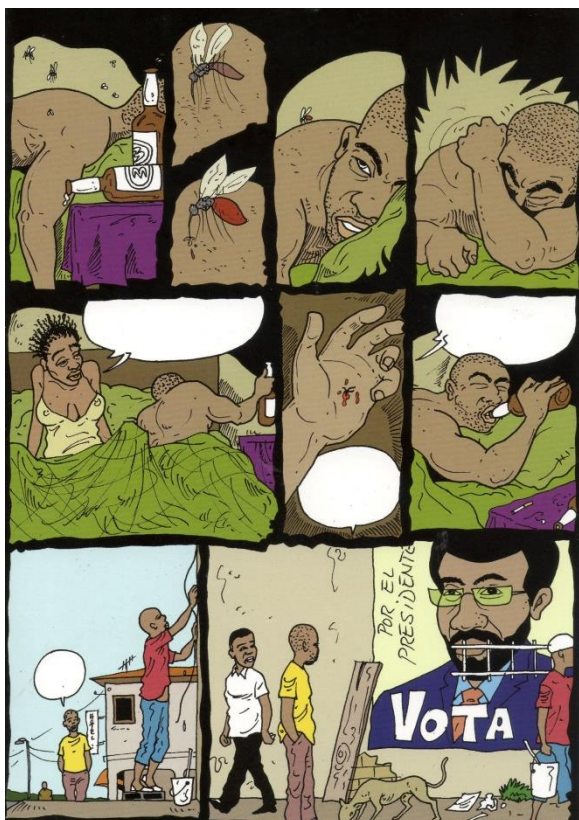
In *The Aesthetics of Comics*, cultural critic and philosopher David Carrier defines the comic as a sequence of images with a story and speech balloons. He argues that comics are related to both literature and the visual arts because comics also consist of stories that can be read and images that can be seen (2000: 7). In Carrier's view comics are "essentially a composite art: when they are successful, they have verbal and visual elements seamlessly combined" (Ibid.: 4). He attributes an important role to the speech balloons, that he describes as a kind of 'containers' that are not seen (but are heard) by the characters in the comic and are only visible to the reader.<sup>7</sup> They can contain words or images but can also be empty (31). In the various comics by Esono Ebalé, we find speech balloons in round and rectangular shapes that are often empty,<sup>8</sup> usually left blank, as in *Votez, encore et encore* (Fig.2.6) and *Mar de mierda* (Fig.2.7), but there are also examples of empty, black or dark gray filled speech balloons with a white border around them, as in *Paraguayas* (Fig.2.9) and *El sueño CMYK de una prostituta* (Fig.2.10), the first of which is a more traditional strip with text in speech balloons and the latter more a cartoon without text. There are also examples of text that is part of the image as in *Mar de mierda*, in which the text within one of the frames fills the background or as in *Etiopia* (Fig.2.8), in which the letters in the foreground are part of the representations of a kind of protest demonstration. Carrier states that empty speech balloons are often used to show that the figures have no thoughts (31). Esono Ebalé himself mentioned

---

<sup>7</sup> Carrier refers to Bruno di Giovanni who is said to have invented the speech balloon in 15th-century Florence; the speech balloon that grew out of what the Italian caricaturists called "fumetto" ("a puff of smoke" in English) and which, Giorgio Vasari says, resulted from a technical failure of the image that therefore needed words to tell a story (41).

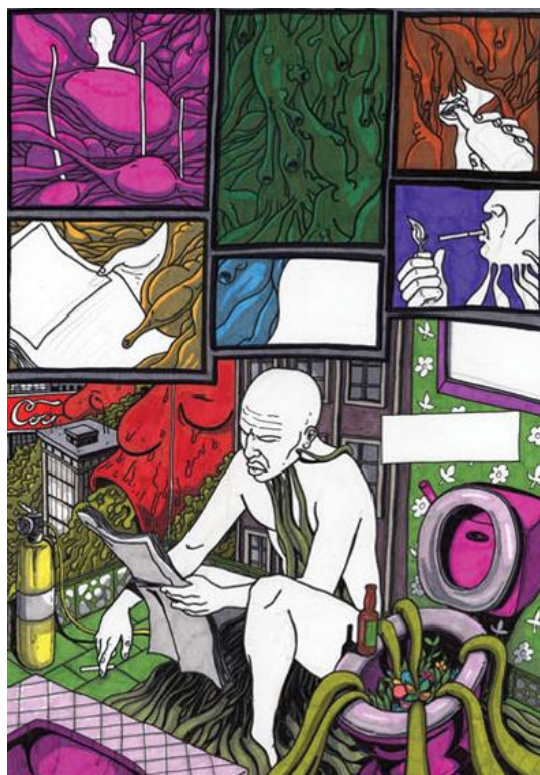
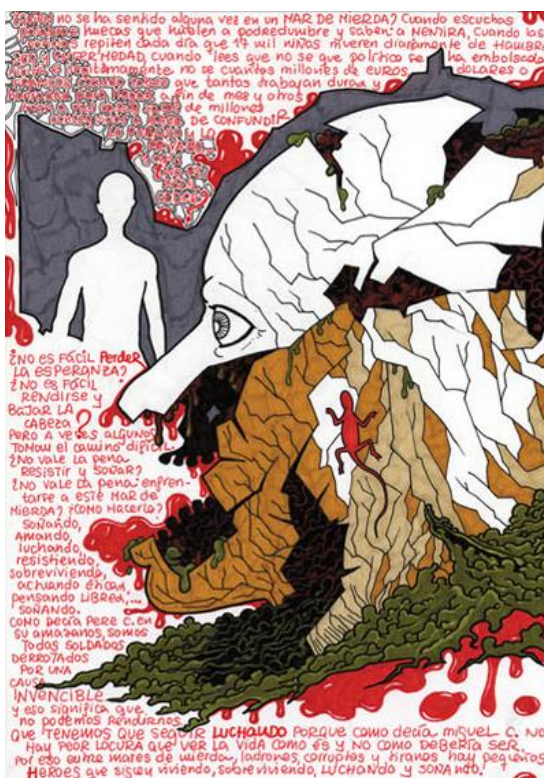
<sup>8</sup> Almost all comics by Esono Ebalé consist of loose sheets, varying from 3 sheets (*Cordón Umbilical*; Fig.211), 6 sheets (*Mar de mierda*; Fig.2.7, *Etiopia*; Fig.2.8, *Dictadores*; Fig.2.12, *Bozales*; Fig. .213), 8 sheets (*El sueño CMYK de una prostituta*; Fig.2.10), 14 sheets (*Paraguayas*; Fig.2.9) and 15 sheets (*Bozales*; Fig.213). The only comics in book form discussed here are the comics that are part of *Los asesinos de mi inteligencia* (2008) and *La Pesadilla de Obi* (2015).





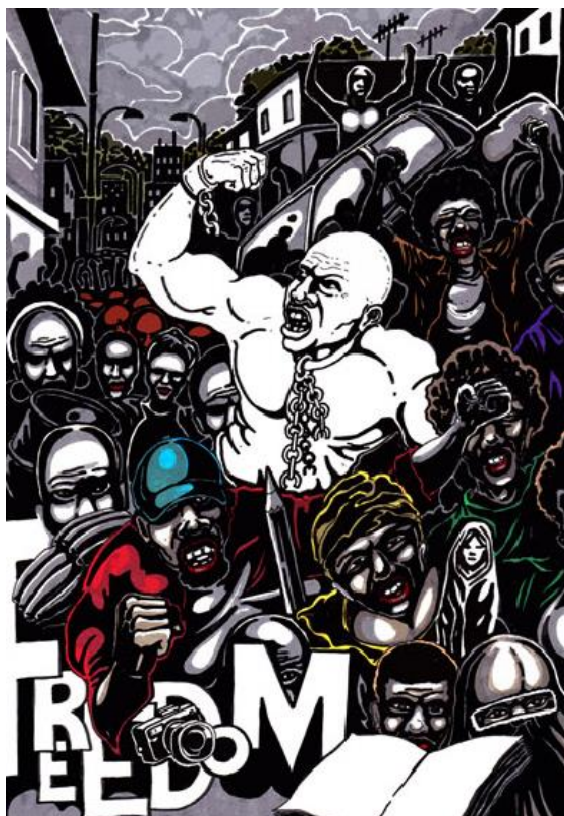
Afb.2.6 Votéz, encore et encore, 2005-6.





**Afb.2.7** *Mar de mierda*, 2010.





Afb.2.8 Etiopia, 2010.





Afb.2.9 Paraguayas, 2013.



Afb.2.10 El sueño CMYK de una prostituta, 2010



censorship in his country as the reason in an interview, but that text is not always necessary "because people in Guinea are mainly visually oriented" (Brus, *Frontaal Naakt*, 2014).

Besides empty speech balloons, his works also contain empty figures cut out against a background, sometimes outlined, sometimes not (as in his drawings). When it comes to human figures, there is a difference between where those human figures are completely white without any filling and where they have obviously human features. The figures with human features could also be seen as white-skinned people but, given the context of these cartoons, they can be seen here as empty and unfilled, like part of a 'cracked' head (*Mar de mierda*) and shapes of weapons and tanks, saved against a blood-red background (*Etiopia*).

In *Cordón umbilical* (Fig. 2.11), the figures are empty of leaves, butterflies and all kinds of fantasy figures. The question is why, in addition to the white (and black) speech balloons, does Esono Ebalé also leave these shapes white? Perhaps it is no coincidence that these forms left open are anonymous figures and figures who occupy a special position in their environment. In *Mar de mierda*, the white figure is the only one to be free of dung and the white cracked head stands out against green gunk, red drops (blood) and the text written in red around it:

Isn't it easy to lose hope? Isn't it easy to surrender and hang your head? But sometimes some do take the hard way. Isn't it worth resisting and dreaming? Isn't this sea of shit worth facing? How? Dreaming, loving, fighting, resisting, surviving, acting ethically, thinking freely... dreaming like Pere C. who said in his Amazon that we are all soldiers being defeated by an invincible cause and therefore we cannot surrender; that we have to continue fighting, because as Miguel C. says, there is no worse madness than taking life for what it is, ignoring what it should be. Therefore, among the seas of shit, thieves, corruption and tyrants, there are little heroes who continue to live, survive, fight [and] dream.<sup>9</sup> [own translation]

The text refers to historical figures who in the past have confronted the "dung" in their environment and to the "little heroes who go on living, surviving, fighting and dreaming".<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> ¿No es fácil perder la esperanza? No es fácil rendirse y bajar la cabeza? Pero a veces algunos toman el camino difícil. ¿No vale la pena resistir y soñar? ¿No vale la pena enfrentarse a este mar de mierda? ¿Cómo hacerlo? Soñando, amando, luchando, resistiendo, sobreviviendo, actuando ético, pensando libre... soñando como decía pere C. en su Amazonas, somos todos soldados derrotados por una causa invencible y eso significa que no podemos rendirnos, que tenemos que seguir luchando, porque como decía Miguel C. no hay peor locura que ver a la vida como es y no como debería ser. Por eso entre mares de mierda, ladrones, corruptos y tiranos hay pequeños héroes que siguen viviendo, sobreviviendo, luchando, soñando.

<sup>10</sup> Mentioned as an example are "pere C en su Amazonas" and Miguel C. Pere C. refers to Pere (Pedro) Casaldáliga, a Spanish religious writer and poet who spent much of his life in Brazil in the second half of the 20th century and whose key statement is "somos todos soldados derrotados por una causa invencible". Miguel C. is Miguel de Cervantes, the writer of *Don Quixote*, who was considered crazy for titling at windmills and flocks of sheep that, in his mind's eye, he saw as giants and an army of soldiers.



Afb. 2.11. *Cordón umbilical*, [jaartal?]

However, in the image itself the description also seems to refer to the white, anonymous figure. Other empty forms, as in *Cordón umbilical*, are forms borrowed from nature or fantasy that might be seen either as pure or innocent and anonymous or against the black or dark gray speech balloons as the dark side of the story. Esono Ebalé applies them where the idyll is to be threatened in the scenes that follow (*El sueño CMYK de una prostituta*) or in dark, macabre situations (*Paraguayas*).

Ultimately, the question is whether the speech balloons as nothing more than empty 'containers' and the empty figures express the absence of thoughts (according to Carrier) or censorship (as Esono Ebalé says), or whether, borrowing the terminology of Rancière and Badiou, are also linked to a situation in which a political or eventual rupture occurs (a question that will be answered in more detail at the end of this chapter). Furthermore, the empty forms also seem to expose the silence and anonymity or innocence of figures who fall outside the hegemonic order. In *Etiopia*, on the other hand, forms of weapons and tanks are left open against a blood-red background and in a cartoon about slavery and colonization that can be seen as a metaphor of war.

### **3. Metaphors and stereotypes in Ebalé's comics and cartoons**

This section is an examination of the (political) role that cartoon metaphors and stereotypes play in Esono Ebalé's cartoons and comics. In the chapter "Visual metaphorical conceptualization in political cartoons" in *Multimodal Metaphor*, Joost Schilperoord and Alfons A. Maes define the cartoon metaphor as a rhetorical figure in which a certain entity (object or domain) is conceptualized as a target in terms of another entity (object or domain) as source. Regarding the specific role that metaphors play in cartoons, they note the following:

Typical of metaphors in editorial cartoons is that they not only require somehow the mapping of features from one object or domain to another, as all metaphors do, but their interpretation also includes a critical stance towards a particular socio-political situation, event or person (2009: 215).

As cartoon metaphors repeat themselves, as they do in many comics and cartoons, they also become stereotypes. On the site of the society *Onze Taal*, the stereotype is defined as a 'fixed

image, in particular of a certain type of person or a (population) group'.<sup>11</sup> *OnzeTaal* defines stereotypical as an adjective meaning 'fixed, unchanging, clichéd, regularly recurring'. What stereotypes Esono Ebalé uses and with what meaning will emerge mainly from the analysis of the comic strip *La Pesadilla de Obi* (Section 3.2), but in the first part of this section the emphasis falls on the metaphorical effect of his visual stories. In order to cast more light on the discourse, the interface between Esono Ebalé's comics (and visual stories) and the Japanese *manga* comic and African comics is examined to find out how certain stereotypes play a role in this (Section 3.3).

### 3.1 The metaphorical effect of some cartoons

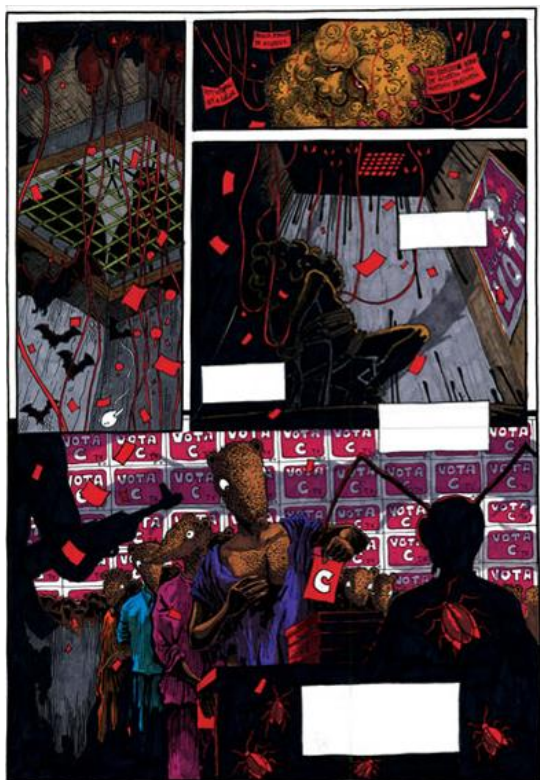
In addition to an object with certain characteristics, Schilperoord and Maes mention a certain scenario or scheme as a possible source of a metaphor. For example, a stereotypical hospital scenario (doctors and a patient) can be used as a source that has been twisted by caricatural or surreal exaggeration with the aim of casting critical light on a particular political or social situation (for example, by presenting a political system or a country as a patient).<sup>12</sup> In *Mar de mierda* (Fig.2.7), the situation can be seen as one in which dung streams through the streets as the 'vomit' of "thieves, corrupt and tyrants" (as explained by the text written in red) and in which the white figure, whether "fighting or dreaming", is a loner standing next to a blooming toilet bowl enjoying a cigarette and a beer. This situation can be interpreted as a metaphorical image (as source domain) that refers to a real situation of injustice and corruption (as target domain).

A similar situation is also found in other comics and cartoons by Esono Ebalé, including *Dictadores* (Fig.2.12). In this, people resembling rats (with rats' heads) are forcibly encouraged by others who resemble cockroaches (with feelers) to vote for the party of C (cucaracha = cockroach). Notes and posters with the letter C are plastered everywhere but, in the last frame of this cartoon (shown here on the fourth page), appears a woman standing alone against a crowd of black silhouettes of cockroaches holding a flag inscribed: "Puedo

<sup>11</sup> [<https://onzetaal.nl/>]

<sup>12</sup> Schilperoord and Maes give as an example a cartoon in which Poland 'is lying on a sick bed', around which the leader of Solidarnosc Lech Walesa, the earlier Polish leader Wojciech Jaruzelski and Karl Marx gather: "The cartoon triggers an entire conceptual domain that we may call a hospital scenario. The scenario contains several elements: persons (staff, patients), roles (doctor, patient), relations (doctors and medical instruments) and objects (instruments, a drip), and attributes (being sick). Hence, with respect to the topic of this cartoon the scenario serves as a supplier of various metaphorical relations [...]" (2009: 227).





Afb.2.12 Dictadores, 2009.

votar a otro partido que no sea el de las cucarachas”.<sup>13</sup> Also striking here are the empty speech balloons that, in contrast to the speech balloons of, for example, *Votez, encore et encore* (Fig.2.6), are not round, only rectangular, suggesting that this is not about missing and suggested dialogues, but rather blank comments (empty promises). The only commentary in the one filled speech balloon at the very end reads: “HOUSTON...we have a PROBLEM!” This text establishes a link with the (partisan) US, that is also expressed in symbols and stereotypes. This text, coupled with the image of an elephant covered with the American and other flags that is on its way to a dark woman (Africa?), who is ready with spread legs. The situation of the 'voting rats' and 'dictatorial cockroaches' (as a source domain) can be projected onto that of Africa where dictators, assisted by foreign interference, determine how people vote (as a target domain). The lonely figure resists this, not by keeping aloof from the gunk as in *Mar de mierda*, but also by performing a certain/decisive action. In *Mar de mierda*, America is also present in the red tentacles that form part of the beard of a terrifying figure and, in combination with the white stars and the blue of the cloth this figure has draped over his arm, reproduce the stars and stripes of the American flag. In this image, however, the white figure seems more likely to be engulfed by the gray mass flowing from the red tentacles on the American flag.

Schilperoord and Maes also mention separate objects or figures as possible source domains. Characteristics of these objects or figures refer (as source domain) to Africa or the US (as target domain), for instance, the mechanically spread-eagled supine, dark female body in *Dictadores* or the stars and stripes in the figure of the bearded man in *Mar de mierda*. The choice of cockroaches and rats to stand for dictatorial and subordinate parties respectively in *Dictadores* can also be taken metaphorically: cockroaches are intrusive, crawling over walls and lurking behind windows (as can be seen on the first page of the series of drawings) and must be eradicated, whereas rats and mice are more likely to flee. These (negative) qualities are projected on both sides here, in a dark world of buildings and dungeons combined with lots of red, black and gray and in the occasional mechanical, robotic creature. Opposite this is the woman – neither rat, nor cockroach, nor robot – who revolts, holding the only text present and gifted with a human face. The properties of all the figures in this story can be projected,

---

<sup>13</sup> "I can vote for another party that isn't that of the cockroaches." [own translation]

as source domain, and the figures and parties that are part of dictatorial societies in the world and in Africa, as target domain.

In *Bozales* (Fig. 2.13), an object (alongside the head) plays the leading role. The fifteen sheets of this story display figures with either muzzles (*bozales*) or gas masks, from which hoses and tubes extrude. Sometimes there are just heads with muzzles, floating against a colored background, but on most of the sheets we see figures in various roles and in various situations. A muzzle can be used to curb dogs with a tendency to bite and a gas mask provides a person with oxygen in a situation that would otherwise be suffocating. Obviously, these are metaphors for the restrictive, muzzled and stifling effect of censorship in a dictatorship that affects everyone, including those with a different sexual orientation (as is evident in the image of the orange body hooked on barbs against a rainbow background).

The *Etiopia* cartoon (Fig. 2.8) can also be interpreted metaphorically, reinforced by stereotypical symbols. The second page of this six-page cartoon shows a Christian cross and a chained and blindfolded figure who can be seen as a slave and as a symbol of slavery, controlled by a white colonial figure in a tropical suit who can be seen as a symbol of colonial power. Apart from being separate symbols and stereotypes, together these different elements can be seen as a metaphor for the colonial era against which, in an age of cars, cameras and books, people who are fighting for FREEDOM (written in letters that are part of the image) revolt. This is followed by the sheet with weapons left open in a sea of red (blood) that, in combination with the 'severed' heads floating above, can serve as a metaphor for a violent colonial and neo-colonial era in Ethiopia. The metaphor has been reinforced in the image by the contrasting of the white shapes of the weapons against the red. These therefore also work as a separate image metaphor; as weapons that punch 'holes' in blood and that, as empty forms, simultaneously show everything and nothing (Badiou), an image that, in combination with the heads, reinforces the horror of the scene.

His works reveal that Esono Ebalé uses fictional scenarios with exaggerations as source domains in both the individual and successive sheets of the stories, such as "seas of gunk" streaming through streets in *Mar de mierda* as well as the cockroaches suppressing rats in *Dictadores*. These situations seem to refer to social abuses and political oppression in Africa and in Equatorial Guinea as a target domain, presenting a critical examination of the situation in this continent and, in particular, also possibly hinting at the role of the individual as an (unfilled) loner within this. Loners, objects like muzzles in *Bozales* and the guns in *Etiopia* also count as separate metaphors. These enhance the scenes even more by their





**Afb.2.13** *Bozales*, 2011.

'emptiness' that contrasts with the environment (overwhelmed by the abundant 'gunk' in *Mar de mierda* and the 'blood' in *Etiopia*). In *Dictadores*, this emptiness is emphasized even more strongly by the absence of comments in the speech balloons, with the exception of the communication addressed to Houston and America as the text in the last speech balloon.

### 3.2 The effect of stereotypes and comic conventions in *La pesadilla de Obi*

One of the characteristics of comics is the element of repetition, as remarked on in comics artist and writer Will Eisner's definition in *Comics and sequential art*. He describes comics as a series of repeating images and recognizable symbols (2008: 2). If these images and symbols are used again and again to convey the same ideas, they form their own language (or literature) Eisner argues, thereby creating a "grammar of sequential art". Eisner is convinced that the reader's visual and verbal abilities play an important role in two closely related 'regimes':

The format of comics presents a montage of both word and image, and the reader is thus required to exercise both visual and verbal interpretive skills. The regimes of art (e.g.

perspective, symmetry, line) and regimes of literature (e.g., grammar, plot, syntax) become superimposed upon each other. The reading of a graphic novel is an act of both aesthetic perception and intellectual pursuit (Ibid.: 2).

Herein, Eisner says, lies an important difference between a novel and a comic:

In writing with words alone, the author directs the reader's imagination. In comics the imagining is done for the reader. An image once drawn becomes a precise statement that brooks little or no further interpretation. When the two are mixed, the words become welded to the image and no longer serve to describe but rather to provide sound, dialogue and connective passages (Ibid.: 127).

Like Eisner, in *The Aesthetics of Comics*, David Carrier emphasizes the sequence and narrative of the images in the description of a comic as “a narrative sequence with speech balloons”, in which text and image flow into each other (Carrier, 2000: 4). Carrier states that the image is topical (current and local) and has a greater impact than the text.<sup>14</sup> He also calls comics a mass medium in book format, that makes them accessible to a large, semi-literate public (74). Carrier, Eisner and the Dutch comics journalist Joost Pollman all discuss image characteristics such as the frames that together form a page with spaces in between, the different shapes of speech balloons and the way in which they are filled (or not filled), the design of that text, the use of different types of lines and spatial representation. Carrier argues that two images can already form a story because a sequence is possible. He insists that the spaces between the frames play an important role because they enable the viewer to transform the individual images into the whole of a single idea. The spaces in between act as the cement that holds the frames together and, Carrier says, they form an active part of the whole (51). In this sense, interspaces can also be understood as voids that matter. In some of Esono Ebalé's visual stories, the spaces in between are aligned with the (empty) speech balloons, for example, in *El sueño CMYK de una prostituta* (Fig.2.10), in which the black spaces are in line with the equally black speech balloons. There are also spaces that 'split' the image, for instance, the head in *Cordón umbilical* (Fig.2.11) and in *Mar de mierda* (Fig.2.7) where the gray part breaks the text written in red along the contours of the figures, so that we seem to be looking into the dark (guzzled) emptiness of the background. And, elsewhere as in *Cordón umbilical*, the space between the frames comes into play because a green shape moves outside the frame, as is the case with various shapes in *La pesadilla de Obi* (Fig. 2.14). It then

---

<sup>14</sup> In his definition Carrier quotes David Kunzle who wrote a historical treatise on comics (Kunzle. 1973, in Carrier, 2000: 3).

seems as if forms and figures step out of the frame into an empty space, making the frame a tangible boundary between inside and outside, while the space in-between functions as a void that is more than just cement.

In addition to the design of frames, the font and the perspective point of view are also imbued with expressiveness. Eisner describes how the non-verbal expressiveness of speech balloons and frames is expressed in the form; rectangular frames indicate what is said is commentary in the here and now, wavy or cloudy frames flashbacks or thoughts and jagged frames indicate strong emotions or sounds (2008: 44). For example, there is a difference between the round, empty speech balloons in *Votez, encore et encore* (Fig. 2.6) and rectangular, empty speech balloons in *Dictadores* (Fig. 2.12); because of these differently shaped frames we know that in *Votez, encore et encore* there are dialogues and that in *Votez, encore et encore* the (individual) comments remain open. In *Mar de mierda* (Fig.2.7), apart from the fact that it is broken in the 'frame', the expressiveness of the text is emphasized, because it is written in red and by hand.

As a whole, comics might differ in style, although both Eisner and Carrier focus on the specifics of comics from a practical and/or philosophical approach rather than the different comic styles. Carrier states that cartoonists are innovative in finding new subjects and original characters rather than in the more formal aspects and therefore resemble novelists more than visual artists (2000: 114-15).<sup>15</sup>

In this section, Esono Ebalé's comic strip *La pesadilla de Obi* will be analyzed in order to examine the role of the similarity in relation to the observable reality, 'empty spaces' and the working of stereotypes and other comic book conventions, with what different theorists (Eisner, Carrier, Pollmann) have said about this.

In *La Pesadilla de Obi* (2015), that appeared in an English version at the same time as *Obi's Nightmare*,<sup>16</sup> 'distortions of the likeness' prevail in stereotypical images. That is, caricatural distortions and exaggerations of a certain type of person (Obiang and his son, Teodorín) or a certain population group are repeated (for instance, the stereotype of the black woman with large breasts and broad in the beam and the stereotype of the white American doctor with red

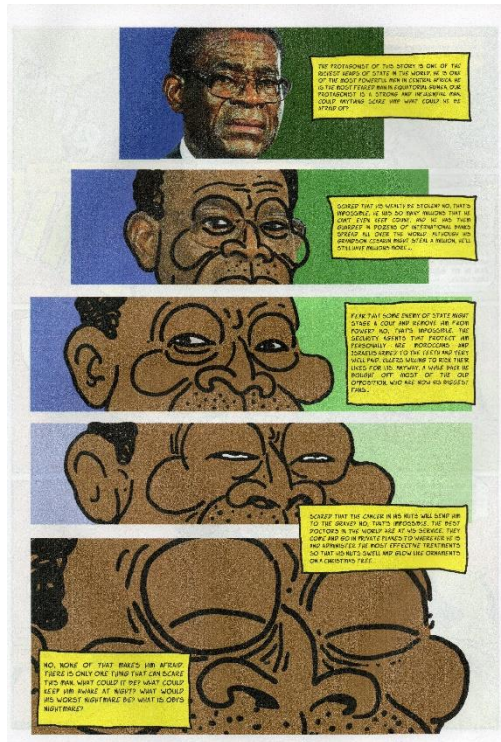
---

<sup>15</sup> "[...] the most famous comic illustrators were boldly original not in terms of their formal innovations but because they found new subjects and original kinds of characters. In this way, these creators of comics seem more like novelists than visual artists"

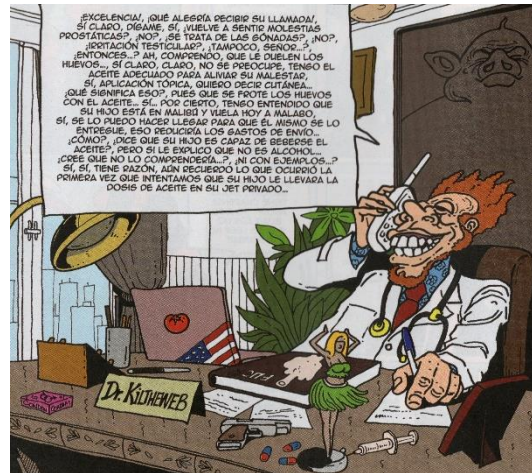
<sup>16</sup> The pages quoted here are the Spanish version of *La Pesadilla de Obi* that consists of 127 pages (including the preface).



**Afb.2.14** *La Pesadilla de Obi*, 2015



p.6



p.14



p.30

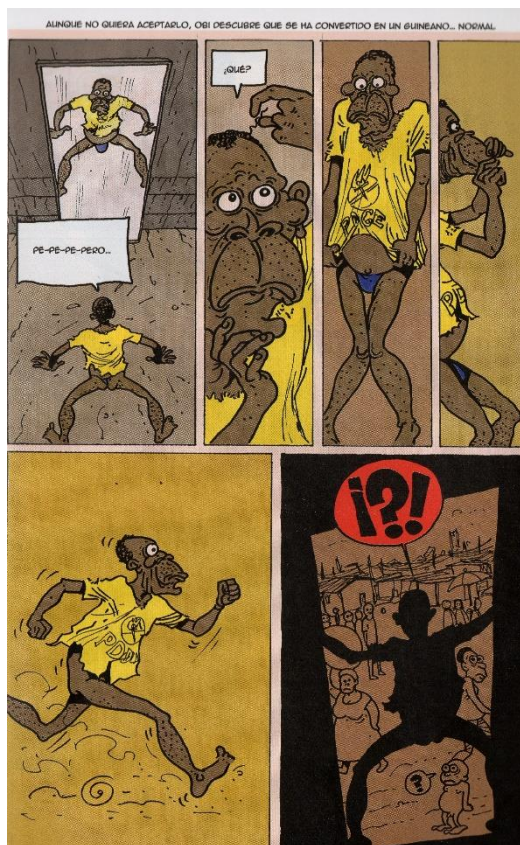


p.31

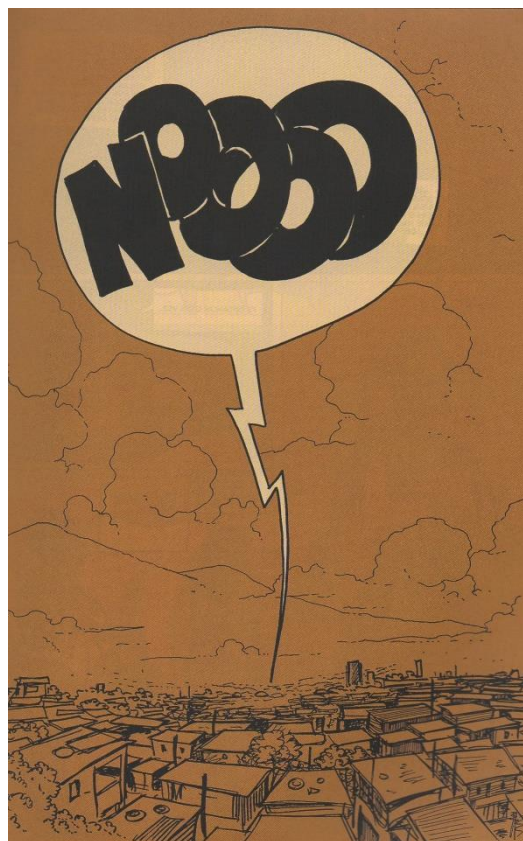
beard or mustache; *La Pesadilla de Obi*, Fig. 2.14, p.14). At the beginning we see how a photo of Obiang has been processed in a number of lines to create a 'distortion of the likeness' and the stereotype that he will remain throughout the comic (Fig. 2.14, p.6). In this version, on the same sheet, he comes closer in a number of successive frames, until we see only his cheekbones and closed eyes in close-up. In five frames we read the text that announces the story posing the central question of what might still scare the president. Could it be that he might lose his fortune, a coup d'état, an illness or perhaps something else? The text, as does the close-up of Obi, draws us into the story as a reader. It is the beginning of what awaits him next. After being allowed to continue for a while in his old, luxurious life as a dictator, he awakens in a nightmare as an 'ordinary Guinean' in the world created by himself devoid of all presidential riches. The transition to that other world takes place on two pages (Fig.2.14, pp.30,31), in which Obi lies on a bright green colored bed and the countdown begins in the text, while we see his head (in a similar way as on the first leaf) in the three lower narrow horizontal frames come closer and closer until it can be seen in close-up sleeping, with in the text frame: "Comienza la pesadilla de Obi" (Obi's nightmare begins). The next page has an inverted page mirror; it begins with three narrow horizontal frames in which a sleeping Obi wakes up opening one eye and then we see him farther and farther away in the frame at the bottom of his bed, with broken glasses and a sleeping woman next to him. All colors are now blurred, while bold white letters are also part of the image as sounds. In the lower frame the O of GROOOOO! progresses, as it were, into the whites of Obi's wide-open eyes as he examines his broken glasses, wondering where the hell he is. A few pages later this realization only seems to penetrate properly into the page-filling orange-brown colored frame that shows the city (market) in bird's eye view, from which an almost page-filling speech balloon rises like a scream, containing the in bold, black and each other partly overlapping letters spelling out NOOOO (Fig.2.14, p.35).

Eisner claims that typeface and perspective can increase or decrease engagement; bird's-eye view creates distance and makes the reader more of an observer, whereas a low viewpoint combined with a close-up increases involvement (2008: 92). In contrast to Obi's penetrating close-ups, the bird's-eye view makes him invisible and void, against which stands out the gigantic cry in bold letters, making it all the more powerful (Fig.2.14, p.35). Eisner says that the choice of the typeface enhances the expressiveness of the whole, with the





p.33



p.35



p.84



p.85

typeface serving the story and at the same time forming an extension of the image, while also expressing moods and sounds:<sup>17</sup>

Lettering (hand-drawn or created with type), treated 'graphically' and in the service of the story, functions as an extension of the imagery. In this context it provides the mood, a narrative bridge and the implication of sound (Eisner, 2,3).

In the continuation of the story, Obi passes through the different 'worlds' of everyday existence (the market, the pub, the taxi, his son's school, the hospital, the police station and finally the prison), consistently being humiliated and encountering all kinds of abuses. His eyes bulge constantly as he fills the frame, cries out loudly and screams that he must wake up from this nightmare (Fig. 2.14, pp.84,85). Here both texts and figures extend beyond the borders of the frames so that these frames not only mark the boundary between the image inside and the 'void' outside, but also draw the reader directly into the action (Eisner, 48-9). The 'winds of diarrhea' by Teodorín (Fig.2.14, p.15) that extend beyond the frame also emphasize the absurdity of this scene, just as the 'papers wiped out of the frame' underline the brutal behavior of the soldiers under the dictatorial regime (Fig. 2.14, p. 24). The reader looks on with Obi who has just awakened from his nightmare. Standing as a silhouette in the frame of the doorway, he looks at the world that, given the black question mark and exclamation marks placed in an alarming red speech bubble, he barely seems to understand (Fig. 2.14, p.33). Eisner also mentions the example of a doorway as a frame, inviting the reader to participate in the action (Eisner, 49). Time also plays a role in this; Eisner has said that more frames are used on a page to condense time, splitting up and intensifying the action. Long, narrow, vertical frames create a feeling of pressure because they increase the tempo, while frames that expand in width stretch the time (Eisner, 30-4). In *La Pesadilla de Obi*, the tempo is increased in narrow, vertical frames, at both the bottom and the top of the sheet (Fig. 2.14. pp.33,83,90) and occasionally a 'movement' continues in the narrow vertical frames, as in this case with Obi who, walking in a kind of curve, picks up the flag with the emblem of Equatorial Guinea (Fig.2.14, p.83).

Eventually Obi ends up in jail, hell and heaven in which the colors change. In the torture scenes, both the text and all the color disappear (Fig. 2.14, p.99); we see only grays and the whites of Obi's bulging eyes. Subsequently, color appears in the prison cell only in

---

<sup>17</sup> Eisner points out that a handwritten text has more personality than a typed text and he shows examples in which the design of letters has been adapted to the image (2008: 4.5).





