

# An Introduction to Spanish Post-colonial Exile: The Narrative of Donato Ndongo

*Michael Ugarte is Professor of Spanish Literature at the University of Missouri-Columbia. Ugarte is the author of books and articles dealing with modern Spanish literature and culture, among which is *Shifting Ground: Spanish Civil War Exile*. He is currently working on a book on Spain's cultural relations with Africa in the twentieth century.*

The writing of Donato Ndongo, Equatorial Guinea's foremost intellectual and novelist (now living in exile in Murcia) has much to do with the post-colonial condition both in terms of politics and in terms of the complexities (philosophical as well as aesthetic) of representation. He has written many historical essays concerning his country, as well as novels. The fictional narratives have the feel of epics; they dramatize history in the form of eyewitness testimony, accounts that question the causes of the events as well as questions about the very rendering of these events. These narratives make for the discussion of perspective, identity, nostalgia (typical of exile writing), and they do so in a way that is unusual in Western culture. Ndongo has said that one of his primary goals is to recast his oral tradition, to replicate the stories he heard as a child and continues to hear and read as an adult and to tell them as if he were the griot, Africa's archetypal story-teller, chosen by his community or the spirits of the clan to tell that community who its members are and how they got to be the way they are.

Donato Ndongo is "Western" in two specific senses: he is from the region of central west Africa, an area that includes the nations of Senegal, Cameroon, Gabon, and Nigeria. But he is also "European." Indeed, in being from a former Spanish colony Ndongo has a lot of Europe in him, despite Spain's much-discussed reputation of being at the margins of Europe. Ndongo might be considered European in the postmodern or postcolonial sense in much the same way as are African writers steeped in the so-called "Western tradition." The very title of Ndongo's first novel, *Las tinieblas*

*de tu memoria negra*, comes from a line of verse of one of the foremost proponents of “negritude,” Leopold Senghor, in a poem from *Chants d'ombre*, “Gardé jalousement par les ténèbres fidèles de leur mémoire noire” (28), also one of the novel’s epigraphs: “guardado celosamente por las tinieblas fieles de su memoria negra” (7).<sup>1</sup> This novel takes the form of an Afro-Spanish *bildungsroman* narrated by a first/second person in search of racial, cultural, linguistic, existential identity, all very much within a socio/historic colonial structure.

The frame consists of an opening chapter “zero” evoking the remembrances of this I/you (a person without a name in the novel) when he was an adolescent in his native Equatorial Guinea. This first memory is the rendition of his decision not to become a priest, a difficult move not as much for him as for his then mentor, Father Ortiz—especially when he as a lad declares to the priest, “Reverencia, África no necesita únicamente sacerdotes” (17). Ndongo moves from this opening scene to the story of the I/you from his childhood through adolescence and ending with his departure from his community. The final images of this first chapter are reminiscent of the evocations of remembrance in Nabokov’s well-known autobiography, *Speak Memory*:

Es otoño. Lluve. Hace frío, pero no lo notas. Es un tiempo desgraciado que te hace sentirte molesto, que te lleva recuerdos de una niñez que condicionaría para siempre tu existencia. A través de la persiana medio levantada para aprovechar los últimos rayos de luz percibes el eco del deambular ajetreado de los habitantes de la gran ciudad. La monotonía exasperante y sublime de las gotas contra el cristal trae a tu memoria un paisaje atrocamente distin-

to (naturaleza exultante contra cemento y cristal), el que divisabas desde tu ventana del seminario de Banapá. Definitivamente, ésta es una tarde propicia para el recuerdo. (19)<sup>2</sup>

The seminary in Banapá gives us the specific sense of place that was evoked in the text previous to this description. The body of the novel consists of a series of negotiations between the narrator’s Fang culture and the Spanish. The ambivalences of these negotiations are palpable, beginning with the most recent moment in the history of the narrative—that is, the protagonist’s crisis of faith, a crisis that becomes a definitive affirmation of that elusive identity. From this crisis affirmation we travel back into the first/second person’s past and his dealings with the protagonist’s former mentor, Padre Ortiz, an all too typical Spanish missionary, ill-tempered and authoritarian. As these memories unravel, Ortiz is set against hegemonic and counter-hegemonic figures who are members of the main character’s clan: tío Abeso, a man who refuses to submit to the Spanish/European ways, the protagonist’s mother, the incarnation of the (perhaps essentialist) roots the young man is searching for, and his father, a man who takes a different path from that of tío Abeso as the former is willing to acquiesce to the so-called civilizing and moralizing domination of Spain. In a telling encounter between tío Abeso and Padre Ortiz, the priest sets out to convert the former acting on the assumption that such a conversion would accomplish a great deal for the cause of Catholicism in the native land given the admiration and reputation Abeso enjoys in his community, a man who believes in the old ways, a man who refuses to celebrate the so-called benefits brought

