

Interview With Donato Ndongo

Entrevista

This face-to-face discussion took place in June of 2002 and has been revised and updated since then through written (mostly electronic) correspondence. Donato Ndongo was at that time Director of The Center of African Studies at the University of Murcia. In the fall of 2003 this center was closed due to economic exigencies. However, Ndongo feels there were political considerations as well. What follows is a transcription and translation from Spanish of a July 2002 conversation followed by an addendum which is the result of a follow-up visit I had with Ndongo in June of 2004 in which I asked him to clarify some of the comments he made in the earlier conversation.

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Politics and History of Equatorial Guinea

Michael Ugarte (MU): The history of Equatorial Guinea (EG) might serve as a model for the social, political, and cultural patterns of African post-colonialism, particularly the severe problems that arise after independence. However, EG is also an exception among African countries. Could you tell us what you feel are both the typical and atypical aspects of your country's historical development?

Donato Ndongo (DN): On the one hand EG is an atypical country within the context of Africa because it

was colonized by Spain. It is the only Spanish colony south of the Sahara. This gives it a certain singularity. The Spanish language was the official language of EG until two years ago when the President tried to proclaim French as the official language. This decree has had no practical consequence, since Guineans continue to speak Spanish. Education continues to be conducted in Spanish, the little education there is. The government continues to conduct its affairs in Spanish. The language used for communication among people of different ethnic groups continues to be Spanish. Thus, this linguistic and cultural feature is what makes EG different from its Francophone, Lusophone, and Anglophone neighbors.

“Despite independence in 1968 we have never experienced a democratic regime. We have never known peace, well being, or economic development.”

On the other hand, the most outstanding feature of the history of EG is something common to other African countries. Despite independence in 1968 we have never experienced a democratic regime. We have never known peace, well being, or economic development. EG became one of the poorest countries in the world when Francisco Macías took power. He destroyed everything the country had, the little left to us by Spanish colonialism. While colonial power was intrinsically perverse, it left some exploited resources such as cocoa, arguably the highest quality cocoa in the world. EG produced 40,000 tons of cocoa in the year of independence [1968]. That figure fell to three or four thousand eleven years later. Similarly, in 1968, EG produced 300,000 cubic meters of lumber, but in the Macías regime lumber was hardly produced at all. The same goes for coffee, some eight thousand tons in 1968, and in 1979 coffee production virtually disappeared. We became one of the poorest countries in the world. We thought that was going to change with Teodoro Obiang’s coup of 1979, but we soon realized this would not be the case—it was another dictatorship.

While today EG is no longer one of the poorest countries in the world due to the production of petroleum—some 250,000 barrels a day and rising, according to United Nations, World Bank (WB), and International Monetary Fund (IMF)—ninety-five percent of the population receives no benefits from this resource. The profits are enjoyed by the five percent which is made up of the president and those in his circles, most of them Obiang family members. The rest of the population lives in abject poverty.

Keep in mind that richness and poverty are not abstract concepts. Malabo, for example, is, from what I understand, the only capital in the world with major deficiencies in

electricity; there is little or no interior plumbing. The environmental hazards are numerous, for example fecal waters run through the streets. I am not talking only of the villages, this is true even in the larger cities. There is also a great lack of medical facilities, proper nutrition, education, transportation, and given that Obiang has been in power for twenty-three years, I don't think this situation will change as long as his rule continues.

MU: There are various ethnic groups in EG: Bubis, Fangs, Playeros, the inhabitants of Annobón. How do you see the relations among all these groups? Is EG an invention of colonialism or is there a viable unity among all these different groups?

DN: Considering that European colonialism divided Africa without the slightest regard for cultural or linguistic differences among the people they conquered, it is true that EG is something of an invention of European colonialism. However, the historical reality is that EG was colonized by Spain and, as I insisted earlier, its language is Spanish. This reality gives EG a unity.

MU: A related question: Ethnic conflicts are common in Africa, some indescribably bloody like the one in Rwanda about a decade ago. Are there ethnic tensions of this sort in EG?

DN: Yes. If we look at the history of EG, we note that all the different ethnicities of EG were united in the forties and fifties in hopes of achieving independence—there were political alliances among all those struggling and conspiring together. But in a law written in 1958 and enacted a year later by the Franco regime, EG was divided into two provinces, Fernando Poo and Rio Muni. All this was put into effect under the administration of Luis Carrero Blanco who was second in command in Spain and whose specific responsibility was the governance of Spain's few remaining colonies. Thus the Spanish government realized that divisions must be created and fostered in order to perpetuate its colonial domination and to erode the sense of unity in the democratic nationalist movement. This process begins in 1958 and increases during EG's autonomy, 1964-1968. When Guineans began to negotiate the agreement for independence, the ethnic divisions had already been created. In fact the constitutional conference on independence was structured according to political parties based on ethnic identity as well as ideology. The ethnic divisions gave rise to an agreement between the Bubi political party and Macías, a Fang, who promised to give the island its independence after achieving freedom from Spain.