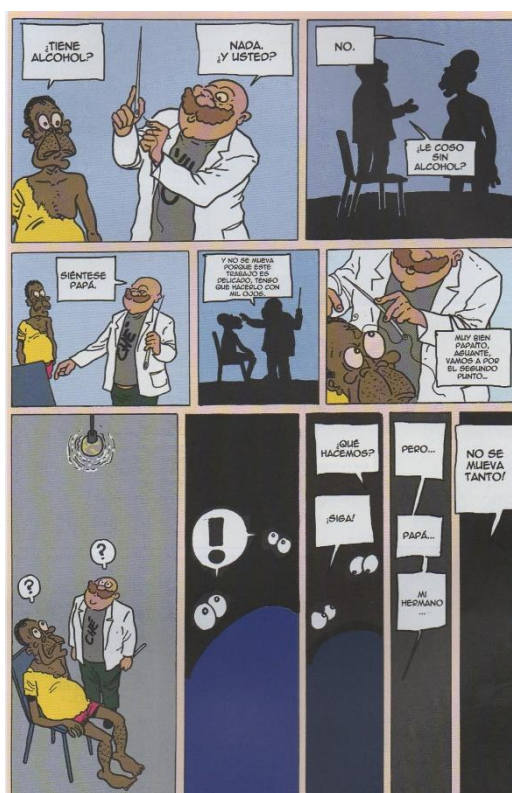
p.15



p.24

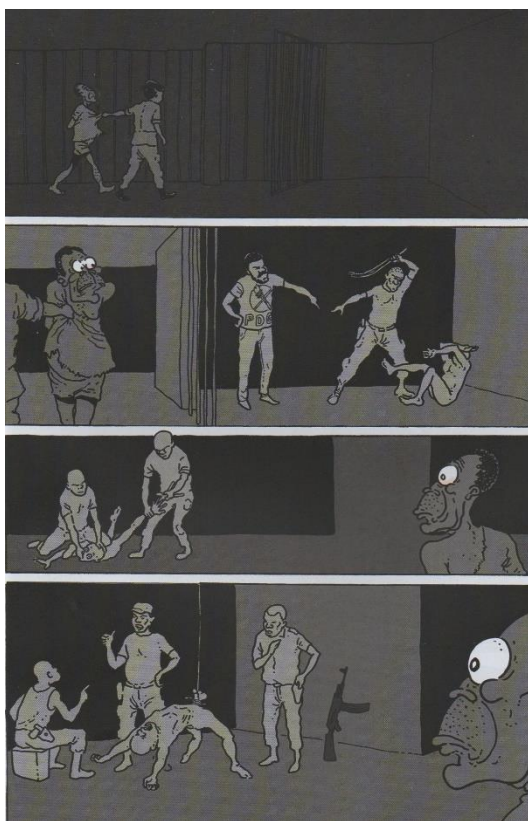


p.83

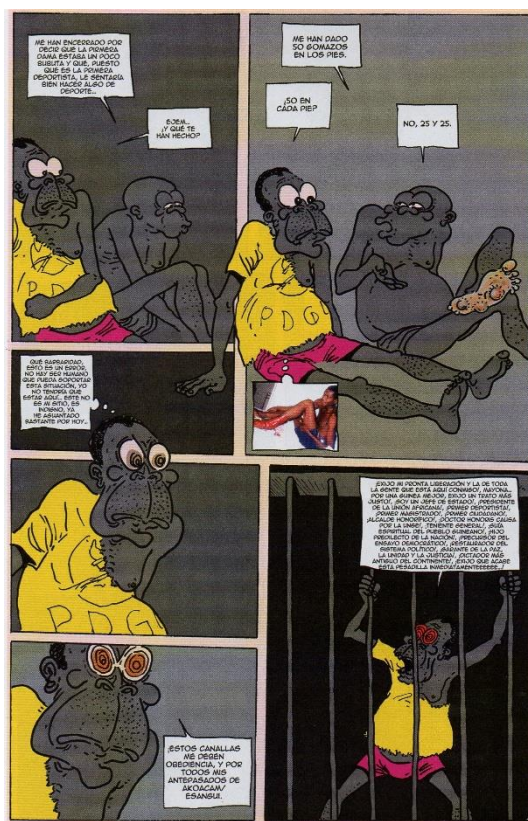


p.90





p.99



p.101

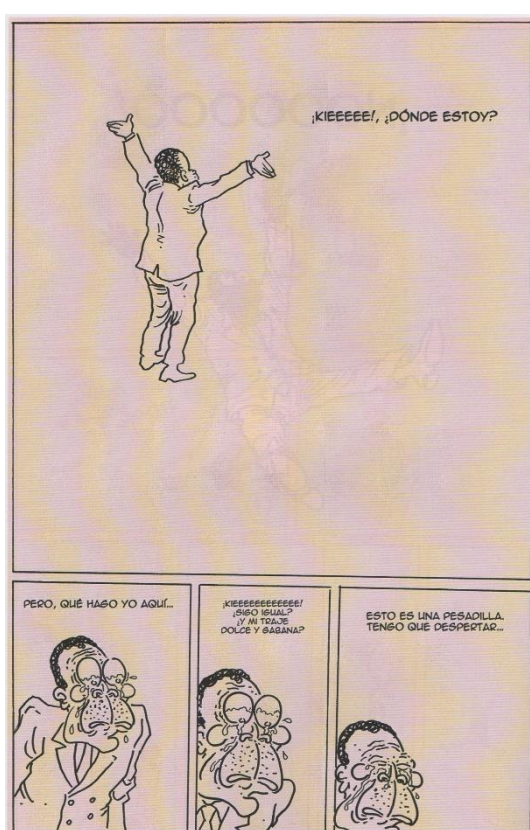
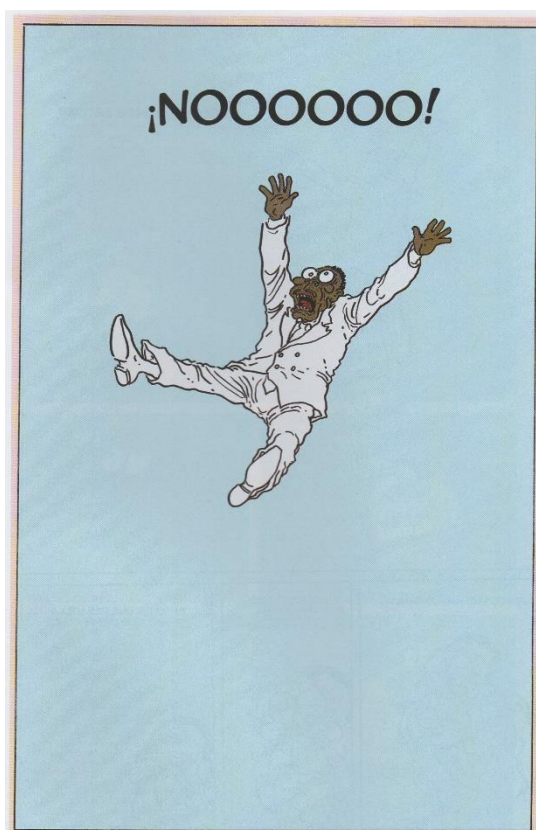
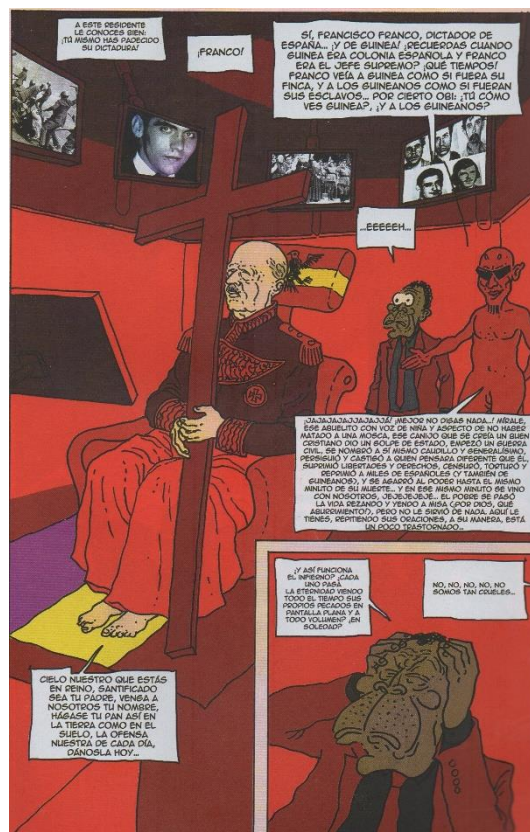


p.107



p.109





Obi's clothes and occasionally in his eyeballs, in the blistered sole of a fellow prisoner's foot and a photo of someone with a bloodied leg depicted at the bottom of the frame as Obi's thought (Fig.2.14, p.101). The use of photos in the comic is striking, not only as a 'thought', but also on TV screens at the beginning, in public buildings, for instance, the portrait photograph of Obiang<sup>18</sup> and in hell. Everything is red there, except for Obi's pants and shirt and the colors of flags and the colors of some photos 'pasted' on screens surrounding the ex-dictators consigned to hell (Fig.2.14, pp. 99,109,110,113). These dictators (including the African dictators Mobutu, Idi Amin, Bokassa, Gaddafi, as well as the Spanish dictator Franco), as almost all shapes and figures in the comic, are drawn in what Joost Pollmann in *De stripprofessor. Vijftig colleges over tekenkunst* calls the *clear line* – so named after the title and an image on a notebook accompanying the exhibition *Tintin* by the Dutch cartoonist Joost Swarte in 1977 – as a style with uniform lines, without thickening or thinning, without shadows and cross-hatches (2016:18). Nevertheless, the forms of the dictators in hell are distinguished by the details of their individual features and clothing. Apparently, Esono Ebalé postulates that there is more room in hell for detailed resemblance and less for stereotypes, although the devil himself is a stereotype, complete with goat's legs, goatee, horns, pointy ears and somewhat seedy looking sunglasses, and the figure of Obi also retains its caricatural form.

Esono Ebalé created the strip together with some others and in the preface they describe how the idea for this strip came about sometime in mid-2011, on a Sunday morning on a terrace of a bar in Malabo when, while enjoying peppery soup and a few beers, the music was suddenly interrupted by a speech by Obiang (2015: 3).<sup>19</sup> In that speech, Obiang boasted of the wealth of the country with an unprecedentedly high gross national product but, looking around, they saw only mud and neglect. Their president was just laughing at his people, therefore it would only be fair for the people to laugh at him. Consequently they came up with a 125-page comic strip starring Obiang.<sup>20</sup> The fact that the makers opted for the strip form ties in with

---

<sup>18</sup> In the hospital, the framed photo of Obiang hangs next to that of Fidel Castro with the crossed flags of both countries in between and below the text *VIVA LA AMISTAD GUINEOCUBANA* (long live the friendship between Equatorial Guinea and Cuba) (Esono Ebalé, et al, 2015: 91).

<sup>19</sup> Besides Esono Ebalé, as writers the preface also mentions Chino and Tenso Tenso who preferred to remain anonymous and to give their names only as pseudonyms.

<sup>20</sup> The number of pages minus the introduction in this Spanish edition. There are also differences between the English and Spanish editions; on the cover of the Spanish edition, a raggedly dressed Obi sits on a stool, and in the English equivalent, he is wrapping the American flag around himself. The Spanish version is smaller in size

what Carrier claims about the strip as a mass medium in book format, making it accessible to a larger semi-literate public, as is to be found in Equatorial Guinea, where the strip cannot be sold.<sup>21</sup> What Pollmann calls the *clear line* contributes to the clarity and hence also to the readability of the strip, while the stereotype and caricatural lies in a 'distortion of the likeness' that contributes to the laughable effect. The situation in Equatorial Guinea is exposed using stereotypes in a way that is both painful and laughable, with Esono Ebalé employing many means (design of letters, frames, the going outside the box of text and images and so forth) that, according to Carrier and Eisner, intensify the eloquence of a story and increase the reader's involvement in it. In the depiction of the prison scenes, hell and heaven, the intensification of the story's eloquence is very clearly expressed, not only through the omission or limitation of color (almost only gray or only red or blue), but also through the solid backgrounds in empty spaces (Fig. 2.14, pp.99,101,107,123).

Because the torture scenes take place in bare, empty spaces that seem even more 'empty' because of the absence of color, the horror of these scenes is also emphasized. In hell almost all color is red, thereby intensifying them, and in heaven there is only blue. However, in the final reckoning there seems to be nothing left for Obi but the colorless space of total nothingness in which he wonders where he is (*¡kieeeee! ¿dónde estoy?*) (Fig.2.14, p.124). Voids are given deeper emphasis by involving the off-screen spaces in the story. In these figures or letters step outside the borders of the frame. Because the figure or text exits the image into the empty space, a connection is made with the viewer/reader who, as it were, is sucked from this empty space and through the empty spaces in between into the image with the figure or text and is hence involved in the action.

### 3.3 Interfaces with the Japanese *manga* comic and with African comics

In *El Sueño CMYK de una prostituta* (Fig.2.10), the style in which the figure of the girl is drawn seems to have been influenced by the Japanese *manga* comics. Pollmann posits that

---

and sometimes a detail differs: in the Spanish edition, Macías wears black underpants when he appears before Obi (Spanish edition: 118); in the English edition he is naked endowed with vaguely sketched genitalia (English edition: 112). The text of the English version translates the local dialect (pidgin) that is still present in the Spanish version. "Mama, di man decres?" (39) is translated in the English edition as "Mom, is that man crazy?" (34) and "Na mi toca tek watá!" as "It's my turn to get water!"

<sup>21</sup> The comic is published in the US by EG Justice and was initially printed in an edition of 3,000 in Barcelona and an edition of 500 in Canada (English version). There is also a free online version; <https://pubhtml5.com/owts/ndmk>



this style is characterized by an “abundant use of *speed lines*, figures with saucer eyes, dynamic poses and bare decors” (2016: 44). In this part of this section, bearing in mind what Pollmann claims about this, an investigation will be made into what role the *manga* comic plays in the works of Esono Ebalé. Beside this Japanese input, other (American and European) influences that possibly play a role will also be looked at and questions will be posed about whether there is a relationship between the works of Esono Ebalé and those of other contemporary African comic artists.

Pollmann links the characteristics of *manga* comics (Fig. 2.15) to the Japanese woodcut that he believes shares the “shadowless line and flat perspective” with today's *manga* and to what he calls the *disneyfication* of comics culture; the influence of Walt Disney on the big-eyed figures (2016: 44). Pollmann argues that this transforms the popular *manga* into a 'globalized imagery', suitable for integration into diverse cultures because on account of their unnatural eye magnification, *manga* people stand outside racial reality (Ibid). Esono Ebalé's big-eyed faces are related to the *manga* style and, by using them, he seems to want to express a certain innocence in his comics. In *El sueño CMYK de una prostituta*, on the first of the eight sheets a 'manga girl' appears in a natural, but almost colorless, empty environment, with a booklet in her hands. This is later found by a figure with a red star on his cap (military?), with whom the girl seems to lose her innocence in the subsequent (sex) scenes and in an embrace with a red (devilish) figure wearing a cap. Pollmann has stated that African comics also prove that *manga* forms a kind of *lingua franca* in the current popular comic culture. He writes about Nigerian comics: “[...] their comics are not allowed to speak a dialect. In Cameroon the magazine *AfroShonen* is now published, with black cartoon characters in *manga* style” (2016: 42).

Nevertheless, Africa also has a comic strip culture, that may or may not be its own, as witnessed by Internet sites, such as the now popular Internet site *Kugali*.<sup>22</sup> It shows many comics in different styles and in various categories, including *African Mythology*, *Urban Fantasy* and *Superhero* (Fig.2.16); inspired by American and European comics that share overly muscular figures, based on African and other heroes endowed with mechanical, robotic features in a science fiction-like environment.

---

<sup>22</sup> [<http://kugali.com/>]

In an interview in *Frontaal Naakt*, Esono Ebalé himself also mentions African cartoonists with whom he feels a kinship, such as Didier Kasai, who portrays everyday life in the Central African Republic, and the Congolese cartoonist Kandolo Lilela (Barly Baruti Baruti) (Brus, 2014) (Fig. 2.17, 2.18). In 2000, *Africultures*, a French bulletin, devoted its thirty-second issue to the 'Bande Dessinée d'Afrique'. In it, the journalist Sébastien Langevin mentions the following comic strip genres that apply to Africa: “la BD biographique, que raconte l’histoire d’une personne, la BD didactique, qui a pour mission de transmettre un savoir, la BD humoristique qui distrait, la BD historique qui raconte l’histoire des peuples, la BD religieuse” (2000: 19). The question is whether the work of Esono Ebalé also falls into one of these categories. Although his comics and cartoons almost all carry a clear message, they are not didactic instructions and *La pesadilla de Obi* is humorous but cannot be classified in the category of purely entertainment.

The same bulletin notes that the oral tradition still plays a major role in Africa, making the comic appealing to those who cannot read, have no TV and are interested in social themes (27). The French historian Michel Pierre draws attention to how Africa was previously depicted in comics by European cartoonists (such as Hergé, *Tintin in Congo*) who had never set foot on African soil and portrayed Africa against a backdrop of excess, teeming with lots of rain, tam-tam and wild beasts (44). African artists do break through this image, albeit with difficulty because there are hardly any opportunities to publish comics in Africa. This means that cartoonists are usually linked to a newspaper that carries political drawings, a position that makes them vulnerable in dictatorial regimes. Like Esono Ebalé, Issa Nyafaga also had to flee his country of Cameroon because of his political cartoons. In 2015 he delivered the following in a speech to the UN:

The artist who challenges authority through his or her expression is seen as a threat by people who are using their power to create profit for a select few by inflicting violence on people and the planet. Artists are indeed a threat to governments and to people who abuse and oppress, while being necessary allies for building and maintaining a healthy form of democratic government. (Nyaphaga, 2015: 13)

He now calls himself “a global citizen, I don't have a country, my religion is Art and my country is the Earth” (Ibid. 58).

Esono Ebalé is in a similar position because, in almost all his cartoons and comics, but especially in *La pesadilla de Obi*, he adopts an extremely critical stance toward the Obiang regime. Nevertheless, his works fall outside any of the comic categories mentioned by

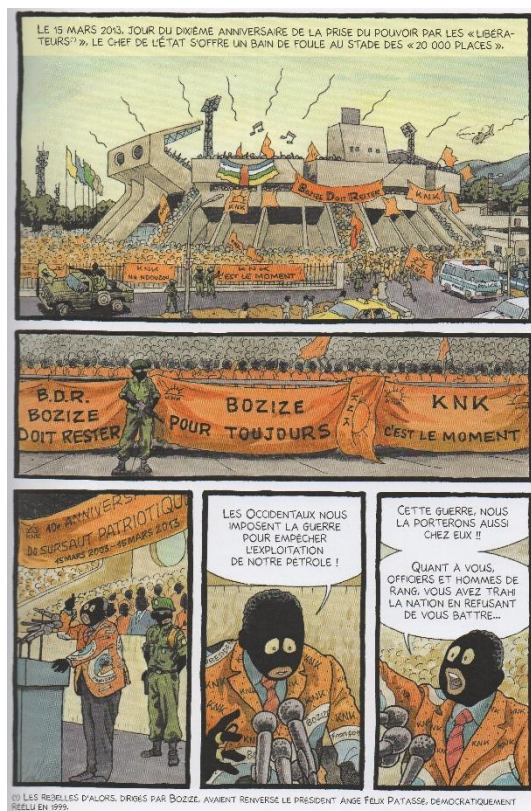




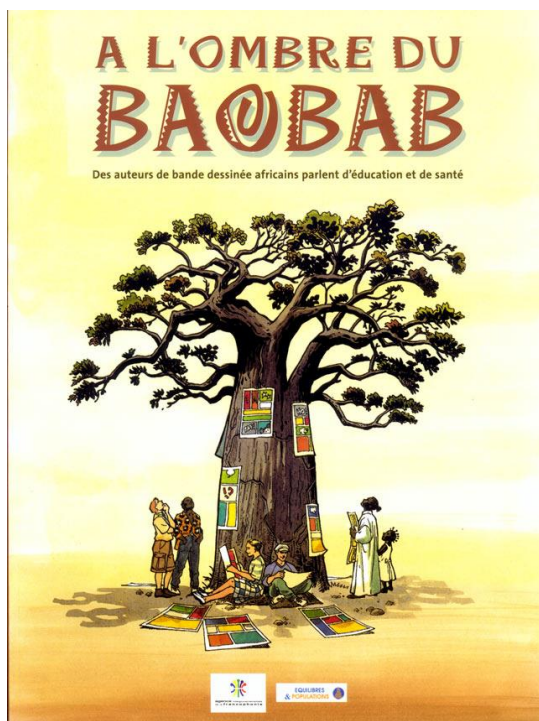
Afb.2.15 Manga comic.



Afb.2.16 African comics / Superheroes [<http://kugali.com/>].



**Afb.2.17** Didier Kassaï, *Tempête sur Bangui*, p.17  
(Ed. Saint-Avertin: La Boîte à Bulles, 2015).



**Afb.2.18** Kandolo Lilela (Barly Baruti Baruti).

Langevin in *'Bande Dessinée d'Afrique'*. He adopts an independent position to the 'African comics culture' as Langevin puts it, but is influenced by the Japanese *manga* comics and superheroes as we see them depicted in American and European comics. We can note the characteristics of these comics, for example, in *El Sueño CMYK de una prostituta* ('saucer eyes' borrowed from *manga* comics) and in *Dictadores* (mechanical, robotic, science fiction-like features borrowed from American and European superheroes). Esono Ebalé's visual stories and comics are also distinguished both in their reduction (voids) and in their exaggeration (metaphors and stereotypes) of the more documentary and illustrative comics by, for example, Didier Kassai and Kandolo Lilela. *La pesadilla de Obi* derives its strength mainly from what is left out in spaces in terms of details and color, while Kassai's comics give a full and detailed account of the situation in his country (Central African Republic). *La pesadilla de Obi* is therefore more in line with Esono Ebalé's aforementioned works, in which voids and cartoon metaphors also play a major role, than with an African (or American-European) comic strip culture.

#### 4. Collage and caricature as a 'subversive act'

In her essay "Heartfield and Modern Art", Nancy Roth describes collage and photomontage as "the 'organic' blending or integrating of parts into a coherent picture in terms of space and composition" (1992: 26).<sup>23</sup> John Heartfield (Fig. 2.19) personally saw his photomontages as an extension of photography that he did not consider art, as the following quote shows:

I started making photomontages during the First World War. [...] The most important thing for me was that I intrinsically became involved in the opposition and worked with a medium I didn't consider to be an artistic medium, photography. [...] I found out how you can fool people with photos, really fool them. [...] You can lie and tell the truth by putting the wrong title or wrong captions under them.<sup>24</sup> (1992: 14)

In the introduction to *The Age of Collage Vol.2*, art critic Noelia Hobeika calls the removal of images from their original context (and then putting them back together in a new composition) a "subversive act" that is tantamount to a form of protest: "Subversion is at the

<sup>23</sup> In visual works of art, 'collage' refers to cutting and pasting (a technique that was made known by the Cubists and Dadaists at the beginning of the 20th century). Montage refers to photographic images from magazines that Heartfield used for his 'photomontages'.

<sup>24</sup> See Fig. 24 as one of the examples of Heartfield's collages that Walter Benjamin also refers to in his *Passagen-Werk* (Buck-Morss, 1995: 77-8).

core of collage. Collecting images, stripping them of their initial context, and pasting them into new compositions is an act of subversion, sometimes even a subtle yet bold form of protest.” (2016:2)

This section contains an examination of how Esono Ebalé brings together in his collages heterogeneous and incompatible elements in what Rancière calls a 'dialectical montage' (2010: 62) and that, Heartfield asserts, can both 'lie' and 'tell the truth', thereby also transforming these collages into a 'subversive act'. An attempt will be made to assess to what extent Esono Ebalé's collages can be seen as a 'subversive act' that exposes certain aspects of the regime in Equatorial Guinea (4.1). The subversive effect in his caricatures (with equally heterogeneous and incompatible elements) will also be probed (4.2). It should be noted that all collages and caricatures discussed here have a title, a short caption (usually in a larger and different colored font), that is followed by a text relating to the image, complementing it, as if a void in the image still needs to be 'filled'. How the texts (complete) these voids will also be involved in the collages and caricatures examined in this section.

#### 4.1 Collage as 'dialectical montage' and 'subversive act'

Most of Esono Ebalé's 'collages' have been created digitally,<sup>25</sup> albeit also using drawing techniques. In these collages he combines elements that, although have an alienating effect in combination, nevertheless form a whole in terms of style. This applies to the drawings discussed earlier (Fig. 2.1, 2.3) as well as to most of his Obiang caricatures and other digital collages or photomontages. *Pobre mental* (Fig. 2.20) shows a frontal smiling head in which various (visual) elements come together including a photo of the head of the president (Obiang) and that of his son (Teodorín), with on the top of this head the contours of various transparent buildings, a crane or derrick with black flame and a torch with yellow/red flames. On those flames, partly visible, is drawn a dish with a photo of a brain from which a white plume of smoke emerges. Furthermore, the head has eyebrows consisting of the letters H2020 on one side and PDGE on the other, in which the E partly disappears behind a large, white and black-lined lock. The dark brown head as a whole stands out against a background of grey/beige areas that widen diagonally, creating the effect of a kind of halo.<sup>26</sup> The critique of

---

<sup>25</sup> Esono Ebalé has posted almost all of his digital collages on his weblog [https://laslocurasdejamonyqueso.blogspot.com/] that he maintained from June 23, 2011 to July 24, 2014.

<sup>26</sup> As with almost all Obiang Caricatures.



the regime lies in the merging of the various elements present in the head and the title. H2020 (*el Horizonte 2020*) refers to the prospect of a better future that Obiang and his party, the PDGE, offered his people in 2020. The blackened oil yields (the torch fueled by oil) should lead to this, but the brain is also engulfed in the flames of the torch (the symbol of the PDGE) that crowns the head and goes up in smoke. For added emphasis the head is locked, evidenced by the large padlock on the right, that can be interpreted as a reference to censorship. The title refers to a statement made by Obiang in a BBC radio interview in 2012, in which he described his own population as “pobres mentals” (mentally disadvantaged).<sup>27</sup> Esono Ebalé provokes and activates the viewer, not only through the opposing elements in the image, but also through the title *Pobre mental* and in the accompanying text:

If you think this image doesn't represent you, you are mentally retarded. If you don't think you're mentally retarded, try imagining yourself without those elements in your head.<sup>28</sup> [own translation]

The way in which he addresses the viewer – as a resident of Equatorial Guinea – in this text, makes it impossible for the viewer to remain passive. The artist is holding up a mirror to him when he looks at this image from which he cannot escape, even without the (opposing) elements of the image in his own head. The viewer is awakened from his lethargy by the clashing elements which confront him (Obiang's oil riches and promises to the head that is 'locked' and the brain carried by the burning torch of the regime 'goes up in smoke') and is irrevocably drawn into the political process; according to the text, the heterogeneous character of the assembled parts of the collage or photomontage must provoke irritation in the viewer, encouraging them to think and participate in the political process themselves. By means of this collage, Esono Ebalé compels both criticism of the regime and self-criticism from the viewer. Hence his collage complies with what Hobeika calls a subversive act.

---

<sup>27</sup> "En este país nosotros no conocemos lo que es pobreza. ¿Por qué? Podemos decir...eh... faltas que son normales. En el país, toda la gente vive de acuerdo a su mentalidad; porque existe la pobreza mental. Es aquella pobreza que, aun dando posibilidades a una persona, siempre se queda en el mismo lugar." (In this country we don't have poverty. Why not? We can say...uh... that flaws are normal. In the country everyone lives according to their mentality and mental poverty exists. It is this poverty that, although a person is offered opportunities, always remains where it is/never progresses.) [own translation] This is a statement made by Obiang in a BBC interview with Stephen John Sackur in December 2012.

<sup>28</sup> Si crees de que ésta imagen no te representa, entonces eres un pobre mental. Si crees de que no eres un pobre mental, entonces trata de imaginarte sin esos elementos de la imagen en tu cabeza.





Afb.2.19 John Heartfield, *German Natural History, Metamorphosis*, 1934.



Afb.2.20 *¡No soy pobre mental!*, 2013.

In addition to the (inherent) subversive character of the collage, Hobeika also singles out the collage as a twenty-first-century appropriation of pasting, cutting, sampling and remixing in the digital sphere and as a “mirroring the patchwork experience of globalization, through which elements that carry differing – sometimes even opposing – histories are brought together in layering of cultures” (2016: 3). This layering of cultures brought into conjunction with the 'patchwork' of globalization is best expressed in *Estoy orgulloso de mi negro* (Fig. 2.21) and *Blindaje reformista para el dictador Chicotte* (Fig. 2.22). In both collages or (photo) montages, in which elements derived from different cultures are brought into a relationship with each other. In *Estoy orgulloso de mi negro*, Obiang walks on a carpet in the colors of the Spanish flag with a large portrait of Franco in the background and in *Blindaje reformista para el dictador Chicotte* Obiang 'rides' forth in the armor of Don Quixote<sup>29</sup> and in the colors of Spain on a 'horse' composed of the flags of the UN, the US and the flag of Equatorial Guinea.<sup>30</sup> In the texts accompanying these images, Esono Ebalé clarifies the connections;<sup>31</sup> in *Estoy orgulloso de mi negro*, Franco proudly watches over his ‘apprentice’ Obiang, who received his military training in Zaragoza. If he were still alive, the text suggests, Franco would be even more proud of his former "black pupil" than of the former king of Spain. So much so that, if he saw what this student is now capable of, he would certainly decide to “live among the blacks”: “Ya que si Franco levantase la cabeza yviese de lo que es capaz su alumno de Zaragoza, dirá: "Me voy a vivir entre negros”.”<sup>32</sup> And in the text accompanying *Blindaje reformista para el dictador Chicotte* (armor of reform for the dictator, Chicotte), Esono Ebalé, takes the armor of Don Quixote to refer to the armor of the reforms promised by Obiang, that the president peddles to his people and that he uses to legitimize international ties. The artist gives a different twist to Don Quixote's opening sentence "En un lugar de La Mancha de cuyo nombre no quiero acordarme [...]"<sup>33</sup> in his text:

<sup>29</sup> This refers to Don Quixote, who imagines himself a knight on horseback.

<sup>30</sup> This seems to be a motif that also recurs in paintings by other African painters. The Congolese painter, Sapin Makengele, also shows politicians moving over flags in his drawings and paintings.

<sup>31</sup> These are long texts accompanying the images (that usually are introduced with a title and short text), of which fragments are used that explicitly apply to the images in my research. The entire text fills a void.

<sup>32</sup> If Franco lifted his head and saw what his student from Zaragoza was capable of, he would say, "I'm going to live among the blacks." [own translation]

<sup>33</sup> Don Quijote de la Mancha, the novel Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra wrote in 1605.



**Afb.2.21** *Estoy orgulloso de mi negro*, 2013.



**Afb.2.22** *Blindaje reformista para el dictador Chicotte*, 2011.

In a place of black La Mancha, whose name I DO NOT want to remember, lived ambassadors and representatives of countries who, for fifty years, saw how a *Don Chicotte* could bleed and extort an entire people with impunity and without shame.<sup>34</sup> [own translation]

Esono Ebalé allows both political and cultural elements to collide here, making it difficult to close the eyes of Spain, the US and the UN to a dictator who, in his words, “was a Chicotte for fifty years who with impunity and shamelessness could extort an entire nation”; in the same vein as Benjamin shows how National Socialism is exposed in Heartfield's collage (Buck-Morss, 1995: 77-8).

## 4.2 Caricature as a 'subversive act'

Throughout 2013, Esono Ebalé produced caricatures of the president in various capacities; as a devil or animal, in combination with genitals, as a wild man, as a decomposing head, as a killer and as a man with blood on his hands, in an artistic capacity or in all kinds of more or less sexually tinted female roles and as a transvestite. In almost all of these caricatures, the figure of Obiang, usually distorted, takes center stage in the plane either in combination with certain objects or dressed in a certain way and placed against a background that is divided into even, pastel-colored bands that flare out like a kind of halo towards the edge of the frame forming a contrast for the figure.

Whereas in his drawings Esono Ebalé merely 'empties' heads by substituting other objects for them (Fig. 2.3), in some of his caricatures he goes even a little farther in this emptying, for example, by stripping Obiang completely of his body and replacing it with a penis topped only by his head in ¡¡¡ERES LA POLLA!!! (Fig. 2.23). However, emptying in this example is also undermined by literally depicting “la polla” – the Spanish vulgar name for penis but also an expression for someone who is “tough” – accompanied by the ironic text:

And because we were colonized by the Spaniards and at the present time still depend on Spain on a social and political level, we cannot be mistaken when we use the expression – ¡¡¡ES LA POLLA!!! – when we refer to him [the president]. And here's the historical picture. As long as

---

<sup>34</sup> En el lugar de la MANCHA NEGRA de cuyo nombre SÍ quiero acordarme vivían embajadores y representantes de países que vieron casi 50 años cómo un DON CHICOTTE hacía desangrar a todo un pueblo impunemente y sin ninguna vergüenza.

you live, never forget that LA POLLA IS THE DICTATOR.<sup>35</sup> [own translation]

Text and image transpose the whole into a subversive act because in it Obiang is 'laid bare', both literally and figuratively, and consequently also stripped (emptied) of his status. Pertinently, the image, like most of the caricatures (digitally), is accurately drawn with hatching and realistic light/shadow effects and both these images and the collages are almost always accompanied by an accompanying text that fills what remains open or empty even more pertinently. Likewise, these caricatures, both his collages or photomontages and the image of *¡¡¡ERES LA POLLA!!!* are composed of different (colliding) elements, the main ingredient being the head of the president, with which that president is represented in different ways unmasked, knocked down and defused. How this happens in the different Obiang caricatures by the juxtaposition of certain combinations and distortions will be elucidated,<sup>36</sup> emphasizing the subversive effect so created. The diabolical, sexual and carnivalesque will be explored by applying theories of Mikhail Bakhtin. Thereafter, the role of the primitive will be examined on the basis of a theory of Erik van de Ligt and finally the role of the feminine on the basis of the crossover theory of Marjorie Garber.

### *1. The role of the diabolical, sexual and carnivalesque in the Obiang caricatures*

In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin points out that in his comic form the devil becomes harmless (2006: 20). He also emphasizes the degrading and materializing effect of the popular laughter aimed at the 'underbelly'. That smile, he declares, degrades everything that is high, spiritual, ideal or abstract and brings the object down to earth with a bang and right back to the carnal (Ibid.). Importantly, Bakhtin stresses, the laugh also purifies:

Laughter purifies from dogmatism, from the intolerant and the petrified; it liberates from fanaticism and pedantry, from fear and intimidation, from didacticism, naïveté and illusion, from the single meaning, the single level, from sentimentality. (Ibid.: 23)

---

<sup>35</sup> Y como fuimos colonizados por los españoles. Y seguimos dependiendo de la España actual a nivel socio político, entonces no podemos equivocarnos si usamos el dicho: *¡¡¡ES LA POLLA!!!* al referirnos a él. [...] Y he aquí la imagen histórica. Para que vivan el tiempo que vivan ustedes, jamás se les olvide de que LA POLLA ES EL DICTADOR.

<sup>36</sup> Distortions are not caricatured in every culture; African masks and other African images show distortions to which a spiritual meaning is often attached.



The 'underbelly' is described by Bakhtin as "the material bodily lower stratum" (41). By this he means everything connected with earthly pleasures such as food, sexual acts and defecation; besides the abdomen, his definition includes the buttocks and the genitals (in opposition to the head, nose and mouth, although these are also associated with these "pleasures"). The lower abdomen and defecation also symbolize a spiritual defecation; freeing oneself from certain false seriousness, illusions and "fear-inspired sublimations" (367). Bakhtin views the liberating discharge of the 'underbelly' and the laughter as the main components of the carnivalesque, clownish and grotesque that is part of Western folk culture. He describes Carnival as a festival associated with ancient pagan, agricultural festivals celebrated both in periods of tranquility or in times of crisis. They are interruptions of a natural cycle: moments of death and birth, of change and renewal that always led to a festive conception of the world (9).<sup>37</sup>

*DEBLEO* (Fig. 2.24) shows Obiang turned three-quarters, with arms folded, sharp nails, horns and a devilish tail partly out of the picture. The text accompanying the statue is entitled *LA DESCONFIANZA DE DIOS "...MI PROPIO DEMONIO"* (the distrust of God...my own devil/my personal demon) and should be seen in the context of the divine status that Obiang ascribes to himself.<sup>38</sup> Esono Ebalé contrasts this divine status with the devil, because: "a todo Dios le toca su Diablo" (every God has his Devil). Through the title and text, he indicates that someone who assumes a divine status without acknowledging his demonic side cannot be trusted. Pertinently, as a devil with glasses and a tail swinging upwards, Obiang is more laughable than frightening, so that in his comic form he becomes harmless (Bakhtin). Esono Ebalé seizes on every possible way to render Obiang harmless, not sparing the 'underbelly'. In one of his caricatures, he literally puts him 'defecating' with his legs wide apart and bare lower body. This caricature bears the title *Mierda* (shit), with the subtitle: "Por favor, ¿Hay algún pobre mental que pueda limpiar toda ésta mierda?... os sea, tooooda la mierda. El

<sup>37</sup> In the carnival, one also places oneself outside the usual social order. In *L'ordre du discours*, Michel Foucault claims that, as a lunatic, one places oneself outside any discourse (of a certain discipline, faith or political party). The discourse is charged with power that implies that the fool or jester also places himself outside the power of the discourse. This renders the fool harmless (2001: 5). [Hence, they were tolerated by kings]

<sup>38</sup> In 2003, Obiang was called "The God of Equatorial Guinea" on state radio. The following was literally said (in Fang): "Es como el Dios que está en el Cielo, tiene todos los poderes sobre los hombres y las cosas. Él puede decidir de matar sin que nadie le pida cuentas y sin ir al infierno, porque es el mismo Dios con el que está en contacto permanent, que le da esta fuerza." (He is like a God in Heaven who is omnipotent over people and things. He can decide to kill without being accountable for it and without having to go to hell for it because he is in permanent contact with God Himself Who gives him strength.) [own translation]

lugar debe de quedar limpio.”<sup>39</sup> (Fig.2.25) Again, the term “pobre mental” is used here, referring to the way Obiang has denigrated his people. The accompanying text explains that the mess that Obiang wants the people to clean up consists of the dunghill of his incapable and corrupt ministries such as, for example, the Ministry of Education that offers a quality education “lejos de una calidad mínima” (far below par) and the Ministry of Sports that is described in the text as “el circo para el pueblo” (the circus for the people). The defecation (*mierda*) can therefore be seen as a metaphor for a political and social defecation and there is a double discharge, because “it simultaneously materializes and unburdens” (Bakhtin, 1984: 376); the president is brought down to earth with his stools, purging the viewer mentally of the fear and intimidation that emanate from Obiang's dictatorial regime.

In other caricatures, the focus is also put on his genitals. For example, they might form his nose or body (Fig.2.23) or his penis is accentuated by a red 'cap' for Obiang who, like a kind of jester, is swathed in the flag of Santo Tomé (with which Equatorial Guinea concluded an oil treaty), holds up his 'baby son' Teodorín with the same cap on his penis (Fig. 2.26). In this digital collage entitled *King Leon*, in which the heads of Obiang and Teodorin are pasted into a digital drawing, the little boy who giving a gesture of a person acknowledging applause and laughing (*jijiji*) also wears sunglasses and a hat with donkey's ears. His father pronounces the text: “Tomad, os dejo a este burro. Creo que conmigo no podréis fin del maldito diálogo nacional”,<sup>40</sup> that means that people will just have to put up with their stupid donkey son (the donkey that stands for 'dumb') because his reign (or “national dialogue”) is eternal. The title, *King Leon*, refers to the film and musical *The Lion King*.<sup>41</sup> This includes a song about “an infinite cycle” and this, according to the title and accompanying text, is “lo que no debe ocurrir” (that which should not happen). The image can therefore be seen as a clownishly packaged warning. In the carnivalesque and clownesque, the 'natural cycle' is broken and this act says Bakhtin, creates room for innovation (1984: 9).

<sup>39</sup> “Please, is there a mentally disturbed person who can clean up all this shit? ...that is, all the shit. The place has to be kept clean.” [own translation] In another caricature of Obiang, he calls him “Su Excremencia” (His Excrement), as a variant of Su Excelencia (His Excellency).

<sup>40</sup> “Take it, I'll leave you this donkey. Don't think you can end the damned national dialogue with me.” [own translation]

<sup>41</sup> *The Lion King* is a 1994 American animated film produced by Walt Disney Feature Animation. It is the 32nd of Disney's animated films. The story is set on the African savannah, over which the king of beasts, the lion, is lord and master. The animals are all so humanized/transmogrified that they can talk and think like humans.



**Afb.2.23** ¡¡¡ERES LA POLLA!!!, 2013.



**Afb.2.24** DEBLEO, 2013.



**Afb.2.25** MIERDA, 2013.

By use of the carnivalesque image and the accompanying text, Esono Ebalé breaks the cycle of 'successors to the throne'. By doing so, he also 'empties' Obiang of his power and status by portraying him as a jester, again drawing attention to what Bakhtin describes as "the material bodily lower stratum". The red caps on the penises also increase the overall cheerful effect and cause the fear of the dictator (and his son) to evaporate, because, Bakhtin claims, the smile also frees people of fear and intimidation, thereby rendering the dictator harmless.

## 2. *The Role of the Primitive in the Obiang caricatures*

In *Bushman* (Fig. 2.27), Obiang appears in the guise of a large monkey, without a neck and with both shoulders hunched, his fists clenched and a belly that seems to consist of growths, with (here too) exaggerated testicles and with extra hairy legs. The animal is also emphasized in his face that can be clearly seen in *Obiang disintegrando* (Obiang falling apart, Fig. 2.28); his small eyes are (as in a monkey) set deep within his eye sockets, his nose is shortened and runs flush with his bony cheekbones, emphasizing what might be called the face of a monkey with extra space between nose and upper lip and with extra narrow lips. In his Master's thesis, *Dieren in politieke cartoons. Onderzoek naar het gebruik van dieren als brondomein van visuele metaforen* (Animals in political cartoons. Research into the use of animals as a source domain of visual metaphors), Erik van de Ligt points out that someone who is compared to a monkey in the western world comes across as stupid and primitive; an image that, he argues, probably originated from the knowledge that man has evolved further from the apes and that apes have in fact lagged behind humans in their development (2006: 40). In the depiction of Obiang as a monkey, the features of a monkey are projected onto him; Obiang is made to look so stupid and primitive. His caricatural appearance also goes against the classical ideal of beauty of the standard academic head used in the art history and experienced as 'beautiful' (Gombrich, 1988: 317).<sup>42</sup> By these standards Obiang is not only primitive and ugly, his head also disintegrates and Esono Ebalé associates him with violence by depicting him with a chainsaw (Fig.2.29) or in combination with streams of blood (Fig.2.30). Wielding the chainsaw, Obiang utters a threat (in the speech balloon): "Atreveros

<sup>42</sup> In *Art and Illusion*, Gombrich claims that the academic standard headline according to the 18th-century draftsman F. Grose corresponds to the canon of Greek art and is experienced as "beautiful" because it is expressionless (1988: 317).



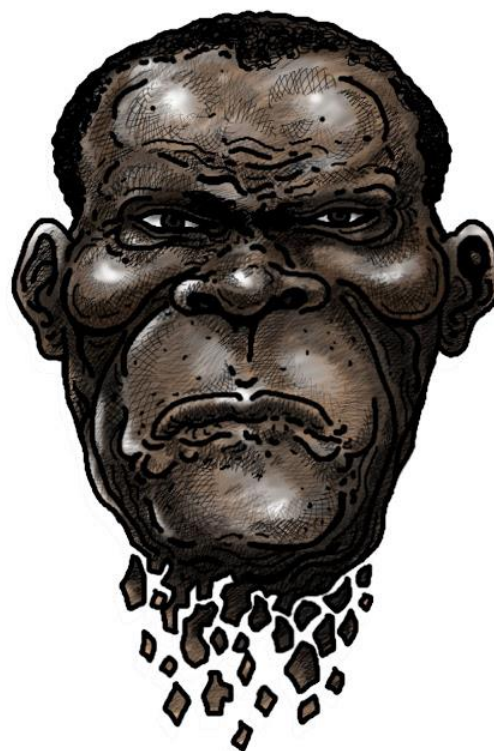


Afb.2.26 KING LEON, 2014.

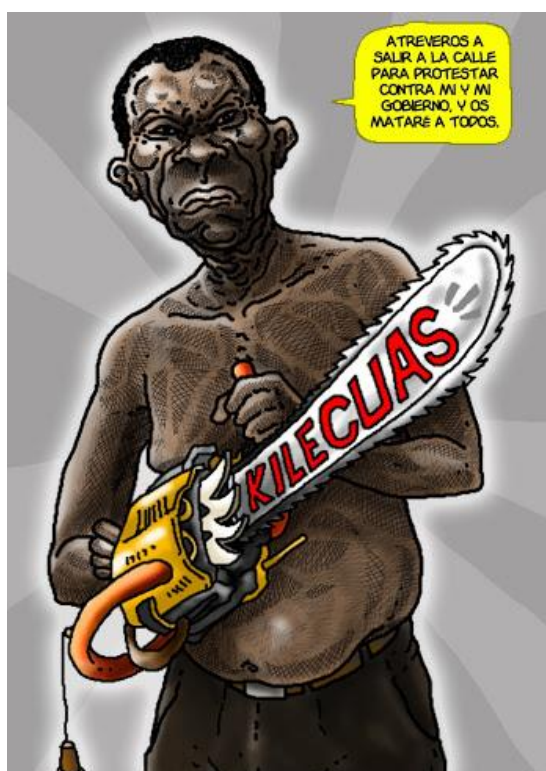




Afb.2.27 *BUSMAN*, 2013.



Afb.2.28 *OBIANG DESINTEGRADO*, 201



Afb.2.29 *THE KILLER*, 2013.