to his land by the colonizers. It is a cosmic encounter, not without a certain subversive absurdity reminiscent of Chinua Achebe's canonical Nigerian novel, *Things Fall Apart*, a novel that Ndongo has said had great impact on him when he read it in a Spanish translation in the sixties.

But if *Tinieblas* were merely a conventional articulation of nationalist sentiments embodied in Senghor's or Césaire's celebration of "negritude," the novel would not have the destabilizing force that it has. In much of Ndongo's writing one senses the same criticism of "negritude" as that of Franz Fanon: while it had its moment, "negritude" is an essentialist proposition with few capabilities of transformation, an essentialism informed by the same consciousness as colonization (see Fanon's *Black Skins*; for Césaire see Gendzier 38-39, 56-58). Ndongo's novel, on the contrary, despite the Senghor-inspired epigraph, transcends the aims of cultural nationalism with a relentless questioning of the entire complex process of cultural formation—unlikely mixtures, mirroring images, linguistic borrowings of Fang words, encounters between the Spanish and its Other along with those between Fang and its Other. There is a vivid presence of that post-colonial phenomenon, hybridity—a hybridity that takes a variety of forms and seems to arise everywhere in today's global moment. The exploration of hybridity for Ndongo seems to be synonymous with the exploration of self.

In *Tinieblas* the protagonist's search for authenticity is a question of negotiation (Bhabha) as it is an affirmation *a la* Senghor of an African identity in all its mixtures. Yet unlike the vocation of the Senghor poem, "memoria negra" is as much a racial marker as it is a word association pointing to the murky and nightmarish qualities of

memory. Within the limits and deceptions of memory, the protagonist recreates a series of happenings and sensations that frame that identity. In my reading as a critic of contemporary Spanish literature, Ndongo's text is reminiscent of Juan Goytisolo's "signs of identity"; indeed Goytisolo is another acknowledged influence of Ndongo in his use of a first/second person narrative structure which decries the authoritarian, Catholic, colonial cultural past that has at once defined and oppressed the speaking subject. And at the same time, as in *Señas*, the dialogical I/you structure of *Tinieblas* presents obstacles to the definitive end of the search. At stake here is memory itself—always elusive, always reformulating and contradicting itself as it must be informed by the present, in this case a post-colonial present.<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, there are fundamental differences between Goytisolo's and Ndongo's perspective, or subject position: Goytisolo is clearly a product of the privilege of colonial power, as he himself acknowledges, while Ndongo has been on the receiving end of the very colonial power from which the former has benefited. Most clearly, Juan Goytisolo is in no danger of being sent to jail, tortured, or killed when he goes back to Spain to chat with his agent.

Yet even in this obvious contrast there are ambivalences, traces of overlapping effects of empire—Goytisolo's first/second person as victim of the authoritarianism he seeks to destroy and Ndongo's I/you as beneficiary of that very system. The tone of *Tinieblas* is not without confessional resonances typical of autobiography. The narrator feels uneasy about his having been singled out by the colonizing missionaries as the exceptional child, as the native chosen to carry out the moralizing and civilizing enterprise of colonization. For me, the

exilic voice of Ndongo is a paramount feature of his post-colonialism. The following is from the opening chapter in which the narrator recalls a dialogue between him and father Ortiz in which the latter challenges the protagonist to answer the call to be a Christian leader among his people.

—Puedes elegir. [...] O bien serás lo bastante animoso como para emprender solo esta dura etapa, o bien la llevarás a cabo con los demás, uniéndote a su paso y adaptando su marcha. En el primero serás un explorador de calidad excepcional. En el segundo, no harás más que un trabajo de serie, mediocre, y en todo caso indigno de ti [...].  
 —¿Y esto, reverencia, todo esto, suplicaba yo, no es...?  
 —¿Qué, amigo mío?  
 —Pues orgullo—una especie de presunción. (13)

While Ortiz insists that there is no presumption in his “child’s” leadership role, the reader is invited to participate in the protagonist’s self-doubt.