But Macías had no intention of carrying this out. Some have spoken of the oppression of Fang or continental Guinea over the islanders, but this is not the case, given that Macías's repression was more intense in his own area. Indeed, there were more deaths among Fang during his brutal regime than among Bubis.

MU: Have there been any historical instances or attempts (pre-independence or post-independence) on the part of the Fang to expand its territory by invasion or by other means?

DN: No, none. Curiously, however, there are people who speak of a Fang invasion of Bioko without knowing the history. The first contact between Fang and Bubis, as I relate in my book *España en Guinea*, occurred in the 1910s under Angel Barrera, Spanish governor at the time, as a result of the need for labor in the cocoa-producing area of Fernando Poo. People were deported from the continent to the island to work on the plantations. This is what some radical nationalist Bubis call “invasion.” These deportations were akin to slavery. My mother was born in Fernando Poo precisely because my grandfather was obligated to work on the coffee plantations—these people did not move voluntarily.

MU: What about Annobón? Some Annobonese have spoken about their own marginalization within EG.

DN: This is a good point. Since independence neither Equatoguinean head of state has gone to Annobón. About every three or four months or longer a boat arrives in Annobón from Malabo to bring essentials: food, soap, medical supplies, petroleum needed not for transportation but for lamps since there is no electricity. But given the infrequency of these deliveries, many Annobonese die of hunger or sickness without anyone not from Annobón realizing it. There is no hospital in Annobón. There is no hospital in Malabo either, but at least there are a few doctors. So there is a legitimate reason for the Annobonese to complain about their own marginality.

MU: But you say there has been no attempt to invade.

DN: No, no. There is nothing worth invading. Representatives are sent to these remote areas to carry out repression. They take advantage of the few riches: goats, chickens, fruit, but they are not there to improve the area. The problems of EG have to do with dictatorship, not with excesses of nationalism.

MU: There were two important political transitions in the recent history of EG, the change from Spanish colonialism to independence and the coup that brought the present ruler, Teodoro Obiang, to power. Describe those transitions. Were there democratic possibilities?

DN: Yes, there were political parties that were interested in creating a democracy. Curiously, Franco did not allow political parties in Spain in the sixties, but he did permit them in EG. As I said earlier, there were parties based on democratic ideologies as well as those based on ethnic identity. The first constitution was democratic: it called for limits of power for the president, a national assembly, separation between judicial, legislative, and executive decision making, a period of five years stipulated for elections to take place. Five months after independence, with the pretext of an attempted coup—a conspiracy that has never been proven to have existed—Macías arrested all the leaders of political parties, starting with the one he most feared, Atanasio Ndongu. Both Ndongu and Bonifacio Ndo, another democratic leader, were executed for treason along with many other leaders of democratic parties.

When Macías fell, brought down and executed by his own nephew, Teodoro Obiang, some people believed there might be possibilities for a democracy. At first he declared an amnesty for political prisoners and stated that his coup was designed to create democracy. But his practice belied those promises. Many of us were suspicious of him from the beginning. At that time I wrote articles warning that Obiang was not the person to bring democracy to the country, that it was our responsibility to require that he fulfill the lofty promises he made when he took power. Our suspicions have born themselves out. He has been in power for twenty-three years and continues killing his opponents. The most recent example is the case of some sixty-four people accused of sedition and sentenced to death. Due to international pressure, the sentences have been reduced to incarceration. But a prison sentence is akin to death, since many are suffering from broken limbs and they are not being attended to medically nor are they being fed or given water. One of these people is a prominent member of the opposition, Plácido Micó. He was accused of plotting a coup, but in the trial there was no proof, according to Spanish observers. Internationally, this trial has turned into a trial against the Obiang regime. Obiang and his cronies have said that in EG there is no torture, but the defendants, with their broken hands and arms, were there for everybody to see.

Obiang, having organized a coup himself, is concerned that the same might happen to him. In essence he has done everything that Macías did, including the creation of his own political party, which he called, Democratic Party of Equatorial Guinea. While political parties have been allowed only as a result of pressure both within and outside the country, it is illegal for them to meet or disseminate information. It is illegal to speak against the regime. For simply pointing out that Malabo is in need of electricity, people have been arrested. This is state terrorism.

MU: Describe the geo-political importance of oil in your country, particularly as it relates to the current situation.