Afb.2.30 *BLOOD*, 2013.

a salir a la calle para protestar contra mí y mi gobierno, y os mataré a todos.”<sup>43</sup> This image is accompanied by the text: “Obiang tranquilo...tranquilo Obiang. ¿Ndjúé bot es capaz de matar a pacíficos manifestantes en protesta por la forma que tiene él y sus colegas de gobernar el país?”<sup>44</sup> It is true that Obiang is associated with violence here but, the accompanying text suggest the question is whether he and his colleagues would be capable of taking the law into their own hands like this. In this text, he is also belittled by addressing him as one would address a dog with "calm down/easy does it". It empties the image of its threat and hence also removes an obstacle to actually taking to the streets in protest (according to the text in the yellow speech balloon).

### 3. *The Role of the feminine in Obiang caricatures*

Obiang plays a very different role in *Sweet Ndjúé bot* (sweet leader, Fig. 2.31), appearing sweetly feminine, dressed in a strapless dress, sporting eye-catching earrings and a feminine-looking hairstyle that seems to have been inspired by the female hairstyle of the Nigerian visual artist Yinka Shonibare<sup>45</sup> (Fig. 2.32). Esono Ebalé has drawn numerous caricatures in which he shows Obiang as a woman or transvestite, sometimes with the accent only on the head, but also referring to more or less well-known figures and in all kinds of feminine poses, dressed in feminine garments. In *Vested interests: cross dressing & cultural anxiety*, Majorie Garber links the transition from one sex to another or from one skin color to another – called crossover – to the stereotype of the black man as a symbol of sexual potency: “[...] the overdetermination of the phallus, both as a signifier for the phantasy hypersexuality of black men in the eyes and minds of white observers [...]” (1992: 300). By portraying him as a woman, he is stripped of his masculinity and therefore made harmless, just as black pop stars such as Little Richard, Michael Jackson and Prince also themselves made themselves ‘harmless’ by dressing in extravagant female clothing and wearing make-up. Garber quotes

<sup>43</sup> "Dare to go out into the streets to protest against me and my government, and I will kill you all."

<sup>44</sup> "Quiet Obiang...quiet Obiang. Is Ndjúé not capable of killing peaceful protesters in protest against the way he and his colleagues run the country? "

<sup>45</sup> Yinka Shonibare (1962) is an English artist of Nigerian descent who works with African 'Dutch Wax' fabrics. He has also portrayed himself with these fabrics incorporated into his hairstyle. Shonibare was born in London but spent his childhood in Lagos. Back in London, he studied art. He is now internationally known and exhibits his works in various western museums. Esono Ebalé drew this portrait in November 2013 and was probably inspired by Shonibare's hairstyle. He had earlier drawn a portrait of Shonibare in an article about his work in the magazine *Revistart* (Brus, 164, 2014: 22).

Little Richard: "We decided that my image should be crazy and a way out so that the adults would think I was harmless" (Ibid.: 302).<sup>46</sup>

In *KISSSSSSS* (subtitled "Kiss from a rose") (Fig. 2.33) the president is not only feminized by his attitude and the make-up, he also provokes with his pouty and shiny red mouth. He gives an (ironic) kiss to those who still have not understood that the D (in PDGE) does not stand for democracy, but for dictatorship:

Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo, Head of State and the Government, Founding President of the Democratic Party of Equatorial Guinea sends a cordial kiss to all of you who have not yet understood that the "D" of his political party stands for "DICTATORSHIP". Since, were it meant to stand for DEMOCRACY, he would not have to instill it in us in 2013, even we had already been stuck with the famous MULTIPARTISM for more than twenty years. Thinking is free.<sup>47</sup> [own translation]

line of text in letters filled with the national colors of Equatorial Guinea also 'blows up' with the message: "Obiang fete y..." (Obiang go away and...). This line is supplemented in the caricatural portrayal of Obiang as Marilyn Monroe in *¡¡¡OOOH MY GOD...*, (Fig. 2.34) as an extension of this; from the subway grid below Marilyn's billowing summer dress,<sup>48</sup> a the title with the image with: "y llévase a Teodorín, a Gabrielín, a Constantinita, a Armengolín, a celestinita", indicating that he has even had to take his son Teodorín and the rest of his family along with the cry *¡¡¡Oooh my God...* Many of these caricatures refer to the political situation in Equatorial Guinea, but there are also some that expose the links between the regime and certain fashion designers, singers and otherwise well-known personalities.

The caricatures that place Obiang in feminine roles and poses render him 'harmless' as a stereotypical black man, taking Garber's theory, because he is, as it were, emptied of his masculinity, thereby also exposing the political situation as well as the ties Obiang's party maintains with locally known personalities.

---

<sup>46</sup> A relationship can also be made here with the 'harmless fool' (Foucault, 2001: 5).

<sup>47</sup> Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo, Jefe de Estado y del Gobierno, Presidente Fundador del Partido Democrático de Guinea Ecuatorial os manda un cordial beso a todos los que no habéis captado todavía que la "D" de su partido político significa "DICTADURA". Ya que si significase DEMOCRACIA, no lo estaría ensayando en pleno 2013 cuando ya llevamos más de 20 años con el famoso MULTIPARTIDISMO a cuestas. R-E-F-F-L-X-I-O-N-A-R es gratis.

<sup>48</sup> That famous Marilyn Monroe photo shoot took place outside a New York subway station in 1954, promoting one of her films, *The Seven Year Itch*.





**Afb.2.31** SWEET NDJÚÉ BOT, 2013.



**Afb.2.32** Yinka Shonibare (foto The Centre of African Studies, Londen, 2015).



**Afb.2.33** KISSSSSSS, 2013.



**Afb.2.34** *iiiOOOH MY GOD....*, 2013.

## 5. The voids in the works of Esono Ebalé as a truth procedure

In the previous sections, it has been established that Esono Ebalé creates 'voids' in his drawings in two different ways. On the one hand, he does this by using the drawing surface 'all-over' and filling it in a linear walk (what Bryson refers to as *a walk for a walk's sake*), 'walking around' certain shapes thereby leaving them to remain open or empty. The more he walks around these shapes, the fuller his drawing, but the emptier the shapes. On the other hand, he chooses different 'motifs', borrowed from (European) art history and visual culture, both popular or classical, with which he removes other motifs and, as it were, empties, for instance, the heads of human figures. He also applies the same process of emptying in his Obiang caricatures, but in this he takes it even farther. This is done, for example, by depicting Obiang as an erect penis in its entirety, by which Esono Ebalé, in combination with the text, strips him of his 'tough role' as a dictator. The subversive effect that this entails is also expressed in the way in which the president is depicted with diabolical and carnivalesque connotations and in primitive or feminine roles. By portraying the president with sexual overtones, as a devil, primitive or carnivalesque, he is brought *down to earth*, through which he is stripped of his status and emptied as a status symbol. The laughter coupled with the lower abdomen acts as a discharge and in the carnivalesque, by which the *natural cycle* is broken. As Bakhtin postulates, there is also room for innovation that, in this context can be understood as room for a possible renewal of the political situation in Equatorial Guinea.

The 'emptying' is also done by (what Garber describes as) crossover; switching from one sex to another. She claims that it is extra painful for a black man to be portrayed as a woman because of the "overdetermination of the phallus" by (white) others. As a result, Obiang will be even more humiliated if he is placed in a female role, that empties him of his masculinity and therefore also eliminates or renders harmless.

In "Troisième esquisse d'un manifeste de l'affirmationnisme" (The Affirmationist Manifesto. Third Draft for a Manifesto of Affirmationist Art), Badiou calls the 'artistic configuration' in which, he says, "the formless is eliminated or, conversely, made into form, at the moment when, for lack of evidence, for lack of impurity, nothing real is left" (2012: 84). Badiou, is convinced that art is committed to purifying the impure, by clinging to what he believes is a duty to make visible, "against all the evidence of the visible" (Ibid.: 83). When Esono Ebalé



taking Obiang in his sights and strips his caricatures of status, power or masculinity, this can be interpreted as (political) 'purification' derived from the purification in/the crucible of his cartoons. In his visual stories, white figures appear as innocent forms in a telling environment (the story of metaphors and symbols) in which they show 'nothing' through their emptiness, that, Badiou argues, amounts to everything that remains hidden and therefore also enigmatic, but in which, nonetheless, a purification in which truth is revealed takes place.

In *Le noir. Éclats d'une non-couleur* (BLACK; *The brilliance of a non-color*), Badiou considers white and black to be two sides of the same coin because they are not colors; white is the light in which all colors coincide and black is precisely the lack of light and therefore also of color. The dark and light sides of life are therefore interchangeable, Badiou argues, and hence white and black stand for everything and nothing (2017: 35). Consequently, the white and black (or gray) in the speech balloons in Esono Ebalé's cartoons might also be regarded as 'all or nothing' and two sides of the same coin. The absence of text in the white, gray or black speech balloons can be seen as a reference to censorship (or to persons who have no thoughts), but it also exposes the silence on everything (or nothing) that falls outside the hegemonic order. The empty speech balloons and parallel to them the empty, innocent or anonymous figures who, as loners, fall outside the social order in, among other examples, *Mar de mierda* (Fig.2.7), cut a hole in the situation that, in Rancière's view, leads to the emergence of a political rupture and, in Badiou's vision, an eventual rupture.

In the last scene in the *Etiopia* cartoon (Fig.2.8), as a representation of a violent situation that, in the definition of Schilperoord and Maes, is a metaphorical source domain by which to address the violent colonial and neocolonial era in Ethiopia as a target domain, the empty figures are not innocent. These are forms of weapons that work with added power because they are cocked in the red of the blood dripping from the severed heads.

The red also has a special function when used as the color of letters (Fig.2.7) and in the empty spaces of hell in *La pesadilla de Obi*, as indeed are the grays in the torture scenes. By reducing or omitting details and colors and 'purifying' the space, these scenes are, as it were, emptied to their very core and therefore extra penetrating. The figure of Obiang, already stripped down to poverty, having already lost all his status and power at the beginning of the story, finds himself alone in increasingly harrowing situations, until he finally ends up in a total void (*La Pesadilla de Obi*, 124).

Besides through the medium of the color, the reader is involved in this through the clear lines, caricatural exaggerations, close-ups and choices regarding the design of frames, font and perspective point of view, as well as through the letters and figures that enter the empty space outside their frames. In this way, as it were, the reader is 'sucked into' the story from the empty outer space and beyond the equally empty spaces in between, so that these spaces and the reader also become involved in the action. Moreover, as a popular medium and 'globalized visual language' of, for example, Japanese *manga* culture (Pollmann), the strip lends itself perfectly to reaching a 'semi-lettered' audience (Carrier). It expresses the community orientation and conforms to Badiou's *L'idée du communisme* (The Idea of Communism) in which as many people as possible are convinced that, beyond the official story of the State, there is such a thing as "the fabulous exception of truths-in-the-making" (Badiou, 2012: 29-93). However, although Esono Ebalé adopts a critical stance toward the Obiang regime in almost all his cartoons and comics, in particular in *La pesadilla de Obi*, in his comics he adopts an independent position with regard to African comics culture. His comics, in which voids and cartoon metaphors play a major role, correspond more closely to his other work than to an African (or American-European) comic culture.

In his collages, Esono Ebalé allows both political and cultural elements to collide; a happening that can irritate the viewer, who is thereby stimulated to think and take a different view (than in *La pesadilla de Obi*, for example) of the political process in Equatorial Guinea. Viewed in the framework of Rancière's terminology, these collages can be considered *dialectical montages*. In his *dissensus* theory, Rancière refers to political strategies that make the invisible visible or question the visible, creating new relationships and meanings.<sup>49</sup> Therein lies the political rift (*dissensus*) that turns Esono Ebalé's collages and caricatures into a *subversive act* (Hobeika). The subversive aspect can also be found in his drawings, cartoons and comics, especially in the omission or emptying. By the different strategies of emptying, such as emptying the person of Obiang of his status in different ways or emptying color and emptying spaces and certain shapes, what was not visible before not only becomes visible, it becomes visible spaces, shapes and figures, that as Badiou posits, are also purified or intensified. These spaces, shapes and figures are intensified all the more because what

---

<sup>49</sup> [...] strategies intended to make the invisible visible or to question the self-evidence of the visible; to rupture given relations between things and meanings and, inversely, to invent novel relationships between things and meanings that were previously unrelated" (2015: 149).

surrounds them is 'full'; fully drawn, filled with symbols and metaphors, full of color or teeming with details. And precisely by minimizing everything present in spaces in *La pesadilla de Obi*, taking away color and omitting text (versus that which is full), an emptiness is created that exposes the truth of the hell or sinister torture methods applied in torture chambers. What Rancière refers to as *dissensus* and Badiou as an eventual rupture in which a 'truth procedure' takes place, in Esono Ebalé's works takes place in what clashes in his collages and caricatures, but even more in what he empties in his drawings, cartoons, comics and collages as caricatures. A purification occurs in this that enables the artist to break through the censorship and political order in his country, thereby opening up the possibility of a new (political) situation. The pure and empty figure he places as a loner against social and political abuses can be seen as a metaphor for the current social and political situation in Equatorial Guinea. Being that loner is an inescapable fact, as Esono Ebalé writes in his self-portrait on the site of *Macuto*: "[...] no busco ser. Ya soy" (I didn't ask to be there. I'm already there.).

## **Part III Stories**

*Voids in the novels of Ndongo-Bidyogo, Nsue Angüe en Ávila Laurel*





# Chapter 1 Donato Ndongo - *Poderes de la tempestad*

## *Introduction*

*Tú eras tú, decían.  
Yo soy yo, sabían.  
I  
n  
o  
l  
v  
i  
d  
a  
b  
l  
e ideal, irreductible hacia la nada.  
El cero infinito: el perfecto círculo.*

*Rueda rodando la redonda rueda.  
Hacia la nada. O hacia el todo.*

*Plenitud: el Cero.<sup>1</sup>*

(Ndongo, *Olvidos*: 75)

Although Donato Ndongo-Bidyogo has long maintained that he is not a poet, a collection of his poems was published in 2016 containing verses that he had hidden away for years as *Olvidos* (forgotten), of which the above poem is one.<sup>2</sup> In this poem he refers to *tú* (you) and

---

<sup>1</sup>

*You were you, they said  
I am me, they knew  
unforgettable ideal, irreducible toward nothing  
The infinite zero: the perfect circle.*

*Rolls rolling the round wheel  
Toward nowhere. Or toward everything.*

*Fullness: the Zero. [own translation]*

<sup>2</sup> In the preface to his collection of poems, he writes that, in his memory of his childhood, a preface always began with a poem, but he denies that he is a poet himself despite the poems included in his *Antología de la literatura guineana*: “En mis recuerdos de los años mozos, un proemio abría siempre un poemario. Aquí va el mío: para decir que no soy poeta. Lo confesé siempre, y así lo expresé en mi *Antología de la literatura guineana*, donde se colocaron ‘dos poemas de juventud y dos rabiosos’” (Olvidos, 2016: 27).

yo (I) and an “unforgettable ideal that cannot be reduced to anything” referring to “the infinite zero: the perfect circle” that rolls like a wheel to the nothing that is simultaneously everything, and full (referring to the fullness of the round *Zero*). The poem raises the question about which unforgettable and incomprehensible “ideal” is here related to that *Zero* that stands for nothing (empty) or precisely for everything (full). Perhaps a connection can be made with Badiou's idea of "truths as incorporeal things which, like the poet's consciousness, become and linger 'between the emptiness and the pure event'" (Logiques des mondes, 2006: 12).

This chapter contains an examination of whether and where in Ndongo's<sup>3</sup> novel, *Poderes de la tempestad*, there are faults or voids in which "truths become and linger" and of the possibility that a political truth lingers in those voids. In the course of the investigation, the novel will first be related to Ndongo's oeuvre in the context of his journalistic and literary career and afterwards to his oeuvre in a context of Spanish, Latin American and African literature as suggested by literary critics. Possible ruptures and voids will be investigated on the basis of a narratological analysis, the role of the alternation you-I – not only in the poem, but also in the novel – and the structure of the novel. Based on this structure, the importance of *paratexts* (Genette) and *mise en abyme* (Dällenbach) and the role autobiographical (Lejeune) and oral (Ong) elements play in this novel will be examined.

## 1. Ndongo's journalism and literary career

Ndongo was born in 1950 in the village of Alén Efack, not far from Niefang on the mainland Bioko in Equatorial Guinea. He grew up in a Fang family that was considered *emancipado* in the colonial system, meaning that they belonged to a black 'middle class'. His father owned cocoa plantations and gave his son a Roman Catholic upbringing, although he also grew up knowing the traditions of the Fang culture. In 1965, his family sent him to Spain to attend secondary school, after which he began university studies in history and journalism in Barcelona in 1969. A series of articles he then wrote for the newspaper *ABC*, under the title *Guinea vista por un guineano*, was the beginning of Ndongo's journalistic career that

---

<sup>3</sup> Donato Ndongo-Bidyogo is his official name. However, the latest issue of *Los poderes de la tempestad* (2015) mentions the writer as Donato Ndongo and this is what he is usually called. I shall use the name Donato Ndongo in this chapter.

continued into the 1970s.<sup>4</sup> However, these articles also put him in a position that made it impossible for him to return to his homeland.<sup>5</sup> In the first half of the 1970s, he wrote a series of articles in the magazine *Índice* about 'African socialism' and as a tribute to Frantz Fanon about the Carnation Revolution in Portugal. During the same period, he also wrote for various other newspapers and magazines (*ABC*, *Diario 16*, *Historia 16*, *Mundo Negro*) and for the Spanish press agency EFE (Otabela and Onomo Abena, 2008: 41-5).

After Teodoro Nguema Obiang's *Golpe de la Libertad* in 1979, Ndongo returned to Guinea for two short visits. In the period that followed, from 1982 he was director of El Colegio Mayor Universitario Nuestra Señora de África (affiliated with the Universidad Complutense), a cultural institution in Madrid that offers African students the opportunity to study in Spain. In 1985, Ndongo decided to return definitively to Guinea, where the Obiang regime seemed to be displaying a certain openness and where he was offered a position as director of the Centro Hispano-Guineano de Malabo. However, the controversial articles that appeared in the *Africa 2000* and *El Patio*, published by the cultural center thereafter, provoked so much resistance from the government that he had to leave the center in 1992 to take full employment with the EFE news agency. Because of his critical statements about Obiang's rule, his position in Guinea eventually became untenable (death threats) and he fled to Libreville, the capital of Gabon, where he remained for another year before returning to Spain.

In Spain, from 2000 to 2003, Ndongo headed the Centro de Estudios Africanos, that was established by the AECI (*Agencia Española de Cooperación Internacional*) in collaboration with the University of Murcia. This center organized activities related to African culture and published the magazine *Cuadernos*. However, it had to stop these activities when its supervisor changed and its funding was stopped in 2003, as a consequence of which Ndongo lost its position. However, he continued to write columns<sup>6</sup> and, since 2005, he has been affiliated with universities in the US, among them, Missouri-Columbia, as a

---

<sup>4</sup> He wrote five articles for *ABC* under a pseudonym because Franco had banned messages from Guinea as '*materia reservada*' and he also ran the risk of being arrested by 'the long arm' of Macías.

<sup>5</sup> In March 1965, after a failed *coup d'état*, Macías had severed all contact with "imperialist and colonialist Spain", withdrew scholarships for students from Guinea who were studying in Spain and banned intellectuals (see Part I, Chapter I of this study).

<sup>6</sup> As an employee of the magazine *Mundo Negro* with a monthly column "Al margins de la noticia".

teacher of African-Spanish literature. To date, he is still writing articles for various Spanish newspapers and magazines and participates in conferences.

In 1977 Ndongo's journalistic work and essays resulted in the publication of an overview of the history of Equatorial Guinea up to that time in a volume entitled *Historia y tragedia de Guinea Ecuatorial*.<sup>7</sup> Earlier, he had also embarked on a literary path with the short stories *El sueño* (1973) and *La travesía* (1977).<sup>8</sup> *El sueño* is a story about an African who (in a dream) leaves his country to save for the twelve cows he needs as a bride price. This story was published in the magazine *Papeles de Son Armadans*, under the leadership of the Spanish writer and Nobel laureate Camilo José Cela. *La travesía* is a story about the Atlantic crossing, the Middle Passage, endured by black slaves transported under inhumane conditions. This formed the impetus for Ndongo's first novel, *Las tinieblas de mi memoria negra* (1987). This novel, that he wrote after his first return to Guinea in 1979 after the fall of Macías, contains elements of the preceding stories, as do his later novels *Los poderes de la tempestad* (1997) and *El metro* (2007).<sup>9</sup>

## 2. Literary contexts

Besides the fact that others have placed Donato Ndongo's literature in a certain literary context, he has also done this himself in various interviews. During his university studies in Spain in the 1970s, he was confronted with the Marxist ideas of writers who opposed Franco. In an interview with Mbaré Ngom, he said that he was unable to embrace them because of the reign of terror of Macías, supported by the then Soviet Union, Cuba, China and North Korea, and therefore he could not blindly surrender to what he believed to be Marxist ideology (Ngom, 2008: 188).<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, in the 1960s and 1970s he moved in left-wing circles that

---

<sup>7</sup> This essay was republished by Bellaterra in Barcelona in February 2020.

<sup>8</sup> Both stories are included in *Entre estética y compromiso* (Otabela and Onomo Abena, 2008: 85-99).

<sup>9</sup> Elements such as colonialism, 'white versus black', African traditions versus western culture and the search for better social (and political) conditions play a role in all three of Ndongo's novels, but most notably in his latest work, *El metro*, in which an African leaves his village because he does not fit in with the traditions observed there, to try his luck elsewhere (with a dramatic outcome).

<sup>10</sup> In *Los poderes de la tempestad* this is comically referred to: "¿Mis amigos blancos sabían de verdad lo que es la revolución? ¿Bastaba con dejarse crecer la barba rala, encasquetarse una boina negra y vestir una casaca verde olivo ad Rastro para sentirse revolucionario y creerse que uno se hallaba en Sierra Maestra [...]?" (99)

opposed the Franco regime and as a journalist wrote articles on 'African socialism' and the Carnation Revolution in Portugal.<sup>11</sup>

## 2.1 Spain

Ndongo-Bydiogo mentions Camilo José Cela, Juan Goytisolo, Rafael Sánchez Ferlosio and Jesús Fernández Santos who are part of Spanish literature and are writers of interest to him personally (Ngom, 2008: 194). They are all authors of 'la generación del medio siglo' or, in other words, of the period during the Franco era and the Macías regime in Equatorial Guinea that was 'silenced' by Franco.<sup>12</sup> It was in this climate that Ndongo came to Spain in 1965 and was introduced to the Spanish literature of the time, that was also subjected to censorship.

Ndongo mentions the Spanish writer Juan Goytisolo (a member of the Generation of 1950) as the person who, with his novel *Señas de identidad* (1966), prompted him to write *Las tinieblas de tu memoria negra* (Zielina Limonta, 2008: 252). The novels of Goytisolo and Ndongo-Bydiogo are both parts of a trilogy in which both main characters end up in an identity crisis related to the situation in the country in which they were born and raised.<sup>13</sup> In addition to Ndongo himself, several researchers and literary critics (Uribe: 2005, Ugarte: 2006, Nomo Ngamba: 2015, Epps: 2010) have made a connection between *Las tinieblas de tu memoria negra* and *Poderes de la tempestad* by Ndongo and the trilogy *Señas de identidad* (1966), *Reivindicación del conde Don Julian* (1970) and *Juan sin Tierra* (1975) by Juan Goytisolo. Besides the concept of the trilogy, the critics point out that there are important substantive and stylistic similarities between the novels of the two authors and a connection can also be made between their stay in exile and their journalistic and political activities.<sup>14</sup> Both wrote their first novel after a traumatic visit to their native country; *Señas de identidad* is the result of the author's personal and literary crisis after revisiting Franco's Spain and,

---

<sup>11</sup> All Ndongo's biographical data are taken from Otabela and Onomo Abena, *Entre estética y compromiso*, 2008.

<sup>12</sup> By considering everything related to the former colony as *materia reservada* (see Part I, Chapter I of this study)

<sup>13</sup> A trilogy together with *Los poderes de la tempestad* and a third novel announced by Ndongo in various interviews, with the (provisional) title *Los hijos de la tribu*.

<sup>14</sup> It should be noted that, in the first place, Goytisolo himself made the choice to emigrate to France and Africa (Tangier) to escape the Franco regime. Unlike Ndongo, he was in no danger of being imprisoned, tortured or killed on his return to Spain: "Ndongo experienced externally-imposed political exile in Spain. As Ugarte bluntly puts it: 'Goytisolo is in no danger of being sent to jail, tortured, or killed when he goes back to Spain to chat with his agent'" (Epps, 2010: 147).



through his literature, Donato Ndongo subjected himself and his country to a grueling investigation after his confrontational stay in Guinea in 1979. In her essay in *Estudios de Literatura* 6, Monique Nomo Ngama compares the theme of *Los poderes de la tempestad* with that of *Señas de identidad*. Both novels, she says, are themed around an exile's desperate search for identity and his failed retreat, eventually to become a protagonist in and witness to the dictatorship and the fight against oblivion (Nomo Ngama, 2015: 362). In addition to the thematic relationship, Brian Epps points out that the novels also have stylistic features in common; both Nodongo and Goytisolo make use of inner monologues (alternating the first and second person you-I), and their novels either lack punctuation marks or are peppered many question marks and infixes, as well as 'meandering sentences' (2010: 145). However, one important difference, that strikes Epps, is that Ndongo's stylistic experiments also stem from the traditional African storytelling culture. Epps describes this as: "The traditional African conceptions of storytelling and identity, in which the individual, decidedly less inflated and fetishized than in the West, is intrinsically bound up in the collective" (Ibid.: 146). This calls into question Nomo Ngama's view that both Goytisolo and Ndongo have been influenced by surrealism, magical realism, social realism and so forth (Nomo Ngamba, 2015: 362). In his interview with Ngom, Ndongo himself indicated that the continuous digressions, inner monologues and the involvement of the reader (through the alternation of you-I) in the narrative was inspired by the storytelling tradition of the Fang (Ngom, 2008: 195). However, it is likely that his long stay in Spain and contact with Spanish literature have also contributed to his writing style, that, as he says himself, is embedded in both Spanish and Fang culture (Ibid.: 204).

## 2.2 Latin American literature and dictators

The Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier has defined the Latin American dictators in the 1970s as the 'archetype' of Latin American literature (Phaf-Rheinberger, 2010: 141). A culture of debate around this remark has emerged in Latin America that, Ineke Phaf-Rheinberger has indicated, takes on a new dimension if we include *Los poderes de la tempestad* of Ndongo; equating Equatorial Guinea at the time as the "Dachau or the Auschwitz of Africa" (Ibid.: 142). Nevertheless, Phaf-Rheinberger argues, none of the authors or critics conducting the debate have paid any attention to the dictatorship of Francisco Macías Nguema. Be that as it

may, she believes Ndonga's novel has the same characteristics as Latin American novels that deal with power in the figure of a dictator as a lifelong president<sup>15</sup> (144). She also mentions one important difference; Spain does not play a central role in Latin American novels about dictators, as it does in Ndonga's novel. In it, the dictator opts for communist regimes that he sets in opposition to imperialist and Roman Catholic Spain. Phaf-Rheinberger places Ndonga in a tradition that she refers to as *arte retro*:

Ndonga manifests himself as one of these "literate" representatives of the *arte retro* (a term by which Rama denotes a modern memory culture), that monitors the semiotic signs of change in an urban society at a key moment in its transformation from a colony to a modern republic. [Own translation] Phaf-Rheinberger borrows the term *arte retro* from the Uruguayan essayist Ángel Rama (1926-1983).<sup>16</sup> [own translation]

Ndonga's novel, that recalls the physical disappearance of 50,000 people during a process of "Africanization" under a dictatorship in Equatorial Guinea founded on terror and intimidation, is part of a culture of remembrance, Phaf-Rheinberger points out (150). She argues that the post-war memory of the Holocaust has opened the door to a culture of remembrance that has now been extended to a global context, in which the consequences of the horrors of an earlier period are still having an impact on the current situation of a country (Ibid.).

Phaf-Rheinberger ends her essay with the observation that *Poderes de la tempestad* has not caused a debate in Guinea like that Vargas Llosa's *La fiesta del chivo* in the Dominican Republic (154).<sup>17</sup> Yet there are striking similarities between the two novels that are also explained in more detail by Joseph-Désiré Otabela Mewolo. In his essay, he makes his comparison from a 'socially critical' angle of the dictator's role in both novels, examining, among other points, the dictator's personality cult, his machismo, unlimited power and nationalism (2004: 30). Both Trujillo in *La fiesta del chivo* and Macías in *Los poderes de la tempestad* assume the role of a *dios padre* of their people; Macías as 'papá Macías Nguema

---

<sup>15</sup> Phaf-Rheinberger mentions the novels *El señor presidente* (1946) by Miguel Ángels Asturias, *El otoño del patriarca* (1975) by Gabriel García Márquez, *Yo, el Supremo* (1974) by Augusto Roa Bastos, *El recurso del método* (1974) by Alejo Carpentier and *La fiesta del chivo* (2000) by Mario Vargas Llosa. Her point is that these are all novels that exude an atmosphere of intimidation and terror.

<sup>16</sup> Ndonga manifiesta ser uno de estos 'letrados' portadores del *arte retro* (término de Rama que alude a una cultura moderna de memoria), que vigila los cambios de los signos semióticos de una sociedad urbana en un momento clave de su transformación de una colonia a una república moderna (Ibid.: 142).

<sup>17</sup> *La fiesta del chivo* (2000) by Vargas Llosa describes the memories of Urania Cabral on her return to Santo Domingo (capital of the Dominican Republic) of the dictator of that country, Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina, in the period from 1930 to 1961.

Biyogo Ñegue Ndong' and *padre de la patria* in Fang (the language of his tribe) that has been declared the national language (Ibid.: 32). Otabela Mewolo points out the comparison between *el chivo* Trujillo and *el gallo* Macías as *único gallo del corral* (the only cock on the dunghill)<sup>18</sup> and to the racism of both Trujillo (toward Haitians) and Macías (toward whites) that went hand in hand with nationalism:

Saving the country of Guinea from western colonialism and imperialism is also the argument the dictator Nguema uses to justify his own 'nationalism', in a form that rejects everything to do with Spain in particular and with the western world in general.<sup>19</sup> [own translation]

## 2.3 African literature and *Négritude*

In his interview with Ngom, Ndongo has said that in *Entre estética y compromiso* he thinks in Spanish as well as in Fang (the language of the ethnic group to which he belongs), meaning, he claims that his literature is equally determined by both cultures (Ngom, 2008: 203). He also calls himself a writer and journalist from Equatorial Guinea who is deeply concerned about his country and compatriots and that he has been writing about this ever since he discovered that someone with a black skin can also write (187-88). By his own admission, he made this discovery in high school when he read *Things Fall Apart*, the novel by the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe, who was also his first contact with black literature in general and African literature in particular (187).<sup>20</sup> In several interviews, Ndongo has also referred to other African writers such as Léopold Senghor and Frantz Fanon, who belong to the group of intellectuals who formed the *Négritude* movement in the 1930s.

Looking at the theme of his novels (the consequences of colonialism and the role that skin color plays in this), Ndongo might be seen to be a follower of the *Négritude* movement.<sup>21</sup> However, Michael Ugarte asserts that Ndongo is not because he is less interested in emphasizing a specific, national identity than in the way power functions (Ugarte, 2013: 98).

---

<sup>18</sup> El gallo, the rooster was a symbol of Macías' party.

<sup>19</sup> Salvar la patria guineana del colonialismo y del imperialismo occidentales es también el argumento esgrimido por el dictador Nguema para justificar su particular 'nacionalismo', bajo forma de rechazo de todo lo relacionado con España en particular y el mundo occidental en general.<sup>19</sup> (Ibid.: 41)

<sup>20</sup> It should be noted that *Las tinieblas de mi memoria negra* has a passage in common with *Things fall apart*. Both novels contain a passage in which a relative of the main character (uncle or grandfather), as a representative of the local African religion, confronts a pastor or priest as a representative of the Christian religion.

<sup>21</sup> See Part I, Chapter 2, note 49.

Nevertheless, there is also a connection with the *Négritude* movement, that is apparent in the title of his first novel *Las tinieblas de tu memoria negra*, that is taken from a poem by Léopold Senghor<sup>22</sup> and in a series of articles he wrote about Frantz Fanon. These articles appeared under the heading *Pensando and Frantz Fanon* (*Índice*, 1972, 1973) and deal with themes such as colonization, racism, interracial sexuality, alienation and emancipation; themes that also play a role in *Los poderes de la tempestad* and his other novels.<sup>23</sup> Ndonga refers to *Négritude* in the sixth stanza of his poem *Cántico*:

*El poeta llora a las muertos  
que matan manos negras  
en nombre de la Negritud.  
Yo canto con mi pueblo  
una vida pasada bajo el cacaotero  
para que ellos merienden cho-co-la-te.*<sup>24</sup>

(*Olvidos*: 58,59)

In the first stanzas of this poem, he indicates how he sees himself as an (African) poet and how he sees poets in general:

*Yo no quiero ser poeta  
para cantar a África.  
Yo no quiero ser poeta  
para glosar lo negro.  
Yo no quiero ser poeta así*

*El poeta no es cantor de bellezas.  
El poeta no luce la brillante piel negra.  
El poeta, este poeta no tiene voz  
para andares ondulantes de hermosas damas  
de pelos rizados y caderas redondas.*

*El poeta llora su tierra*

<sup>22</sup> The poem "Pour Emma Payelleville l'infimière" from *Chants d'hommes* 27-28 by Senghor ends with the lines: "Sous ton visage lumineux, au carrefour / des cœurs noirs / Gardé jalousement par les ténèbres / fidèles de leur mémoire noire." The title *Las tinieblas de tu memoria negra* is derived from the last line of Senghor's poem and also serves as the motto of this novel.

<sup>23</sup> The series of articles Ndonga wrote about Fanon is mainly based on *Peau noire, masques blancs* (1952) and *Les Damnés de la Terre* (1961).

<sup>24</sup> *The poet mourns the dead  
that kill black hands  
Because they are Black  
I sing with my people  
of a past life under the cocoa tree  
so that they have a piece of chocolate.*  
[own translation]

*inmensa y pequeña  
dura y frágil  
luminosa y oscura  
rica y pobre.*<sup>25</sup>

These stanzas of his poem reveal that Ndonga does not join the *Négritude* movement when it comes to singing the praises of the black skin, but when it comes to social involvement.

Ndonga is convinced that literature (and poetry) has a primarily social function: "Mi obra está creada dentro del compromiso con mi pueblo y conmigo mismo. Esto es clarísimo. Yo no considero la literatura como arte y solo arte. Considero que la literatura tiene una función social [...]." <sup>26</sup> (Zielina Limonta, 2008: 259)

### 3 Poderes de la tempestad

*Poderes de la tempestad* is a sequel to *Las tinieblas de tu memoria negra* said by the author as part of a trilogy of which the third part has not yet been published. Ndonga began this trilogy after seeing with his own eyes in 1979 how the country had deteriorated under the Macías dictatorship. The novel can be placed against the background of what Ndonga refers to as 'la generación perdida' or 'el periodo del silencio', the period in which many intellectuals from Guinea found themselves in exile, 'silently' abroad, most of them in Spain. *Poderes de*

---

25

*I don't want to be a poet  
to sing about Africa.  
I don't want to be a poet  
to cheer the Blacks.  
I don't want to be a poet like that*

*The poet is not a singer of beauties.  
The poet does not show off the black skin.  
The poet, this poet, has no voice  
for the undulating gaits of beautiful ladies  
with curly hair and rounded hips.*

*The poet mourns his land  
huge and small  
hard and brittle  
bright and dark  
rich and poor.  
[own translation]*

<sup>26</sup> "My work is created in the commitment to my people and myself. This is crystal clear. I do not consider literature as art and only art. I consider that literature has a social function [...]" [own translation]



*la tempestad* can be seen as a reaction to this period of silence, at a time when writers from Guinea felt that they could voice criticism again after Franco and after the fall of Macías. It is a retrospective of the terror of Macías, written from the perspective of a black man, a fact that, Miguel Ugarte states, is unusual and certainly not common in Spanish literature (2013: 87).

### 3.1 The story

The first sentence of chapter 0 of the novel gives an ominous message about what awaits the main character in the remaining chapters (up to 12):

Porque cuando decidiste retornar a la tierra de tus antepasados después de tantos años de peregrinaje por los mundos de los hombres sabios, aún no conocías las penalidades que jalonan la existencia de un hombre sobre la Tierra, y ni siquiera intuías que con ello te jugabas la vida.<sup>27</sup> (13)

The 'tú' (and simultaneously 'yo') in the novel is a lawyer who, after his "pilgrimage through the worlds of the wise men", that is his sojourn in Spain, returns with his wife, Ángeles, and daughter, Rut, to the country of his ancestors, Equatorial Guinea. Only at the end of the novel does it become clear that he is not only risking his own life, but also that of his family. He really wants to visit Guinea but the omens already there at the beginning continue to pile up during the story. Upon their arrival, the lawyer and Ángeles, who is a teacher, think they can do something for the country,<sup>28</sup> but it soon becomes clear that this is an illusion. They are subjected to various forms of intimidation, hardships and trials; during checks their luggage is stolen by the customs and the military, Ángeles is sexually groped by a female official (Ada), the living conditions of Cousin Mbo who takes them in are so dreadful that they choose not to live in his house, but in a hotel. It is not long before they also witness propaganda and horrific abuse on the streets. Gradually the lawyer realizes that he made a mistake:

Había cometido un error, un tremendo error al traerlas [a Ángeles y Rut] a Guinea.<sup>29</sup> (112)

---

<sup>27</sup> Because, when you decided to return to the land of your ancestors after so many years of pilgrimage through the worlds of wise men, you were still unaware of the hardships that mark the existence of a man on Earth, and you did even have the slightest inkling that with this you were risking your life. [own translation]

<sup>28</sup> "Angeles is a teacher, her husband a lawyer. Together, they symbolically embody the union of education and the rule of law" (Epps, 2010: 154).

<sup>29</sup> I had made a mistake, a tremendous mistake, in bringing them [Angels and Ruth] to Guinea. [own translation]

He decides that he does not want to settle in the country but is still determined to visit his family in the countryside of Río Muni. When he finally manages to get the necessary papers from the party (PUNT), they undertake the journey to Bata and from there to the village of his parents, in the course of which they are forced to witness a public execution of (it turns out later) an uncle of the lawyer. Upon arrival in the village, that he so barely recognizes that they initially drive past it, his grandfather, Nguema Anseme, dies and he undergoes a purification ritual performed by his uncle, Abeso, in the presence of his father. This cleansing ritual plus all the memories he has of his time in Spain in various flashbacks to his studies, the time he got to know Ángeles, the birth of Rut and the time he spent with friends, eventually gives him the strength he needs when he ends up in Blavis Prison in Malabo. He is arrested after a hasty departure from the village because of an incident with a relative.<sup>30</sup> After this Ángeles and Rut return to Spain. During an interrogation he is 'assaulted' by Ada and then he and his Cousin Mbo are tortured and beaten. Mbo had also been arrested and does not survive this ordeal. The reason for his imprisonment and torture is that they want him to sign a statement in which he admits to having conspired against Macías and it soon obvious that it no longer matters whether he resists or not or what he says:

Entonces comprendiste que ya no saldrías de ahí, dijeras lo que dijeras, habías caído en las garras del Tigre.<sup>31</sup> (196)

Finally, more dead than alive he manages to escape from Blavis with the help of a fellow inmate. Together they flee to Cameroon by boat.

### 3.2 The narrator

*Tu/yo*

In the novel there are two narrators; one tells the story in the I-form and the other tells it in

---

<sup>30</sup> During an obligatory party for which the family has to provide meat and drink, an incident occurs: one of Tío Abeso's sons - primo Edjo - insults and beats up one of the soldiers. He is taken away with hands tied como *un antílope cazado en el bosque* (as an antelope captured while hunting in the forest) (164).

<sup>31</sup> Then you understood that, no matter what you said, you would no longer get out of there, you had fallen into the claws of the Tiger. [own translation]

the you-form (*yo/tú*).<sup>32</sup> The narrator in the I-form tells what happened to him as a memory and, by doing so, he places himself outside the story of which he is part.<sup>33</sup> The second and you-narrator who, although he does address the I in the story, like the first (I) narrator is also located outside the story.<sup>34</sup> In the first few pages, one narrator presents himself in the you-form (see the passages quoted above), while the other narrator introduces himself in the course of this introductory chapter in the I-form as a lawyer in a dialogue with his wife quoted by himself:

[...] quiero volver, Ángeles, para ver a mi familia después de tantos y tan largos años; aquí ya no hago nada, terminé los estudios y ya soy abogado con suficiente experiencia para luchar contra la injusticia y promover el derecho, [...].<sup>35</sup> (16)

The narrator who recounts his memories in the I-form (in the first instance) leaves open to the reader the possibility that this is an autobiographical story, all the more because the narrator has no name. Lejeune explains that this can then involve an outsourcing of the autobiographical (autobiographical elements) to another narrator in the first person, in what he calls a 'pacte romanesque' (1975: 29).<sup>36</sup> And, when it comes to the representation of memories, Dorrit Cohen states in *Transparent Minds*, the first person in an "autobiographical narration" has a more powerful effect than the third person (1978:15). In such a narration, the I-person must recall the past and then express it in the narration (Ibid.). If there is also a you-narrator, this makes the effect even more powerful because then a 'doubling' occurs since the I-person seems to be either talking to or arguing with himself. She states that the you-narrator can also be used because a narration restricted to the first person entails a limitation: "The first-person narrator has less free access to his own past psyche than the omniscient narrator

<sup>32</sup> Rimmon-Kenan apud Genette: *intradiegetic* I-narrator and an *extradiegetic* you-narrator.

<sup>33</sup> Rimmon-Kenan apud Genette: *extradiegetic/homodiegetic*.