Throughout the narrative Ndongo’s protagonist expresses doubts such as this one in all their subtle ethical ambiguity and Christian humility that ironically must be countered by the priest to carry on the enterprise of colonization. One of the most gripping manifestations of the novel’s hybrid ambivalence is found in the closing of the narrative. I reiterate the narrative’s epic, perhaps even Odyssean features, particularly in this last scene as the protagonist is on his way from his village to Bata, the largest locale on the mainland, then to the capital. It is a trip that will eventually take him to the “mother country” to be educated. This journey may also be read as an imagined future existence in the “West,” a question concern-

ing the very future of his clan and his native society.

All the ambivalence of the memory of a thirteen-year-old is at once an affirmation and an interrogation of “negritude,” a chiaroscuro process of representation. The ambiguity is apparent on this trip in a canoe toward the ship, Malabo-bound with Father Ortiz and a black man hired to row:

Y echaste una última mirada atrás, ¿recuerdas?, como para cerciorarte de que de verdad habías dejado atrás la tierra madre tierna, o queriendo retener el rostro de tu madre, pobre madre mía, pero ya habían desaparecido de tu vista y de tu vida [...] y sacaste tu mano para sentir por primera vez el sabor del Atlántico, me han dicho que está salado, a ver si es verdad, y el remero te dijo algo que no entendiste, ¿recuerdas?, era la primera vez que oías a otro negro hablar un idioma distinto al fang, éste debe ser un combe o un bujeba, váyase usted a saber, y entendiste al padre y no entendiste al combe o al bujeba. (164)

Later, upon embarkation on the ship with a crew of black subalterns obeying the orders of the white supervisors, the first/second person returns to the present of the narrative, the same I/you now grown and recalling:

[un] negro que se aposentaba con su guitarra bajo la casetilla del puente y empezaba a desentrañar de las cuerdas un ritmo lejano, lejano y tibio, que te acompañaría a lo largo del atardecer, en la larga noche, mientras llovía, en el camarote, mientras el barco surcaba el golfo; y muchos años después aún seguías moviéndote al compás de esos vaivenes

mecido por las olas y por la tibia música de la guitarra de oyeng. (165-66)

What we witness in this culminating scene is the cultural, political, economic, and moral ambivalences of the post-colonial condition: there is an affirmation of “negritude” that contains its own interrogation. The inability of the protagonist to understand the words of the *combe* or *bujeba* in the presence of the black crew taking orders from the whites incarnates the uneasiness concerning the entrance into the world of his superiors—the possibility of a future shift from subaltern to overseer of subalterns. And all this occurs in the light of that vividly serene image of the young lad recalling his sweet mother, immersing his hand into the rolling water and tasting its salt, and now listening to the sounds of the guitar with all the cadences of a lullaby.

Yet despite the serenity of this final moment there is a strong suggestion that the rest of the odyssey will be a rough ride. Indeed, this novel is followed by a tempest, the second in Ndongo’s trilogy *Los poderes de la tempestad*.<sup>4</sup> There are important differences between the first novel and this second one. Published ten years later, the structure and tone of the post-colonial critique has changed from wistful, albeit critical, nostalgia to open denunciation of a real situation—that is, a situation contemporaneous with the author’s immediate past. These “poderes,” these powers of the tempest, are no longer simply arrogant and monological but physically brutal, grotesque, at times horrific. This novel deals directly with the “afro-fascist” (a term coined by Max Liniger-Goumaz, 1983) regime of Francisco Macías (from independence in 1968 to 1979), as in the novel’s relentless epithet: Papá Mesieme Nguema Biyogo Ñegue Ndong (24).

The protagonist is a lawyer of Guinean origin and resident in Spain who decided to return to his country with his white Spanish wife, Angeles, and young daughter. The novel is the history of a return (or an attempted return) that takes place shortly after independence.<sup>5</sup> From the beginning this return is seen both by the protagonist and the I/you narrator as an affirmation of identity. However, this affirmative nationalist return becomes itself the prime antagonist of the narrative, both in terms of the plot and the ethical interrogation. The protagonist encounters a series of obstacles: the sexual harassment of Angeles upon their arrival at the Malabo airport and the confiscation of the family’s money; food and water scarcity; the death of a drunkard who is run over by the president’s motorcade; the return of the protagonist to his native village where he is informed of the abuse suffered by his father; Angeles’s decision to go back to Spain with their daughter and his subsequent detention, imprisonment, and torture; and finally, the protagonist’s escape, an epic journey on a canoe and a quasi-miraculous arrival in an unfamiliar African land. This proverbial “saga/fuga,” although, is all too real, a combination of a García Márquez narrative and a Rigoberta Menchú testimony, descriptions rarely seen in Spanish literature.