DN: Spanish colonialists knew there was oil in EG, but for several reasons, this potential was not exploited. In colonial times oil was not as important a world resource as it is now. In fact, the extraction of oil in the Bioko Gulf area would have presented obstacles to the exploration of lumber and cocoa. Oil became extremely important as a world commodity around 1973, after EG had gained independence. Yet the international community was aware of the abuses of the Macías regime and avoided investment in the country. After Obiang's coup in 1980 Spain created a petroleum company with Obiang called Hispanoil. In the eighties Hispanoil explored the area for petroleum, but its conclusion was that the level of production would be minimal, in essence that the costs outweighed the gains. So Hispanoil, which is now Repsol, stopped exploring. I am convinced that this oversight was based more on politics than economics.

However, the U.S. ambassador at the time, Chestor Norris, was very interested, and in the last decade there has been much speculation and exploitation of Equatoguinean oil. Now Obiang stresses that neither the Spaniards nor Macías were interested in oil,

that the little oil there is has been God's gift to him and his family; his son Gabriel and his son-in-law Juan Oló are his petroleum managers. Mind you, oil production is a highly secretive enterprise in EG. The IMF, WB and other international organizations have complained about this. While Obiang asks for loans, supposedly for the development of his country, he manipulates the figures having to do with oil production. The United Nations last year has sent envoys to investigate reports of human rights violations, but Obiang did not allow entry of UN personnel. And this year a group of African countries, headed by Nigeria, asked the UN to refrain from sending human rights investigators to EG since they claimed human rights abuses were non-existent in that country. The European Union abstained with Spain leading the move for abstention. But the most recent court case that I spoke of earlier has made both the African and European factions look ridiculous in the light of the abuse of power witnessed by the observers.

“Africa does not have presidents, it has wardens, stewards working for the interests of the rich nations and multinational corporations. Most Africans cannot denounce this because we do not have the liberty to do so. Until developed countries realize this, the Third World, and Africa in particular, will go nowhere.”

You should be aware too that U.S. oil companies saved EG from falling in 1993-94. I know, I was a journalist there working for EFE [Spain's wire service] at the time. The only country supporting EG then was France because it was encouraged by Obiang's attempts to make French the official language. However, Spain and the European Union were pressuring EG to respect the democratic rights of its citizens. The interest in EG on the part of US-based oil conglomerates saved the day for Obiang. In fact some of the profits from Guinean oil were used to carry out oppression in Nigeria. There are eyewitness reports that helicopters owned by Exxon-Mobil were used to kidnap Nigerian rebels and transport them to EG for execution.

All this has to do with the politics of oil. It is oil that leads to my having been taken to court here in Spain for having written “tendentious” articles defaming the Obiang family.

MU: Much is being said these days about “globalization.” Do you see benefits in the investment on the part of opulent western countries and multinational corporations in your country?

DN: Basically, I feel that investment in African countries on the part of multinational corporations is not a bad idea. But all this should be done fairly and at a cost beneficial to the country in which companies are investing. Also, measures must be taken to ensure that the country use the profits for the good of its citizens. This is not being done in EG. First, the percentage of profits from oil going toward the Guinean government is well below the world norm, and secondly, virtually none of it is used for development. It goes directly into the pockets of Obiang and company.

MU: What are your thoughts on the so-called “anti-globalization” movement?

DN: I have often said in public that we Africans are suffering the consequences of a neo-colonization. We have moved from direct domination by Europe to indirect domination through intermediaries in the form of post-independence governments. Africa does not have presidents, it has wardens, stewards working for the interests of the rich nations and multinational corporations. Most Africans cannot denounce this because we do not have the liberty to do so. Until developed countries realize this, the Third World, and Africa in particular, will go nowhere.

The movement for progress must be undertaken through solidarity among the peoples of the developed world and the peoples of Africa. We must understand that this “state of well-being” that everyone speaks about, this opulence, this excess of material goods, depends on the misery of the Third World. For this reason I think those who point out the pitfalls of globalization are on the right path. I have written articles in their favor and I will continue to do so.

MU: On a related note, how do you feel about efforts on the part of these “anti-globalizers” and Non-Governmental Organizations to pressure the richer nations, the WB and IMF to forgive the external debt accumulated by African governments?

DN: We need to understand that indiscriminate loans to African countries benefit dictatorships and cause further misery. Let’s just take one example: during the five years of dictatorial rule in Nigeria of Sani Abacha robbed between three and five hundred million dollars intended for the economic development of his country. How can this be forgiven? On the contrary, he should be obligated to pay back the money. Too often as in the case with Mobutu, Edi Amin, and our own Macías, when we relieve the debt owed by them, we are authorizing the corruption, we are saying it’s fine to go on robbing the people of Africa as well as the people of the developed world.