<sup>34</sup> Rimmon-Kenan apud Genette: *extradiegetic/heterodiegetic* narrator. The you-narrator is a little farther outside the story than the I-narrator; Luz Rodríguez Carranza in *Un Teatro de la Memoria* calls it a voice that addresses the character, individualized as you (1983: 17). The you-narrator therefore moves to a different story level (than the I-narrator), namely: a story level that is more equal to the level on which the reader finds themselves; as Michel Butor claims in *Répertoire II*, in which he refers to the first, second and third person in a novel, who, he claims, also communicate with each other: en tant qu'il est différent de l'auteur et du lecteur, la première 'représente' l'auteur, la seconde le lecteur; mais toutes ces personnes communiquent entre elles, il se produit des déplacements incessants" (1964: 67).

<sup>35</sup> I want to return, Ángeles, to see my family after so many, such long years; I can no longer do anything here, I have completed my studies and I am already a lawyer with enough experience to fight against injustice and promote law and order, [...]. [own translation]

<sup>36</sup> Although Ndongo has always denied the autobiographical nature of his novels, there are still similarities between the you/I narrator in the novel and his own life, given his own return to Guinea after so many years of not seeing his family, albeit during the Macías regime.

of third-person fiction has to the psyches of his characters" (Ibid.: 144). In the I-form, the lawyer can only tell what is happening within his field of vision and he cannot go beyond his own memories. The narrator who tells the story in the you-form does have that opportunity. He can step outside the I-figure and move into another time and space, giving a different perspective. In the novel, the narrator in the second person eventually knows what is going on outside the prison when the lawyer "I" is locked up:

Jáudenes supo que habías sido detenido cuando llevabas dos días en sus manos. Y, tal como lo había prometido a Ángeles sin que tú lo supieras, se apresuró a comunicárselo por vía diplomática [...]. Tus socios del bufete escribieron a la Asociación Internacional de Juristas, a Justicia y Paz, a la Comisión de Derechos Humanos de Naciones Unidas y a cuantas organizaciones humanitarias pudieron, y llovieron cartas y telegramas sobre Macías pidiendo tu liberación. [...] Tú no podías saber todo eso, sólo percibías, sin comprender, los efectos de aquel movimiento a tu alrededor [...].<sup>37</sup> (233)

The you-narrator therefore sees the 'I' from the outside, but at the same time is also aware of his feelings and thoughts (from the inside), that is made apparent in "sólo percibías, sin comprender, los efectos". This second narrator in the you-form gives the writer the opportunity to broaden the scope of the story.

### *Narrator focus*

The story is expanded because the narrator in the you-form with an external focus (as external focalizer) can look at himself in the I-form (as internal focalizer) and the situation. In *Répertoire II*, Michel Butor points out that the you-narrator broadens the focus of the 'I' who for some reason cannot tell his/her own story: "soit parce qu'il ment, nous cache ou se cache quelque chose, soit parce qu'il n'a pas tous les éléments, ou même, s'il les a, qu'il est incapable de les relier convenablement" (1964: 66,67). Butor indicates that the second person always appears when there is a development in a character's consciousness; whenever he cannot tell his own story or if a secret has to be extracted from him (67). The narrator in the you form therefore broadens what Rimmon-Kenan calls the "facets of focalization", that, in

---

<sup>37</sup> Jáudenes knew that you had been arrested after you had been in his hands for two days. And, just as he had promised, Ángeles, without your knowledge, he hastened to communicate it to her through diplomatic channels [...]. Your brother counsels at the lawyer's office wrote to the International Association of Jurists, Justice and Peace, the United Nations Human Rights Commission and as many humanitarian organizations as they could, and letters and telegrams rained down on Macías demanding your release. [...] You could not have known all that, you could only see, without understanding, the effects of that movement around you [...]. [own translation]

her view, includes the psychological and ideological facet in addition to the space and time facet. Throughout the novel, through both focalizations, we learn from the narrator how he feels and what he thinks in an almost continuous interior monologue (from the inside). The psychological facet of the other characters remains more or less unknown or, like that of Ángeles, for example, is exposed by the you-narrator in an outside focus:

Y Ángeles empezó a preocuparse por tu comportamiento, cada vez más extravagante e impropio a medida que pasaban los días. No habías cumplido ni mes y medio en Guinea pero tu carácter había cambiado de forma alarmante para ella [...].<sup>38</sup> (97)

In the use of the ideological facet, the narrator in the you-form confronts the 'I', about whom a false verdict has been passed, with what is going on from the point of view of (the ideology of) the regime:

Claro que nunca te juzgaron, ni hubo sentencia, ni te comunicaron pena alguna. Porque el informe que serviría para acallar a los organismos internacionales, cuyos responsables se desentenderían a partir de entonces de tu asunto sin poner duda ni un solo momento el cúmulo de mentiras sobre el que se asentaba el gobierno del único milagro de Guinea Ecuatorial [...].<sup>39</sup> (235)

The you-form is used by the I-narrator to inform himself, from a focus that is outside himself, about what is going on outside his story. It turns out that all events up to that point had been distorted by the regime. The lawyer who returned to Malabo with his manuals to serve his country and see his family is portrayed by the regime as a spy in the service of Spain with subversive intentions:

[...] y así lo confirmó el tribunal por las evidencias aportadas por la Fiscalía y que la defensa no pudo contrarrestar, que, además de espiar en el campamento militar, habías introducido en el país propaganda subversiva con los fines ya expuestos, habías recibido mucho dinero de diplomáticos extranjeros acreditados para perpetrar tus demoníacas acciones, te habías reunido con fines conspiratorios con elementos españoles a altas horas de la noche en una

---

<sup>38</sup> And Ángeles began to worry about your behavior, that was becoming increasingly extravagant and inappropriate as the days went by. You hadn't been in Guinea a month and a half but she thought your character had changed alarmingly [...]. [own translation]

<sup>39</sup> Of course, they never judged you, nor was any sentence passed, nor did they pronounce any penalty. Because, the report that would serve to silence the international organizations, whose leaders would afterwards ignore your problem without doubting for a single moment the pack of lies on which the government of the only miracle of Equatorial Guinea was based [...]. [own translation]



habitación de tu hostel, te habías desplazado a la parte continental del país donde debías iniciar tu sucio trabajo [...].<sup>40</sup>(234)

It can be argued that there is a discrepancy between the focalization of the you-narrator and that of the I-narrator. The you-narrator focuses on the regime's point of view, one that he transfers to the I-narrator<sup>41</sup> who is aware of this because of his own predicament. In other words, the you-narrator here fills a gap (emptiness) between what the I-narrator knows and cannot know because it is taking place outside his own field of vision.<sup>42</sup>

The focalization of the regime and that from the position of the (black) Africans is directly expressed in the dialogue that Ana (as a representative of the focus of the regime) conducts with the I-narrator:

Nosotros somos africanos, abogado, somos negros. Nuestro mundo es otro, y debemos dejar a los blancos con sus cosas. Pero que no nos sigan engañando. Tú eres un hombre inteligente, y les conoces bien. ¿Qué han hecho por ti? ¿Qué han hecho por tu pueblo? Sólo explotarnos y llevarse nuestras riquezas, para enriquecerse a costa nuestra. Solo somos los hombres sobre los que se aúpan para alcanzar su cielo, su bienestar, egoístamente, y ya es hora de que rompamos eso, porque estamos hartos de soportar su peso. Y tú debes decidir de qué parte estás.<sup>43</sup> (205)

On the other hand, Cousin Mbo acts as a focalizer for the lawyer's family who has remained behind in Guinea:

No debiste venir a Guinea. [...] En la Guinea actual todo es al revés de lo que tú recuerdas. Ir limpio es un crimen. Persiguen a todos que saben algo, a los maestros, a los pocos guineanos

---

<sup>40</sup> [...] And therefore the court affirmed the evidence presented by the Public Prosecution Service, that the defense could not contradict, [alleging] that besides spying on the military camp, you had brought subversive propaganda into the country for the purposes already stated, that you had received a lot of money from accredited foreign diplomats who paid you to perpetrate your devilish actions, that you encountered Spanish elements in your hotel room late at night for the purposes of conspiring and that you had moved to the continental part of the country where you had to begin your dirty work [...]. [own translation]

<sup>41</sup> The you-narrator can be seen here as the focalizing subject who focuses on (the focalization of) the regime as the object of focalization. This distinction between subject and object of focalization is taken from Mieke Bal: "Focalization is the relation between the subject and object of perception" (2002: 41).

<sup>42</sup> See Butor's idea mentioned earlier that the second person always appears when the I-person cannot tell its own story (1964: 67).

<sup>43</sup> We are Africans, lawyer, we are black. Our world is a different one and we should leave the whites to their own devices. But don't keep fooling us. You are an intelligent man and you are well acquainted with them. What have they done for you? What have they done for your people? Only exploit us and take our wealth to enrich themselves at our expense. We are nothing but the men they climb upon to reach their heaven, selfishly to acquire their own prosperity, and now it is time for us to break through this, because we are sick of carrying their weight. You must decide which side you are on. [own translation]

que tienen alguna carrera, sobre todo si han estudiado en algún país de bloque occidental, y peor si es en la colonialista España.<sup>44</sup> (62,63)

However, we do not get to know their own state of mind of any of these focalizers (Ana and Mbo); their focalization is a limited focalization from the outside.

### 3.3 The structure of the novel

The novel consists of twelve untitled chapters, preceded by a dedication and some quotes. At the end of the chapters, there is a blank page with only a single line. The story proceeds chronologically over the different chapters and is told from day to day at the beginning, but gradually accelerates. Delays come in the form of flashbacks, dialogues, certain events, speeches and interrogations. In this section, the role and effect of certain more or less self-contained text elements will be examined on the basis of Genette's idea of *paratext* and Dällenbach's idea of *mise en abyme*. Bearing Ong's work in mind, whether there are also oral characteristics and what the effect of this is in this novel will also be examined.

#### *Four paratexts*

The novel has two mottos, a dedication and another closing sentence that can be seen as 'framework of the story' and can therefore pass for what Genette calls *paratext*. It concerns two quotations as pre-announcement, a quotation from *The Book of Revelation*:

Lo que veas escríbelo en un libro y envíalo a las siete Iglesias.<sup>45</sup>  
*Apocalipsis*, 1.11

And a quote from King Lear:

Maldita sea la época en que el rebaño de ciegos es conducido por un puñado de locos!<sup>46</sup>  
W. Shakespeare: *El rey Lear*.

---

<sup>44</sup> You shouldn't have come to Guinea. [...] In Guinea today, everything is the opposite of what you remember. Being honest is a crime. They persecute everyone who knows something, the teachers, the few Guineans who have a career, especially if they have studied in a western country, even worse if it has been in colonialist Spain. [own translation]

<sup>45</sup> What you see write it in a book and send it to the seven Churches. [own translation]

<sup>46</sup> Cursed be the age when a flock of the blind is led by a bunch of lunatics! [own translation]

The first quote is a motto indicating the necessity of what is to be written as a testimony to be made known to the world, just as John was instructed to send his prophecies to 'las siete Iglesias' (the seven churches and congregations).<sup>47</sup> The second quote, taken from King Lear, makes it clear that the testimony to be revealed is about an era in which a group of blind people are led by 'un puñado de locos' (a bunch of madmen). Besides being a reference to what is to come, the quotes also imbue the text with a universal (Biblical and tragic) value. The personal pain and suffering of the clan or community is introduced universally through these paratexts and pre-announcement of the Apocalypse. Ndonga calls it an allegory:

Creo que aquí también está clara la alegoría: me sentía en la obligación de publicar a los cuatro vientos ('enviar a las siete Iglesias') lo que vi en el país, donde un rebaño de ciegos es, efectivamente, conducido por un puñado de locos.<sup>48</sup> (Zielina Limonta, 2008: 256)

The two quotes are followed by a dedication from the writer to his grandparents and uncle, to whom he says he owes "a permanent review that avoids forgetting":

A mis abuelos Pascual y Josefina, en su otra vida, a quienes debo la permanente mirada hacia atrás que impide el olvido; y a su hijo, el tío Patricio, muerto sin consuelo de una tumba para el recuerdo.<sup>49</sup>

With this message, as he looks back on his grandparents, their son and his uncle who died without the comfort of a grave as a memory (perhaps thanks to the Macías regime), Ndonga has already put the novel on a permanent retrospective beforehand.

After the story of the novel has been told, at the end there is a completely blank page with only a closing line on the verso that contains both a prediction and a retrospective as "the thorn that will find its way out where it came in":

La espina saldrá por donde entró  
(*Bamileké*)<sup>50</sup>

---

<sup>47</sup> "Saying, I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last; and what ye see, write it in a book, and send it to the seven churches which are in Asia, even to Ephesus, and to Smyrna, and to Pergamos, and to Thyatira, and to Sardis, and to Philadelphia, and to Laodicea." (From *Book of Revelation 1-11*; "The Commandment to Write." 1:11)

<sup>48</sup> I think the allegory is also clear here: I felt an obligation to publish ("send to the seven Churches") what I saw in the country, in which a flock of blind people are actually being led by a handful of lunatics. [own translation]

<sup>49</sup> To my grandparents, Pascual and Josefina, in their other lives, to whom I owe the permanent look backwards that prevents forgetting; and to their son, Uncle Patricio, dead without the consolation of a grave to remember. [own translation]

<sup>50</sup> Bamileké is a language or people in Cameroon.

## *Mise en abyme*

Retrospectives and foresights are also present in the text of the novel. Where a text shows a doubling as an “internal mirror that reflects the whole of the story”, Dällenbach dubs this a *mise en abyme* (1989: 36). For example, both the opening sentence and the last sentence of the novel can be seen as a *mise en abyme* because, in them, the course of the novel is reflected by means of a look ahead and in retrospect.

In the opening sentence of the novel,<sup>51</sup> the events resulting from the lawyer's decision to return to his country, thereby also risking his own life, are already referred to. Moments later, the I-narrator and lawyer compares himself to Julius Caesar crossing the Rubicon:

En ese preciso momento me embargó la misma indefinible sensación que debió apoderarse del ánimo de Julio César al pasar el Rubicón, y díjeme en mi interior, inconsciente y melancólicamente, *alea iacta est!*<sup>52</sup> (21,22)

Like Julius Caesar's fate after crossing the River Rubicón into the territory of Rome, that of the lawyer was sealed as soon as he arrived in Equatorial Guinea with his family to settle in 'las garras del Tigre'.<sup>53</sup> All events flow from this to culminate in the transgression of the military regime that he has to endure and that he can only throw off by his flight, condensed in the last sentence of the novel:

El miliciano arrojó entonces al mar su fúsil, su gorro y la casaca de su uniforme verde olivo, y quedaron atrás todas las penalidades y todos los horrores.<sup>54</sup> (252)

Halfway through the story there is a turning point (what Dällenbach calls a *mise en abyme* as pivot) that is expressed in a cleansing ritual. The lawyer is taken by his Uncle Abeso, “jefe

---

<sup>51</sup> Porque cuando decidiste retornar a la tierra de tus antepasados después de tantos años de peregrinaje por los mundos de los hombres sabios, aún no conocías las penalidades que jalonan la existencia de un hombre sobre la Tierra, y ni siquiera intuías que con ello te jugabas la vida (13).

<sup>52</sup> At that precise moment, the same indefinable sensation that must have taken hold of Julius Caesar's mind as he crossed the Rubicon overcame me, and I said to myself, unconsciously and sadly, *alea iacta est!* [own translation] *Alea iacta est* is Latin for 'the die is cast', meaning the inevitable will happen. The saying is used today to mean that certain events have been irrevocably set in motion and that something inevitable will happen, for instance, the gambler who has already rolled the dice.

<sup>53</sup> Macías was nicknamed 'el Tigre de Mongombo' (Mgomo is in Rio Muni where he came from). In *Los poderes de la tempestad*, three-quarters of the way through the novel, the inevitable becomes apparent when the lawyer understands that he had "fallen into the Tiger's claws" (196).

<sup>54</sup> The soldier then threw his rifle, cap and the tunic of his olive-colored uniform into the sea, leaving all the misery and horror behind us. [own translation]

efectivo de la tribu y heredero de la tradición”, into the forest where naked he undergoes ritual whose purpose is to ensure a long life, free of all evil and protected from his enemies:

Y, maldijo a todos aquellos que proyectaran su perfidia sobre ti, porque estás ungido con el poder de la tribu desde siempre y la tribu se mira en ti, y las tribulaciones de este mundo y las asechanzas de los enemigos nada podrán contra tu firme voluntad de resistencia. A veces hay que parecer cobarde, dijo el tío Abeso, para salvarte y salvar a tu pueblo, eso me enseñó el jefe Abeso Motulu y te lo transmito ahora con mi bendición. Nunca olvides que la clave del éxito está en saber esperar, los más pacientes son siempre los vencedores al final [...].<sup>55</sup> (166-67)

The run-up to this is the journey (to Malabo, Bata and the village of the ancestors) that culminates in his reunion with his parents and in this ritual. The ritual gives him the strength to endure everything that happens next (in a descending line!); the journey back to Bata and Malabo where he ends up in prison. In that prison he finds himself in a situation in which he is reminded of the circumstances of the ritual and that also transposes the torture into a kind of ritual:

Y el tío Abeso asperjaba sobre mi frente y el pecho y el vientre y el sexo y los muslos y los pies el agua espesa y glutinosa de las infusiones de las hojas que renovaban mi alianza con el tribu [...]<sup>56</sup> (244)

The event is not only mirrored literally (nudity, sprinkling water over the body) but also figuratively, as a force.

### *Oral influences*

In the novel oral influences are mainly expressed by what Ong calls an "enthusiastic description of physical violence" (1982: 44). An example of this is the enthusiasm with which one of the soldiers reports what he and the other soldiers had perpetrated during their visit to Annobón:

---

<sup>55</sup> And, he cursed all those who would diplease you, because you have been anointed forever with the power of the tribe and that tribe is within you, and the tribulations of this world and the snares of the enemies will do nothing against your firm resolve to resist. Sometimes you have to seem cowardly, said Uncle Abeso, to save yourself and your people, that is what Chief Abeso Motulu taught me and what I now transmit to you with my blessing. Never forget that the key to success is knowing how to wait, the most patient are always the winners in the end [...]. [own translation]

<sup>56</sup> And Uncle Abeso sprinkled on my forehead, ,chest, belly, genitals, thighs and feet the thick, glutinous water made from the infusions of the leaves that renewed my bond with the tribe [...]. [own translation]



[...] nuestro camarada Aboasikara y sus valientes milicianos a cuyo frente estaba el camarada Satán mandó abrirles los vientres a golpes de bayoneta, teníais que haber visto la cara de esos mozalbetes antes tan chulos cuando miraron con la honda sorpresa sus barrigas que se vaciaban, intentando sujetarse las tripas que se desparramaban en sus manos, como berreaban los condenados, igualitos que cabras abiertas en canal, y cuando fueron cayendo al suelo envueltos en su propia mierda [...].<sup>57</sup> (162)

It is part of a sentence that begins on p.160 with: “Tu eres un hombre de suerte, camarada, tener un hijo tan sabio y una nuera blanca [...]”,<sup>58</sup> addressed to the lawyer's father to whom a group of soldiers pays an intimidatory visit that ends in a description of numerous rapes in Annobón, with the words: [...] no dejamos ni una sola virgen”<sup>59</sup> (62). In short, it is an oral narration as "story within the story" that runs through a sentence and is poured out over the reader in all its vehemence halted only here and there by commas, as it were. The character telling this story is limited to a single designation (district chief) and fits the template of "evil"<sup>60</sup> as do the other representatives of the regime in the novel.

### 3.4 The characters and circumstances

The main characters in the story are the lawyer and his wife, Ángeles, who both come to Guinea to settle, fully intending to work there. The lawyer has an even more urgent goal, to regain his own identity with his family in his native country after years away in Spain, but he doubts if they will still recognize and accept him:

Habías transgredido el tabú y les llevabas a una blanca como esposa y a una nieta mulata, que podrían representar todos los nuevos signos, sí, pero intuías que también simbolizaban tu segregación de la tribu.<sup>61</sup> (15)

---

<sup>57</sup> [...] our comrade Aboasikara and his brave militiamen headed by Comrade Satan ordered their stomachs to be bayoneted, you should have seen the faces of those young lads, so cool before, when they looked with profound surprise at their emptying bellies, as they tried to hold onto their guts that spilled out in their hands, how those damned bleated like goats whose carcasses have been cut open, and then fell to the ground bathed in their own shit [...]. [own translation]

<sup>58</sup> You are a lucky man, Comrade, to have such a wise son and a white daughter-in-law [...]. [own translation]

<sup>59</sup> [...] we didn't leave a single virgin. [own translation]

<sup>60</sup> This expresses the opposition between good and evil that, Ong declares, characterizes oral texts (Ong, 1982: 70).

<sup>61</sup> You had violated the taboo and you brought them a white woman as a wife and a mulatto granddaughter, who could represent all the new signs [of the times], yes, but you intuited that they also symbolized your segregation from the tribe. [own translation]

Although his fears prove unfounded as far as his family is concerned, throughout his stay in the country he is constantly opposed by the representatives of the regime who are hostile to Spain and anyone who is white. The lawyer and his family also seem barely able to cope with the conditions of neglect and decay that are expressed in descriptions such as:

Pero desde el mirador subía un hedor nauseabundo, que os obligó a alejaros de la cancela construida sobre el acantilado, pues éste se había convertido en un vertedero de basuras en el que descubriste, entre la vegetación crecida y descuidada, pieles de plátanos recientes, restos de mangos podridos y un perro muerto con la barriga hinchada, a punto de estallar, y otros desperdicios sobre los que rondaban miles de moscas. A un lado del jardín se levantaba una barraca de cemento y piedra, que había sido en su momento un merendero, y en el centro se erguía una fuente, ahora sin agua, que había estado coronada por una escultura, ahora rota, cuyos restos proclamaban, mejor que ninguna otra cosa, el abandono a que estaba la ciudad.<sup>62</sup> (60)

The conditions in Guinea contrast negatively with what they had left behind in Spain, or as the (Spanish) doctor who visits Ángeles – who is on the verge of a nervous breakdown – remarks:

Entiendo que ustedes lo tienen difícil, los guineanos acostumbrados a vivir en España, siempre con el corazón dividido y el alma atrás.<sup>63</sup> (115)

In the same line lies the contrast between the (more/less) 'rounded characters' of the lawyer, Ángeles and *el primo* Mbo, who represent 'the good', and the 'flat characters' of the representatives of the regime, including *la miliciana* Ada, representing 'evil'. In the (recurring) animal descriptions of Ada's appearance with her:

[...] pechos colosales, arrugados, reblandecidos y deformes, en cuyos enormes pezones, bolas nigérrimas, nacían unos pelos como alambres, agresivos y extrañamente tiesos.<sup>64</sup> (206)

---

<sup>62</sup> But from the lookout arose a nauseating stench, that forced you to move away from the gate built on the cliff, because it had become a garbage dump in which you might discover, among the overgrown, neglected vegetation, recent banana peels, remains of rotten mangoes and a dead dog with a swollen belly, about to burst open, and other rubbish swarming with legions of flies. On one side of the garden, that had once upon a time been a picnic area, stood a cement and stone hut and in the center rose a fountain, now waterless, previously crowned by a now broken sculpture whose remains proclaimed, more than anything else, the abandonment of the city. [own translation]

<sup>63</sup> I understand that you are having a hard time, you Guineans who are used to living in Spain, with a heart forever divided and a soul left behind. [own translation]

<sup>64</sup> [...] colossal breasts, withered, flabby and shapeless, from whose enormous nipples, black balls, sprang a few hairs resembling barbed wire, aggressive and strangely stiff. [own translation]

and her rough sex-crazed performance at the beginning and end of the novel not only converges the regime's sexism and racism, but also paints a picture that stands in contrast to Ángeles (and Spain); her gentleness is expressed in her name alone.<sup>65</sup> However, Ada also arouses the lawyer's fascination; the you/I narrator talks about "la imagen obsesionante"(88) and "la imagen tentadora y excitante de la miliciana Ada" (189).<sup>66</sup> In the descriptions, he is also clearly attracted to this woman whose dark complexion, capacious body and robust, aggressive behavior contrast with "la piel sonrosada" (pink complexion) and the vulnerability of Ángeles, from whom he feels increasingly distanced.

Minor characters such as *la miliciana*, Ada, and *el jefecillo*, Elo, are characterized only through their function and cruelty, as personifications of the regime and of evil.<sup>67</sup> In the repetition of the recurring descriptions of sexual, bellicose and menacing elements, the stereotype of evil emerges in these characters to act as a contrast to the stereotype of good. The stereotype of the guilty black woman, Ada, who instills only fear is opposed to the innocent stereotype of the white Ángeles. From a black perspective, however, Ángeles is also linked to the stereotypical image of the white whore: "[...] que una blanca a la que le gustan los negros no puede ser sino una puta."<sup>68</sup> (103) In the novel, different characters are played off against each other as stereotypes.

#### 4. Ndongo's novel as truth proceedings

The quote from the *The Book of Revelation*, as the motto of the novel, is about the *Alpha and Omega* and the I who, as the *First and the Last*,<sup>69</sup> are called to bear witness and make it known in a book. The lawyer's book and story, testimony to "the flock of blind men, led by a handful of lunatics" (the second motto taken from Shakespeare), is what follows; its necessity and irreversibility evident in the reference of the I-narrator to Julius Caesar's *alea iacta est*

<sup>65</sup> Ángeles and Rut are names with a Biblical sound in keeping with their characters; Ángeles has an angelic character in the novel, that is matched by the description of her soft skin; "su piel sonrosada, embebida ya por el sol tropical, se mostraba calida, límpida y suave". (70) Donato Ndongo says of this character: "[...] es una creación ideal de la mujer que me hubiera gustado tener" (Zielina Limonta, 2008: 262).

<sup>66</sup> "The obsessive image" / "the seductive and titillating image of *la miliciana* Ada" [own translation]

<sup>67</sup> Michael Ugarte makes a connection to Frantz Fanon's theory: "Ndongo, through Ada and the physical response to her, has extended Fanon's description of racial sexual politics by exposing the militia women's black mask." His argument is that Ada appears in the novel as "a black woman wearing the mask of the white male colonizer-rapist" (2013: 238).

<sup>68</sup> "[...] that a white (woman) who loves blacks can only be a whore" [own translation]

<sup>69</sup> "Saying, I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last; and what ye see, write it in a book, and send it to the seven churches [...]"

(the die is cast). After the lawyer has given his testimony, there is another blank page at the end of the novel with on the *verso* the spell that makes the painfulness of that testimony clear in *the thorn that penetrated and where it also* (as permanent testimony?) *will come out*. This references the beginning and end of the novel and rounds off the story like the circle and the wheel in Ndongo's poem,<sup>70</sup> turning towards *the nothing* or, conversely, toward *the everything*:

*Rueda rodando la redonda rueda.  
Hacia la nada. O hacia el todo*

The first happening, a thorn that penetrates the body (to leave it again) seems to be a personal pain, but Ndongo connects that personal pain to that of his country and people, as is expressed in several stanzas of the poem *Cántico*, quoted earlier, including this (seventh) stanza:

*El poeta llora a los muertos  
Que matan manos negras  
En nombre de la Negritud.  
Yo canto con mi pueblo  
Una vida pasada bajo el cacaotero  
Para que ellos merienden cho-co-la-te.*

In the novel, personal pain is linked to the pain of the family in an assignment addressed to the grandparents and uncle, who are owed a "permanent look back" to rescue them from oblivion. This shows the necessity of witnessing and making this public or, as Ndongo himself put it: "[...] me sentía en la obligación de publicar a los cuatro vientos ('enviar a las siete Iglesias') lo que vi en el país" (Zielina Limonta, 2008: 256).

Because the lawyer cannot help but remain faithful to his own decision to return to his country, he also suffers the painful consequences. In everything he experiences and in the accompanying pain (that is *everything* and *nothing*, like the wheel in the poem rolls to *all* or *nothing*), a truth procedure takes place but one that does not concern the particular truth of the lawyer (or author), but a universal and community-oriented truth announced in the *paratexts* in the message. Therefore, with his novel, Ndongo becomes part of a culture of remembrance in which the memory of the large-scale massacres under Macías continues into

---

<sup>70</sup> The poem is quoted at the beginning of this chapter.

the present as truth, while its universality can also be associated with violent Latin American dictatorships and the Holocaust in the Second World War (Phaf-Rheinberger).

Because the author enters into an 'autobiographical pact' with the reader, by outsourcing the autobiographical to a nameless I-figure (Lejeune), the message, and with it also the memory, acquires a powerful effect that is reinforced in the 'doubling' of the you-person. The you-narrator can go beyond the I-narrator's own memory whenever there is (for that I-narrator) a void created by what he does not know. In this way the you-narrator fills voids with truths that are not known by the self because they take place outside his own field of vision. This often concerns political truths from the focus of the regime, focalized not by him but by the you-narrator, who is outside the story and is instead on the narrative level of the reader. Because the reader is involved in the story in two ways (both through the first and second person) in a series of flashbacks, dialogues, speeches and interrogations, the events come across with greater intensity. In the first part of the story, the reader is gradually drawn into what happens to the lawyer and his family, into how his aversion to the situation in which he finds himself grows and how it turns against him when he threatens to become alienated from himself. Then, about halfway through the story, there is a rift that is marked by a cleansing ritual (as *mise en abyme*) mirrored in a torture scene during his time in prison. In the end, in the interrogations and torture, the thoughts, monologues and dialogues merge to such an extent that the reader is crushed by them as it were.

Besides the double double narrative perspective, the stereotypes present in the novel can also be seen as a means of, as Ndongho himself points out, “implicar al oyente (ahora lector) en la historia narrada”.<sup>71</sup> Because of their stereotypical description (often linked to the colonial past and characteristics of the dictatorship), certain characters in the novel (such as Ángeles and Ada) are contrasted against each other all the more sharply; a situation that coupled with the detailed description of physical violence contributes to the action and dynamics of the story, in keeping with an oral tradition (Ong). Nevertheless, the continuous, 'meandering' sentences without a break, with the alternation of the you-I perspective, can be linked not only to an oral tradition, but also to the literature of Spanish author Goytisolo whose novel *Señas de identidad* exhibits similarities with *Los poderes de la tempestad* in both stylistic and substantive terms. (Nomo Ngamba, Epps).

---

<sup>71</sup> “involving the listener (now reader) in the told story”, in which Ndongho invokes the Fang tradition (Ngom, 2008: 195).



In the purification ritual, an ancestral power to survive is passed on that is used during the torture (in which this ritual is mirrored). In the pain of that survival (the thorn that goes in) the political rupture occurs in which a truth that finds its way out in the testimony (where the thorn will go out again) apotheosizes. In short, there is a pain underlying this novel as a testimony and as a truth procedure that is both personal (the lawyer's pain) and universal (the pain of family, clan and community). This pain (as does the circle in the poem) stands for *all* or *nothing*; or for the emptiness in which truth occurs (Badiou). There are other voids in the novel in which there is the difference in focus and level of storytelling between the I and you narrator, in which there are empty stereotypes in the characters and which end in a blank page leading up to the page with the saying about the thorn. All these voids present in the novel commence a truth procedure that continues into the present and therefore transcends the theme of the lawyer's personal agony and the violence under the Macías regime.

## Chapter 2 María Nsue Angüe – *Ekomo*

### *Introduction*

*No sé dónde estoy, si no es en la frontera entre la vida y la muerte.*<sup>1</sup>

(Nsue Angüe, *Ekomo*: 19)

Even before Nnanga, the narrator in María Nsue Angüe's novel *Ekomo*, begins her story (in the first chapter), we are introduced, “A modo de introducción” (by way of introduction), to the state she is in at the moment. This is somewhere on a dividing line between life and death; the context of which will probably become clear in the novel, a deduction that can be made in this 'introduction' to the book in which the narrator says she needs to express everything that the person whom she is addressing in the second person (Ekomo?) should know:

Necesitaría un libro para expresar todo lo que necesitas saber, aunque no hay palabras que puedan describir con suficiente claridad la congoja que vi en tus ojos.<sup>2</sup> (17)

The suffering endured is apparent from the first sentence of the novel: “Una daga se ha clavado en mi pecho”;<sup>3</sup> and agony that also seems to lie at the core of this “first novel in Spanish-African literature written by a woman” described by Mbaré Ngom in *Literatura de Guinea Ecuatorial (Antología)* (2000: 26). Ngom says that, in this novel Nsue Angüe still holds on to African traditions even as she makes a rapprochement with western civilization,<sup>4</sup> whereas Donato Ndongo-Bidyogo asserts that no political (anti-colonial) charge can be attached to this as far as literature in Equatorial Guinea is concerned (Ibid.: 42). This seems to be endorsed by Nsue Angüe herself who, in an interview with Mischa G. Hendel called herself a writer who writes only for her children and grandchildren, in order to pass on the

---

<sup>1</sup> I do not know where I am, if not on the brink between life and death. [own translation]

<sup>2</sup> I would need a book to express everything you need to know, although there are no words that can describe clearly enough the sadness I saw in your eyes. [own translation]

<sup>3</sup> A dagger has lodged itself in my chest. [own translation]

<sup>4</sup> “La novela, además de darnos una visión de la condición de la mujer «desde dentro», plantea el enfrentamiento entre dos visiones de África: la primera aferrada a sus tradiciones, y la segunda aspirando a acercarse más y similar, si cabe, la civilización occidental” (Ibid.: 26).

stories that existed before the colonial era, in which politics plays no role: “Yo ni siquiera tengo responsabilidad con mis lectores, escribo para que disfruten porque yo disfruto escribirlo. Yo no escribo temas politicos, escribo temas populares para el pueblo.”<sup>5</sup> (Hendel, 2008: 5)

This chapter, about a novel in which a woman looks back on her childhood and the rituals of the Fang community in which she grew up, as well as her suffering after burying in her husband in contravention to the prohibitions of her community, will examine where and how in this novel she expresses her state “between life and death” or “between a little bit/whisker of sun and a little bit/whisker of shade”. Afterwards it will delve into whether this suffering and this 'intermediate state' can also be linked to ruptures or voids with a political charge,<sup>6</sup> even though both Ndongso and Nsue Angüe personally deny any political charge. These ruptures and voids will also be investigated in this chapter using the concepts of Genette's *paratext* and Dällenbach's *mise en abyme* and on the basis of the role that autobiographical and oral elements play in this (Lejeune, Ong), in which various facets will be analyzed using the narrative analysis theories as discussed in Rimmon-Kenan.

## 1. Cultural and literary context

María Nsue Angüe was born in Bata in 1948 and died in Malabo in 2017. Her Fang family who had converted to Protestantism originated from Bidjabis, a town in the northeast of Rio Muni not far from the borders with Cameroon and Gabón. There she spent her childhood until she was eight years old when she was placed with a Protestant missionary family in Madrid. Her father stayed behind in Guinea where, after independence in 1968, he became Minister of Education and Agriculture under Macías and later ambassador to Ethiopia, a post to which he was appointed in 1976 and where he was murdered by agents of Macías. Nsue Angüe spent her secondary school years in Spain where she studied journalism and music in Madrid until she returned to Guinea in 1971. On her return to Guinea, she immersed herself in the Fang language and culture, she held the office of director of the Ministry of Women's Affairs in Malabo from 1979 to 1980 and subsequently worked as a journalist for the newspaper *Ebano*. For a long time, she also lived again in Spain, where she collaborated on a

---

<sup>5</sup> “I don't even have a responsibility to my readers, I write for them to enjoy because I enjoy writing it. I do not write about political matters, I write about what really matters to people.” [own translation]

<sup>6</sup> According to the theories of Rancière and Badiou, as set out in the theoretical framework of this research.

project with musicians and then back in Guinea where she wrote *Ekomo* in 1985 and later directed a story project that resulted in a popular TV program.<sup>7</sup>

*Ekomo* attracted particular attention because it was the first novel by a writer from Equatorial Guinea published in Spain after independence in 1968.<sup>8</sup> Nsue Angüe's oeuvre also consists of poems, short stories in the genre of the storytelling tradition of the Fang and journalistic or literary articles. Her first collection of short stories, *Relatos*, was published in 1999 and an anthology of her poems had already appeared under the title *Delirios* (1991). Most of her poems and stories were published by the Centro Cultural Hispano-Guineano. In October 2016, her last collection of short stories was published in Spain under the title *Cuentos y relatos*.

### *Nsue Angüe as storyteller and writer of minor literature*

Since, besides poems and short story collections, Nsue Angüe's oeuvre has been limited to just that one novel, literary criticism has focused mainly on this. In interviews, in addition to being a writer, she is mainly referred to as a storyteller, or “*abuela cuentacuentos*” (Grandma Storyteller), as Benita Sampedro Vizcaya calls her in the *In Memoriam* text in the Spanish newspaper *ABC* in 2017. This is an allusion to what Nsue Angüe remarked about herself in an interview with Baltasar Fra-Molinero: “Los cuentos son la mejor filosofía de vida que se puede ofrecer a un niño y los mejores pedagogos para ello son los abuelos. Yo creo que más que resucitar la tradición, lo que intento resucitar es la importancia del 'abuelo' dentro de nuestras familias.”<sup>9</sup> (Fra Molinero, 2010)

In short, by telling her stories, Nsue Angüe was making a claim to revive both the Fang tradition and the importance of the grandparents in the (Fang) family ties. However, she did not write in Fang but in Spanish and this reduces her literature, in the assessment of Sylvia Castro Borrego, to “minor literature”; a literature written by a (migrant) minority in a

---

<sup>7</sup> Nsue Angüe composed some narrative and musical themes for the CD-ROM project *Mbayah, o la leyenda del sauce* in 1997, with musicians from Guinea from different ethnic backgrounds (Fang, Bubi, Ndowé). She also organized a story project in collaboration with children that resulted in a TV program, popular in Equatorial Guinea, entitled *Bia-Ba* (Fang for *Here We Are*). Its aim was to introduce the children in the city (Malabo) to the oral histories of their ancestors (Sampedro Vizcaya, 2015: 178).

<sup>8</sup> The novel was also translated into French in 1995 with the title *Ekomo, au Coeur de la forêt guinéenne* (Paris: L'Harmattan).

<sup>9</sup> Stories are the best philosophy of life that can be offered to a child and the best educators to do this are the grandparents. I believe that, rather than tradition, I want to revive the importance of the grandparent within our families.” [own translation]

“major language” (17/3, 2016: 151). As an example, she cites texts composed in Spanish, the dominant language in Spain and the Spanish-speaking world, but written by individuals belonging to a racial or cultural group different to the mainstream Spaniards (Ibid).<sup>10</sup> However, Nsue Angüe lived most of her life in Spain and, in the aforementioned interview with Mischa Hendel, pointed out that in Guinea she was not so much seen as belonging to “the hers” (her Fang ethnic group), but rather as European and even ‘white’ (Hendel, 2008: 9).<sup>11</sup> Writers whom she says influenced her are mainly (female) European writers, ranging from Rosalía de Castro, Carmen Laforet, Ana María Matute to Saint Theresa and the Bronte sisters (Ngom, 2003: 295).<sup>12</sup>

## 2. Ekomo

In *Africanos en Europa*, Miguel Ugarte summarizes Nsue Angüe's novel as a return to “la madre patria” of the author who, in his view, like more African intellectual migrants, traveled back and forth between Africa and Europe with a double consciousness (*dobles conciencia*) and therefore can view two cultures from both the outside and the inside (2013: 200). Various researchers and literary critics have already highlighted various cultural, gender and literary aspects of the novel that will be included in the analysis of the story, as will be Nsue Angüe's own commentary in interviews.

### 2.1 The story

The story is told by Nnanga Aba'a who herself is part of this story. It is about what is happening (in an unspecified time) in her village and what the consequences are for herself and her husband, Ekomo. In her narration she also looks back on her childhood. In between, she tells stories about others and the history of Africa.

---

<sup>10</sup> “A minor literature is not literature written in a minor language, but one written by a minority in a major language. For instance, the texts object of our study, are written in Spanish, which is the dominant language in Spain and the Hispanic world, but they are written by individuals who carry racial and cultural markers that are different from mainstream Spaniards.”

<sup>11</sup> “Y encuentras, estás en un país de que dicen que es tuyo, pero que los tuyos te ven como europeo, ¿no? Que hasta ahora te siguen viendo como Europea, no, y te das cuenta que has estado un montón de años viviendo entre blancos que te toman como uno más y cuando llegues a tu propio pueblo es tu pueblo que te toma como diferente.”

<sup>12</sup> “I hate labels. ... I admire Rosalía de Castro very much; she is my principal role model, but don’t overlook others such as Carmen Laforet, Ana María Matute, Saint Teresa de Jesús and the Brönte sisters.”



In the village, an omen in the shape of the appearance of a double sign: a tombstone is visible in the clouds and lightning strikes the *ceiba sagrada* (sacred tree), that loses its crown and as it falls takes a large branch with it, portends evil days ahead. It is predicted that an old leader and a young man will die. Since Ekomo has come back from the city with a swollen leg, we know from the beginning of the story that he might be that young man.<sup>13</sup> Despite the holding of a purification ritual, the village elder – *el abuelo* – dies and a little later the young Nfumba'a also dies after going hunting. Meanwhile, Ekomo's condition worsens and Nnanga, on the advice of the wise men of the *Aaba'a* (the village meeting-house), decides to accompany him in a search for someone who can help them. Their first visit is to a traditional healer who also investigates whether their wish to have children can be fulfilled, but who does not have a remedy for Ekomo. Then they cross the border (of an unspecified country) to reach the city where they consult a white doctor. However, he wants to amputate Ekomo's leg but it turns out that this is not an option. Eventually, the pair end up at a Roman Catholic mission where Ekomo dies. Nnanga then has to look for an opportunity to bury him, impossible on the mission site because Ekomo is not a Roman Catholic. Thwarted she buries him a little deeper into the forest under a *ceiba grande*. By doing so, she violates the traditional taboo of her tribe that forbids a woman to touch a man's dead body. This prohibition earns her a severe punishment when she returns to her village.