While *Poderes* is similar in tone to *Tinieblas* in the tension it creates within the first person narrator, it takes a slightly different direction in its full embrace of the collective voice. In *Poderes* there are incidents seen through the eyes of many: tío Abeso (the same character as the one in *Tinieblas*), Angeles, the protagonist’s brother—Adjaba, his father, his mother, his daughter, others. The structuring narrative voice, that self-questioning I/you dominant in *Tinieblas* at times metamorphoses into

these other voices, thereby achieving the author's stated intention of playing the role of the griot.<sup>6</sup> The metamorphosis has not only to do with identity but also with syntax, as in the following lengthy sentence that appears shortly before Angeles's decision to go back to Spain without her husband (which will be followed by the latter's arrest). The characters are dutifully on their way to a stadium in Malabo where they are compelled by the government to listen to a speech by Papá Mesie, Macías:

Y mientras caminabais bajo la lluvia hacia el estadio, Adjaba te iba relatando que en ese mismo lugar fusilaron días atrás a varios presos subversivos, me alegro de que no estuvierais aquí, mi hermano, porque fue espantoso ver matar a tantos jóvenes a sangre fría, yo lo presencié porque no tuve más remedio, se ha convertido en espectáculo obligado eso de ir a ver cómo matan [...]. (227)

This sentence continues for some twenty seemingly run-on lines reproducing Adjaba's speech yet structured by the I/you, which is always the dominating voice. The next sentence begins: "Y el miedo te invadió de nuevo [...]" (227).

Ndongo's discourse, with all its post-colonial ambivalence, his critical descriptions of the effects of colonialism (in *Poderes* they are horrific) and his attempt to expose his world to the eyes of the international community, all of this opens windows to the New World of Africa, a post-nationalist world in which nationalism itself is subject to intense scrutiny. Beware of that nationalism, Ndongo seems to say, as if to echo Fanon, the post-colonial critic *avant la lettre*. The present moment of Equatorial Guinea, Ndongo also tells us, is a deeply difficult

moment, filled with many contradictions and uncertainties, and the case of Spanish Guinea is the case of many African nations. For Hispanists (most of us residents of that so-called First World, reapers of the fruits of colonialism), Cultural Studies encourages us to make attempts to understand the postcolonial underpinnings of the objects of our study. Ndongo provides us with an initial step toward understanding the voices of a world now resoundingly silent. I am referring to that clamorous silence of the subaltern, as Gyatri Spivak suggests in her oft-cited essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" While in this essay, her answer seems to be more no than yes given her critique of language in general and post-colonial discourse in particular, it is also feasible to initiate a dialogue, a search for the voices of the Other—in all their authenticity and inauthenticity. Indeed, those are voices manifested not only in the social/psychiatric treatises of Fanon and in other radical African critics but also in the tradition of the at times equally radical philosophical Western tradition of Emmanuel Levinas, and in the voices of the Other as we hear them in the writing of Ndongo.

In the wake of September 11, 2001, and the subsequent world order, more ongoing thought on colonialism and post-colonialism is called for. Understanding the post-colonial condition helps shed light on the vicissitudes of what some might call a new era, a new post-colonial reality. It might also even serve as a partial answer to that annoyingly ingenuous question, "Why do they hate us?" (whomever "they" refers to). It is becoming more and more clear that realizing the avowed neo-colonial goals of the post 9/11 Anglo-American Alliance, will most certainly not get us any closer to understanding those voices of the Other. Perhaps ingenuously I reiterate what I have

suggested in this essay: that a gesture toward understanding those voices is a gesture toward peace. But to arrive here, in my opinion, action on the part of dissenting citizens is needed as much, or more so, than essays.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, Senghor's poem, "Pour Emma Payelleville, infirmière," is a eulogy for a nurse who during World War II cared for injured black soldiers. Ndongo's title as well as the epigraph is the culminating image of the poem.

<sup>2</sup> For an informed analysis of the autobiographical underpinnings of Ndongo's novels see N'gom. For other analyses of *Tinieblas* see Fra-Molinero and Nsue Otong.