On the other hand, if there are cases in which the debt has been used for progress and there is proof it has not been ill spent, then debt relief is a legitimate measure. A concrete case is that of Mozambique. Here is a country that has suffered a war and other calamities, but there has been an honest effort to negotiate a peace, and these efforts have been largely successful. Also, there is no evidence of a Mozambican leader with castles in France, as was the case with Mobutu.

MU: How do you feel about the rising immigration of Africans to Spain and other European countries?

DN: From my point of view it is not a problem of immigration but emigration. This problem is not unrelated to everything we have been talking about. If there were prosperity in African countries—no wars, real independence, no repression—there would be no emigration. Thus it is logical that the long-range solution to this problem is to deal with the situations within the countries from which people are fleeing.

“We need to try to understand what makes a person take risks such as traversing the Sahara on foot, stowing away in the baggage compartment of a plane, cross(ing) the Mediterranean on a canoe, the state of desperation that a pregnant woman feels when she risks her life to arrive at God knows where. We need to demand that Europeans put themselves in our place.”

In the case of EG, many people flee to escape misery. Curiously, there are more foreigners living there than Guineans. Yes, that is true. Why? Because Guineans are barred from working for the oil companies unless they belong to Obiang’s single political party, or unless they pay a special tax. There are all kinds of conditions. The people working for those companies are Philippine, Malaysian, and from other countries. Many Guineans go elsewhere for work: Gabon, Cameroon, Nigeria, Spain. So if the Spanish government is so concerned about immigration, why is something not done to ensure that these jobs go to Guineans? This is what should be done: end the conditions that make us flee our country. No one leaves their land voluntarily, no one except for tourists who want to see the Eiffel Tower, but that is another matter.

That said, the people who leave for richer countries should not be treated as fifth-class citizens without any rights. Need I remind Spaniards that they too were compelled to leave their land at several times in their history? We need to try to understand what makes a person take risks such as traversing the Sahara on foot, stowing away in the baggage compartment of a plane, cross[ing] the Mediterranean in a canoe, the state of desperation that a pregnant woman feels when she risks her life to arrive at God knows where. We need to demand that Europeans put themselves in our place.

We also need to be more realistic about the consequences of immigration, rising crime, etc. Consider this: every summer some twenty-five million tourists arrive in Spain, and as a direct consequence there is a rise in crime by about thirty percent. Is anyone saying that we should restrict the entry of tourists for this reason?

MU: Are you in favor of sanctioning governments that violate international law by allowing people to leave their countries without proper documentation?

DN: Absolutely. There are countries that do not respect international laws pertaining to travel, governments that do not look after the interests of their own citizens. These countries should suffer the consequences of this lack of compliance.

MU: How do you see the current of dissidence against Obiang in Spain? Is there solidarity among Guinean exiles in Spain?

DN: Within Guinean exile circles we find all sorts. There are many people who have been fighting for democracy in EG for all their lives and find themselves in Spain for that reason. There are others, however, who are in Spain but who at one time collaborated with the dictatorship, including torturers, people in Obiang's government and family members who, due to a petty squabble with him have chosen to live in Spain. I have no qualms in naming names: the ex-minister of the interior just a year ago, is now living in Barcelona. The vice-president under Macías, Bonifacio Ndema Esolo, is now in Almería. A few of Obiang's cousins and other family members now reside in Valencia, people who carried out torture in EG just a little while ago.

MU: Do any of these ex-collaborators write for exile journals that you are aware of? Do they participate in organizations to change the government? If so, I imagine that this creates certain tensions.

DN: Yes, absolutely, many. I have no problem in allowing them to write and participate. But for me the most troubling fact is that many of these people have not ended their collaboration with Obiang's regime. Many are still in touch with the government, some acting as spies.

MU: What is the future of EG? Is a transition from dictatorship to democracy possible like the one in Spain?

DN: What made the transition in Spain possible? It was the will of the king. EG does not have anything like that. There is no semblance of democracy. Thus we should demand that Mr. Obiang dialogue with us for the purpose of changing the government, and if he does not do so, there comes a time when our hearts and bodies can stand no more. I am not justifying violence. I am simply saying that we have the moral obligation to seek liberty and justice. The French Revolution led to much violence but it is seen as one of the most decisive steps toward human advancement.

MU: Yes, but you have also said the real change might come through international pressures. What are the prospects for a change to come as a result of these pressures? What, for example, has or should the present Spanish government's position be on the current political situation of EG?