The flashbacks form a second storyline. In it, Nnanga looks back on her childhood, how Ekomo visited their village with his father who is a *brujo* (magician), how her dance career as *Paloma de Fuego* began and how she initially rejected Ekomo, but eventually chose him after he had her kidnapped just as she was about to be married off. Both storylines are interrupted by stories related to the events in the village or in Africa in general: at the beginning of the novel, the story is about a woman who cheated on her husband and the punishment this brought upon her. This is an indication that the story about Nfumba'a can also be understood as a more or less stand-alone story (before he dies, he returns as an old man with a gun and an antelope). There are also the stories about *Oyono el canoso*, a convert to Christianity, who has to choose between one of his four wives, stories of *el curandero* (traditional healer) and the people who visit him, Nnanga's vision of a strange encounter with a boy by a river and the story told by Ekomo about the origin of the peoples of Africa.

---

<sup>13</sup> There is another sign that can be interpreted as a prophecy: on the night on which the soul of the deceased grandfather takes flight, a gigantic foot stamps onto the roof of a house, whereupon the house bursts into flames and the foot disappears (57).

## 2.2 The narrator

Nnanga is the primary first-person narrator of events of which she herself is a part.<sup>14</sup> In the monologues (at the beginning and end of the novel), however, she also addresses Ekomo in the second person.<sup>15</sup> There are also events that she recounts about others, in which she herself is not involved (for example, about Ekomo's return from the city and about his decline). In addition, the story is occasionally and temporarily taken over from her by other storytellers of stand-alone stories of which these narrators themselves are not a part (such as the creation myths of the Fang told by Ekomo and by others).<sup>16</sup> Moreover, other people also have monologues in the novel (such as *el abuelo* who gives instructions about what to do after his death in a monologue and *Oyono el canoso* who tells what has happened to him and his wives likewise in a monologue).<sup>17</sup> Those they address are sometimes visible in the story (such as the women whom *Oyono el canoso* addresses), but are also not visible (such as the invisible villagers whom the village elder addresses).<sup>18</sup>

### *Narrator focus*

As a narrator/focalizer, Nnanga looks both back and forward. Most of the novel is set between two moments of suffering, with the protagonist/narrator Nnanga looking on her own "between life and death" state from the inside out at the moment (after her husband has died and she has buried him).<sup>19</sup> She also tells the story about what happens in her village and what she herself experiences as an adult woman in the I-form but, with more distance from what has happened, as do the fragments in which she looks back on her youth.<sup>20</sup> It is a bird's eye

---

<sup>14</sup> On the basis of the different levels of narration mentioned by Rimmon-Kenan (1983: 92-97), a distinction can be made between Nnanga as an *intradiegetic/homodiegetic narrator* in the monologue at the beginning and end of the novel and Nnanga as an *extradiegetic/homodiegetic narrator* of the events of which she is part, but on which she looks back (from the outside).

<sup>15</sup> With Ekomo as *intradiegetic narratee*. This has been referred to by Rimmon-Kenan as the level on which the person to whom the story is told is located and is visible in the story (104-106).

<sup>16</sup> In which both Nnanga (if she is recounting about others of whom she herself is outside) and these other narrators are *extradiegetic/heterodiegetic narrators*.

<sup>17</sup> Whereby she, in her monologue at the beginning and end of the novel, like Nnanga, is an *intradiegetic/homodiegetic narrator*.

<sup>18</sup> As *intradiegetic narratee* (visible in the story) and *extradiegetic narratee* (not visible in the story).

<sup>19</sup> as an *internal focalizer from within*, based on the different types of focalization mentioned by Rimmon-Kenan (75-78).

<sup>20</sup> She sees the events as an *external focalizer*, but tells the story of which she herself is a part *from within* (and in that sense as an *external focalization from within*).

view with retrospective moments<sup>21</sup> but, from the focus of both Nnanga and the village community, there are also predictive moments about the suffering to come,<sup>22</sup> for example, when the village elder explains the significance of the tombstone that is silhouetted in the sky:

La voz del jefe contesta a las voces de las mentes. La voz del jefe tiene un énfasis tan profundo que suena a ultratumba.

– Esta es la gran señal de los antepasados. Esta es la señal del África antigua, la lápida de los poderosos. Cada vez que veáis esta señal dibujada en el cielo, habréis de entender que un poderoso va a morir en África. Su muerte será violenta, será injusta. Su muerte es ineludible y, en protesta de ello, los cielos nos avisan. [...].<sup>23</sup> (22)

Turning to the *psychological facet* of the focalization, Nnanga (as an internal focalizer) is subjectively colored in her emotions and thoughts. However, there is also another voice in her that expresses general views about the Africans who deny their traditions, as reflected in her commentary on the death of *el viejo*:

Quizá solamente el viejo, que había provocado el sonido de los tambores, sabía que con su muerte marcaba el fin de un África y daba comienzo a otra. [...] Quizás sólo aquel viejo del tam-tam sabía que al africano de hoy le interesan otras cosas, tiene otros problemas, otros dioses, otras creencias; y va abundando lentamente su tradición, influenciado por no sé qué ola que se nos viene encima.<sup>24</sup> (53)

In line with this, the focus is shifted to the account of Padre Ndongo Akele:

Ahora llega el blanco y os dice que ya no es hacia abajo sino hacia arriba a donde tendréis que partir, y os lo creéis. No dudo ni dejo de dudar. Lo que sí me pregunto es, en caso de que sea cierto que allá arriba hay otra morada, ¿quién os asegura que es para los africanos? [...] ¿cómo sabéis que podréis entrar en el terreno sagrado de los blancos si aquí en la tierra no os dejan entrar en sus casas? [...] ¿Qué busca un africano entre las nubes, llenas de frío, si no hay selva

---

<sup>21</sup> Referred to as analepsis/flashback, juxtaposed by Rimmon-Kenan (and Genette) with prolepsis/flashforward (46).

<sup>22</sup> as *prolepsis/flashforward*

<sup>23</sup> The chief's voice answers the voices of the minds. The chief's voice carries such a deep significance that it sounds as if it were coming from beyond the grave. – This is the great sign of the ancestors. This is the sign of ancient Africa, the tombstone of the mighty. Every time you see this sign drawn in the sky you will have to face the fact that a powerful man in Africa is going to die. His death will be violent; it will be unjust. His death is inevitable and, in protest to it, the heavens warn us. [...]. [own translation]

<sup>24</sup> Perhaps only the old man who had caused the drums to sound knew that, with his death, he marked the end of one Africa and the beginning of another. [...] Perhaps only that old man knew from the tam-tam that the African of today is interested in other things and has other problems, other gods, other beliefs; and its tradition is slowly expanding, influenced by I don't know what wave is about to come upon us. [own translation]

donde cazar ni río donde pescar? ¡estúpidos! ¡Más que estúpidos! Porque si os dejan entrar en el cielo sólo será para ser sus criados o sus esclavos.<sup>25</sup> (126)

The other voice, resounding in Nnanga, betrays a double focus that offers space to an ideological commentary<sup>26</sup> that pits Africa against Europe.

## 2.3 The structure of the novel

The introduction, *A modo de introducción*, is followed by ten chapters (indicated by Roman numerals), a number of which are divided into numbered parts. The chapters or parts thereof are often opened with poetic lines describing the mental state of the narrator:

*Busco en la oscuridad  
y no hay más que vacío.  
Busco en mi mente  
y no hay más que nieblas...*<sup>27</sup> (113)

or with lines dealing with the meteorological conditions:

*Volvió a salir el sol...  
Pero estaba triste tras las nubes.*<sup>28</sup> (107)

Besides the fact that the story of Nnanga is interrupted by three other, more or less independent, stories, there are also interruptions in the form of a *tam-tam* announcement (51), some songs (60,225) and a prayer (113-14).

The writer dedicates the novel to “Nnanga, my old friend. Too bad she can't read.”

*A Nnanga, mi amiga vieja.  
Lástima que no sepa a leer:*

---

<sup>25</sup> Now the white man comes and tells you that you will no longer have to go downward, but upward and you believe it. I do not doubt nor do I stop doubting. What I do wonder is, in case it is certain that there is another refuge up there, who assures you that it is for the Africans? [...] How do you know that you will be able to enter the sacred ground of the whites if here on earth they do not even let you enter their houses? [...] What is an African looking for in the clouds, full of cold, if there is no jungle to hunt in and no river to fish? Idiots! More than idiotic! Because, if they let you into Heaven, it will only be to be their servants or their slaves. [own translation]

<sup>26</sup> A voice designated by Rimmon-Kenan as *implied author* (1983: 87-90).

<sup>27</sup> *I search in the dark/and there is nothing but emptiness. / I search my mind/and there is nothing but mists...* [own translation]

<sup>28</sup> *The sun came up again.../But it was sad behind the clouds...* [own translation]

In *Paratexts. Thresholds of interpretation*, Genette refers to 'dedication' as "the proclamation (since or not) of the relationship (of one kind or another) between the author and some person, group, or entity" (1997: 135). He also notes that a work can be dedicated to a public or private person, that be the reader or a character in the story. In Nsue Angüe's novel, at first sight, the message of the dedication (as a *paratext*) appears to be addressed both to "mi vieja amiga Nnanga" as a private person, and to the narrator, Nnanga Aba'a, in the novel. In the interview with Fra-Molinero, Nsue Angüe indicated that Nnanga in Fang means 'mother' and *aba'a* (or *abaá*) is the place where the men of the village gather: "Si ponemos Nnanga Aba'a, la estamos llamando por decirlo de alguna manera, la madre del *abaa*, que es lo mismo que decir, la madre de los hombres."<sup>29</sup> (Fra-Molinero, 2010) In doing so, she generalizes the name she associates with the community as "madre de los hombres".<sup>30</sup> In "Narrative of a Woman's Life and Writing" (*Daughters of the diaspora*) referring to *Ekomo* (and the African novel in general), Ngom speaks of a social "I" that he believes is inclusive and "collective and not fragmented as in the autobiographical projects of the West" (2003: 304-5).

In *Le Pacte Autobiographique*, Lejeune refers to the 'autobiographical pact' as a 'covenant' into which the writer enters with the reader (1975: 28-30). In Nsue Angüe's novel, this seems to be the name Nnanga. By using this name, the author does not declare herself identical to the narrator (that would make the novel an autobiography), but in the sense of in that name she expresses her own connection with the Fang community and by doing so she (in Lejeune's definition) also concludes an autobiographical pact. Through this action and in the dedication of the novel as *implied author* (Rimmon-Kenan) and hiding herself in the 'I', that speaks for the community (Ngom), she enters into an alliance with "her old friend Nnanga" who is not considered a reader (*Lástima que no sepa leer*), but a fictional member of the audience of a story subsequently told by the character of the same name.

### *Metaphorical Preludes*

In "Ideations of Collective Memory in Hispanophone Africa: The Case of María Nsue Angüe's 'Ekomo'", Adam Lifshy views Ekomo's slowly atrophying leg as a metaphor for the

<sup>29</sup> "Nnanga Aba'a we call her, to put it another way, the mother of the *abaá*, that is the same as saying, the mother of men." [own translation]

<sup>30</sup> The grandmother of the narrator is also called Nnanga; the narrator, grandmother and all the other women in the community seem to be included in the name and message of the novel. (Also noteworthy is the colon behind the novel's message, making it appear as if Nnanga is addressing herself, as a character in the novel).



disintegration of Africa: “Ekomo's leg would seem to be a stand-in for all that Nnanga has witnessed decomposing in Africa from the start” (Lifshey 24: 181). In the novel, there is a connection between the atrophying leg and some prophetic events as (metaphorical) foreshadowings of death, such as a gravestone appearing in the sky, the crown breaking off the *ceiba*<sup>31</sup> taking with it a young, sturdy branch from the sacred tree and a foot that bores into a roof.<sup>32</sup> That these are not only portents of the death of “un gran jefe y un hombre joven” (30) (a great chief and a young man), but also a reference to moribund African culture, is, Lifshey argues, expressed both in the 'journey' of Nfumba'a, the young man who goes hunting in contravention of the traditional prohibitions, in the 'journey' that Nnanga and Ekomo make in search of healing Ekomo's leg (Ibid.: 180). Lifshey points to the parallel between these two journeys that end in death and are therefore doomed to failure: “As Ekomo and Nnanga leave the tribe in search of a doctor for his leg, the village setting of the first half of the book is now replaced by an archetypal journey in the second half. Yet this journey, like the elder and Nfumbaha, seems doomed from the start” (Ibid). In this connection, Lifshey also refers to the commentary on Nfumba'a's fatal return to his village (that also seems to contain the voice of an *implied author*):

Nfumba'a, el africano de hoy, Hombre de la Mañana, tras estar dos lluvias en Europa, dejó su tradición encerrada entre los libros dejó allí su personalidad y sus creencias africanas, y el ser sin continente regresó a su pueblo con un disfraz del europeo sin el europeo dentro. Con una máscara de Europa pero sin su rostro en ella. Medio blanco, medio negro. Sus hermanos salieron en su busca porque le amaban, se arriesgaron dos días en la selva porque eran sus hermanos. Las lágrimas de la madre son las del África y sus lamentos se esparcen alargados por el aire hasta los confines de la tierra por todos aquellos hijos perdidos y no hallados. ¿Quién puede escuchar el llanto de la madre África sin sentir compasión por esa mujer que no hace más que echar hijos al mundo para ver como poco a poco van perdiendo su personalidad? Y sin embargo, cada vez que cae uno de sus hijos, África llora personificándose en cada una de las madres del Nfumba'a. Hijos prefabricados por los supermercados de la evolución histórica, que sin embargo no evolucionan y hablan de política, comercio y

<sup>31</sup> “La ceiba sagrada de mi pueblo guarda el totum de la tribu” [...] (29). The *ceiba* is a tree species that is not native to Equatorial Guinea, but does grow in Cuba. In the first edition of *Ekomo*, Nsue Angüe defended herself against a proposed modification of this, stating that this is an “árbol del bien” (tree of good), that in her view could be any tree regarded as such, but that she transposed to the Fang context as a *ceiba* (Lifshey 24:178).

<sup>32</sup> Mineke Schipper points out that there are many stories in African oral narratives that deal with body parts: “There are also stories about a hand that goes through life on its own. There are a lot stories about body parts that lead a life of their own and may or may not eventually end up on or on a body again. For example, there is a wonderful story about a skull bouncing through the forest, lending limbs everywhere, to go to the market like a true gentleman in the city and seduce an innocent girl there” (1987: 21).

religión, que les son ajenos, sin detenerse a examinar el verdadero sentido de las cosas, y mueren con las chaquetas puesta y seguro de haber cumplido su misión.<sup>33</sup> (107,108)

In the story of Nfumba'a, and that of Ekomo (and his atrophying leg), urban and "Western influences" play a part: Nfumba'a who has returned from Europe "degenerate" and Ekomo who has returned from the city with a diseased leg. The city appears repeatedly in the novel as a symbol of strange and pernicious influences. Lifshey summarizes this as follows: "Given Nfumbaha's fate, however, the West and its institutions seem unlikely to provide alternative salvation. Ekomo, like Nfumbaha, has been exposed to Western urban presences before, but that hardly has been wholesome or regenerative: the novel starts out with committing adultery in a city" (Ibid: 181).

However, the dubious future of Africa, Lifshey claims, resonates not only in Ekomo's decaying leg, but also (as appears in the course of the novel) in Nnanga's barrenness (180). Miguel Ugarte calls the (im)possibility of having children, coupled with the survival of the community and the necessity of the journey in search of healing for Ekomo's leg, crucial (2013: 105).<sup>34</sup> Ugarte sees the demise of Africa reflected in the passage that ends the novel, that includes the lines:

Que lloren todas las mujeres juntas. [...] ¡Qué lloren las madres de las hembras, porque las hembras nacen para ser madres y esposas! ¡Qué lllore la mujer fértil, abrazando a la esteril!<sup>35</sup> (247)

In the last sentences:

---

<sup>33</sup> After spending two seasons in Europe, Nfumba'a, today's African, Man of the Morning, left his tradition locked in books, along with his African personality and beliefs and returns to his people in the guise of a European [but] without the European inner self; wearing a mask of Europe but without his face in it. Half white, half black. His brothers came looking for him because they loved him, they risked two days in the jungle because they were his brothers. The mother's tears are those of Africa and her laments are broadcast far and wide through the air to the ends of the earth for all those have lost and not found sons. Who can listen to the cry of Mother Africa without feeling compassion for that woman who does nothing but bring children into the world only to see how, little by little, they are losing their personality? And yet, every time one of her children falls, Africa cries, personifying herself in each of the mothers of the Nfumba'a. Children prefabricated by the supermarkets of historical evolution but who nevertheless do not evolve and talk about politics, commerce and religion, that are alien to them, without considering the true meaning of things, and die with their jackets on and sure of having accomplished their mission. [own translation]

<sup>34</sup> "Pero mi interpretación es que la enfermedad es una fuerza que se suma al rol de Nnanga como madre sin hijos. Aquí de nuevo, la posibilidad de los niños como un posible futuro, la continuación de la vida de la comunidad, y junto a ello, la necesidad del viaje, todo ello es crucial."

<sup>35</sup> Let all the women cry together. [...] Let the mothers of girls cry, because the girls are born to be mothers and wives! Let the fertile woman cry, embracing the sterile one! (247) [own translation]

Abro los ojos, eso creo, y me encuentro confundida entre la gente. Mas... ¡qué sola! ¡Qué tremendamente sola estoy!<sup>36</sup> (248)

Ugarte points to this state of despair and loneliness in which Nnanga is left bereft after Ekomo's death and in which there seems to be no more help for "la madre de África" whose children are lost in the diaspora, from which they return unrecognizable (if they come back at all) and the mother is left behind in absolute solitude (209).

Although both Lifshey and Ugarte link the role of Ekomo's illness and Nnanga's infertility to the breakup and threat to the survival of 'Madre África', Lifshey does not see in this so much (as does Ugarte) a reflection of infertility and motherhood, but more a political message that, he states, lies in the criticism of external (colonial) factors:

While it is true that the text does not explicitly assail with nationalistic fervor the colonial or postcolonial power structures of Equatorial Guinea, its extended lament for the death of longstanding tribal and continental orders can be read as criticism of those external forces whose presences coincided with this collapse. That the novel is more dirge than a diatribe does not make it devoid of 'sentimientos anticolonialistas' (Lifshey 14: 183).<sup>37</sup>

While Lifshey and Ugarte treat Ekomo's illness as a repercussion of the decline of Africa, Lola Aponte-Ramos argues that it can also be seen as a metaphor for the disruption of a social order (2004: 103).<sup>38</sup> Aponte-Ramos argues that the novel contains a questioned femininity alongside a degraded masculinity that can also be associated with a fragmented western world (102). This would be reflected in Ekomo's rotting and atrophying leg; the disease that leads to social exclusion from his village, but also offers an opportunity to rethink the relationship between a man and a woman. Aponte-Ramos believes that the female and male protagonists in the novel grow towards each other: the man becomes dependent, weak and increasingly excluded from public life, while his wife enters into precisely those areas that are traditionally forbidden to a woman (Ibid.). Aponte-Ramos interprets this illness and the accompanying disruption of the social order as elements that make room for a new order in which traditional patterns between man and woman are broken. She points out that

---

<sup>36</sup> I think I open my eyes and find myself confused among the people. But ... how alone! How tremendously alone I am. [own translation]

<sup>37</sup> In this Lifshey contradicts the view that anticolonial sentiments should not play a role in María Nsue Angüe, as Vicente Granados claims in the prologue to the first edition of Ekomo: "No hay en la novela el más mínimo resentimiento, ni trata ninguna cuestión política de carácter panfletario, porque la obra cumple una de las características de la literatura guineana escrita: la ausencia de sentimientos anticolonistas" (Granados, 1985: 13).

<sup>38</sup> Aponte-Ramos draws on Susan Sontag's idea of the 'disease as a metaphor' and claims that the strange influences of the city manifest themselves physically in Ekomo.

Ekomo's disease manifests itself when the sovereign state and the cohesion within it are under discussion and all its structures are shaken: the Fang tradition as well as the western, the colonial and postcolonial, the city and village/family, husband and wife (106). In her study *Repensar Ekomo de María Nsue Angüe*, Anna Mester points out that, in her novel, Nsue Angüe breaks with the colonial dualism that not only pits white against black, but also the modern against the traditional and the feminine against the masculine (2009: 48). She emphasizes that the narrator questions the position of women in relation to the patriarchal forces of her community and a western patriarchal colonialism, that she resists through various voices and actions (62). Mester thinks that in the openness and free expression of dance Nnanga finds an opportunity to escape restrictive dualisms and social norms (63).

Besides the fact that Ekomo's "atrophying leg" can be linked to the disintegration of social patterns (Aponte-Ramos) and the demise of "Madre África" (Lifshey, Ugarte), Marvin Lewis argues that this leg, that stands for Ekomo's visit to the city, decides the whole novel. In the passage at the beginning of the novel, about his visit to the city and in the conflict in which the end of the novel condenses, Lewis states:

This passage is important to the structure of the novel because it reveals the importance of memory in Ekomo's development and establishes the major conflict elaborated in the plot. The action vacillates between past and present, between remembering and forgetting: 'between a little bit of sun and a tiny bit of shade', a primary leitmotif (2007: 130).

In addition, the idea of the city is reflected in what Lewis calls a "black/white dichotomy" (134), encapsulated when Nnanga and Ekomo visit a white doctor in the city and then an African *curandero* in the countryside. Lewis points out that these scenes when both methods fail expose the cultural differences between Africans and Europeans:

Whereas the African healer tried to find a traditional solution to the problem by using herbs and incantations, the European doctor resorts to the more efficient method of physical dismemberment. Just as the doctor does not understand Ekomo's language, neither does he understand that without his leg, Ekomo would not be considered to be a whole man in his culture. Subsequently the protagonist does not find a solution in either traditional or modern medicine (Ibid.: 134-35).

### *Mise en abyme*

Although Lewis refers to the binary aspect of the novel with his "black/white dichotomy" (as do the other critics mentioned with their oppositions of Africa versus Europe, city versus

country, man versus woman), he also refers to the poetic description of Nnanga's status. That state between "a little bit of sun and a little bit of shade" or "between life and death" is expressed in the lyrical introductions of the chapters:

*Busco en mi mente/No hay ni presente, ni pasado, ni futuro/¿Dónde están los cuerpos? Las tinieblas cayeron sobre mí.../¡Qué desasosiego! Sopla la brisa y, en un momento determinado, el tiempo parece haberse detenido en la nada. Pienso: ¿Dónde están los cuerpos? Volvió a salir el sol... Pero estaba triste tras las nubes. Sopla la brisa y, en un momento determinado, el tiempo parece haberse detenido en la nada.*<sup>39</sup>

These poetic reflections form a binding factor in a fragmented story; they string the events together and hence form a reflection of the text as a whole, like a *mise en abyme*. The role that the dance plays is in line with this, as are the role of certain recurring rituals and ultimately the funeral ritual. At the beginning of the novel, there is a ritual dance in which certain sexual boundaries are crossed:

Debo danzar con mis suegros. Debo danzar con los viejos, debo unir mi sexo al abuelo para purificarme. Debo bailar y entregar mi cuerpo a la luz de la hoguera.<sup>40</sup> (34)

And Nnanga almost goes beyond herself as 'Paloma de Fuego':

Vibré, vibré y vibré al son de los sonidos. Mi espíritu se escapó del cuerpo y voló con la paloma de fuego, primero a ras del suelo y después más y más alto; hasta buscar los cielos.<sup>41</sup> (103)

The dance and the spiritual are repeated in more events (191-92) to culminate at the end of the novel in a purification ritual in the river (247), in which Nnanga finds herself on the border between life and death (248). Aponte-Ramos argues that in dance and orgy – as well as in lyricism – patterns of heterosexuality and monogamy are broken, creating space for a new identity:

---

<sup>39</sup> I search my mind / There is neither present, nor past, nor future / Where are the bodies? The darkness fell on me ... / What uneasiness! The breeze blows and, at a certain moment, time seems to have stopped in nothingness. I think: Where are the bodies? The sun rose again ... But it was sad behind the clouds. The breeze blows and, at a certain moment, time seems to have stopped in nothingness. [own translation]

<sup>40</sup> I must dance with my in-laws. I must dance with the Ancients, I must unite my sex to my grandfather to purify myself. I must dance and surrender my body to the light of the stake/bonfire. [own translation]

<sup>41</sup> I vibrated, vibrated and vibrated to the sound of the sounds. My spirit escaped from the body and flew with the fire dove, first on the ground and then higher and higher; until it reached for the skies. [own translation]



Coincide [la danza] con la insistencia de la autora en mantener un lenguaje lírico e intimista, cuyas claves nos escatima. El sujeto femenino necesita redefinir el lenguaje mismo, y la danza representa una resistencia al lenguaje heterosexual y regulador a favor de la posibilidad de creación de nuevas identidades para lo femenino y lo masculino.<sup>42</sup> (2004: 111)

Nnanga's state "between life and death" as a result of her act (and that act itself) also refers to the classic tragedy *Antigone*, as Melva Persico notes in her article "Voices and Hybridity; The Case of María Nsue Angüe's *Ekomo*" (Persico 31:133-148). She compares Nnanga with the leading actress in *Antígona* (1991), an adaptation of the tragedy of Sophocles by Trinidad Morgades Besari tailored to the situation in Equatorial Guinea.<sup>43</sup> In this play, the protagonist, Antígona, like Nnanga, is a dancer and (like Nnanga and Antigone in the original tragedy) defies the prescriptions of the ruler pertaining to a funeral ritual: "Just Nnanga has defied tradition by burying the husband, Antígona has defied the orders of the president and has buried her brothers" (Ibid: 140). However, Persico argues that, unlike Antígona in Morgades Besari's play, Nnanga manifests herself as a "silent observer" of a patriarchal community, and of the other women of her community (Ibid.: 141).

Antígona's act in Morgadi Besari's play and Nnanga's act in *Ekomo* are both reflected in the act of Antigone in the original Greek tragedy. In *Imagine there's no women. Ethics and Sublimation*, Joan Copjec puts Antigone's betrayal of the community, by acting on behalf of her brother as an individual, versus Creon's sacrifice of family values, by acting in accordance of the laws of the city-state (2002:15).<sup>44</sup> Copjec involves certain (death and sexual) urges, inspired by an unstoppable and transcendent, autonomous force in Antigone's act. Consequently, Copjec (referring to a psychoanalytic concept) claims that it is also a

---

<sup>42</sup> [The dance] coincides with the author's insistence on maintaining a lyrical and intimate language, whose keys she spares us. The female subject needs to redefine language itself and the dance represents a resistance to heterosexual and regulatory language in favor of the possibility of creating new identities for the feminine and the masculine. [own translation]

<sup>43</sup> This concerns the play *Antígona*, written by Morgades Besari (1931-2019) who worked as a writer, teacher and translator at the UNED (Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia) in Spain and at the UNGE (Universidad Nacional de Guinea Ecuatorial) in Malabo. In this play, Antígona buries her brothers in defiance of the president's decree, after he was attacked by representatives of the people. Like Antigone in the Greek tragedy of the same name, she is sentenced to death for this, but she manages to flee from an eruption of the volcano that kills not her but the president. The play ends with a new beginning, after the fire has reduced everything to nothing and the Divine laws of nature have triumphed: "Todo arde, todo es ceniza... De la nada todo salió, a la nada retorna todo: poder autoridad, ambición, leyes humanas. Solo queda la ley de Dios, la ley natural". The three acts of this play are included in *Nueva Antología de La Literatura de Guinea Ecuatorial*. (Mbaré Ngom and Gloria Nistal, 2012: 626-32)

<sup>44</sup> Antigone buries her brother Polynices against the law of Creon (who then rules over Thebes) that forbids this and she is punished for it. Creon has her locked up near the tomb in which she has buried her brother and she commits suicide, after which her beloved, Haemon, Creon's son, attacks his father. In the end he also commits suicide, as does his mother, Euridice, who cannot bear the pain of his death, leaving Creon alone.

purifying and sublimating act that Antigone can perform only by stepping outside herself free of social restrictions, closing a gap between the individual and the community (24).

Copjec points out that Antigone, out of love for her brother, lifts herself above her own naked existence (25).<sup>45</sup> That love makes her insensitive to the approval of others and she does not justify it either, because ultimately she sets her own rules, even though this leads to her own death.<sup>46</sup> Nnanga, out of love for her husband, also makes her own rules by constructing a coffin for Ekomo, touching his corpse and burying him. And, because she violates the taboo of the Fang community, she too is destined for death:

Cada uno de los golpes que suenan al clavar las maderas me dice: *Faltaste al tabú... faltaste al tabú... Tocaste el cadáver de tu marido muerto. ¡Morirás!*<sup>47</sup> (232)

Like Antigone, she commits a crime from the point of view of the community, a predicament in which Nnanga is torn between Fang traditions and Christian values, as expressed by *el Pastor* addressing the village:

– ¿Por qué pretendéis su muerte? – continuó el Pastor. Porque es muerte para ella si os empeñáis y confundís las cosas. Pues además de sacerdote de Dios soy fang y respeto nuestras costumbres y la tradición. Sé por ello que una viuda debe pasar por ciertos castigos y, sobre todo, no debe tocar el cadáver de su difunto. Más yo os hago esta pregunta: ¿hubiera sido mejor dejarle insepulto? ¿Qué es lo más importante para vosotros: violar el tabú por amor o conservarlo sabiendo que se está faltando a una de las leyes más divinas de la humanidad? No es igualmente tabú dejar un cadáver insepulto?<sup>48</sup> (243)

---

<sup>45</sup> In which she refers to the naked existence in *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* by Giorgio Agamben.

<sup>46</sup> Basing herself on Lacan, Copjec argues that Antigone's love for her brother drives her to a break with the community, by committing what she describes as a "criminal drive": "Lacan views the act of the loving sister as a definitive break with her community: 'because the community refuses to [bury Polyinices, she] is required ... to maintain that essential being which is the family Até.' In other words, the deed Antigone undertakes traces the path of the criminal drive, away from the possibilities the community prescribes and toward the impossible real. That she is 'required' to do so testifies to the Zwang or compulsion of drive, which is indifferent to external criteria, such as the good opinion of others" (2002: 40,41).

<sup>47</sup> Every hammer blow on the wood tells me: *You broke the taboo ... you failed/defied??? the taboo ... You touched the corpse of your dead husband. You will die!* [own translation]

<sup>48</sup> - Why do you want her dead? - continued *el Pastor*. For if you insist, it means her death, and confuses matters. However, besides being a priest of God, I am also a Fang and I respect our customs and traditions. For this reason, I know that a widow has to undergo certain punishments and, above all, she is not allowed to touch the corpse of her deceased spouse. But I ask you this question: Would it have been better to leave him unburied? What is more important to you: to violate the taboo out of love or to observe it in the knowledge that doing so is ignoring one of the most divine laws of humanity? Isn't it also a taboo to leave a body unburied? [own translation]

Nnanga is also called Sara by this pastor: "[...] hija de la Iglesia, cordera de la manada del señor Jesucristu [...]" (243).

Besides those conflicting (Fang and Christian) taboos, *el Pastor* also points out Nnanga's courage according to the witnesses from the village in which she buried Ekomo:

[...] Más tarde me contó cómo le había enterrado su esposa, y también el médico y el Pastor de allí me hablaron con admiración de la fuerza de voluntad y resignación de la joven extranjera. Todos allí están admirados del comportamiento de la muchacha [...].<sup>49</sup> (242-43)

Nganga's unflinching courage and rebellion, the fruit of her unconditional love for Ekomo, can be associated with Antigone's courage and rebellion, stemming from the love for her brother.<sup>50</sup> Both are autonomous in their actions, thereby closing a gap between the individual and the community (Copjec, 24). In Ekomo, however, Nnanga's autonomous act leads to finding herself in an interspace in which Ekomo also seems to have ended up when, just before his death, he wonders what would become of him because he has not been baptized, nor has he lived according to the rules of his ancestors:

*¡Yo me estoy muriendo! ¿Qué será de mí? Al cielo no puedo ir, puesto que no estoy bautizado; y el infierno es demasiado castigo para mis pocos pecados. Al purgatorio no puedo ir pues no soy cristiano; y para el limbo, soy muy viejo ya para entrar en él. A los ancestros traicioné al renegar de ellos... .*<sup>51</sup> (221)

At the end of the novel, both Nnanga and Ekomo seem to find themselves not only between life and death, but also in 'nothingness':

– ¿Soñando que estás vivo o... soñando que te has muerto? Las dos cosas. Todo es un sueño. Tú tan sólo sueñas. / – No te comprendo... / – ¿Y quién comprende? Todos están locos. ¡Todos! Menos tú y yo... No es nada. Nada es.<sup>52</sup> (238)

Finally, in Nnanga the voice of her rebellion resounds (also resounding Antigone's rebellion):

Grita mi rebelión: *¡No! ¡No estoy muerta ni viva!*<sup>53</sup> (248)

<sup>49</sup> [...] Later, he told me how his wife had buried him, and the doctor and the Pastor there also spoke to me with admiration of the willpower and resignation of the young woman from outside. Everyone there admire the girl's behavior [...]. [own translation]

<sup>50</sup> And perhaps also as a reference to the play by Trinidad Morgades Besari.

<sup>51</sup> *I am dying! What will become of me?* I cannot go to Heaven, since I am not baptized; and hell is too heavy a punishment for my few sins. I cannot go to purgatory because I am not a Christian; and I am too old to enter Limbo. I betrayed the ancestors by denying them ... [own translation]

<sup>52</sup> - Dreaming that you are alive or ... dreaming that you have died? Both. Everything is a dream. You only dream. / - I don't understand you ... / - Who does understand? All are crazy. All! Except you and me ... It's nothing. Nothing is.

<sup>53</sup> My rebellion screams: *No! I am neither dead nor alive!* [own translation]

## *Oral influences*

In the dedication to the novel (*A Nnanga, mi amiga vieja. Lástima que no sepa leer*), Benita Sampedro Vizcaya finds proof that the writer is not only addressing a western readership, but also those in another cultural context who have had the chance to learn to read (2015: 183). Sampedro Vizcaya refers to Nsue Angüe's cultural legacy from the oral tradition and practices as well as from the Fang language (Ibid.). The author herself says the following (in the interview with Hendel) about the language:

El lenguaje fang es fonéticamente musical. Entonces, como bantú expresándome e identificarme, me doy cuenta de que cuando cuentan historias y cuentos, las acciones son cantadas. Hay partes que son muy musicales, prosa poética, y la narración es normal. Jugando a ser bantú, siguiendo el ritmo que los bantúes, como supongo que tenemos que seguir, como vemos de la literatura oral, que tiene estas fuerzas.<sup>54</sup> (Hendel, 2008: 3)

Besides the musical and poetic features Nsue Angüe cites in this quote, certain phrases and formulas are repeated throughout the story,<sup>55</sup> as with these phrases in Chapter I:

El jefe baja la mirada al suelo y busca, entre el polvo, la sangre de aquellos que fueron sus antepasados. El viejo baja la mirada y busca bajo el polvo la sangre reseca de África.<sup>56</sup> (23)

The audience (and indirectly the reader) is also involved in the story through passages with a series of questions:

La gente se mira en silencio, y las preguntas mueren en el pecho. ¿Cómo ha de morir el abuelo, si todos en este pueblo saben que del hombre de hierbas se dijo que habría de morir en batalla? ¿Cómo ha de morir el abuelo si se acabaron las luchas de tribus y envejeció la paz? ¿No fue dicho que aquel hombre de guerras había de morir de lanza? ¿Con quién luchará el hombre para buscar su propia muerte?<sup>57</sup> (44)

<sup>54</sup> The Fang language is phonetically musical. Therefore, as a Bantu expressing myself and identifying myself, I realize that, when they tell stories and tales, the action is being sung. The narration contains very musical parts and poetic prose is therefore normal. Playing like Bantu, following the rhythm of the Bantu, that I suppose we have to follow and are inspired by the oral literature that has these strengths.

<sup>55</sup> With repetitions as a hallmark of the oral; to be able to remember the spoken text with the aid of rhythm, repetition of certain formulas in the form of fixed expressions (clichés) and proverbs (Ong, 1982: 34).

<sup>56</sup> Bowing his head to the ground, the chief seeks, among the dust, the blood of those who were his ancestors. The chief bows his head and searches the bone-dry blood of Africa under the dust. [own translation] The question is whose voice we hear here; the voice of Nnanga or that of Africa (and the author as implied author)?

<sup>57</sup> The people look at each other in silence, and the questions grow silent in their chests. Why must the grandfather die when everyone in this village knows that the shaman announced that he was going to die in battle? Why must the grandfather die when the tribal struggles are over and the peace has matured? Was it not said that that warrior was to die by the spear? With whom will the man fight to seek his own death? [own translation]

Mineke Schipper has written that, in an oral tradition, the audience also determines how extensively actions, dialogues, formulas, choruses and so forth are repeated (1987: 25).

Schipper also points out that the oral tradition in African countries was principally maintained by women, an assertion also endorsed by Ngom:

[...] the woman was the real axis around which the community's organization and survival rotated. The women also articulated a central (and critical) role in the arena(s) of education and traditional oral literature. [...] Oral in origin, traditional literature was a powerful, didactic instrument that women fully employed for education. The use of tales, songs, satire, praise songs and other genres allowed women not only to educate but also to impart culture to children.<sup>58</sup> (Ngom, 2003: 301)

However, Schipper asserts that women in African society are insufficiently heard (just as oral literature is also less 'heard' than written literature), as witnessed by the West African proverb: "Women have no mouth."<sup>59</sup> Judging by the novel's assignment, Nsue Angüe seems to want to be heard as well as being read, by the women in her community. The novel's dedication can be seen as a prelude to its oral character, with a special and perhaps different role reserved for women.

## 2.4 The characters and circumstances

Central to the story is Nnanga Aba'a's relationship with Ekomo and with the other characters who are subordinate to her role and, as *flat characters*, are often not referred to by their name, but in their roles of *madre*, *el abuelo*, *hombre de las hierbas*, *el curandero* and *el curandero blanco* and so forth.<sup>60</sup> Ekomo is the only exception to this because, at the end of the story, he begins to play a bigger role in the dialogue as his character also undergoes a certain development, but only through the eyes of Nnanga:

---

<sup>58</sup> María Nsue Angüe confirms this in the interview with Mischa Hendel: "Como extranjero te voy a decir que los que mejor cuentan la historia del país, sabes ¿quienes son? Las mujeres de este país. A través de sus códigos: Las mujeres cantan la historia de Guinea, desde los tiempos de la colonia, se sigue con las danzas tradicionales, los cánticos tradicionales, te van contando exactamente lo que va pasando en Guinea en cada momento" (Hendel, 2008: 7).

<sup>59</sup> Schipper conducted research into proverbs and women in the literature of Africa, Asia and Latin America. The chapters of her book *Ongehoorde woorden. Vrouwen en literatuur van Afrika, Azië en Latijns-Amerika* (Unheard Words. Women and literature from Africa, Asia and Latin America) (published by Het Wereldscherm, Weesp/Novib, The Hague, 1984) begin with a number of proverbs, including "Women have no mouth" (proverb from the Beti, Cameroon).

<sup>60</sup> In *The Magellan Fallacy*, Adam Lifshy summarizes the roles of Nnanga and the other characters as follows "She filters the world around her as Ekomo and other characters move in and out her personal life" (2017: 211).



Ekomo había cambiado. Ya no era el joven pendenciero y altanero. Sus ojos ya no danzaban burlones tras sus pestañas. ... Aquel escuálido muchacho que tenía delante, nada tenía que ver con mi marido.<sup>61</sup> (218)

Nnanga and Ekomo are the main 'actors' or 'actants'<sup>62</sup> in the story whose common object is the healing of Ekomo's leg and the fulfillment of their wish to have children. They are helped or opposed by persons (*el curandero*, border guards, a white doctor in the city as *curandero blanco*) and circumstances (their journey in the bus, on foot) and the prediction that a young man must die. In these predictions and circumstances, objects and natural phenomena also appear as 'actant', among them the tombstone in the sky, the branch that breaks off and the foot crushing the roof of a house; objects that presage future, ominous events under repeatedly personalized natural phenomena, such as: *Lloraban las nubes, y sus lágrimas y sudores, una a una, caían blandas sobre la tierra.*<sup>63</sup> (54)

While Nnanga stands for 'mother of all men', *Ekomo* in Fang means 'peace and harmony'. In the interview with Fra-Molinero, Nsue Angüe said that the youthful Nnanga was called *Paloma de fuego*, referencing her red hair and agility: "Paloma de fuego fue su otro nombre al convertirse en bailarina y ser bautizada en el río por la maestra danzarina. La llamó Paloma por su agilidad de movimientos y fuego, por ser pelirroja."<sup>64</sup> (Fra-Molinero, 2010) This title also relates to the symbiosis between man and woman, that she said she wanted to create (also in the interview with Fra-Molinero) by means of the two main characters, Nanga and Ekomo. Aponte-Ramos' idea of the convergence of the female and male protagonist in response to the disruption of a social order seems to be an extension of this 'symbiosis', as does Mester's analysis of the female (rebellious) voice versus male, patriarchal forces. Mester states that Nsue Angüe breaks through the characters with fixed identities, also referring to the character Nfumba as well as those of Nnanga and Ekomo. As Nanga and Ekomo cross the border through which, Mester says, they "reformulate" their identity, Nfumba is proof that disjointed identities in a person can only lead to destruction (2009: 97). Nfumba returns from Spain and goes hunting ignoring traditional prohibitions and this will be his downfall. Mester

---

<sup>61</sup> Ekomo had changed. He was no longer that young haughty brawler. His eyes no longer danced mockingly behind his eyelashes. [...] That scrawny boy in front of me no longer had anything to do with my husband. [own translation]

<sup>62</sup> The roles mentioned by Rimmon-Kennan come from Greimas (1983: 34,35).