<sup>3</sup> In my reading and discussion of Ndongo's prose it is difficult as a "Western" critic not to avoid (odious) comparisons with the cultures with which I am most familiar. I acknowledge that these comparisons are drawn on shaky ground, like those made by Cortés, Columbus, and others of their ilk as they rendered a "new world" to those residing comfortably in the old. I struggle with my own appropriation as I write. I also point out that I have not yet been to Equatorial Guinea; my knowledge of this land is vicarious.

<sup>4</sup> As I write, Ndongo is finishing the final volume of the trilogy that began with *Tinieblas*. I must point out that due to financial constraints and also due to the fact that the Centro de Estudios Africanos in Murcia has been eliminated, Ndongo uses a vintage computer with a tiny screen that not even Bill Gates would recognize. In fact, it may have been sold before Gates was born.

<sup>5</sup> In many ways, it could be said that Ndongo's entire novelistic production is a narration of an exilic return as revealed in the other epigraph of *Tinieblas*, "Para mi señor escribo lo que vi en el mapa del universo: los documentos del futuro que habita en el pasado, el libro del Éxodo-retorno" (Al-Bayati, *Poemas de amor ante los siete pórticos del mundo*).

<sup>6</sup> In the interview for this journal, Ndongo states:

Years ago there were griots, African minstrels who did not only have the duty to entertain but to teach, and this teaching and entertaining included all the artistic genres: music, dance, poetry, theater, narrative. These people had the responsibility to tell people what was happening in their society and to give direction. But they were always subject to persecution by governmental structures that only wanted them to describe the good side of the society. [...] Thus the writer's role is to play the role of the griot, to denounce the ills of society, to give direction, to point out wrongs. The minstrel should not only entertain, he should always point the way. [...] Art has a social function. (229)

## Works Cited

- Achebe, Chinua. *Things Fall Apart*. Oxford: Heineman, 1958.
- Al-Bayati, Abd al-Wahhab. *Poemas de amor ante los siete pórticos del mundo*. Trans. Federico Arbós. Madrid: Ayuntamiento, 1982.
- Bhabha, Homi. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994.
- Castro, Mariano L. de, Donato Ndongo-Bidyogo, and José Urbano Martínez. *España en Guinea: construcción del desencuentro: 1778-1968*. Madrid: Sequitur, 1998.
- Fanon, Franz. *Black Skins, White Masks*. Trans. Charles L. Madkmann. New York: Grove, 1967.
- Fra-Molinero, Baltasar. "La educación sentimental de un exiliado africano: *Las tinieblas de tu memoria negra* de Donato Ndongo-Bidyogo." *Afro-Hispanic Review* 19.1 (2000): 49-57.
- Gendzier, Irene L. *Frantz Fanon: A Critical Study*. New York: Vintage, 1974.
- Goytisolo, Juan. *Señas de identidad*. Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1966.

- Liniger-Goumaz, Max. *De La Guinée Equatoriale. Eléments pour le dossier de l'afro-fascisme*. Geneva: Les Editions du Temps, 1982.
- . *Small Is Not Always Beautiful: The Story of Equatorial Guinea*. Trans. John Wood. Totowa: Barnes and Noble, 1989.
- Nabokov, Vladimir. *Speak Memory: An Autobiography Revisited*. New York: Putnam, 1966.
- Ndongo-Bidyogo, Donato. *Historia y tragedia de Guinea Ecuatorial*. Madrid: Cambio-16, 1977.
- . *Los poderes de la tempestad*. Madrid: Morandi, 1997.
- . *Las tinieblas de memoria negra*. Madrid: Fundamentos, 1987.
- N'gom, M'baré. "La autobiografía como plataforma de denuncia en *Los poderes de la tempestad*, de Donato Ndongo." *Afro-Romance Review* 19.1 (2000): 66-71.
- Nsue Otong, Carlos. "Estudios de los personajes en *Las tinieblas de tu memoria negra* de Donato Ndongo-Bidyogo." *Afro-Hispanic Review* 19.1 (2000): 58-65.
- Senghor, Léopold Sédar. *Chants d'ombre suivi de Hosties noires poèmes*. Paris: Seuil, 1945.
- Spivak, Gayatri. "Can the Subaltern Speak?: Speculations on Widow Sacrifice." *Wedge* 7 (1985): 120-30.
- Ugarte, Michael. "Interview with Donato Ndongo." *Arizona Journal of Hispanic Cultural Studies* 8 (2004): 217-34.