DN: I have often said that Spain should take the lead in international pressure to change that government. When we were poor in resources, Madrid neglected us. Now, however, when EG is rich in oil, suddenly Obiang is more important.

This is not new. What has the Spanish parliament ever done about repression in EG? During the Franco regime, after independence when Macías began killing his own people, things pertaining to EG were called *materia reservada*. Later when Obiang came to power, his image was positive because he got his military training in Zaragoza. Spain must help us resolve the problem by other means.

MU: What do you think are Spain's interests in EG? Why does it not take a more definite stand on the need for democracy and human rights in that country?

DN: The truth is I don't know. I wrote in the nationalist newspaper *ABC* that regarding EG there has been no difference among all the post-Franco political parties. I believe there are economic interests that are being kept secret.

MU: Would you like to return to your country as a government figure? Do you have political ambitions?

DN: I am one of those who believe that governments and literature are incompatible. If I had to choose between politics as a career and literature, I would choose the latter. "Never say never," as they say, but my personal ambitions have more to do with literature than with a possible political position. I prefer to remain a virgin.

MU: But there have been precedents of writers who have gone into politics, Jorge Semprún, Vargas Llosa, Seghor.

DN: The lessons in those cases and others are that politics gets in the way of their writing. I want to write, but, unfortunately, literary creation does not allow me to make a living. If royalties for my books allowed me, I would dedicate myself exclusively to writing. The other things I do related to my work in the university I do willingly, and they are useful, but I admit that I do them because I have no choice. This is not to say that if my government offered me a scholarship, or support for cultural work, I would accept, but certainly not in the present government. I will not sell my soul to anyone.

Literature of Equatorial Guinea

MU: In what geographical/cultural category would you place Equatoguinean literature: Spanish literature from Spain, Ibero-African, African, Afro-Spanish, Afro-Hispanic? Where among these does it fit?

DN: Equatoguinean literature is such a recent category that I'm not sure it would fall exclusively into any one of the categories you just mentioned. If I were to choose a category, I would opt for Afro-Hispanic literature. Not Peninsular because we are not in the peninsula; our literature is not really Iberoamerican either, although there are relationships. But placing our work in the context of Afro-Hispanic literature makes sense because of the cultural links with Bantu culture and the obvious connection with the Spanish language. These two relations inform our identity. We should keep in mind, however, that for concrete reasons (slavery, for example) Afro-Hispanic writers have lost direct links to African culture.

MU: What about links to African literature?

DN: Placing our literature in the category of African literature is problematic because there are not many direct connections. The fact is that African literature is not known in Equatorial Guinea. It is not taught in school, nor is it accessible to most Guineans.

MU: Is it likely that a Guinean writer is more familiar with Unamuno than with Senghor, for example, or Chinua Achebe?

DN: Indeed, much more likely. Spanish literature is part of the high school curriculum. One may find books by African writers in the library of the Hispano-Guinean Cultural Center, but this is a recent phenomenon. An effort is being made in this regard. The 1986 Nobel Prize for literature to Wole Soyinka was an impetus. This made African writers more accessible in Spain, and it filtered down to Equatorial Guinea. Naturally, the Cultural Center is more interested in books written in Spanish, including translations.

MU: Is Equatoguinean literature studied in Spanish universities?

DN: No, not to my knowledge. In these moments there is some interest, but it manifests itself outside the official curriculum. For the most part, Spanish universities have not taken notice of our existence with the important exception of younger critics and professors who tend to be part of English departments, and as you know, post-colonial literature is very much in vogue there.

MU: There is a question among some critics like M'baré N'gom as to why there is no visible anti-colonialist literature in Equatorial Guinea. What is your view?

DN: Yes. I have said also that Spanish Guinean literature is marked by its lack of participation in the anticolonialism of other African narrative and poetry. The reason is not that Guineans have felt any benevolence on the part of the Spanish colonists. It is that the moment Guinean writers begin to express themselves on their own, the historical moment has already passed from colonial to post-colonial oppression. Spanish colonialism was perverse, and Guinean writers are aware of this. I think that the real anti-colonialist novel written from the Spanish Guinean perspective will be written in the future. When weary souls and bodies become less weary, that's when one begins to reflect on the past. There is a danger in that future writers will have to rely on indirect experiences of colonialism.

MU: In a previous essay you wrote that animism is one of the main features of African writing.

DN: Yes, for us Africans, each object has a soul, it has its own spirit. A tree for example has a vital force, a stone has the ability to condition us. We incorporate that vital force in everything we do. This is tremendously important in artistic creation. In our rich oral tradition, there are many stories of animals, rivers, and other natural elements, all of which are animated. All this is something that we writers want to incorporate into

our literature. We want to recreate our own beliefs. This might sound like “magical realism,” but it’s not, it is something that is part of us. If anything, Latin American writers are copying us.