<sup>63</sup> The clouds wept and their tears and sweat fell one by one softly on the earth.

<sup>64</sup> Paloma de fuego was her artistic name when she became a dancer and was baptized in the river by the principal dancer. She called her Paloma (dove) for her agility of movement and fire because of her red hair." [own translation]

points out that Nfumba is no longer an African and will never become a European, leaving him no option but to exist in “la locura de la nada” (the madness of nothingness) (Ibid: 72).

### 3. Nsue Angüe's novel as truth procedure

While Nsue Angüe herself indicated in various interviews (with Fra-Molinero and Hendel) that in her novel she intended to create a symbiosis and harmony between man and woman<sup>65</sup> in a story that consists partly of passages to be sung in a Bantu rhythm, the researchers and literary critics have focused mainly on the contradictions and fractures to be distilled from the novel. For example, Ekomo's atrophying leg is linked by Aponte-Ramos and Mester to a disruption in the social order and traditional (Fang) patterns, with an emphasis on the disintegration of 'patriarchal forces' and the changing relationship between man and woman,<sup>66</sup> by Ugarte and Lifshey to the disintegration of 'Madre África' under the intrusion of European influences and, by extension, by Lewis to a rift between town and countryside. The truth procedure set in motion by these critically acclaimed ‘ruptures’ might be seen as a prelude to the demise of Africa's ‘truth’ (Ugarte, Lifshey), reflected in Nnanga's sterility (Ugarte) or as a rupture necessary to set in motion a 'truth' about the different sexes and identities (Aponte-Ramos, Mester).

Nevertheless, a single critic (Lewis) also refers to the suffering and emptiness expressed in what takes place “between a little bit of sun and a little bit of shade” in which, as in Ekomo's atrophying leg, (according to Lewis) the whole novel will be decided. The events are strung together in the novel by musical and lyrical elements that (as *mise en abyme*) reflect the atmosphere and contain the oral by which the writer says she is following the Bantu rhythm and to pretend "to be Bantu" (*jugando a ser bantu*).<sup>67</sup> In addition to the connecting role that she plays as *cuentacuentos* and is characteristic of women in the originally oral, African culture (Schipper, Ngom, Sampedro Vizcaya), Nsue Angüe also places herself as a Bantu (and traveling back and forth between two countries and cultures) in a kind of interspace. The oral character of the novel (and the link to community) is likewise reflected in the dedication (*paratext*) addressed to Nnanga Aba'a who cannot read and whose

---

<sup>65</sup> The harmony that is also expressed in the names of the main characters Ekomo (peace and harmony) and Nnanga Aba'a (mother of all men).

<sup>66</sup> Although Mester also claims that these patriarchal patterns are broken in dance (2009: 62,63).

<sup>67</sup> “Playing as if she were Bantu”; see quote from interview Hendel in Paragraph 2.3 *Oral influences* of this chapter

name “mother of all men” includes the female part of that community to which the author herself belongs.<sup>68</sup> In doing so (as *implied author*), she enters into an 'autobiographical' pact with the reader in the novel (according to Lejeune's theory) and allows various voices to resonate in Nnanga, including her own.

Besides moving between life and death in lyrical passages, “between a little bit of sun and a little bit of shade”, Nnanga loses herself in the dance. To the rhythm of the *tambores*, certain (sexual) boundaries are crossed in the dance, thereby also breaking with the collective identity of the community:<sup>69</sup>

[...] me apunté; sin tener ni idea de que me iba a llevar un gran disgusto porque nadie de mi casa estaba de acuerdo con que yo bailase.<sup>70</sup> (87)

And in the dance she becomes someone else:

Supe que desde aquel entonces, me había convertido en otra persona muy distinta. Era una artista y mi vida era la danza.<sup>71</sup> (94)

In the dance and lyricism, certain patterns are broken and space is created for a 'new identity', this, however, is not filled in anywhere in the novel as a 'new feminine or masculine identity' (Aponte-Ramos).<sup>72</sup> Nnanga dances alone, 'flying' like *Paloma de fuego*, heedless of the approval of her community.<sup>73</sup> Just as she has to dance for Ekomo (103), in the end she also has to bury him against the rules of the community because she has no other choice. In this

---

<sup>68</sup> It should be noted that Nsue Angüe spent a large part of her life in Spain and only later learned the language of the Fang.

<sup>69</sup> Here is a parallel with Antígona in the play by Trinidad Morgades Besari that begins as follows: “Antígona aparece en el escenario y baila el baile de la soledad. La música del baile se refiere a Antígona; esta quiere vivir, quiere realizarse, quiere ser, se siente joven, inteligente y plétórica de vitalidad.” (Antígona appears on stage and dances the dance of solitude. The dance music is a reference to Antígona; she wants to live, to realize herself, to be, to feel young, intelligent and alive) And a little farther on: “Mientras cantan las voces, Antígona sigue moviéndose al ritmo de los tambores [...]” (While the voices are singing, Antígona continues to move to the beat of the drums). [own translation]

<sup>70</sup> [...] I signed; without having any idea that I was going to be very upset because no one in my house agreed with me dancing. [own translation]

<sup>71</sup> I knew that since then, I had become a very different person. I was an artist and my life was dance. [own translation]

<sup>72</sup> The “symbiosis between man and woman” that Nsue Angüe herself mentioned and that is expressed in the names Nnanga and Ekomo does not yet make a “new feminine or masculine identity” (Aponte-Ramos). Nsue Angüe did not fill this in, neither in the interview in which she made this statement, nor in the novel.

<sup>73</sup> From a drive that makes her indifferent to what is happening outside her and what others think; as Joan Copjec claims about Antigone (2002: 40-1).

sense, her act can be compared to Antigone's deed as an act of rebellion, without any premeditated purpose. Nnanga transgresses all prohibitions and loses herself in “la locura de la nada” (Mester), just as Nfumba'a militates against all prohibitions in the jungle. However, “La locura de la nada” does not so much indicate Nnanga's identity, whether or not feminine (Aponte-Ramos) and Nfumba's identity as African or European (Mester), but rather an absence of any identity.<sup>74</sup>

In the “nothingness” of dance and lyricism, *Ekomo* takes place in the fictitious and meaningful action (*poetry*) that, Rancière argues, differs from everyday, reproductive and meaningless life (*history*) and in which, he hypothesizes, the political takes place (2015:164). It takes courage (and rebellion) to break away from the community by indulging in the dance (Nnanga) or seeking out the dangers of the jungle (Nfumba'a), both acts transgressing the community's taboos. Both Nnanga and Nfumba'a engage in this confrontation with the community. They enter a state (the “nothing”) in which object and subject coincide in ‘the event’, that is, in a state of emptiness from which truths that linger between ‘the void and the pure event can flash up’ (*Logiques des mondes*, 2006: 84) or, as in the novel, “entre un poquito de sol y un poquito de sombra”.

All in all, it can be agreed that political sentiments do not play a direct role in this novel but that, in the state of suffering and the “state between life and death” in which both the narrator, Ekomo and Nfumba'a, find themselves, lurks a void that breaks open their own community. The opening is located in the resistance to both colonial influences (Nfumba'a) and the resistance to the community (Nnanga), in which the name, Nnanga, in the novel's order and other analogous or stereotypical names can be associated with the community. Nnanga shows courage and decisiveness by surrendering to the dance and to her grief at the end of the novel when she breaks the taboo of her tribe by burying Ekomo with her own hands. By doing so she is performing a political act (Rancière) and through this defiance reaches the point at which she is no longer afraid “to be the little that one is” (Badiou), even if this leads to death in the novel, or a state between life and death.<sup>75</sup> The truth procedure (Badiou) this sets in motion transcends Nsue Angüe's claim that her writing had no ambition

---

<sup>74</sup> In this context, Luz Rodríguez Carranza refers to “un sujeto intransitivo: fiel a su propio acto” (an intransitive subject: faithful to one's own action). It concerns a subject without a fixed identity, that carries within itself a part (fictional, singular and intransitive) that is unfilled and that, by its act, opens the possibility to something that is virtual and true (based on Badiou). “[...] para un sujeto intransitivo no se trataría de creer ni de dejar de creer, sino de abrir paso a algo virtual, una verdad” (2019: 83)

<sup>75</sup> See also the quoted passage in which *el pastor* refers to Nnanga's courage (*Ekomo*, 242-43).

other than to entertain herself and her readers and to leave stories to her children and grandchildren (interview Hendel). With the message to her old friend Nnanga in the dedication, the novel initiates a truth procedure that is addressed to the community of which the author is a part. Her voice also echoes in that of Nnanga and in the musicality of the lyrical parts of the text with which she also places herself, *jugando a ser bantu*, in a border area or in-between space “between a little bit of sun and a little bit of shadow”.



## Chapter 3 Juan Tomás Ávila Laurel – *Arde el monte de noche*

### *Introduction*

Los días avanzaban y la carestía empezaba a apoderarse de la isla y en ella ocurrió una cosa que asustó a mucha gente. En realidad empezaron a suceder las cosas malas, como si se dijera que todas ellas estaban alineadas esperando su turno.<sup>1</sup>

(*Arde el monte de noche*, 53)

The island referred to and where the story *Arde el monte de noche*, the novel by Juan Tomás Ávila Laurel, is set is called Annobón. The writer, who was born in Malabo in 1966, spent much of his childhood on this miniscule, volcanic island that seems to have landed like a stone somewhere far off the African coast in the void of the Ocean.<sup>2</sup> As a child, (because his parents' divorce), he lived there with his maternal grandmother, but returned to Malabo to finish school and then trained as a nurse in Bata. Alongside his professional training, Ávila Laurel began writing and was one of the few writers still living in the country, until in 2011, during the Arab Spring, he went on a hunger strike that forced him to leave the country.<sup>3</sup>

Annobón is situated more than 300 kilometers from the mainland and about 150 kms south of the island of São Tomé. Besides Spanish, the few more than two thousand inhabitants speak a language with Portuguese influences called *Fá d'Ambô*. The Portuguese

---

<sup>1</sup> The days advanced and hunger began to take hold of the island where something happened that scared many people. In fact, this was the beginning of all the evils to come, as if they were all desperately awaiting their turn.

<sup>2</sup> This image is taken from the film *El escritor de un país sin librerías* by Marc Serena (director and producer) and Toni Espinosa (producer) released in Spain in 2019. This film begins with animated images of a stone plunging into the ocean and an introduction by Ávila Laurel: “Soy de una isla diminuta del Océano Atlántico, Annobón, una piedra en medio del mar. Cuando yo era pequeño formaba parte de España. En la escuela nos obligaban a hablar en español y a creer en Dios. A los de mi isla los dieron apellidos de ciudades españolas como Sabendell, Valencia, Santander, Zamora... Y a mí me tocó a ser Juan Tomás Ávila Laurel.” (I come from a tiny island in the Atlantic Ocean, Annobón, a stone/rock in the middle of the sea. When I was a child, it was part of Spain. At school they forced us to speak Spanish and believe in God. To those on my island they gave surnames of Spanish cities such as Sabendell, Valencia, Santander, Zamora... My turn was to be called Juan Tomás Ávila).

<sup>3</sup> The hunger strike was a protest against the visit of José Bono Martínez (Spanish President of the Congress of Deputies) to the regime. Ávila Laurel fled to Barcelona where he now lives and works, only returning to Guinea every now and then.

were the first to set foot there between 1483 and 1501,<sup>4</sup> but otherwise showed little interest as it was only a small island in the periphery with little fertile land and rocky shores that made it difficult for boats to land. In the course of the sixteenth century, slaves from São Tomé were brought there from Angola and western central Africa. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, they revolted and ruled the island for a long time - from about 1700 to 1885 without outside European interference. This situation was ultimately brought to an end by the Spaniards who took over the island from the Portuguese in 1778.<sup>5</sup> This change is nowadays apparent in the Spanish culture imposed on the population, expressed in the surnames, such as the author's last name, that, in addition to imposition of the language and religion of that country, have been borrowed from Spanish cities

The lines in the novel quoted above point in the direction of the impending famine and other "evils" that the island will face and of which the narrator in the novel has still not experienced at the time, but already knows are going to come. These evils tally with the depiction of Annobón by Baltasar Fra-Moliner, the opposite to what we imagine today as a touristic, tropical island (2014: 93). He describes it as an island where at night the men relieve themselves on the inaccessible beaches, where witches also venture into the sea at night and where misty mountains and chasms as portals to hell, populated by strange, white birds, are only obstacles between the villages (Ibid.: 96-7).<sup>6</sup>

In *Arde el monte de noche* (The Mountain Burns at Night), the narrator looks back on his youth and the rituals and events on the island in the period of Macías. During this period, the desolation of the island reached a low point/nadir because the population was left to its own resources after part of the male population was shipped off to work as laborers on the cocoa plantations in Bioko. Ávila Laurel has said that, under the regime of Macías, Equatorial Guinea was at the mercy of arbitrariness and that there was even a deliberate

---

<sup>4</sup> The anecdote has it that the discovery of Annobón took place on January 1, 1473 (although that year is not certain), on New Year's Day, in Portuguese *Ano Bom*, later corrupted to Annobón.

<sup>5</sup> In 1778, the Treaty of El Pardo stipulated that Spain took over Annobón, Fernando Poo (now Bioko) and part of the mainland (now Río Muni) from the Portuguese in exchange for part of Brazil.

<sup>6</sup> "La isla en medio del Atlántico en donde ocurren los acontecimientos de *Awala cu sangui* y *Arde el monte de noche* es lo opuesto al estereotipo asociado con el paisaje tropical del turismo moderno o los libros de viajes antiguos. Las playas son lugares pedregosos que no invitan a pasar unas vacaciones a personas de países ricos. En estas novelas la playa es a donde van los hombres a defecar por la noche o las brujas a bañarse, también de noche. Las montañas de la isla son obstáculos para la comunicación entre aldea y aldea. Rodean a sus pueblos con sus sombras. Son lugares de niebla donde habitan pájaros raros y blancos, antesala de precipicios y muerte."

attempt to forget Annobón (2005: 12).<sup>7</sup> This oblivion (as well as the desolation) and the underlying evils are expressed in the novel and will be examined in this chapter. On the basis of a narratological analysis, an investigation will be made into how the evils announced and any other elements contribute to the emptiness on the island and how, after it has first been placed in a cultural and literary context, the novel can be seen as a truth procedure.<sup>8</sup> As with the previous novels, the structure will be examined in order to determine the role of *paratext* (Genette), *mise en abyme* (Dällenbach), autobiographical (Lejeune) and oral (Ong) elements.

## 1 Cultural and literary context

In the colophon of the digital magazine *Fronterad*, in which Ávila Laurel has a blog, he is described as a young, successful writer who participates in important international forums and whose work is characterized by a critical engagement with the social and political reality of his country and the economic inequalities prevailing here. He has also published numerous poems, essays, short stories, novels, three plays<sup>9</sup> and a film script.<sup>10</sup> His poems were published in 1999, in the collection *Historia íntima de la humanidad*, and can be found on his personal weblog.<sup>11</sup> His essays have been published with the titles *El derecho de pernada o cómo se vive el feudalismo en el siglo XXI* (2000), *Cómo convertir este país en paraíso: Otras reflexiones sobre Guinea Ecuatorial* (2005) and *Guinea Ecuatorial. Visceras* (2006). His most important novellas are *La carga* (1999), *Áwala cu sangui* (2000), *El desmayo de Judas* (2001), *Nadie tiene buena fama en este país* (2002) and five short stories have been collected in *Cuentos crudos* (2007). His most important novels include *Avión de ricos, ladrón de cerdos* (2008), *Arde el monte de noche* (2009) and his most recently released novels, *El dictador de Corisco* (2014), *Panga Rilene* (2016), *The Gurugu Pledge* (in 2017 released in an English translation), *Cuando a Guinea se iba por el mar* (2019) and *Red Burdel* (2020).

<sup>7</sup> “Desde los tiempos precoloniales esta isla se había acostumbrado al abandono y a la soledad. Esa soledad no se rompió con la efímera y discontinua administración colonial española. Y con la irrupción de la independencia guineana este hecho se consagró. Si toda Guinea ya estaba abandonada a su suerte, de Annobón se intentó olvidar.”

<sup>8</sup> See the theoretical framework of this research.

<sup>9</sup> His plays are *Pretérito imperfecto* (1991), *Los hombres domésticos* (1992) and *El fracaso de las sombras* (2004); respectively published in the magazines *El patio 5*, *Africa 2000* and by the publishing house Ediciones Pagola. Malabo.

<sup>10</sup> He wrote the script for director Alex Guimerá's animated film *Un día vi diez mil de elefantes*, released in 2015. [<http://www.10000elefantes.com/espanol.html>]

<sup>11</sup> [<http://www.guineanos.org/>]

## 1.1 Essays and *Cuentos Crudos*

Ávila Laurel's columns and essays are described as both critical and provocative by Miguel Ugarte and (unlike his fictional work) written in a journalistic style found all the time in newspapers (2013: 159). By doing this, he parodies the situation in a style that Ugarte describes as follows: "Las palabras del autor son mordaces y en alguna ocasión irónicas al igual que en su burlesca descripción de asuntos como la falta de energía del país [...]"<sup>12</sup> (Ibid) This certainly applies to some of his short stories, such as the story *Mares de ollas* in *Cuentos Crudos*, in which the consequences of an already absurd bureaucratic ordinance obliging the inhabitants of Malabo and Bata to undo all the Christmas purchases they have bought, including braided hair, take on extraordinary proportions. In this story, a 'Brigade of Disorder' removes all hair with disused razor blades 'made in China', but is also assisted in its task by American recruits with a chain saw put to use as a 'braid-mower'. This eventually is gummed up by the blood of the fleas that end up in it and in which the authorities also have a certain share:

¡Vrooom!, el sonar del cortatrenzas, ¡crackcrackcrack!, el corte de las cabezas de los piojos de las chicas sucias, ¡gueeck!, la náusea de los honorables diputados. Pero la razón del malestar de los diputados era que como alguna de las chicas que desfilaban como víctimas era de buen ver y mejor pensar, y aunque algunas todavía no hacían el bachiller tenían ciertas relaciones con los diputados presentes, y el hecho de ver a sus íntimas amigas perdiendo los atributos por los que se vieron atraídos, caían presos de sentimientos contradictorios: vergüenza, impotencia, etcétera.<sup>13</sup> (2007: 14)

In the street this depredations lead to a mutual struggle for the released hair and elsewhere, in the supermarkets, fierce discussions take place about returning now spoiled food. In the end, the battle is settled in a gigantic procession, led by the Archbishop of Bata. In this story, Ávila Laurel places the role of the church, that of politics and that of the Chinese, Americans and Nigerians living in Guinea in a caricatured and critical light. And also in this story he

---

<sup>12</sup> "The author's words are scathing and, on occasion, ironic, both in his burlesque description of matters such as the country's lack of energy [...]" [own translation]

<sup>13</sup> Vrooom! sounded the braid-mower. Crackcrackcrack! It decapitated the fleas of the dirty girls and Guetsssssj! The nausea of the honorable deputies. But their discomfort was mainly caused by the handsome victims who joined the queue and who, although some of them had not even finished high school, maintained certain relationships with the authorities present. Seeing their intimate friends lose their most attractive attributes made them prey to conflicting feelings of shame and impotence. [own translation]

puts the bureaucracy and hypocrisy of those in authority under a magnifying glass as he shows how these are also supported by foreign powers and covered up by the church.

## 1.2 Cultural context

In *Cuentos Crudos*, the story *Un casco de corrupción* (with a soldier suffering from a continuous erection as a “case of corruption”) is set in Annobón, described by Ávila Laurel in the same story as “una bella ínsula situada and el hemisferio sur, el sur de todos los sures posibles”.<sup>14</sup> (2007: 45) But his first novella, in which Annobón plays a central role, is *Áwala cu sangui*<sup>15</sup> that, like *Arde el monte de noche*, has as its theme the isolation, poverty and disease among the inhabitants of the island at the time of Macías. His other novellas and novels are occasionally (partly) set in Annobón, for instance, the last chapter of *Cuando a Guinea se iba por el mar* (about a Spanish historian who investigates Equatorial Guinea in the 1950s). However, elsewhere, both in and outside Equatorial Guinea. *Nadie tiene buena fama en este país* and *Avión de ricos, ladrón de cerdos* are also set at the time of Macías, but in Bata and Malabo and with main characters belonging to different ethnic groups (Fang and Bubi). *La carga* takes place on the mainland in the colonial period, *El desmayo de Judas* in Spain in the late 1990s and *El dictador de Corisco*, *Panga Rilene*, *The Gurugu Pledge* and *Red Burdel*, in which both African and non-African cultures meet, take place in the present day.<sup>16</sup> All in all, it can be noted that his novels feature main characters from different cultural backgrounds from different geographical areas.<sup>17</sup> Perhaps this choice has to do with the fact that the writer has lived in Annobón, Malabo and Bata as well as in Spain<sup>18</sup> and visited various countries, both in and outside Europe, to give lectures. The fact that in his works he

---

<sup>14</sup> “A beautiful island located in the Southern Hemisphere, the south of all possible south.” [own translation]

<sup>15</sup> Marvin Lewis states that this is the first text in Guinea in which Annobón plays a central role: “For the first time, Annobón, in all of its sparseness and ruggedness, takes center stage in an Equatorial Guinean literary text. It is an almost forgotten, desperate island province, ignored by the national center until there is need to exploit its human and natural resources” (Lewis, 2007: 185).

<sup>16</sup> In *El dictador de Corisco*, a Dutch woman enters into a relationship with an islander and in *The Gurugu Pledge*, African migrants tell each other stories on Mount Gurugu in the enclave of Melilla along the North African coast, before crossing the border to claim asylum in Europe. The other novels mentioned here are also set outside Africa.

<sup>17</sup> Or, as Naomi MacLeod points out in her PhD thesis: “In Ávila Laurel's works, there is little continuity when it comes to identifying protagonists and the location of the action. At first glance, it becomes apparent that his protagonists are of both Spanish and Equatorial Guinean backgrounds. Furthermore, within those categories, various geographical areas and diverse ethnic backgrounds are represented” (2012: 126).

<sup>18</sup> Besides moving to Spain in 2011, he had also followed a study of bacteriology there for a certain period in 1998 (Ugarte, 2013: 163).



draws attention to the various ethnic groups in his country can be seen as a counterweight to the idea – both in the Spanish colonial period, in the post-colonial period under Macías and later again also under Obiang –<sup>19</sup> of Equatorial Guinea as a homogeneous country.

### 1.3 Literary context

The writer places himself (besides within an African) within a European, Spanish and Latin American literary context. In an interview following the translation of *Arde el monte de noche*, he mentioned *Lazarillo de Tormes* and *El Buscón* by Francisco de Quevedo as books that made a great impression on him, as have *Cien años de soledad* by Gabriel García Márquez and works by the Spanish writers Javier Marías and Torcuato Luca de Tena, Nigerian writer Wole Soyinka and stories by the Italian writer Italo Calvino (Doyle, *Irish Times*, May 2015). *El Buscón* and *Lazarillo de Tormes*<sup>20</sup> are picaresque novels in which the 'rogue' casts his adventures in a form of social criticism. In *Africanos and Europe*, Miguel Ugarte establishes a relationship between this picaresque genre and the literature of Ávila Laurel who, in his novels as 'exilio interno',<sup>21</sup> through descriptions (albeit not always comical) of events in the I-form manages to evade the criticism of Obiang's regime and of his lackeys (158).

Elisa Rizo calls Ávila Laurel “una figura consolidada en el ambiente cultural de Guinea Ecuatorial” (sturdy figure in the cultural scene in Guinea) (Books.2.,2012: 11), for which she lists three characteristics of his oeuvre:

[...] an ironic historicist style, the literary representation of Guinean Spanish through the fictionalization of orality and, above all, a critical look at the Guinean-Ecuadorian situation, silenced and almost unknown in the rest of the world.<sup>22</sup> [own translation]

---

<sup>19</sup> Under Macías and under Obiang the Fang culture still prevails.

<sup>20</sup> *El Buscón* (in full *Historia de la vida del Buscón, llamado Don Pablos, ejemplo de vagamundos y espejo de tacaños*) is a picaresque novel written by Francisco de Quevedo in +/- 1604 and published in 1626. *Lazarillo de Tormes* is an anonymous Spanish picaresque novel that was first published in 1554.

<sup>21</sup> This is a term that, in Chapter 7 of *Africanos and Europa*, Ugarte links to those who continued to write against the dictatorship while they remained in the country: “En el Capítulo 7 'Los exilios se quedan en casa', trato el tema del exilio interno. La experiencia del exilio y la emigración con frecuencia se compara con la de los que se quedan, tal como ha sucedido en España con Francisco Franco” (2013: xvii). Ugarte cites Ávila Laurel as the most prominent representative of this group.

<sup>22</sup> [...] un estilo irónico de corte historicista, la representación literaria del español guineano mediante la ficcionalización de la oralidad y, sobre todo, una mirada crítica de la situación guineaequatorial, silenciada y casi desconocida en el resto del mundo (Ibid.)

Although Rizo mainly refers to the (literary and oral) context of Equatorial Guinea,<sup>23</sup> the description “un estilo irónico de corte historicista” could also be associated with the picaresque,<sup>24</sup> a style with which both Ugarte and Rizo describe the literature of Ávila Laurel, or at least some of his novels, also those in a European and Spanish literary tradition.

## 2 Arde el monte de noche

This text emphasizes the marginality of the Annobonese entity and simultaneously recognizes the palpable linguistic and cultural difference of the inhabitants of this island from the rest of the inhabitants of Equatorial Guinea. This literary representation of the Annobonese reaffirms them as recipients of two colonial occupations: the Portuguese and the Spanish and, therefore, as possessors of their own historical past and of a particular Guineo-Ecuadorian identity that denies the norm promoted by the government.<sup>25</sup> [own translation]

This is what Elisa Rizo has written in *Hispanic Research Journal* about *Awala cu sangui* (6/2, 2005: 177), but it could equally well relate to *Arde el monte de noche*. In *Debats* Baltasar Fra-Molinero mentions two parallel stories of desolation, told from the perspective of those who were abandoned after the independence of Equatorial Guinea under the Macías regime (123/2, 2014: 93).<sup>26</sup> Portuguese historian Arlindo Manuel Caldeira Cham, in *Afro-Hispanic Review*, describes the period in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when outsiders visiting the island were amazed at the deeply rooted love of freedom manifested by its inhabitants (28/2, 2009: 305). He describes how they had formed a community of fishermen without a single leader or law enforcement agency, with land that was worked by women and belonged to everyone if it had lain fallow for more than two years (299). Conflicts were settled in the *vidjil* or the men's

<sup>23</sup> The author is classified in the table of contents of *Literatura de Guinea Ecuatorial (Antología)* under “La literatura Guineana después de la primera dictadura (1980-1999) (Ndongo and Ngom eds., 2000) and in the later edition of this Antology; *Nueva Antología de la Literatura de Guinea Ecuatorial* (Ngom and Nistal eds., 2012) also under “La literatura del siglo XXI de Guinea Ecuatorial”.

<sup>24</sup> The picaresque of the picaresque novel is most evident in *Avión de ricos, ladrón de cerdos*, a novel in which two 'rogues' at the airport in Bata chase after two fleeing pigs who turn out to belong to a rich and powerful person, who then takes them by plane to Malabo, where they have a series of adventures.

<sup>25</sup> Este texto enfatiza la marginal circunstancia de la entidad annobonesa y a la vez reconoce la palpante diferencia lingüística y cultural de los habitantes de esta isla con respecto al resto de los habitantes de Guinea Ecuatorial. Esta representación literaria de los annoboneses los reafirma como receptores de dos ocupaciones coloniales: la portuguesa y la española, y por lo tanto, como poseedores de un pasado histórico propio y de una identidad guineoecuatoriana particular que desmiente la norma promovida por el gobierno.

<sup>26</sup> “*Awala cu sangui* (Malabo, 2000) y *Arde el monte de noche* (Malabo, 2009) son historias paralelas de abandono desde la perspectiva de los abandonados. Cuentan los avatares de un grupo de annoboneses que sobreviven, viven y mueren en su isla durante los años posteriores a la independencia de Guinea Ecuatorial en pleno régimen de Francisco Macías.”

house by a representation composed of various age groups. An important role was played by the schoolmaster and the cleric, *sacristan*, who judged women who cheated, witches and cases of blasphemy. These crimes could carry a penalty of stoning or a ban on contact with the rest of the community. However, no one was really in charge and, for a long time, they also managed to hold off the leadership of Spanish missionaries and governors (303-5).

## 2.1 The story

There are several stories and anecdotes told in the first person by a narrator who looks back on his childhood in a series of flashbacks, along storylines in which the stories condense throughout the novel and become more and more involved in a circumferential motion, until the circle is, as it were, round. The novel begins and ends with the manufacture and transportation to the seashore of a *cayuco*, a dugout canoe made out of a tree trunk and how it, once partly hollowed out, is transported to the sea. This is done to the accompaniment of a song that the narrator calls the most beautiful song in the world and makes him nostalgic: “[...], y para mí es la canción más bonita del mundo entero, la que más nostalgia de mi tierra me trae” (11).<sup>27</sup> This is followed by the storyline of domestic circumstances and the grandfather sitting on the second floor of the house with his back to the sea, his gaze fixed toward the mountains. This raises questions in the narrator, aroused by his grandfather's appearance, his strange hairstyle and his behavior; as well as his silence, his abstinence from food and isolation from the rest of the village. When the grandfather does leave the house with a strange visitor, the children search his room without what they find there ever being revealed (for fear of punishment). Nevertheless, during the novel more about the grandfather emerges and he assumes a more human face. He cries when the mountains go up in flames (title) and, when he gets up from his chair, it appears that there is a hole in it and later it turns out that he is wearing a stoma. This situation explains why he does not eat or interact with the men in the *vidjil* (village hall). The narrator attributes his condition to an illness that has left him out of the work on the boat where he once worked (184).

---

<sup>27</sup> “[...], and for me it is the most beautiful song in the whole world, the one that fills me the most nostalgia for my country.” [own translation]

Another important storyline is the stoning of a woman who is considered a *maligna* (evil woman, a witch);<sup>28</sup> an event witnessed by the narrator. He describes how a woman is first beaten in the village, seeks refuge in vain with *el cura* (the priest) in the church only to be beaten again and finally to be beaten with a stick. This story is later retold, but this time from a different perspective and in the context of another story, that of a *sacristan* (local religious figure) who falls from a date palm after allegedly being chased by the woman who was using her evil influence, presenting a motive for her beating. Then it turns out that two sisters who had previously caused a disastrous fire on their plantations on the mountain were the two daughters of this *maligna*. The narrator also sees the event of the fire as a prelude to the much greater disaster of the cholera epidemic that claims the lives of a large part of the island's population. The narrator tells how a man suddenly becomes ill and dies shortly afterwards (with him his canoe also "dies" because every man on the island is buried in the wood of his own canoe). It is the beginning of an unstoppable series of deaths caused by the absence of medicines (99).

Finally, there is the storyline of a woman who visits the boat of "the friendly nation" that delivers products to the population in exchange for certain services. Her "payment in kind" gives her a child named Luis Mari who falls ill in the village of San Juan. Thereupon she calls on her foster father to transport them to the large village. Nearly all the storylines come together at the end of the novel; besides being one of the sisters who started the fire on the mountain and therefore also one of the daughters of the beaten woman, the foster father is 'the stranger' with whom the grandfather had gone to the graveyard when he left his room and he is also the maestro of the *cayuco* with which the novel begins and ends. This *maestro* paddles and paddles with his *ahijada* (foster daughter) and her child, but barely makes any headway because the child she clasps tight to her turns out to be long dead. They eventually arrive at the large village but, once on the beach, the woman disappears into a mysterious pit and again between the canoes on the beach. Parallel to this there is a story of eight men who paddle toward a (false) light at sea that they never reach and hence (except for one man) disappear into death paddling.

In between these storylines, are peppered numerous anecdotes about certain living conditions and habits, including the distribution of fish and other food, bed-wetting, the

---

<sup>28</sup> They are described in the novel as older women who break out in sweat at night, but not just sweat: "Y porque el calor no era cualquier calor. Por eso supieron que era alguien malo, alguien que traía el mal. Alguien, pues, que tenía algo que ver con el Maligno" (107).

search for fire and about incidents that happen like squids washing ashore *en masse*, the moving from one village to another at the changing of the seasons, boys playing marbles, collecting mangoes at dawn or a hunt for a bird (during which one of the boys climbs a tree and then 'disappears'), boats (from friendly and unfriendly nations) calling at the island and the goods they deliver, certain (religious) rituals such as the 'sacrifice to the sea'<sup>29</sup> and finally the disappearance of the men at sea.

## 2.2 The Narrator

The narrator recounts customs, traditions and events on Annobón in the first person, acting as a narrator who is both part of the story about his island and his childhood and one who watches and more or less detaches himself from the story.<sup>30</sup>

### *Narrator focus*

The narrator looks back on his youth from a double focalization; from the focus of a child and that of an adult. Because stories are retold from a different focus, they later take on a different dimension. This is the case, for example, with the descriptions of the grandfather who is judged differently from the focus of the child than from that of the adult. The children can see only the tears of the grandfather when the fire breaks out in the mountains as sincere and wonder (compared to their own "childhood") why the grandfather is crying:

Para nosotros fue franco llanto porque él era un mayor, y creíamos que si también lloraba era porque daba la cosa por perdida. ¿Por qué lloraría aquel hombre? ¿Aquel fuego le recordaba algo que había vivido cuando no le conocíamos? ¿Qué era aquello que le recordaba? ¿O quizá lloraba porque no era un mayor, sino que era todavía un niño?<sup>31</sup> (61)

The narrator then switches from one dimension, with "it could, it could have been", to the adult focus:

---

<sup>29</sup> After a major disaster, the islanders paddle around the island three times with a statue of a saint by *Maté Jachín* wrapped in cloth. They also offer sacrifices to the king of the sea.

<sup>30</sup> Rimmon-Kenan calls this (referring to a Genette) an *extradiegetic/heterodiegetic narrator*.

<sup>31</sup> For us it was a genuine weeping because he was an elderly person, and we believed that, if he also cried, it was because he considered all was lost. Why would that man cry? Did that fire remind him of something he had experienced before we knew him? What was it that he was reminded of? Or perhaps he was crying because he was not a grown-up, but was still a child? [own translation]



Podría ser, podría haber sido, pues en mi isla solamente los niños pequeños que lloran por las cosas que no entienden no pescan ni salen en cayuco al sur. Ni pueden entrar en el vidjil para conversar con los viejos. ¿Empecé diciendo que nunca supe si mi abuelo estaba loco? ¿Dije alguna vez que no sabía lo que era?<sup>32</sup> (61)

This also links to this a judgment from his adult perspective:

Lo pregunto ahora que ya no soy niño, y debo confesar que no nos hizo un favor dejándose escapar las lágrimas delante de nosotros [...]. Creo que era un mayor que no sabía ejercer su papel.<sup>33</sup> (72)

Marvin Lewis says that the dual focus in *Arde el monte de noche* has a critical function: “The innocence associated with childhood allows the narrator to bring society into critical focus without receiving the same scrutiny as an adult” (2017: 213-14).<sup>34</sup> The double focalization allows room for more versions of the story and therefore to multiple variants of 'the truth'. In the sentence *¿Dije alguna vez que no sabía lo que era?* (I said once that I didn't know what it was), he also questions his own memory, making the narrator to a certain extent an *unreliable narrator* (Rimmon-Kenan). MacLeod links the narrator's undermining of the reliability and homogeneity of the story to the breaking of a consistent and unambiguous description of a government-imposed truth and identity (2012: 143).

## 2.3 The structure of the novel

The text, that is preceded by a prologue, continues with only a blank line between different passages; that is, with no divisions into chapters. Ineke Phaf-Rheinberger sees the constant repetition of the same topics as a reflection of the monotonous daily routine on the island:

To paint a picture of the island's monotonous quotidian routine, Ávila Laurel structures his novel as one long narrative without division into chapters and by constantly repeating the

---

<sup>32</sup> It could be, it could have been, because on my island only little children don't go fishing, or paddle south by canoe, and only they cry for things they do not understand. Neither can they enter the *vidjil* to converse with the old men. Did I commence by saying that I never knew if my grandfather was crazy? Did I ever say that I didn't know what it was? [own translation]

<sup>33</sup> I ask it now that I am no longer a child and I must confess that he did us no favor by letting his tears escape in front of us [...]. I think he was a senior who did not know his role as an elderly person. [own translation]

<sup>34</sup> Rimmon-Kenan calls this the ideological facet of focalization: the way in which narrator focalizers represent an ideology through how they see the world (1983: 82,83).

same issues, such as hunger, lack of sanitary conditions, and the absence of the men, gradually giving more insight into the dynamics of the island's society (48/3, 2017: 64).

### *Paratext and autobiographical pact*

There is no message or dedication but there is a *paratext* in the form of a prologue – entitled *Isla, frontera, literatura* – by José Manuel Pedrosa, whose name and person also appear in the story:

Todo lo que he contado fue lo que viví, oí o vi cuando era niño. Nunca lo puse por escrito porque, como dije, yo no soy escritor. Esta historia se conocerá por unos blancos. Vinieron a mi isla y quisieron conocer nuestros cuentos, las historias que contábamos de noche antes de ir a dormir. [...] Entonces el jefe de estos blancos, que decía que venía para recuperar nuestra tradición oral, y que se llamaba Manuel, me dijo que contara lo que quisiera, pues a lo mejor había aspectos importantes en los recuerdos de mi niñez.<sup>35</sup> (227)

Besides the fact that the (nameless) narrator's childhood period coincides with that of the author,<sup>36</sup> in this fragment at the end of the novel there is an autobiographical link via the name Manuel. Manuel, described by the narrator as “el jefe de estos blancos, que decía que venía para recuperar nuestra tradición oral”, refers to José Manuel Pedrosa who, in addition to writing the foreword to the novel, actually researched the oral traditions of Equatorial Guinea. By using his name, the author sounds like an *implied author* in the narrator who, although he avers that he is not a writer, claims to have seen in “the interest of the whites” his chance to remember what he still remembered about important events from his youth to tell Manuel:

El interés de los blancos fue mi oportunidad. Espero que Manuel sepa encontrar la manera de dejar por escrito mi historia, para que unos que la hayan vivido, o alguien de mi isla que tenía la misma edad que yo cuando viví lo que cuento en ella, recuerde también lo que ha sido su vida. Sé que en una historia contada en unas cuantas horas no se puede decir todo. Agradezco

---

<sup>35</sup> All I have told is what I experienced, heard or saw as a child. I have never written it down because, as I said, I am not a writer. This story will become known thanks to some whites. They came to my island and wanted to know our stories, the stories that we told at night before going to sleep. [...] And then the chief of these whites, who said he had come to recover our oral tradition and that his name was Manuel, said that I should recount what I wanted to tell, because maybe these were important aspects in my childhood memories. [own translation]

<sup>36</sup> There are parallels between the narrator and the author: as did the narrator, as a child the author lived during the cholera epidemic on Annobón, where he (like the narrator) went to school (166,167).

a Manuel por permitir que mi historia, que es también la de mucha gente de mi isla, ocupe el lugar de un cuento que era lo que quería para su trabajo.<sup>37</sup> (227, 228)

With the help of "the whites", the narrator gives the islanders a voice so that their story is preserved and can therefore be associated with the author whose novel is published with the help of "the whites" with a foreword by José Manuela Pedrosa. This is where the 'autobiographical pact' takes place in which the author has outsourced the autobiographical to another narrator (what Lejeune calls the *pacte romanesque*). Marvin Lewis sees this as an attempt by the author to write the islanders, unheard, forgotten and exploited by colonial and neocolonial powers, back into history: "It is an attempt to write the long suffering, forgotten islanders back into history after exploitation by colonial and neocolonial powers. The author gives voice to the voiceless" (2017: 213).

### *Mise en abyme*

After the evils (*las cosas malas*) had already announced themselves at the beginning,<sup>38</sup> about a third of the way through the novel the narrator looks back at how "the spirit of death and evil" took over the island:

En aquellos tiempos se vivió, durante varias semanas, y meses, la instalación del espíritu de la muerte y del mal sobre la isla del mar de Atlante. En realidad, fue un mal que sucedió a otro. El mal primero era, como ya sintieron los que lo vivieron, una premonición de lo que iba a venir.<sup>39</sup> (81)

The fact that the announcement of this "first evil" (the beating of the *maligna*)<sup>40</sup> was already included in the fire that was deliberately lit, perhaps making this fire a *mise en abyme* and spill or 'pivot' (Dällenbach, 1989: 41), around which all other events and "evils" in the novel revolve. On this premise an investigation will be made into how certain events, such as the

---

<sup>37</sup> White interest was my chance. I hope Manuel knows how to find a way to put my story into writing, so that perhaps some who have lived on or someone from my island who was the same age as me when I experienced what I am telling here will also remember what his life was like. I know that you can't tell everything in a story told in the space of a few hours. I thank Manuel for allowing my story, that is also that of many people on my island, to find its place and I hope that this was the story he wanted for his work. [own translation]

<sup>38</sup> See the quote that begins this chapter.

<sup>39</sup> In those times, for several weeks and months, the presence of the spirit of death and evil was experienced on the island in the Atlantic Sea. In reality, it was one evil that led to another. The first evil, as those who experienced it already felt, was a portent of what was to come. [own translation]

<sup>40</sup> In the text, this *mal primero* seems to refer back to the beating of the woman, but in the novel it is unclear whether this *mal primero* does not also perhaps allude to the fire referred to on the same page.

mystery of the grandfather, the beating and disappearance, are related and to what extent they are caught up in the evil that seems to have been "ignited" by the fire.

### *The grandfather's mystery*

“Avanzaba la noche, seguía haciéndolo el fuego y mi abuelo seguía ahí, quizá lamentándose de su escasa pericia con el mar, y descubrimos que lloraba [...].”<sup>41</sup> (60)

A recurring motif throughout the novel is that of the grandfather. He has literally turned away from the sea, living in a house that is the only one in the village that does not face the sea, but looks toward the mountains from where the fire comes. His non-participation in marine activities and his failure to join the other men in the *vidjil*, both place him in an aloof role that Marvin Lewis says is a symbol of the isolation in which all islanders find themselves: “His isolation is symbolic of the alienation suffered by the entire population on the island in the Atlante, who spend much of their time anticipating disaster” (2017: 219). Lewis also points out that the grandfather remains a mystery for most of the novel (Ibid.: 218). This is reinforced by the fact that the narrator repeatedly wonders about his appearance and behavior and because what the children find in his room is not disclosed. There is also a 'gap' for the reader in the sense of Iser's theory about *gaps*,<sup>42</sup> because the narrator suggests the answer to the question of what can be seen in that room is yet to be revealed (41), while that question continues unanswered throughout the novel.<sup>43</sup>

Fra-Molinero thinks that the mystery of the grandfather also represents the alienation of a part of the (male) population of the island who have been put to work elsewhere (123/2, 2014: 99). The grandfather is sidelined, not only because he has turned away from the sea but also because, in the course of the novel it becomes clear that he had also spent a long time far outside the island in a foreign country, after which he returned empty-handed. Fra-Molinero sees this as a reflection of the colonial and neocolonial regime:

El abuelo, que baila como los ibos de Nigeria con los que ha compartido su vida lejos, ahora viejo y enfermo, ha regresado sin nada que ofrecer, excepto con un colonostomía y una bolsa

---

<sup>41</sup> As the night wore on, the fire grew and my grandfather was still there, perhaps lamenting his lack of expertise at sea, and we discovered that he was crying [...]. [own translation]

<sup>42</sup> Iser's theory is that which remains open in the text helps determine the reader, making it implicit in the text (Iser in Rimmon-Kenan, 1983: 118).

<sup>43</sup> Rimmon-Kenan argues that there is then a permanent gap aimed at the future (*prolepsis*) (1983: 130).

en donde se depositan sus excrementos a la vista del narrador, todo un símbolo físico de relaciones coloniales y neo coloniales.<sup>44</sup> (Ibid.)

However, the grandfather, although turned away from the sea, has his eyes set on the mountain every day, can also be seen as *mise en abyme* of the mountain from which the fire comes.

### *The beating*

¿Qué era aquello? Por ser niños, no alcanzábamos a ver bien todo aquello, pero veíamos que la persona que estaba siendo tan furiosamente golpeada se caía al suelo, luego lograba levantarse y seguía corriendo sin dejar de recibir los palos de esa gente. Bueno no todos los que corríamos tras ella, como yo, golpeábamos, sino que queríamos ser testigos de aquel hecho que nunca había ocurrido en nuestra isla. ¿Qué era aquello? La persona golpeada, que luego podimos ver que era una mujer, sacó fuerzas de donde nadie sabía y corrió delante de la gente y cruzó todo el pueblo y se dirigió a la Misión.<sup>45</sup> (77)

This event of a woman's beating condenses (and intensifies) into repetition:

Corrió aquella mujer con las fuerzas que recuperó en su tiempo dentro de la iglesia y luego cayó al poco de salir, y fuimos testigos de que no solamente siguió la lluvia de palos de sus perseguidores sino que uno de ellos metía su palo en la desnudez de aquella mujer. Metía sus palos en aquella mujer, y lo removía, como si no fuera suficiente con meterlo.<sup>46</sup> (78)

Then the event is retold from an adult perspective (125-30), this time with more details about the woman's family and the motive behind the beating. We now learn that she is not only the mother of the two sisters who lit the fire in the mountains, but is also suspected of being a *maligna* who was close to a sacristan, who shortly afterwards fell to his death from a date palm. It can be associated with fire in two ways; besides being the mother of the sisters who

---

<sup>44</sup> The grandfather, who dances like the Nigerian Ibos with whom he has shared his life far away, now old and sick, has returned with nothing to offer, except his stoma and a bag where his feces ended up in plain sight of the narrator, all as a physical symbol of colonial and neo-colonial relationships. [own translation]

<sup>45</sup> What was that? As children, we could not see all that well, but we saw that the person who was so furiously beaten fell to the ground, then, still pounded by the blows of those people, manage to get up and keep running without stopping. Well, not all of us who ran after her, like me, hit, but we wanted to be witnesses to that fact that this had never ever happened on our island before. What was this? The beaten person, who we could later see was a woman, drew strength from somewhere, without anyone knowing from where, and she ran ahead of the people and crossed the entire town and went to the Mission. [own translation]

<sup>46</sup> That woman, with the strength that she regained at times, ran inside the church and then fell shortly after leaving, and we were witnesses that not only did the rain of sticks from her pursuers continue, but that one of them thrust his stick into the nakedness of that woman. He put his stick into her, and stirred it, as if it was not enough to put it. [own translation]



started the fire, also as a *maligna* who, Marvin Lewis claims, is associated with the slumbering fire of the Pico del Fuego (the central volcano of the island): “The heat emanating from the bodies of the Malignants is related to the dormant volcano 'El Pico', which dominates the island's physical space as well as the thoughts of its inhabitants” (2017: 217). Lewis says that the fire is omnipresent, slumbering both in nature and in the *malignas* as a category of older women whom the narrator tells go to the sea at night sweating after being visited by *el Maligno*. In her dual relationship with the fire – the fire lit by her daughters and the fire that burns within her – the thrashed woman can be seen as *mise en abyme* of the fire of the mountain and all the evil that began with it.

The narrator makes an (indirect) connection between the thrashed *maligna* and the fire in the behavior of *el cura*. The narrator claims he has solved only half the case because he lets her go unprotected, without purifying her. This was not enough to quell the resulting 'fire' and, because no one would leave their house to burn, neither party could ever pass through the gates of Heaven with the other:

Yo no creo que alguien puede entrar en el cielo si dejó su casa ardiendo, o todo el pueblo en el que vivía quemándose por el fuego que provocaron los que vivían en él. Yo creo que no le dejarían entrar en el cielo.<sup>47</sup> (135)

Therein lurks a certain evil with which this "burning house" as *mise en abyme* can also be associated with the fire of the burning mountain. Another fragment in which the beating as *mise en abyme* is mirrored is about the stoning of dogs:

En realidad, en nuestra isla, y cuando por alguna razón un perro, o perra, merecía ser sacrificado, se le ataba en un árbol y todos los niños que estuvieran cerca lo apedreaban hasta morir. Eran los perros de los que se creía que ya no valían para lo que hacían, que era nada, dicho sin faltar a la verdad.”<sup>48</sup> (75,76)

Fra-Molinero asserts that in this fragment, as in the beating of the *maligna*, the social structure of the island and the patriarchal state are reflected. He points out that, in the hunt for the woman accused of witchcraft, that this anecdote about the stoned dogs prefaces, one can

---

<sup>47</sup> I do not believe that anyone could enter Heaven if he left his house alight or the entire village in which he lived burning because of the fire lit by those who lived in that village. I believe that then they would not let him enter Heaven. [own translation]

<sup>48</sup> In reality, on our island, when there was some reason for it, a dog or bitch, needed to be sacrificed, it was tied up to a tree and all the children who were nearby stoned it to death. They were the dogs about which it was believed they were no longer good for what they did, that was nothing, said without being untrue. [own translation]

see a practice that perpetuates the social relationships on the island, in which the patriarchal state finds a way out and controls political and religious enemies by violence.<sup>49</sup>

### *Disappearance*

The beating as the "first evil" is followed by the cholera epidemic that kills much of the island's population as the next "evil". The succession of "evils" can also be counted as the disappearance of a number of men who paddle towards death at sea in the direction of a "false light":<sup>50</sup>

Lo que se dijo, y se dijo esto por lo que contó el único que se había salvado, aunque a medias, fue que la luz que vieron en el horizonte pudo haber sido una luz engañosa, que no hubiera sido una verdadera luz. Es decir, una luz que tenía algo que ver con la muerte. [...] Ellos se dieron cuenta, pero ya no había nada que hacer; desde aquella hora, hasta el mediodía del día siguiente, seguían remando, en busca de su isla perdida. Por eso dije que aunque dijera cien veces lo que remaron, no sería suficiente. Remaron, remaron, remaron, remaron, remaron, remaron, remaron, remaron, remaron, remaron, hasta que no pudieron más.<sup>51</sup> (220)

Referring to this light, Fra-Molinero compares it to *Áwala cu sangui*, in which it also occurs in combination with a disappearance at sea and where it is called *sandjawel*. He links this light in that novel to the cult of San Juan,<sup>52</sup> that he believes is part of a world full of secrets and half-truths, fighting against the oppression that comes from outside and takes place on the island:

“The cult of the Guardian San Juan, the deadly infantile nightmares of the *Jandjal* or the fatal light of the *sandjawel* transform the society portrayed into *Áwala cu sangui*, a world of secrets

---

<sup>49</sup> Fra-Molinero refers to the meaning that the cultural philosophers Grégoire Chamayou and Elias Canetti give to the pursuit of people: “La persecución tiene la forma de una caza, que como señala Grégoire Chamayou, es la forma tearal y favorita de los opresores para deshacerse de los seres oprimidos. [...] Citando a Elias Canetti, Chamayou define la jauría como un grupo de animales que se juntan para buscar una presa y quieren sus sangre y su muerte (Chamayou 123-124).” (123/2, 2014: 110).

<sup>50</sup> This 'evil' is about to happen again as is now predicted by a woman called Sabina (Maminda Zé Sabina) who is in contact with the dead: “[...] pues aquello significaba que los difuntos la obligaban a decir que algo malo iba a ocurrir en la isla.” (15)

<sup>51</sup> What was said, and this was said by the only one who had been saved, although half, it was that the light they saw on the horizon could have been a deceptive light, that it could not have been a real light. That is, it was a light that had something to do with death. [...] They realized, but there was already nothing they could do about it; from that time until noon the next day, they continued to paddle, in search of their lost island. That is why I said that, even were it a hundred times that they paddled, it would not be enough. They paddled, paddled, paddled, paddled, paddled, paddled, paddled, paddled, until they could no more. [own translation]

<sup>52</sup> In *Arde el monte de noche* San Juan is referred to as the patron saint of one of the small villages on the island (153).

and half-truths, in the fight against oppression that comes from outside and the forms of oppression generated within its own ranks [...].”<sup>53</sup> [own translation]

As something indefinable in the distance, the "false light" that is part of these "secrets and half-truths" is fatal to the men at sea.

Light and darkness play an ambivalent role in the novel; while one fears the dangers of darkness, at the same time one fears visibility through exposure to the light of the moon:

¿Oscuridad? Siempre creíamos que de ella podía venir cualquier peligro. De hecho, algunos niños pequeños lloraban inmediatamente al producirse la oscuridad. [...] Y aunque teníamos miedo de la oscuridad, no podíamos exponernos a la luz exagerada de la luna llena. Eso ya lo dije.<sup>54</sup> Era porque con ello te exponías demasiado. Lo que hubiera de lejos te podía ver. Con la oscuridad no podías ver el peligro. Con la luz de la luna sobre la isla te exponías demasiado a él. Todo mi isla daba miedo. [...] Creo que la oscuridad, en la vida de una persona, es la parte más oscura de la miseria en que vive.<sup>55</sup> (157-8)

The darkness, that the narrator describes, is also the darkest part of the misery in which a person lives, Marvin Lewis claims is the way in which the islanders view their future:

“Throughout this novel, darkness is related to the miserable existence of the inhabitants as well as their overall worldview and shared by all segments of the population. Darkness is also a metaphor for the future faced by them” (2017: 215). However, Clelia Olimpia Rodríguez, thinks that darkness also refers to “a state of blindness” to which the islanders are condemned by the cultural and political system (2011: 179). She, too, points to the ambivalent nature of the darkness, that evokes the fear of the politically and culturally abandoned islanders for what is beyond the island, but at the same time they are afraid of the disappearance of the dark that would expose their thin skeletons: “A la oscuridad se le teme porque es la barrera entre ellos y el mundo externo. De la misma manera, se teme la desaparición de la oscuridad

---

<sup>53</sup> “El culto al protector San Juan, las mortales pesadillas infantiles del Jandjal o la funesta luz del sandjawel hacen de la sociedad retratada en Áwala cu sangui un mundo de secretos y medias verdades, en lucha contra la opresión que viene de fuera y las formas de opresión generadas en su propio seno [...]” (123/2, 2014: 96).

<sup>54</sup> The narrator here refers to an earlier passage in the story that also deals with the moon with a similar meaning: “Yo sentía como si la luna, en su plena luz, mostraba demasiado nuestros esqueletos, nuestros defectos” (119).

<sup>55</sup> Darkness? We always believed that any danger could come from her. In fact, some young children would cry immediately darkness fell. [...] And, although we were afraid of the dark, we could not expose ourselves to the overabundant light of the full moon. I have already said this. It was because you were exposing yourself too much. You could see everything from afar. In the dark you couldn't see the danger. In the moonlight on the island, you were exposing yourself too much to it. My whole island was scary. [...] I believe that darkness, in one's life, is the darkest part of the misery in which one live. [own translation]

This also includes a shift and broadening of perspective; as a child he and the other children feared the danger of darkness nor they would face by it by moonlight. However, from the adult narrator's perspective the darkness reflects above all the misery in which the islanders find themselves.

ya que mostraría el espejo de su realidad; la luz exhibiría sus esqueletos” (Ibid).<sup>56</sup> In addition, it seems that, in the dark, the food also disappears into the stomach in a secret, dark way, so that the narrator is inclined to ask for food as soon as it grows light again:

Y cuando comía en la oscuridad, no tenía la misma satisfacción que lo hacía con la luz. Entonces cuando aquella lámpara volvía, tenía la tentación de pedir más comida, pues la había entrado en mi boca cuando había oscuridad lo hizo de manera secreta, u oscura, y por eso no la sentía en mi estómago.<sup>57</sup> (157)

Finally, there is the death of the child, Luis Mari, conceived aboard the ship of the friendly nation. His mother asks the *meastro* of the *cayuco*, with whom the novel begins and ends, to paddle them to the large village and, in that paddling a parallel is drawn with the men paddling in vain toward the light; like them he paddles and paddles but does not advance:

Lo que le impedía a avanzar al hombre, lo que le ataba las manos, como lo sentía él, era que en su cayuco había una persona muerta, aunque, como en aquella ocasión, fuera un niño pequeño. Que los muertos pesaban muchísimo más que los vivos era una cosa que ya se sabía. Y algunos piensan que lo que pesa es la tristeza, el dolor, la inmensa oscuridad de los ojos cerrados del que yace en el cayuco, en aquel caso concreto.<sup>58</sup> (210)

Rodriguez sees that paddling without moving forward as a reflection of the general state of the island; in the novel, death hinders progress but, she argues, the physical attempt to progress without succeeding and without knowing why also applies to the population of the island (210). However, paddling without moving forward and paddling toward the deceptive light are also a reference to each other as *mise en abyme* in the sense of coming nowhere and disappearing into nothingness, or disappearing into the dark.

In summary, it can be said that the *mises en abyme* show that the mystery of the grandfather, as well as that of the evil ones, have some relationship to the fire on the mountain; the grandfather because his gaze is fixed on that mountain every day and the evils that occur after the fire on the mountain kindled by the two sisters. The first evil is the beating of the woman

---

<sup>56</sup> “The dark is feared because it is the barrier between them and the outside world. In the same way, the disappearance of darkness is feared since it would mirror its reality; the light that would reveal their skeletons.” [eigen vertaling]

<sup>57</sup> And when you ate in the dark, you didn't have the same satisfaction as you did by the light. So, when that lamp came back, I would want to ask for more food, because what had already entered my mouth when it was dark had done so secretly, or darkly, and that is why I did not feel it in my stomach. [own translation]

<sup>58</sup> What kept the man from moving forward, what was tying his hands, as he felt, was that there was a dead person in his canoe although, on that occasion, it was a small child. That the dead weighed much more than the living was something that was already known. And some think that what weighs is the sadness, the pain, the immense darkness of the closed eyes of the one who lies in the canoe in this particular case. [own translation]

who, as a *maligna*, was supposed to carry the "evil fire" within her and whose daughters are the sisters who started the fire on the mountain. The severity of her beating is reflected in the stoning of dogs. Furthermore, her "fire" is not extinguished by *el cura* because he offers her no protection. This is followed by the cholera epidemic that is not directly related to the fire but is associated with it by the narrator as "one evil eliciting another". A series of evils follows, including disappearances associated with darkness and a deceptive light at sea. A paddling voyage leads nowhere (to a light that does not exist) or no progress is made, like the paddler of the canoe in which he carries the woman and her dead child. She also turns out to be one of the sisters who started the fire on the mountain that brings the story with all evils back to the fire as the pivotal point at the end of the novel. Also, in the structure of the novel everything revolves around the fire of the mountain and the title of the novel; the fire can be regarded as a *mise en abyme* to which all disasters related to disease, violence and disappearance can be traced.

### *Oral influences*

The novel begins with the lines of a song: *¡Aaala, toma suguewa! ¡Alewa! Aaaaaee, toma seguewa! Alewa!* that the narrator explains as the song in which the master of the *cayuco* expresses his connection with those with whom he paddles the boat out to the sea and what the author calls "la canción más bonita del mundo entero" (the most beautiful song of the world). The oral also lies encapsulated in this song in the way in which the narrator repeatedly addresses the reader with questions and then explains a few things:

¿Sabéis por qué podía ser cualquiera las versiones? Porque la lengua en la que se dice esto no tiene 'usted', pero el 'maestro' que dirige a 'todos' se dirige a ellos con respeto, como si les tratara de usted; y es porque les ruega respetuosamente que tiren de algo.<sup>59</sup> (11)

This fits what Mineke Schipper says was the role of the oral narrator in Africa, "as a kind of conscience in his own society; he pointed out what was wrong and educated the people" (Schipper, 1987: 31). Her hypothesis is that writers have taken over that role and Ávila

---

<sup>59</sup> Do you know why it could be any of those versions? Because the language in which these words are spoken is unknown to 'you', but the *maestro* addresses 'all' with respect, as if it were 'you'; and it is because he respectfully begs them to pull something. [own translation]



Laurel lets the narrator, via Manuel “who came to the island to find out the oral tradition”, also refer to himself (see 2.3).

However, the rhythm and repetition in the sung lines also characterize the rest of the text and arise from the oral narrative style aimed at the listener and, in this case, the reader (Ong, 1982: 34), as is the interrogative form and the preference for pronounced, bizarre characters and an enthusiastic description of physical violence (Ibid.: 44). Excessive physical violence is present in the description of the beating that involves caning and assault, and the bizarre is in the description of the grandfather, among other matters:

Lo primero que empezaba a llamar la atención de aquel hombre era que tenía rapada la mitad de la cabeza, pero rapada para decir que había habido la intervención de una mano, pues no se veía que aquel rapado había sido el resultado de un accidente que le seleccionó la zona del implante capilar de aquella mitad de la cabeza.<sup>60</sup> (26)

'Pronounced bizarre' (Ong, 70) is also found in the character of the *malignas* (as that of the thrashed woman), portrayed as witches who can also infect other women and who are said to be associated with the occult and Evil (*el Maligno*), that is contrasted here with the good of *el sacristan* and the 'innocent children', whom they would poison and pelt and 'contaminate' with objects:

En la lengua en la que cuento esta parte de la historia de mi isla puedo decir que la podemos llamar bruja o, mejor, hechichera, aunque por mí solo la llamaría maligna. Pues aquellas mujeres no solamente podían introducir objetos en los niños, sino envenenarlos con comida o matarlos con otro maleficio. Además, y con un método que solamente conocían, podían pasar su condición de malignas a persona elegida por ellas o tocada por la mala suerte, de manera que a partir de aquella elección, aquella persona, que siempre ha sido otra mujer, fuera a partir de aquel paso visitada por el ser que les infundía tan insufrible calor. Y así pasaba ella a ser una maligna.<sup>61</sup> (108)

---

<sup>60</sup> The first thing that began to attract the attention of this man was that he had half his head shaved, but shaved as a statement to say that there had been the intervention of a hand, because it was not seen that this shaved had been the result of an accident that selected the hair implant area of that half of the head. [eigen vertaling]

<sup>61</sup> In the language in which I tell this part of the story of my island, I can say we can call her a witch or, rather, a sorceress, although I myself would only call her evil. Because these women could not only insert objects into children, but poison them with food or kill them with another spell. Moreover, with a method that only they knew, they could transmit their maliciousness to a person chosen by them or someone whom it unfortunately affected, in such a way that, as soon as that person was chosen, always another woman, from then on that person would be visited by the being that infused them with an intolerable heat. And, so they became malignant. [own translation]

## 2.4 The characters and circumstances

*El abuelo* is the only character whose appearance and behavior, but not his character, is extensively described, although there is a certain shift in the way the narrator sees him. At first, from his childish focus, he sees him as a stranger:

El abuelo estaba ahí, sí, pero alguna vez pensé que aquel hombre, y por serlo, podía no tener nada con nuestra familia, incluso que no fuera de nuestra isla.<sup>62</sup> (28)

But, after discovering what is wrong with him, he shows (still from the focus of the child) more understanding and feeling for his grandfather:

El hecho es que a partir de aquella fecha empecé a comprender un poco a mi abuelo. Cuando pregunté por lo que era aquella bolsa, casi lloro. O lloré por lo que sentí. Sentí pena por él [...].<sup>63</sup> (183)

The other characters are mainly 'flat characters' who are referred to in their roles as '*maestro carpintero*', *madre*, *abuelo*, *ahijada*, '*aquel chico*', *maligna*, *el sacristán* or *el doctor*. They have no name, with the exception of a few such as Luis Mari, *la ahijada*'s child conceived on board who later dies, the husband of the woman being beaten whose name is Toiñ and Sabina (Maminda Zé Sabina), the neighbor who can speak to the dead.<sup>64</sup> Another exception are the dead claimed by the cholera epidemic, whose names fill more than a page, marked by crosses (98-9). This page becomes, as it were, a written graveyard of all the individual dead.

Rodríguez sees the listing of the first and last names here has the double effect of making the reader realize that they are individuals, while the accumulation of so many names also crystallizes the magnitude and impact of the event (2011: 205).<sup>65</sup> Moreover, the names – the original and not the names assigned by them by the Spanish colonizer – reinforce their origin as 'belonging to the island'. Therefore, *el doctor* (also among the dead), since he has no canoe

---

<sup>62</sup> Grandfather was there, yes, but once I thought that this man, because of what he is, couldn't have anything to do with our family, that he wasn't even from our island. [own translation]

<sup>63</sup> The fact is that, from that date, I began to understand my grandfather a little. When I asked what that bag was for, I almost cried. Or I cried for what I felt. I felt sorry for him [...]. [own translation]

<sup>64</sup> See also 2.3 *Mise en Abyme*; disappearances.

<sup>65</sup> With regard to the crosses, names and surnames included in the text, chiseled as a narrative mausoleum, Rodríguez also makes a comparison with the novel by Donato Ndongo: "Esta narrativa es también, como en el caso de *Los poderes de la tempestad*, la representación de un panteón que conmemora la vida de los fallecidos. En el texto quedan inscritas cruces, nombres y apellidos haciendo visible un cenotafio narrativo" (2011: 222).

and is exempt from visiting the *vidjil*, tends to be regarded as an outsider who therefore needs no name:

¿Contamos al doctor aparte? ¿No tenía nombre? ¿Por qué no lo he citado por su nombre? Lo único que sabemos es que en aquellos tiempos era normal que un médico no tuviera cayuco, porque, trabajando de día en el hospital, no tenía tiempo de ir a la pesca. Además, por ser médico, aprendió aquel oficio en otro sitio cuya gente no tenía experiencia en el mar. [...] Tampoco necesitaba irse al vidjil. A la tarde los que sabían que era un hombre ocupado mandaban un atado de pescado a su casa, y lo agradecía con una sonrisa. Todos le saludaban y eso porque era el único que conocía los remedios para los males de su gente. Por eso se le podía permitir como un extranjero, a costa de la caridad, o de su nombre.<sup>66</sup> (100,101)

Nature reflects the tragedy of the first two who died as a result of the cholera epidemic in a description like this:

A partir de aquellas dos muertes el cielo de la isla se cerró para que dejase de brillar el sol sobre ella.<sup>67</sup> (89)

However, nature is also personalized in, for example, the wind that decides something (57), the night that opens its eyes or houses and roofs that satisfy the fire (58), as personifications that also belong to an oral culture.

### 3. Ávila Laurel's novel as truth procedure

Ávila Laurel writes the island and its inhabitants back in history as a counterbalance to an unambiguous identity imposed by the government (Lewis, MacLeod) but, above all, by making the specifics of this island visible and tangible to the reader. He does this by means of a narrator who involves the reader in a questioning manner and with the help of repetitions in daily life on his island, through which he looks back on events in his childhood from a different focus, child/adult. The realistic and detailed way in which he tells how a *cayuco* on his *isla del mar atlante* is hollowed out of a tree trunk and transported to the sea, to the

---

<sup>66</sup> Do we count the doctor apart? Didn't he have a name? Why haven't I mentioned him by name? The only thing we know is that, in those days, it was normal for a doctor not to have a canoe because, working in the hospital during the day, he did not have time to go fishing. Also, being a doctor, he had learned his profession in another place whose people had no experience at sea. [...] Nor did he need to go to the *vidjil*. In the afternoon, those who knew he was a busy man sent a bundle of fish to his house and he thanked them with a smile. Everyone greeted him because he was the only one who knew the cure for the ills of his people. Therefore, as a foreigner, he could be allowed as a courtesy, his name. [own translation]

<sup>67</sup> Because of these two deaths, the sky over the island closed so that the sun would stop shining on it. [own translation]

accompaniment of what he calls "the most beautiful song in the world",<sup>68</sup> makes this event special and makes the island 'tangible'. Certain events are also condensed because they are repeated from the child/adult double focus in a kind of circumferential movement. However, this difference in focus also offers the narrator the opportunity to criticize (Lewis), for example, the behavior of *el cura* and that of the grandfather. In this the writer, who is also regarded as a critical analyst in his essays and on his weblog, also sounds like an *implied author*. There is another link to the writer in the fact that his childhood parallels that of the narrator and, through the character Manuel presented in the novel, who can be related to Manuel Pedrosa who wrote the foreword to the novel. Ávila Laurel might have outsourced part of his own story to the narrator (that which Lejeune calls a *pacte romanesque*).

By adopting the interrogative and instructive form, the narrator also takes on an educational task that stems from an African oral tradition, in which the narrator forms the conscience of society (Schipper). The poetic (song) during the transport of the *cayuco* serves as a binding factor between the islanders and contributes to the dynamics and action inherent in the oral narration, as well as the rhythm, repetition and clichés of good versus evil in stereotypes, such as those of the flat characters of *el sacristán* versus *la maligna*. On the other hand, there are the characters who do have a name and hence acquire a special meaning, such as the records of the deaths as a result of the cholera epidemic. In the enumeration of their original names, followed by crosses, they too are written back in history and a 'pantheon' is erected for them (Rodríguez, 2011: 222). The whole epidemic appears as a rupture and void in the history of the island is reinforced.

The *mise en abyme* investigation has revealed that the cholera epidemic is linked to other evils that revolve around the fire on the mountain and, as such, together create a rift in the island's history. The evils (and ruptures) are exacerbated by the lack of medicine and food,<sup>69</sup>

<sup>68</sup> The song with which the novel begins and is repeated at the end of the novel (206).

<sup>69</sup> In a digital presentation of *Red Burdel* and *Cuando a Guinea se iba por mar*, Ávila Laurel's last two novels, organized by the *Cooperación Española Cultura Bata/Malabo*, September 2020, historian and sociologist Cécile Stehrenberger (University of Wuppertal) says the following about the miserable circumstances: "Podemos aprender de Juan Tomás que desastres no sólo son una cosa natural o biológica, sino en primer lugar una cosa social y política. Suelen ser los pobres los que no tienen los medios necesarios, por ejemplo una casa firme o jabón para enfrentarse a una cosa como un virus." She therefore links disasters that can befall people with the scarcity of resources that affects the poor (at the time of Macías, the entire population of Annobón), that she believes is a social and political issue (one she extends into our time in which the virus Covid-19 is circulating). The presentation, introduced by Benita Sampedro Viscaya can be seen on YouTube [[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HB6EMXkd1x0&fbclid=IwAR2LU\\_9sZOvrAy5H4qEFD9tp616gZ32qPYIUwfDKA\\_lm60f5R8QEda-6GI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HB6EMXkd1x0&fbclid=IwAR2LU_9sZOvrAy5H4qEFD9tp616gZ32qPYIUwfDKA_lm60f5R8QEda-6GI)]

the exposure to light or darkness and the monotonous existence of life on the island, that is also reflected in the structure of the novel (Phaf-Rheinberger). Critics fill in these evils and the mystery of the grandfather with the alienation of (part of) the male population and the isolation of the islanders (Lewis and Fra-Molinero), a perpetuation of the effect of the patriarchal state on the islanders and their fear of external oppression (Fra-Molinero and Rodríguez), fear of the future (Lewis) and blindness to the cultural and political system (Rodríguez). Only Lewis points out that the grandfather also remains a mystery for most of the novel in terms of his appearance and behavior and in not revealing what was in his room.

By interpreting the mystery and the evils as *history*, that in my opinion the critics do too much, not enough justice is done to the novel as *poetry*. Rancière makes this distinction in which poetry intervenes in everyday life through imitation, while in history only a “reproductive and meaningless life” takes place. Taking this view, the (political) strength of the novel does not lie in what the various critics interpret in a historical or sociological context, but in what remains open and in which (in Badiou's theory) a truth procedure takes place. Open spaces remain in this novel, besides the mystery of the grandfather and the empty room, are the mystery of the cult of San Juan and the sacrifices made to the sea,<sup>70</sup> as well as the mysterious disappearance at sea and the paddling without getting anywhere (or arrival at emptiness). And it is all these mysteries that, in conjunction with a series of evils, circulate around the fire that comes from the mountain (as pivot in the novel), that make a political rift in the situation. In his novel, Ávila Laurel does more than just write the island back in history. By what remains open, the novel initiates a truth procedure that also breaks open the existing (political) history of the island and Equatorial Guinea.

---

<sup>70</sup> The islanders offer all kinds of products to the king of the sea; by throwing them into the sea from a canoe without looking back, after which they disappear without ever washing up: “Y ninguno de aquellos objetos volvía a tierra al mismo día ni al siguiente, ni nadie que hubiera estado pescando por los confines del horizonte daba con ellos, con la escasez de todo que padecía la gente. No era un milagro?” (175) (And none of these objects returned to land the same day, nor the next day, nor that anyone who had gone fishing at the end of the horizon ever found them, considering all that they suffered. Is it not miracle?)





## Part IV Conclusions of the study

In interviews and essays, Esono Ebalé, Ndongso and Ávila Laurel in particular have expressed themselves politically, whereas Nsue Angüe barely ever spoke in this sense. However, the main question of my research, how the stories and images of the writers and visual artists from Equatorial Guinea empty and open up the current political situation in that country, does not focus on their political or non-political statements (although they play a supporting role), but on *the political* in their art and literary works. Therefore, theories that focus on art and politics have been chosen as a theoretical framework; in Rancière this is art that, as *the political* breaks with what he refers to as *the police* – or the state –, leaves no room whatsoever and Badiou considers art as a *truth procedure* that takes place after an *eventual rupture* in what he calls *the situation*, that can also be regarded as the state, has occurred. With the help of both theories, this research has sought to identify where spaces or voids exist in the visual arts and literature of Equatorial Guinea, with which the works create a rift in the state, that actually qualifies as a police state, in Equatorial Guinea.

On the basis of these theories, besides the central concepts of *ruptures* and *voids*, concepts such as *necessity*, *courage*, *loyalty* and *interspaces* have proved to be leading, as are related concepts such as metaphors, stereotypes or more specific concepts that in this research in the visual arts relate to the applied media and comics culture and in the literature to narratology and oral characteristics. This final part of my research presents a concluding reflection on where there are clashes or (political) ruptures and voids in the various works, that make them into a *truth procedure* in Badiou's conception of what this means. This will show how the works examined offer an opening to a different *truth* other than that of the current regime in Equatorial Guinea and how this happens in each of the specific works.

It has turned out that the stories and images are based on a necessity that is apparent in literature, among other places, in the *paratexts* (Genette) and in the visual arts, in addition to the images in the accompanying texts. The “implied author” (Rimmon-Kenan: Chatman) or the “autobiographical pact” (Lejeune) can be linked to this requirement in literature, with which the author also resonates in the need to tell the story.

In Ndongso's *Los poderes de la tempestad*, the necessity of the story of the I-narrator and the adventure he embarks on by returning to his country is apparent in the dedication in which he

says he owes a "permanent look back" to his grandparents and in the motto borrowed from the *Apocalypse/Book of Revelation*, that demands that what happened to be made known to the world. That there is no going back from this obligation becomes clear in the further course of the novel with the reference to Julius Caesar's *alea iacta est* (the die is cast). The novel's second motto, taken from Shakespeare's *King Lear* about a "flock of blind men led by a handful of lunatics", also makes it clear that the need for this story comes with an obligation to the community. The novel is about memories that are told in the first person and, that as an 'autobiographical narration', have a powerful effect on the reader (Dorrit Cohen). Moreover, the fact that the narrator in the first person has no name indicates a *romanesk pact* (Lejeune) in which the author outsources his own story to the nameless narrator; an act by which the need to tell this story not only reaches the narrator, but also the author himself. The link to the author is also made in the novels of Nsue Angüe and Ávila Laurel, again with narrators in the first person in which an implicit author resonates in a need to tell the stories; only in these two novels the accents are different.

In *Ekomo*, Nsue Angüe's novel, it is not about Ekomo and Nnanga as the dichotomy between man and woman, city and countryside or the decline of Africa against western influences, as most critics claim, but about the way in which Nnanga positions herself in her community. The necessity of the story lies in her and her role in her community, made apparent from the novel's mission and from the dance and lyricism that play an important role in the novel. In the dedication addressed to Nnanga Aba'a, who cannot read and as "mother of all men" represents the female part of that community, the name Nnanga expresses the connection of both the character and that of the author who belongs to the same community, with the community. She (as *implied author*) therefore enters into an *autobiographical pact* with the reader and allows various voices to resonate in Nnanga, including her own in certain passages (as well as in the passage about Nfumba'a); voices that find their expression, among other media, in the dance and the poetic parts and lines with which each new chapter begins. In these Nnanga loses herself and in them she shows that she must act as she does, even if it militates against the commandments and prohibitions of her community.

The lyricism with which the narrator begins and ends his narration in *Arde el monte de noche*, Ávila Laurel's novel, about the communal and 'rhythmic' paddling of the canoe to the sea accompanied by what he called "the most beautiful song in the world" also underlies a necessity. This is the urge to involve the reader in the life on his 'forgotten' island, expressed

in a densification of the narration from the child/adult double focus in a kind of circumferential movement, the continuous structure of the novel, the oral features and detail with which particular elements and events are told and described. The fact that the narrator sees an opportunity to bring his story out through a certain Manuel, who corresponds to the Manuel who wrote the preface to the novel (the only *paratext* present), also links to the author. The author, who, like the narrator, spent his childhood on Annobón, seems to have outsourced his story to a nameless I-narrator, an act that can also be called a *romanesk pact* in this novel.

While there is a (hidden) link to the author in all three novels studied via an *implicit author* or *romanesk pact*, it can also be said that the artist Esono Ebalé continues to work in his empty/white figures in, for example, *Mar de mierda* (Fig. .2.7). His work concerns figures who assume a special position in their environment propelled by a need to resist, underlined by the text written in red letters about "little heroes who continue to live, survive, fight, dream between the seas of shit, thieves, corrupt and tyrants". The artist, who presents himself in one of his texts as "no busco ser, ya soy" (I did not ask to be there, I am already there),<sup>1</sup> also links his own existence to those little heroes whom he portrays in his works. There seems to be no turning back and this applies to him as well as to the lawyer in *Los poderes de la tempestad*, 'the die has been cast' in the confrontational images he makes. They are images that he creates because he simply has to make them independently of all consequences; just as the lawyer in Ndonga's novel has to return to his country, Nnanga in Nsue Angüe's novel cannot help but dance as *Paloma de fuego* and her husband and in his passion and from the focus of a child and adult the I-narrator in Ávila Laurel's novel must report on the situation on his island, albeit via "the whites" (*Arde el monte de noche*, 227). In the necessary 'must', the characters have no choice but to remain true to themselves and to the community to which they bear witness, regardless of all consequences.

Courage also lies at the root of how the writers confront the community and the (political) situation by means of the situations and characters in their novels and the visual artist in his visual work. By means of his images, Esono Ebalé says that he enters into a direct confrontation with the regime of Obiang with an open mind and, as a person, also accepts the

---

<sup>1</sup> "Es mi personaje con el que quiero que se queden. Pues así es como quiero que se me recuerde en mi paso por vuestras vidas de manipulados y manipuladores. [...] Eso sí, y como siempre digo, no busco ser. Ya soy." [https://www.radiomacuto.net/2019/10/30/el-arte-de-la-manipulacion/]

extreme consequences of this.<sup>2</sup> His works are like “a meeting between a sewing machine and an umbrella on the cutting table” to which Rancière refers and in which, he claims, lies the rupture or *dissensus* in which the political unfolds. This rupture is reinforced where the images, in both literature and in the visual arts, exert a strong effect on the recipient. My research has shown that a link can be made between literature and the visual arts when it comes to certain stereotypes and contradictions (that in literature can also be traced back to oral narration) that intensify the rupture and fill in the voids encountered.

In both literature and the visual arts, appear characters who have been stripped or 'emptied' of their personality and consequently they only confront each other as *flat characters* (Rimmon-Kenan: Forster) and sometimes also as representatives of good and evil. In the works of Esono Ebalé, figures are emptied, as in *Mar de mierda* (Fig.2.7), but the figure of Obiang is also emptied of his status, power and masculinity. As a result, this figure of the president takes on all kinds of stereotypes from beast to the devil and these can be associated with stereotypes in the novels, especially in that of Donato Ndongo's. With her nipples sprouting hairs like barbed wire, the character Ada in his novel resembles the female version of Esono Ebalé's Obiang caricature in which the dictator is emptied by stripping him of his manhood, Ada, who, like Obiang, stands for the regime, is emptied by stripping her of her femininity (apart from the monstrous image given of her that parallels Obiang's 'beastliness'). Ong points out that these stereotypes or bizarre characters (such as the *malignas* and the bizarre image of the grandfather in Ávila Laurel's novel) are often placed in oral narratives as good versus evil (as Ada versus Ángeles in Ndongo's novel and the *maligna* versus the *sacristán* in Ávila Laurel's novel) because they provide something to hold on to in the story or they challenge their readers, making them more involved in the story.<sup>3</sup> In the novels of these writers from Equatorial Guinea, as well as in the visual arts of Esono Ebalé, in these stereotyped and emptied figures 'evil' is reduced to its core through which the break with the 'good' gains strength and with it the power of the political (Rancière) and of the *truth procedure* (Badiou) it initiates. The violence that plays a role in all works has a similar function. In Esono Ebalé's works it is expressed in the blood dripping from Obiang's hands or

---

<sup>2</sup> “Y claramente pone el mejor ejemplo del miedo con el que quieren “derrocar” a un régimen al que solo se puede derrocar siendo valientes. Sin tapujos. A cara descubierta y asumiendo hasta las últimas consecuencias” (Ibid.; <https://www.radiomacuto.net>). The consequences were certainly there when he was arrested in Equatorial Guinea in 2017 and had to spend six months in the country as a political prisoner.

<sup>3</sup> Although I do not link the 'emptying' of the figures in my research to skin color, the white (innocent) figures in Esono Ebalé's works could also be seen in contrast to the black (guilty) Obiang.



Obiang depicted grasping a chainsaw and the blood around the 'empty' weapons, intensifying and perhaps also purifying those forms.<sup>4</sup> In the novels, this concerns the extreme violence that took place in the time of Macias, described in Ndongso's novel, or the violence that can be linked to local customs, such as the beating of the *maligna* as the first evil in the novel by Ávila Laurel and the violent punishment that befalls Nnanga for breaking a taboo in Nsue Angüe's novel.