MU: Yes, I see this not only in your work but other African writers such as Ngungi Wa Thiong’o: the power of the river, the spirits that speak, prophecies, a natural calamity has its own reason for being.

DN: Indeed. When a person dies, many Africans believe and act as if their spirit lived on, the spirits of ancestors, for example. The spirits continue to thrive; they are not just memories, they are active players in life. This is not a simple matter of style, or an attempt to imitate fantastic or magical writing. These are things that condition us, that form our own lives, they help us explain our world.

MU: You have also written on something you call “collective purification” as an important element in African literature.

DN: This is particularly important in Bantu culture. When a given community is suffering from a famine or a drought, people resort to a collective effort to reverse the trend, a purification or purge to petition the gods to stop that evil and to bring on the benefits of nature, to ask that those bad spirits of the ancestors stop causing harm.

These customs are disappearing in their authentic form, and we writers should try to recuperate them—but in a different form. Literature has no limits in this regard; it is a way to continue the tradition, a tradition that has been beneficial and useful. There is evidence that as a consequence of these collective implorings, droughts have ceased and women have resumed giving birth after a period of sterility.

MU: Can these “collective petitions” have political ramifications?

DN: Yes, the adverse political situation is a good field in which we can recreate this kind of collective purge. When a situation is bad, the phenomenon of collective augury (*abusión colectiva*) can be the means to ask the spirits of our ancestors to help us solve the problem. I see myself as a writer and as such the initiator of a collective purge. Thus I engage in an attempt to rid my community of this natural malady called dictatorship and oppression.

MU: Do you consider all this a mark of hyper-determinism, or is there something we might call agency in these collective petitions to have the spirits solve problems?

DN: I believe that every human being has the capacity to choose between good and evil. These collective acts are deliberate attempts to opt for good. At the same time there are things in life that are predestined, certain circumstances from which there is no escape.

MU: Could you talk about the role of the writer as a collective story-teller, *juglar*? I ask this not only in your case but as a theoretical concept.

DN: 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. In African society, literacy has been uncommon. 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.

MU: This sounds like a Horatian concept: "dulce et utile." But in the case of African literature it seems we are talking about something more collective, the writer as a voice of the people, the community.

DN: Yes, this minstrel, this story-teller, is not a person isolated from the social context. He could be anyone, but he has a gift. He is a person who, for whatever reason—genes, the gods, ancestors—is a person who has the gift to tell these stories. Art as an object must have a purpose, we have always believed this. Art for art's sake has never existed in my society.

MU: Another notion you have suggested elsewhere is the importance of what you have called the "precision of the word," that writers should seek to communicate the precise meanings. Could you elaborate? Is this something like Flaubert's "mot juste"?

"That many people in my country are illiterate will not make me stop writing. It will, however, make me write in a particular way, a way of incorporating oral literature."

DN: Yes, this is what I referred to. We are aware that meanings have shades of difference to different people. The language of Equatorial Guinea is tenuous not only because of the variety of languages but also because of the dictatorship that distorts meanings all the time which is a way of distorting reality. This is why I have insisted on using precise language.

MU: But what do you say to those theorists who stress the multiplicity of language, that one of literature's most salient elements is to underline language's inherent tendencies to open a word to various significations; irony is one of many examples. I see this in your own work.

DN: Indeed. I did not mean to devalue the use of irony, plays on words, multiple significations. These are marks of good literature. When I stress precision I am not calling for rigidity. What I want to say is that we should have the talent to say precisely what we want.

MU: But many people in your country are illiterate, as you yourself have pointed out here. So for whom do you write?

DN: I can only answer for myself. First, I do not write for anyone specifically. I do not write for Fangs or Bubis or Spaniards. I write for everyone. The problem is that until now, history, including literary history, has been structured and created by colonizers. Thus I want people all over the world to understand my point of view as an Equatoguinean.

But for this to occur, obviously we need an educated audience. I can't ignore that seventy percent of my countrymen are illiterate. But I don't want them to miss a possible double meaning of a word or a concept. That many people in my country are illiterate will not make me stop writing. It will, however, make me write in a particular way, a way of incorporating oral literature. African writers tend to say things several times in different ways in their literature. In my community when we write a letter, often we have to keep in mind that the recipient may not be able to read and write, therefore we must send the message through an intermediary who must go to the recipient's residence and convey the message precisely. So for the messenger not to forget the message, the message must be expressed many times, with different examples, different details, all so that the message be communicated as the sender intended.

MU: You also have spoken on that well-known dialogue between tradition and modernity.

DN: This pertains to world literature. With regard to African literature, it leads to a major polemic among African intellectuals: Should we create something new, should we seek to be original in the Western sense, or should our main contribution to culture be the recreation of our traditions and thereby assert our identity?

I believe that this polemic need not be so acrimonious. We must understand that European culture is not singular, it is hybrid. Think of all the variants, historical and geographical. Many of the purists who demand that we only use our traditions do not acknowledge certain realities. We Africans are also familiar with modernity, we too use the metro, we travel by plane, we wear suits, etc. I cannot educate my child as if I were still living in the age of my grandfather. Am I going to ask my son to wear a loin cloth? That's ingenuous, it's simply folkloric. We must go beyond that.

MU: I'd like to ask now about the two novels you have written, *Las tinieblas de tu memoria negra* and *Los poderes de la tempestad*. M'baré N'gom has written on the autobiographical aspects of *Tinieblas*. But how do you see this?

DN: Evidently, I agree that all literature has autobiographical elements, but I'd like to go beyond that. Everything that impinges on our minds, our bodies, our experience, all of it can be turned into literature. For example, right now through that window, I see some birds flying up above a cypress tree. Who knows, perhaps years from now I'll describe those very birds but from a different place. In the long run *Tinieblas* is autobiographical only in those terms, only in terms of memories of incidents, images, sensations. But the basic facts surrounding *Tinieblas* are not parts of my life. The protagonist was in a seminary; I have never been a seminarian. The protagonist as a child vomited after his first communion; my first communion was quite normal. Also my first sexual experience was nothing like the one I describe in the novel—thank God. However, there are some things that happened in my home town in Equatorial Guinea that I put into another form.

I'll give you an example of an incident that I might recast in a novel. It has to do with a man who went off about a hundred meters from his house for a bowel movement—in African villages there is no indoor plumbing. Along came some pigs attracted to the smell of his feces and began devouring it, and much to his chagrin, they ripped off his testicles in the process. This actually occurred, and when or if this gets into a novel, people will say I invented it; but it happened.

This incident is autobiographical in the sense that it was related to me, but it never happened to me. Thus the things that happen both in *Tinieblas* and *Poderes* are things of this sort, incidents that I recreate through my experience or the experience of others. I have never been in jail, but there is much description of imprisonment in *Poderes*. My intention has never been to tell the story of my life.

MU: I see circumcision as an important theme in *Tinieblas*. Initiation rituals seem also to be a recurring interest among other African writers. How do you see this?

DN: Yes, this episode is very important in my work and in the work of other African writers because it is a central stage in our lives. I was circumcised, but this does not mean that I described this personal event in my novel. The circumcision that takes place in the novel is very similar to what was related to me about my brother.

Circumcision has to do with the passage from childhood to adulthood. Being circumcised means that you can no longer play with little girls, that you have passed to another stage. I don't think there is anything comparable in European culture.

MU: I see this in the novel as an affirmation of identity.

DN: Indeed, this allows a person to understand that he has become a full-grown human being, an individual.

MU: How do you see traditional practices that have come under criticism in certain circles in the West: polygamy, feminine circumcision, ablation?

DN: On ablation I can only say this is not practiced among my people. But I will say that for the sake of utility, only certain African traditions should be conserved; those that

are not practical should not. Much has been said about polygamy, but I believe that in some cases there is no reason to conserve this custom. In a city in which an African family is living in a three or four room apartment, how can anyone argue that it is beneficial to have seven children and three wives? This is impossible, and we have seen cases of diplomats who insist on keeping these traditions, and it causes problems.

I am usually very permissive when it comes to these kinds of situations. I believe in individual liberty. If a woman finds three men who love her, *chapeau*. And if a man finds three women who love him and all agree to share him as long as everyone agrees, fine. But what I do not accept are the instances, many of them, in which these so-called traditional customs are practiced for the economic betterment of one at the expense of others—the dowry, mothers who prostitute their daughters. I do not agree with practices that involve coercion or exploitation under the pretext of conserving a tradition. This is not right. And as far as ablation is concerned, we have to consider human rights. In any case, I think we should strive for the synthesis between tradition and modernity that I spoke of earlier.

MU: In your novel there is an episode in which your characters walk around the *ekuk* tree in circles and become dizzy.

DN: Yes, the *ekuk* is a shade tree with enormous roots. So if a child walks around it four or five times, he may get dizzy. The roots emerge from the earth. These trees are in danger of extinction due to clear-cutting for lumber. The son of Obiang, Teodorín, is responsible.

MU: You say that you don't want to denigrate any culture, but at the same time you are critical of Spanish missionaries, like Father Ortiz in *Tinieblas*.