The forms emptied and purified by violence (blood) or otherwise provide space for a new truth, but it is not yet clear what that truth will be.<sup>5</sup> In the works examined, purification takes place in different places and in different ways by which those works form a truth procedure in different ways. Besides the fact that in the caricatures and *La pesadilla de Obi* by Esono Ebalé the dictator is emptied and hence also purged of his power, there are the (purified) empty figures that act as holes in the representation. Their emptiness is intensified by their full environment (teeming with line, color or metaphors) and can therefore be seen as 'all or nothing', as in his poem *Tú eras tú, decían*, Ndongso makes the round wheel turn to everything or nothing.<sup>6</sup> In his novel, the lawyer also counts as a loner, whose testimony to the pain he has had to endure "like a thorn that will find its way out where it came in", likewise results in both everything and nothing. This all or nothing can be understood as an opening, resulting from the purification that is present in all three novels, whether or not in the form of a ritual. The lawyer is cleansed in a purification ritual, mirrored (as *mise en abyme*) in the torture scene that follows, that he survives thanks to the power derived from the purification, ultimately opening up his potential testimony. Nnanga purifies herself primarily in her dance and lyricism, and by remaining faithful to her husband, even if this puts her in a space "between a little bit of sun and a little bit of shade" from which she can offer to all the women of her community, in the name of Nnanga Aba'a, an opening. And the narrator in Ávila Laurel's novel seems above all else to want to purify his island of all the evils he sees there, in order to rescue the abandoned island from oblivion and open it up to everyone who reads his story. These openings can be understood as voids that find their expression in the structure of the novels in the use of a different focus (*tú-yo* in Ndongso, adult-child in Ávila Laurel), in the lyrical passages, many repetitions and (other) oral features (with Nsue Angüe

<sup>4</sup> Reference can be made here to what Fanon claims about violence as a release and the 'cleansing effect' that emanates from this that incites the individual to action (2001: 74).

<sup>5</sup> Referring to Badiou: "[...] pretending something of which we do not yet know whether it is true has already become truth" (Badiou, in Bloois and Van den Hemel, 2015: 55).

<sup>6</sup> *Rueda rodando la redonda rueda. Hacia la nada. O hacia el todo* (Ndongo, *Olvidos: Poemas*, 2016: 75).

and Ávila Laurel), the poetic and continuous text (with Ávila Laurel) and the continuous, 'meandering' sentences without pause (with Ndonga; also influenced by *Señas de identidad* by Goytisolo).

Furthermore, in the works not only forms but spaces are also emptied or purified. In the works of Esono Ebalé this concerns both the drawn spaces within the frames and the voids outside them, including the empty spaces between the frames. It has been established that the reader/viewer of his comics is sucked into the story because of the figures and letters that step outside the frames and thereby also overlap intermediate spaces. This makes the reader/viewer even more involved in the story in which the empty space outside the frame of the story also participates in the experience. In literature there is a connection between the *tú-yo* (you-me) narrator in Ndonga's novel as far as this empty 'space' is concerned. In his novel, the you-narrator, as it were, steps into the empty space outside the frame of the I-narrator's own memory. This happens every time that I-narrator finds a hole in what he cannot know because it takes place outside his field of vision (Butor). By means of the you-narrator, the empty space, the space in which the reader is also located, participates in the story, as it does the comic strip. In the comic and in the novel, the reader/viewer is 'double' and therefore even more intensely involved in the story through the space between the frames or the space between you and me. In Nsue Angüe's novel there is also an interspace as a kind of limbo "between a little bit of shade and a little bit of sun", so that this space comes into play at the beginning and end of the novel, as well as in all poetic parts. In Ávila Laurel's novel, the grandfather's space remains empty because what it contains is not revealed, so that the story opens up to the reader who can give it his own interpretation and thereby become actively involved in the story (Iser, Rimmon-Kenan).

In his lecture at UNED, Ibrahim Sundiata emphasized the role he believes should be played by language and culture (art, music, dance) in a concrete plan to unite, differentiate and strengthen for political change as a nation.<sup>7</sup> However, such a call could easily lead to the use of language and culture as a political tool, as is the case, for example, in countries that use language and culture as a means of propaganda. Language and culture as propaganda, however, leave nothing open, just as the state and *the police* leave nothing open, Rancière claims. In his view, *history* is opposed to art and literature, for instance, *poetry* and *dissensus*

---

<sup>7</sup> Sundiata, Canal UNED, 2018. [<https://canal.uned.es/video/5b47099db1111f752b8b4567>]

that both break and leave open, creating space for something new. Badiou adds that we do not yet know what this new thing that manifests itself in the empty spaces within art after an eventual rupture will be.<sup>8</sup> Up to the present day, the literature of Equatorial Guinea has been interpreted by quite a few researchers as *history*, often 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, the individual works have been examined as *poetry* that does not fill in (binary) but leaves it open. It has become apparent that, each in their own way, the writers and visual artist draw attention to the (current) situation in Equatorial Guinea through their work, but that this is based on similar forces that make each of the works political where their works involve ruptures and voids.

Especially in *La pesadilla de Obi* and in his Obiang caricatures, Esono Ebalé focuses directly on the current political regime, just as in *Poderes de la tempestad* Ndongo focuses directly on the Macías regime. *Ekomo* and *Arde el monte de noche* do not refer directly to the current political situation, but can be linked to the political (Rancière, Badiou), as a result of which Nsue Angüe and Ávila Laurel also draw attention to the situation in the country with their novels, albeit indirectly. Nsue Angüe's novel does not differ from the other two novels, in the first place because the main character is a woman and this would mainly be about male-female relationships or urban and rural traditions, but because of the way in which the protagonist presents herself in the novel, in her dance and poetry. In her action, she steps outside herself, as it were, replete with the pain that also underlies this action. The same pain seems to underlie the thorn that in Ndongo's novel enters the lawyer in the same place as it comes out and with which both the story is completed as is the testimony he has to give about all that happened to him. In Ávila Laurel's novel, it is the pain of the abandoned islanders whose lives seem to lead nowhere just like their voyages by sea and, to add insult to injury, they are plagued by all kinds of evils.

Although pain or resistance lies at the root of all the works examined, it is expressed in very different ways; Esono Ebalé and Ndongo, more than Nsue Angüe and Ávila Laurel, use the grotesque and caricatural in the stereotypes that fit their direct political message to the previous and current regime. As visual artists and writers, they are also the people who have placed themselves emphatically outside the current regime, although this also applies to Ávila

---

<sup>8</sup> There is a parallel here with narratology and Iser who says that the reader fills in gaps according to his own imagination that differs for everyone (Iser, 1980: 11). So, something new can arise in the reader's mind that is imbibed from the text (the work of art) but which is not (yet) known.

Laurel, whose novel is a more implicit critique of Macías' dictatorship. Only Nsue Angüe deviates because of her apolitical attitude, perhaps because she never openly distanced herself from the current political regime and continued to fulfill a cultural role in it until her death. However, her voice can be heard when Nnanga and Nfumba'a surrender to "*la locura de la nada*" (Mester) in the most poetic parts of the novel when they find themselves in a kind of interspace "between a little bit of sun and a little bit of shade", in which the author also claims to be *jugando a ser bantu*. Therein lies the (political) emptiness that connects her novel with those of the other two writers and, as a result of which, her role is not limited to an *abuela cuentacuentos* as she called herself and others have called her.

The specialty and the power of all the works is determined by what the voids found reveal and open. It has been discovered that these concern both empty (intermediate) spaces in both literature and the visual arts (that include certain stereotypes and metaphors) that have an intensifying effect on the work as a whole and that actively involve the reader/viewer in the work. Although what is emptied differs per work, the conclusion can be drawn that the torture, disappearances, evils and pains exposed in the voids create a (political and eventual) rupture that offers an opening to what is and at the same time is not yet, described by Badiou as a truth-in-the-making. This significance of this is that, with these works, a truth procedure is set in motion that transcends the (closed) truth of the current dictatorial regime and therefore also empties the dictatorship. In the confrontation with the voids in their works, the makers have had the courage to be the little one (Badiou), while remaining true to themselves and to their community. The strength with which they focus on the current community and political situation of Equatorial Guinea through their art and literature will also have an effect as a truth procedure in the future.

## BIOGRAPHY

- Aponte-Ramos, Lola. “Los territorios de la identidad: Transgénero y transnacionalidad en Ekomo de María Nsue Angüe.” *La Recuperación de la Memoria: creación cultural e identidad nacional en la literatura hispano-negroafricana*. Ed. Mbaré Ngom. Alcalá de Henares: Universidad de Alcalá 2004. 101-113.
- --, Lola, and Elisa Rizo. “Guinea Ecuatorial como pregunta abierta: Hacia el diálogo entre nuestras otredades.” *Revista Iberoamericana*, nr. 248-9, 2014. 745-760., doi:10.5195/reviberoamer.2014.7193.
- Ávila Laurel, Juan Tomás. *Arde el monte de noche*. Madrid: Calambur Narrativa, 2009.
- --, *Cuentos Crudos*. Malabo: Centro Cultural Español de Bata/Malabo, 2007.
- --., *Cómo convertir este país en un paraíso*. Malabo: Pángola, 2005.
- --, *Diccionario básico, y aleatorio, de la dictadura Guineana*. Barcelona: Laboratorio de recursos orales, Ceiba, 2011.
- --, “La ubicad de la literatura guineana”, *Debats*, nr. 123/2, 2014. 72-79.
- Badiou, Alain: *Logiques des mondes. L’Être et l’événement. 2*, Parijs: Editions Du Seuil, 2006.
- --, *BLACK; The brilliance of a non-color*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017.
- --, *De twintigste eeuw* (The Twentieth Century). Kampen: Ten Have, 2006.
- --, “Troisième esquisse d’un manifeste de l’affirmationnisme”, *Circonstances, 2, Irak, foulard, Allemagne/France*. Parijs: Editions Léo Scheer/Lignes et Manifeste, 2004. 83-105. As “Het Affirmationistische Manifest. Derde ontwerp voor een manifest van de affirmationistische kunst” (The Affirmationist Manifesto. Third draft for a manifesto of the affirmationist art) in Alain Badiou. *Inesthetiek: filosofie, kunst*,



*politiek* (Alain Badiou. *Inesthetics: philosophy, art, politics*). Eds. Joost de Bloois and Ernst van den Hemel. Translated by Joost Beerten, Amsterdam: Octavo publicaties, 2012. 70-87.

- --, “Art et philosophie”, *Petit manuel d’inesthétique*. Parijs: Editions du Seuil, 2005. 2-29. As “Kunst en filosofie” in *Alain Badiou. Inesthetiek: filosofie, kunst, politiek* (Alain Badiou. *Inesthetics: philosophy, art, politics*). Eds. Joost de Bloois and Ernst van den Hemel. Translated by Joost Beerten, Amsterdam: Octavo publicaties, 2012. 88-105.
- --, “L’écriture du générique: Samuel Beckett”, *Conditions*. Parijs: Editions du Seuil, 1992. 329-366. As “Het schrijven van het generieke: Samuel Becket” in *Alain Badiou. Inesthetiek: filosofie, kunst, politiek* (Alain Badiou. *Inesthetics: philosophy, art, politics*). Eds. Joost de Bloois and Ernst van den Hemel. Translated by Ineke van der Burg, Amsterdam: Octavo publicaties, 2012. 135-177.
- --, “L’Idée du communisme”, *L’Hypothèse communiste. Circonstances*, 5. Fécamp: Nouvelles Editions Lignes, 2009. 181-205. Als “De Idee van het communisme” in *Alain Badiou. Inesthetiek: filosofie, kunst, politiek* (Alain Badiou. *Inesthetics: philosophy, art, politics*). Eds. Joost de Bloois and Ernst van den Hemel. Translated by Joost Beerten, Amsterdam: Octavo publicaties, 2012. 279-97.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Rabelais and His World*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984.
- Bal, Mieke. *De theorie van vertellen en verhalen* (The Theorie of Storytelling and telling Stories). Muiderberg: Coutinho BV, 1990.
- --, *Travelling concepts in the humanities*. Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2002.
- Benjamin, Walter, *Het kunstwerk in het tijdperk van zijn technische reproduceerbaarheid en andere essays*. (The Artwork in the Age of Its Technical Reproducibility and Other Essays). Translated by Henk Hoeks. Amsterdam: Boom (third print), 2017.

- Bloois, Joost de., and Ernst van den Hemel, eds. *Alain Badiou. Inesthetiek: filosofie, kunst, politiek* (Alain Badiou. Inesthetics: philosophy, art, politics). Amsterdam: Octavo publicaties, 2012.
- Brus, Anita. “‘Van onrecht word ik baldadig’ – interview met de Afrikaanse striptekenaar Ramón Esono Ebalé.” (“Injustice makes me rowdy” – interview with the African cartoonist Ramón Esono Ebalé). *Frontaal Naakt*, 2014. [<https://www.frontaalnaakt.nl/archives/van-onrecht-word-ik-baldadig-interview-met-de-afrikaanse-striptekenaar-ramon-esono-ebale.html>].
- --, “Exposiciones Africanas, sobre el arte de Ramón Esono Ebalé.” *Revistart: revista de las artes*. nr.169, 2014. 22,23.
- --, “Futurismo guineano. Sobre los cuadros del artista guineano Desidero Manresa Bodipo.” *Revistart: revista de las artes*. nr.176, 2016. 14,15.
- Bryson, Norman. “A Walk for a Walk’s Sake.” *The Stage of Drawing: Gesture and Act. Selected from the Tate Collection*. Eds. Catherine de Zegher and Avis Newman. Londen: Tate Publishing, 2003. 149-158.
- Buck Morss, Susan. ‘*La balsa de Medusa*’, *Dialéctica de la mirada, Walter Benjamin y el proyecto de los Pasajes*. Madrid: Visor. Dis., SA, 1995.
- Butor, Michel. *Répertoire II. Études et conférences 1959-1963*. Parijs: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1964.
- Campos Serrano, Alicia. *De colonia a Estado: Guinea Ecuatorial, 1955-1968*. Madrid: Centro de los estudios políticos y constitucionales, 2002.
- Caldeira Cham, Arlindo Manuel. “Organizing Freedom: *De Facto* Independence on the Island of Ano Bom (Annobón) during the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries.” *Afro-Hispanic Review*. Ed. William Luis. Nashville: Vanderbilt University, vol. 28, nr. 2, 2009. 293-310.
- Carrasco González, Antonio. *Historia de la novela colonial hispanoafriicana*. Madrid: SIAL Ediciones, 2009.
- Carrier, David. *The aesthetics of comics*. Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000.
- Castro Borrego, Silvia. “Claiming the Politics of Articulation through Agency and Wholeness in Two Afro-Hispanic Postcolonial Narratives.” *Journal of International Women’s Studies*, vol. 17, nr. 3, 2016. 149-163.
- Cohn, Dorrit. *Transparent Minds*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1978.

- --, *The Distinction of Fiction*. Baltimore/Londen: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999.
- Copjec, Joan. *Imagine there's no woman: ethics and sublimation*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002, 2-47.
- --, *The Distinction of Fiction*. Baltimore/Londen: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999.
- Dällenbach, Lucien. *The Mirror in the Text*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989.
- Doyle, Martin. "Juan Tomás Ávila laurel Q&A: 'I wrote one of my first novels sitting up a tree.' Author from Equatorial Guinea on what he reads and how he writes", *The Irish Times*, mei 2015. [<https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/juan-tom%C3%A1s-%C3%A1vila-laurel-q-a-i-wrote-one-of-my-first-novels-sitting-up-a-tree-1.2221197>]
- Eisner, Will. *Comics and sequential art. Principles and practices from the legendary cartoonist*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2008.
- Epps, Brad. "Learning from the Beginning. *Education, translation, and intercultural transmission in Donato Ndongo's Shadows of Your Black Memory (1987)*." *Transition*, nr.103, Cabo Verde, 2010. 144-167.
- Esono Ebalé, Ramón. *Ramón Esono Ebalé: Los asesinos de mi inteligencia*. Malbo/Bata: CCEM/CCEB, 2008.
- Esono Ebalé, Ramón, Chino, and Tenso, Tenso. *La pesadilla de Obi*. Washington: EG Justice, 2015.
- Fanon, Frantz, and Jean Paul Sartre. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Londen: Penguin Books, 2001.
- Foucault, Michel. *L'ordre du discours*. Inaugural speech Collège de France, delivered December 2, 1970, Edition Le Foucault Électronique, 2001. [<https://litterature924853235.files.wordpress.com/2018/06/ebook-michel-foucault-l-ordre-du-discours.pdf>].
- Fra-Molinero, Baltasar. "El deber de contar y la pasión de escribir." Interview with María Nsue Angüe, Maine VS, 10 juni 2010. [<http://abacus.bates.edu/~bframoli/pagina/mariansue.htm>].
- --, "Estado, religión, trabajo y hambre", *Debats*, vol. 123, nr.2, 2014. 92-105.

- Fransecky, Roger B., and John L. Debes. *Visual Literacy: A way to learn – A way to teach*. Washington, DC: Association for Educational Communications and Technology: 1972.
- Garber, Marjorie B. *Vested interests : cross dressing & cultural anxiety*. New York: Routledge, 1992.
- Genette, Gerard. *Paratexts. Thresholds of interpretation*. Translated by Jane E. Lewin, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- Gombrich, Ernst H. *Kunst en illusie. De psychologie van het beeldend weergeven* (Art and Illusion. The Psychology of Visual Representation). Translated by H. van Teylingen and W.A.C. Whitlau, Houten: De Haan, 1988.
- Granados, Vicente, “Ekomo, de María Nsue Angüe. Edición, prólogo y notas.” *Ekomo*. María Nsue Angüe. Madrid: UNED, 1985. 9-13.
- Hendel, Mischa G., “Conversación con María Nsue Angüe. Escritora.” CCM Malabo, 18 oktober 2008, 1-10.  
[[https://birdlikecultura.files.wordpress.com/2015/10/19\\_interview\\_18okt2008\\_marian\\_sueangc3bce.pdf](https://birdlikecultura.files.wordpress.com/2015/10/19_interview_18okt2008_marian_sueangc3bce.pdf)].
- Hobeika, Noelia. “Collecting Echoes: The Poetic Power Of Collage.” *The Age of Collage Vol.2: Contemporary Collage in Modern Art*. Eds, Dennis Busch and Robert Klanten. Berlin: Gestalten, 2016. 2,3
- Iser, Wolfgang. “Interaction between Text and Reader.” *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation*. Eds. Susan L. Suleiman and Inge Crosman. Princeton: Princeton University Press: 1980. 106-20.
- Kedra, Joanna. “What does it mean to be visually literate? Examination of visual literacy definitions in a context of higher education.” *Journal of Visual Literacy* 37, No. 2, 2018. 67-84.
- Kies, Mateo, and Amelie Klein, *Making África – Un continente de diseño contemporáneo*. Guggenheim Bilbao/Vitra Design Museum, 2015.
- Korsten, Frans-Willem, *Lessen in Literatuur*. Nijmegen: Vantilt, 2002.
- Langevin, Sébastien. “La bande dessinée africaine, son discours et ses problèmes.” *Africultures: BD d’Afrique*. no 32, November 2000. 17-21.
- Lejeune, Philippe, *Le Pacte Autobiographique*. Parijs: Éditions du Seuil, 1975.
- Lewis, Marvin A. *An Introduction to the Literature of Equatorial Guinea. Between Colonization and Dictatorship*. Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 2007.

- --, *Equatorial Guinean Literature In Its National and Transnational Contexts*. Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 2017.
- Lifshy, Adam. "Ideations of Collective Memory in Hispanophone Africa: The Case of María Nsue Angüe's 'Ekomo'", *Hispanic Journal*, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, vol. 24, nr. 1/2, 2003. 173-185.
- --, *The Magellan Fallacy. Globalization and the Emergence of Asian and African Literature in Spanish*. Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 2017.
- Ligt, Erik van de., *Dieren in politieke cartoons. Onderzoek naar het gebruik van dieren als brondomein van visuele metaforen* (Animals in political cartoons. Exploring the use of animals as a source domain of visual metaphors). 2006. Universiteit van Tilburg, Master's Thesis.
- Luis, William and Laura C..Brown (eds). *Afro-Hispanic Review*, Nashville: Vanderbilt University. vol. 28, nr.2, 2009.
- MacLeod, Naomi. *Form and function of non-linguistic calls in human infants. The Expression of Identity in Equatorial Guinean Narratives (1994 - 2007)*, 2012. University of St Andrews, Master's Thesis.
- Meister, Jan Christoph. "Narratology." *Handbook of Narratology*, Volume 2. Eds. Peter Hühn, Jan Christoph Meister, John Pier and Wolf Schmid, Berlijn: Walter de Gruyter, 2014. 623-631.
- Mester, Anna. *Repensar Ekomo de María Nsue Angüe: un desafío ecuatoguineano a la hispanidad*, 2009. Mount Holyoke College, Department of Romance Languages and Literatures, Bachelor Thesis.
- Ndong-Bidyogo, Donato. *Los poderes de la tempestad*. Madrid: Assata Ediciones, 2015.
- --, *Historia y tragedia de Guinea Ecuatorial*. Madrid: Editorial Cambio, 1977.
- --, "Literatura moderna hispanófono en Guinea Ecuatorial." *Jornadas de Estudios Africanos*. Ed. Marta Sofía López. León: Universidad de León, 2001. 125-135.
- --, *Olvidos: Poemas*. Ed. Inmaculada Díaz Nabrona. Madrid: Verbum, 2016.
- --, and Mbaré Ngom, eds. *Literatura de Guinea Ecuatorial (Antología)*. Madrid: Casa de África, SIAL Ediciones, 2000.
- Nerín, Gustau. *La última selva de España. Antropófagos, misioneros y guardias civiles, Crónica de la conquista de los Fang de la Guinea Española. 1914-1930*. Madrid: Los libros de la catarata, 2010.

- Ngom, Mbaré and Gloria Nistal (eds.). *Nueva Antología de la Literatura de Guinea Ecuatorial*. Madrid: Casa de África, SIAL Ediciones, 2012.
- Ngom, Mbaré. "Entrevista con Donato Ndongo-Bidyogo." *Diálogos con Guinea : panorama de la literatura guineoecuatorial de expresión castellana a través de sus protagonistas*. Madrid: Labrys, 1996. 69-90. In *Entre estética y compromiso. La obra de Donato Ndongo-Bidyogo*. Otabela, and Onoma-Abena. Madrid: UNED, 2008. 187-206.
- --, *La recuperación de la memoria: creación cultural e identidad nacional en la literatura hispano-negroafricana*. Alcalá de Henares: Universidad de Alcalá, 2004.
- --, "La literatura africana de expresión castellana: de una 'literatura posible' a una literatura real. Etapas de un proceso de creación cultural." *De Guinea E. a las literaturas hispanoafricanas*. Eds. Landry-Wilfrid Miampika and Patricia Arroyo. Madrid: Verbum, 2010. 23-40.
- --, "Equatorial Guinea Writers in Exile." *World Literature in Spanish: an Encyclopedia. Volume I*. Eds. Maureen Ihrie and Salvador O. Oropesa. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2011. 348-352.
- --, "Memoria y exilio en la literatura africana hispana." *Palabras, Revista de la cultura y de las ideas*, vol. 1, nov. 2009. 97-110.
- --, "Writing from the Soul: A Conversation with María Nsue Angüe/Narrative of a Woman's Life and Writing. María Nsue Angüe's *Ekomo*." *Daughters of the Diaspora. Afro-Hispanic Writers*, Ed. Miriam DeCosta-Willis. Miami VS: Kingston, Ian Randle Publishers, 2003. 295-309.
- Nomo Ngamba, Monique. "Semejanzas y diferencias entre 'Los poderes de la tempestad' (1997) de Donato Ndongo-Bidyogo y 'Señas de identidad' (1977) y 'Reivindicación del conde Don Julian' de Juan Goytisolo' (1999)." Ediciones Universidad de Valladolid: *Castilla, Estudios de Literatura*, nr. 6, 2015. 350-366. [Castilla-2015-6-SemejanzasDiferencias.pdf]
- Nsue Angüe, María, *Ekomo*, 2de ed., Madrid: Grupo Editorial Sial Pigmalión, 2008.
- --, *Cuentos y relatos*, Madrid: Grupo Editorial Sial Pigmalión, 2016.
- Nyaphaga, Issa. *Art is stronger than hate*. Austin/Texas: Alamo Bay Press, 2015.
- Ong Walter Jackson. *Orality and Literacy The Technologizing of the World*. London: Methuen, 1982.
- Otabela, Joseph-Désiré, and Sosthène Onomo Abena. *Entre estética y compromiso. La obra de Donato Ndongo-Bidyogo*. Madrid: UNED, 2008.



- Odartey-Wellington, Dorothy. "Hacia una literatura nacional: entrevista a Donato Ndongo-Bidyogo", *Afro-Hispanic Review*, vol. 25, nr. 2, 2006. 159-172. In *Entre estética y compromiso. La obra de Donato Ndongo-Bidyogo*. Otabela, and Onoma-Abena. Madrid: UNED, 2008. 216-231.
- Otabela Melowo, Joseph-Désiré. "La figura del dictador: Macías Nguema y Rafael Trujillo en *Los Poderes de la tempestad* de Donato Ndongo Bidyogo y en *La fiesta del Chivo* de Mario Vargas Llosa." *Connotas. Revista de crítica y teoría literarias*, vol. 2, nr. 2, juni 2004. 27-46.  
[<https://connotas.unison.mx/index.php/critlit/article/view/271>].
- --, "Literatura de Guinea Ecuatorial. Sujeto cultural y dictadura: el personaje del abogado en *Los poderes de la tempestad* de Donato Ndongo Bidyogo." *EPOS*. XIX, 2003. 119-128. [<http://e-spacio.uned.es/fez/eserv/bibliuned:Epos-CE5EC1AF-19C8-88B8-A02D-870B7E2942F6/Documento.pdf>]
- Pachnicke, Peter, and Klaus Honnef, eds. *John Heartfield*. New York: Incorporated, 1992.
- Persico, Melva. "Voices an Hybridity; The Case of María Nsue Angüe's *Ekomo*." *Afro-Hispanic Review*, vol. 31, 2012. 133-148.
- Phaf-Rheinberger, Ineke. "Los discurso literarios sobre situaciones dictatoriales en África y América Latina." *De Guinea E. a las literaturas hispanoafricanas*. Eds. Landry-Wilfrid Miampika and Patricia Arroyo. Madrid: Verbum, 2010. 140-154.
- --, "Migration versus Stagnation in Equatorial Guinea: The Sea as the Promise of Modernity." *Research in African Literatures: Migratory Movements and Diasporic Positionings in Contemporary Hispano- and Catalano-African Literatures*, Indiana University Press, vol. 48, nr. 3, 2017. 55-71.  
[[www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/reseafritelite.48.issue-3](http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/reseafritelite.48.issue-3)]
- Pollmann, Joost. *De stripprofessor. Vijftig colleges over tekenkunst*. Amsterdam: Podium, 2016.
- Rancière, Jacques. "Ten Theses on Politics." *Dissensus. On Politics and Aesthetics*. Translated and edited by Steven Corvoran, Londen: Bloomsbury, 2015. 25-52.
- --, "The Paradoxes of Political Art." *Dissensus. On Politics and Aesthetics*. Translated and edited by Steven Corvoran, Londen: Bloomsbury, 2015. 142-159.
- --, "The politics of literature." *Dissensus. On Politics and Aesthetics*. Translated and edited by Steven Corvoran, Londen: Bloomsbury, 2015. 160-176.
- --, *Disagreement. Politics and philosophy*, Minneapolis-London: University of Minnesota Press, 1999.

- --, *Het esthetische denken* (The Aesthetic Thinging). Translated by Walter van der Star, Amsterdam: Valiz, Amsterdam, 2007.
- --, *De toekomst van het beeld* (The Future of the Image). Translated by Walter van der Star, Amsterdam: Octavio publicaties, 2010.
- Rimmon-Kenan, Shlomith. *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*. London/New York: Methuen, 1983.
- --, *Transparent Minds. Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1978.
- Rizo, Elisa. "En torno a la obra de Juan Tomás Ávila Laurel, un protagonista de las letras guineoecuatorianas", *Hispanic Research Journal*, vol. 6, nr. 2, 2005. 175-78., doi:10.1179/146827305x38823.
- --, "Letras transversales: obras escogidas (ensayo, poesía, relatos, teatro)", *World Languages and Cultures Books*. Books. 2., 2012. [https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/language\_books/2]
- Rodríguez Carranza, Luz. *Un Teatro de la Memoria. Análisis de Terra Nostra de Carlos Fuentes*. Leuven: Leuven University Press/Danila Alberto Vergara, 1991.
- --, "Hacia un sujeto intransitivo *Philip Seymour Hoffman*, par exemple, la obra belga de Rafael Spregelburd (2017)." *El taco en la brea*. 6.9 (mei 2019) ISSN 2362-4191. 77-85.
- Rodríguez, Clelia Olimpia. *Aproximaciones Literarias a la Memoria, Historia e Identidad en la Literatura Contemporánea de Guinea Ecuatorial*, 2011. Department of Spanish and Portuguese University of Toronto, Masterthesis.
- Rose, Aaron, and Mandy Kahn. *Collage Culture*. Zürich: JRP/Ringier Kunstverlag, 2011.
- Roth, Nancy. "Heartfield and Modern Art." *John Heartfield*. Eds. Peter Pachnicke and Klaus Honnef. New York: Incorporated, 1992. 18-29.
- Sampedro Vizcaya, Benita. "Ekomo's Interventions", *African Immigrants in Contemporary Spanish Texts. Crossing the Strait*, Eds. Debra Faszter-McMahon and Victoria L. Ketz. Farnham/Burlington: Ashgate, 2015. 177-192.
- --, "Rethinking the Archive and the colonial library: Equatorial Guinea." *Journal of Spanish Cultural Studies*, vol. 9, nr 3, 2008. 341-363.
- --, "Guinea Ecuatorial en la agenda política de los Estados Unidos." *Palabras: Revista de la cultura y de las ideas*, vol. 2, september 2010, 65-82

- --, "María Nsue Angüe, la abuela cuentacuentos." *ABC* 21 maart 2017: [[https://www.abc.es/cultura/cultural/abci-maria-nsue-angue-abuela-cuentacuentos-201703210051\\_noticia.html](https://www.abc.es/cultura/cultural/abci-maria-nsue-angue-abuela-cuentacuentos-201703210051_noticia.html)].
- Russell, Bertrand. *De geschiedenis van de westerse filosofie* (The History of Western Philosophy), Katwijk aan Zee: Servire, 1981. 183-190.
- Schilperoord, Joost, and Alfons A. Maes. "Visual metaphoric conceptualization in political cartoons." *Multimodal Metaphor*. Eds. Charles Forceville and Eduardo Urios-Aparisi. Berlijn: Mouton De Gruyter, 2009. 215-243.
- Schipper, Mineke. "Van orale vertelling naar geschreven roman: Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*." *Boeken van Zwarte schrijvers* ("From Oral Narration to Written Novel: Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*." Books by Black Writers). Ed. J.B Weenink. Amsterdam: VU Uitgeverij, 1987. 11-32.
- Schmitt, Carl. *Het begrip politiek: Gevolgd door Het tijdperk van neutralisering en depolitisering* (Understanding Politics: Followed by The Age of Neutralizations and Depolitizations). Translated by George Kwaad, Amsterdam: Boom, 2001.
- Silverstein, Ken. "Theodorin's world." *Foreign Policy (FP)* 21 febr. 2011. [<https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/02/21/teodorins-world/>]
- Sundiata, Ibrahim K, *Equatorial Guinea, Colonialism, State Terror, and the Search for Stability*, Bulder. S. Francisco & Oxford: Westview Press, 1990.
- --, "The Roots of African Despotism: The Question of Political Culture." *African Studies Review*. Cambridge University Press, vol. 31, nr. 1, april 1988. 9-31.
- Steenmeijer, Maarten. *Moderne Spaanse en Spaans-Amerikaanse literatuur: Van 1870 tot heden* (Modern Spanish and Spanish American Literature: From 1870 to the Present). Groningen: Martinus Nijhoff, 1996.
- Trujillo, José Ramón. "Recepción y problemas de la literatura de Guinea Ecuatorial." *África hacia el siglo XXI, Actas del II Congreso Internacional de Estudios Africanos en el Mundo Ibérico*. Tweede versie, nov. 2005, Madrid: SIAL Ediciones, 2001. 527-540.
- Ugarte, Michael, *Africanos en Europa: La cultura del exilio y la emigración de Guinea Ecuatorial a España*. Nieuw York: Ndowe International Press, 2013.
- --, "Interview with Donato Ndongo." *Arizona Journal of Hispanic Cultural Studies*, vol. 8, 2004. 217-234. In *Entre estética y compromiso. La obra de Donato Ndongo-Bidyogo*. Otabela, and Onoma-Abena. Madrid: UNED, 2008. 232-251.

- Van Gelder, Hilde, and Helen Westgeest, *Photography Theorie in Historical Perspective. Case studies from Contemporary Art*. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011.1-13.
- Westgeest, Helen. *Slow Painting. Contemplation and Critique in the Digital Age*. Bloombury: Bloomsbury Visual Arts 2021. 1-13.
- Zielina Limonta, María. "Donato Ndongo-Bidyogo: un escritor guineano y su obra." *Afro-Hispanic Review*, University of Missouri-Columbia, 2000. 106-116. In *Entre estética y compromiso. La obra de Donato Ndongo-Bidyogo*. Otabela, and Onoma-Abena. Madrid: UNED, 2008. 252-271.

## ABSTRACT

This thesis is about how writers and visual artists from Equatorial Guinea demand (political) attention for the current situation in their country through their work. Their country is a former colony of Spain that gained independence in 1968, when Francisco Macías Nguema who became the first president turned the country into a terrifying dictatorship. This seemed to come to an end in 1979 with the coup launched by his cousin Teodoro Nguema Mbasogo. However, he re-established the dictatorship and was subsequently has been personally enriched by oil revenues since the 1980s. Intellectuals fled the country in large numbers during the first Macías dictatorship and continue to do so today because of the deplorable living conditions and censorship prevailing under Obiang, who has run the country as a family business ever 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. My research does not focus on their personal political statements but on *the political* aspect in their visual art and literary works. This has been examined on the basis of some theoretical concepts put forward by 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’) leaving 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. Rancière argues that art is political as soon as a rupture occurs as its opening reveals what was previously not visible. This rupture or *dissensus* is an extension of what Badiou calls an *eventual rupture* in the situation in which art ‘empties’ that situation and thereby offers space for what he calls a *truth procedure*. Based on these concepts of Rancière and Badiou, voids, by which these works create a rupture in the dictatorship that is therefore also being emptied, have been sought in the works of the three

writers and one visual artist from Equatorial Guinea. The hypothesis of this research is that both in the literature and in the 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 that adheres to the various currents within narratology as discussed by Schlomith Rimmon-Kenan in her handbook *Narrative Fiction* (explained in Chapter 2 of Part I) has been chosen. An important part of this narratological analysis in this research into the ruptures and voids present in the novels are those 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 might be (because every reader can give a different interpretation to a text), just as we do not know what the interpretation of Badiou's voids that offer an opening to a different truth than the one up to now (in the situation) was true will be. A *mise en abyme* (as a reflection of the whole story or as a pivotal 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 oral aspects, like 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* (Rimmon-Kenan) has also been examined, in conjunction with 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 art of Esono Ebalé. In order to investigate the voids in his works, these were analyzed both separately (on the basis of various visual elements) and in categories according to the artistic media applied (drawings, comics and picture stories, collages and caricatures), in which 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) as well as the caricature as a subversive act and 'discharge of the gut' or 'crossover' (Bakhtin, Garber).



Each of the chapters in the works examined ends with a summary of the ruptures and voids found in the images and the stories that cause these images and stories to function as a truth procedure according to Badiou's view. Examining the works of Ramón Esono Ebalé (Part II of the research), it appears that in his drawings he 'walks around voids' (Bryson). As the lines around them condense, the voids in those drawings gather strength. 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, a beast or a woman, he not only places him in a different role, he also empties him of his (dictatorial) status. It can also be argued that, in his comics and visual stories, Esono Ebalé purifies figures that often stand outside the story as marginal characters, thereby reinforcing their innocence. Purification is also reinforced by a fully drawn environment, teeming with numerous motifs, most with symbolic and metaphorical references. Purification also takes place 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 these spaces (for instance, where it concerns a torture chamber or hell) becomes even more palpable, making torture in the dictatorship all the more tangible. The same process applies to the censorship, expressed in the emptiness in the speech bubbles. The speech bubbles have therefore not only been left empty because the regime has censored the text, but also because of what they do not show and actually gains in expressiveness as a result. The upshot is that 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 the 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* and *mise en abyme*), and the characters and their circumstances. In Donato Ndongo's *Podere 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 the 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), it can be understood as an emptiness in which truth occurs (Badiou). This also applies to the voids in the novel in which there is the difference in focus and level of narration between the *you* and *I* narrator and in which 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 in which, at the beginning and end, she says she is "between a little sun and a little shadow". By burying (and touching) her deceased husband, Ekomo, she performs an act that signals a break with her community that also incorporates *the political* (Rancière) and by which she demonstrates 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 in which she submits herself to "*la locura de la nada*" (Mester), in other words, to nothingness or emptiness, akin to Nfumba'a who returns from Europe and goes into the jungle defying all prohibitions. The fact that the author also commits herself to this nothing is patent in the message (*paratext*) of the novel addressed to her old friend, Nnanga, who shares the same name as the narrator, a name that also means "mother of all women". By choosing this name, the author's voice also resonates in the dance and musicality of the lyrical parts of the text. By doing so she also places herself, *jugando a ser bantu* (playing a Bantu), 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 away from 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 the events in his youth. Critics write that, by means of this novel, Ávila Laurel has written his island (where he grew up) back into history, acting as a counterweight to an unambiguous identity imposed on it by the government (Lewis, MacLeod). However, my research has shown that, in the first place, the (political) power of the novel lies not in this aspect, that would have reduced 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 particular cult and certain disappearances) that, in conjunction with a series of evils, circulate around the fire emerging from the mountain (as pivot in the novel), making a political break in the situation. In this novel, Ávila Laurel sets in motion a truth procedure that also breaks open the existing (political) history of the island and of Equatorial Guinea.

In the end, in addition to *ruptures* and *voids*, concepts such as *necessity*, *courage*, *fidelity* and *in-between spaces* proved to be the guidelines of my research, lending their voice to the more specific concepts related to visual arts and literature. In the concluding Part IV of the

research, using these concepts that might or might not be common features, I summarize where there are (political) ruptures and voids in the various works that transforms them into a truth procedure offering an opening to a different truth to that propagated by the current regime in Equatorial Guinea.

One conclusion, based on the distinction between *history* and *poetry* made by Rancière, is that the literature of Equatorial Guinea has so far been interpreted by quite a few researchers as *history*, as such often binary, contrasting colonial versus neo-colonial, the traditional countryside versus the modern city or by emphasizing the relationship between the sexes. Choosing a different path, in my research, I have examined the individual works as *poetry* that does not fill in gaps (binarily) but leaves them open. It turns out that the writers and the visual artist, each in their own way and through their work, have drawn 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 at points at which the image or story is broken open, creating space for something new. In the novel by Nsue Angüe, the story is broken open when the protagonist steps outside himself, as it were, in (the emptiness of) dance and poetry. This is accompanied by pain, whereas in Ndongo's novel the lawyer's testimony is accompanied by the pain of the thorn coming out in the same place as it went in. Pain also underlies the deserted islanders in Ávila Laurel's novel who are either paddling nowhere or exerting themselves without moving forward, plagued by all kinds of evils. The pain also palpitates in the emptiness of the torture chambers, the suffering figures, the empty speech bubbles and texts in the works of Esono Ebalé. As does Ndongo 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 specialty and the power of all the works is determined by what the voids found in them open and reveal. This appears to center on empty (intermediate) spaces in both literature and visual art (that also include certain stereotypes and metaphors) that have an intensifying effect on the work as a whole and actively involve the reader/observer in the work. Although in each work what is emptied differs, the conclusion has to be 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; 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 thereby 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 true to themselves and 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.

## CURRICULUM VITAE

Anita Brus was born in Enschede in 1959. From 1977 she followed first and second degree teacher training courses in art subjects in Leeuwarden and Amersfoort, after which she worked as a teacher of drawing and visual education at various secondary schools. However, she switched to Spanish in 2006, having obtained a bachelor's degree in Spanish in 2003 from the Spanish teacher training course at the Hogeschool van Utrecht and then graduating from the University of Amsterdam (Universiteit Amsterdam/UVA) as a Master of Arts in Spanish Language and Culture in 2006. Since that time, she has taught Spanish courses at a Community College and she is still working as a Spanish teacher at the upper HAVO/VWO secondary school in Amsterdam. In 2013 and 2014, she was a member of the research group *Estudios Afro-hispánicos pluridisciplinarios* of the UNED, the Open University in Madrid, that consists of an international group of scientists in various disciplines who conduct research on Equatorial Guinea. Since then, she has given various lectures on the political situation, art and culture of Equatorial Guinea and co-organized an exhibition of the works of Ramón Esono Ebalé during the Haarlem Comic Days in 2017. She has also written for magazines and on the Internet about various Spanish-, Latin American- and African-culture related topics. Since 2016 she has been writing columns about contemporary African visual art in the Spanish art magazine *Revistart*.







## CURRICULUM VITAE

Anita Brus was born in Enschede in 1959. From 1977 she followed first and second degree teacher training courses in art subjects in Leeuwarden and Amersfoort, after which she worked as a teacher of drawing and visual education at various secondary schools. However, she switched to Spanish in 2006, having obtained a bachelor's degree in Spanish in 2003 from the Spanish teacher training course at the Hogeschool van Utrecht and then graduating from the University of Amsterdam (Universiteit Amsterdam/UVA) as a Master of Arts in Spanish Language and Culture in 2006. Since that time, she has taught Spanish courses at a Community College and she is still working as a Spanish teacher at the upper HAVO/VWO secondary school in Amsterdam. In 2013 and 2014, she was a member of the research group *Estudios Afro-hispánicos pluridisciplinarios* of the UNED, the Open University in Madrid, that consists of an international group of scientists in various disciplines who conduct research on Equatorial Guinea. Since then, she has given various lectures on the political situation, art and culture of Equatorial Guinea and co-organized an exhibition of the works of Ramón Esono Ebalé during the Haarlem Comic Days in 2017. She has also written for magazines and on the Internet about various Spanish-, Latin American- and African-culture related topics. Since 2016 she has been writing columns about contemporary African visual art in the Spanish art magazine *Revistart*.