DN: Yes, without a doubt. It could not be otherwise. He had to “civilize” and educate pagans, and pagans had special need of education: they were going to hell if they did not convert. The missionaries imposed a series of prohibitions on us—fear, continual fear. Anguish. This is something that is certainly autobiographical, my childhood was terrible in this regard; I was living in constant fear of hell.

MU: Your novel is anti-colonial but is it anticlerical?

DN: I don't think so. Perhaps a missionary in Africa might read it that way, but I was not trying to denigrate anyone. What I tried to describe was the excessive role that missionaries had in the education of an entire generation of Guineans. Whether this education was good or bad is another issue, what I have described is the conflict, the cultural clash. This is the reality. I don't think I am making a value judgment in *Tinieblas*.

MU: I found a profound similarity between that cultural clash you speak of in your novel and the one in Chinua Achebe's famous work, *Things Fall Apart*. You have said that this novel has influenced you.

DN: Yes, it was the first novel I read by a black man. I was fifteen years old. It was translated into Spanish as *Un mundo se aleja* [literally, *A World Becomes Distant*]. Today the translation is *Todo se desmorona* [*Everything Crumbles*] which is more accurate, no? When I read this book I was transformed. It was remarkable to me then that a black man had written such a thing. It was not only that he was African, but that he had written about things familiar to me—it was my world, my experience. I think this is where my vocation as a writer was born. When I was in school in Valencia I was the only black student. And everyone asked me about Africa, from the most ignorant questions imaginable to the most interesting. This inspired me; it made me think about my own culture. It was this curiosity, this desire to tell people about my life and culture that made me want to write.

MU: Passing now to *Poderes*, why did it take so long to write? Ten years, isn't that so?

DN: Simple. I had no time. I had to make a living, and I was immersed in other things having to do with the oppression of my country. In 1994 when I left Guinea for Gabon, on the other hand, I had little to do. I was working for EFE but I had time to create the structure of a new novel which would eventually become *Poderes*.

MU: Can you give us your general views on this novel, its genesis, its reason for being?

DN: I wanted to write a trilogy on Equatorial Guinea. *Tinieblas* has to do with the colonial period while *Poderes* takes place in the post-colonial dictatorship. Writing *Poderes* was cathartic for me. I left Equatorial Guinea with a great deal of anxiety and writing the novel was therapeutic. Everything that happens in *Poderes* happened to someone I know or someone whose story was told to me. I want people to know that everything there happened. And I want them to think about Equatorial Guinea from our point of view, the anguish, the hardship. I did not write it to please or to entertain.

MU: We touched on this earlier, but would you agree with García Márquez when he said that everything he writes has to do with the reality of Latin America, that he is perplexed by the term “magical realism”? Would you say the same of your work?

DN: If you want to call what I write magic, go ahead, but understand that for me, what happens in *Los poderes de la tempestad* is the reality of Equatorial Guinea. I remember when I was a child, a woman we knew rose from the dead. I don't know what happened exactly, but I imagine people did not know she was alive. The custom is to bury the dead three hours or less from the time of death, so when this woman was in her coffin, as the earth was being shoveled onto it, suddenly she began to scream and bang on the coffin, and someone heard her. She was brought out of her coffin, and indeed she was alive. Her name was Tecla. This is magical realism, but it's also reality.

MU: The final question: Can you tell us what you have in your files? What projects are you working on now?

DN: I have several novels in mind with provisional titles: *El metro* is about a Guinean émigré's experiences in Spain. I'm also finishing another historical essay titled *Guinea*

Ecuatorial: Franquismo y dictadores. This is a priority and it should be finished soon. After this I will go back to *El metro*. Another novel, *Mar de fondo*, will be the recreation of memories of an African youngster in Europe, an adolescent who arrives in Europe at about age eleven. It will be a comparison of customs he left behind in conjunction with those that he sees in Europe. And *Los hijos de la tribu* will be the last volume of the trilogy that began with *Tinieblas*.

MU: We readers and admirers of your novels are looking forward to these works. Thank you very much for your thoughts.

Addendum:

Since this discussion Ndongo tells me he is about to finish *El metro*. His work at the Centro de Estudios Africanos, he adds, has not allowed him enough time to devote to the writing of literature. Therefore, now that the Centro has closed he is pleased he has more time to write. However, at the moment (July 2004) Ndongo finds himself unemployed, with a wife and two children who depend on him and an uncertain future. He also tells me that officials of the Spanish Guinean government, that is, Teodoro Obiang and his family along with their governmental associates would like very much to silence the voices of dissent both within Ecuatorial Guinea and in Spain. But the life and writing of Donato Ndongo-Bidyogo has much future in the making.