

# Introduction

*M'baré N'gom is Professor and Chair of Modern Languages at Morgan State University-Baltimore. An expert on African Francophone and Afro-Spanish literature, he has written extensively on Equatorial Guinean literature and culture. Among his many publications are Diálogos con Guinea (1996).*

*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.*

What is Spanish literature? In many ways this special issue of the *Arizona Journal of Hispanic Cultural Studies* begs the question. But it is not rhetorical. We do not necessarily insist that Spanish literature is much broader than supposed, or that it may include some or all of Latin American literature, or that it may encompass literature written in Catalan, Galician or Euskera along with literature written in Spanish from northern Africa (Ceuta, Melilla, the Rif) or a growing body of works written from (or in exile from) Equatorial Guinea, the only African Spanish speaking country south of the Sahara and the focus of this volume. Nor do we necessarily put forth the notion that literature includes cultural artifacts along with “great works.” Indeed, the opposite of all these positions may be argued eloquently: that we muddy already murky waters when we force these categories into the realm of Spanish literature. It may be true that what we need is not more far-fetched connections and comparisons, but specificity, limitations, the honesty to say, “That particular text or issue falls out of my realm of understanding.”

Our intention in putting together this issue is not to answer the above question, but simply to reflect on it. And this reflection will, we hope, come to the fore as our readers begin to peruse the contents of the volume and perhaps stop to read an essay, interview, or discussion. To us, more important than that nagging question—What is Spanish literature?—is the need to disseminate information on a tiny Spanish speaking spot on the globe and in passing to expose certain realities (imagined and otherwise) that do not receive

enough attention. As one of the contributors to the pedagogy piece points out, Africa is only dark because of the West's ignorance of it. Indeed, to fill the need for specificity concerning the realities of Africa and Equatorial Guinea along with their complex relations with Europe may be this volume's primary intention, a goal more difficult to realize than may be imagined. Access to and dissemination of Equatoguinean culture is not easy. The publishing outlets are not only poorly funded but the distribution of their



products is severely limited. When one adds to this that the mere act of producing a creative work of dissent in Equatorial Guinea may land an author or artist in jail—the horrific jail (both real and imagined) of Playa Negra described in Donato Ndongo's *Los poderes de la tempestad*—to say nothing of the shortages of electricity and clean water, one begins to acquire a first-hand understanding of the materiality of cultural canons.<sup>1</sup>

As we fill in the basic “social-studies” data, we point out that Equatorial Guinea is a former Spanish colony of some 19,000

square miles with a population of less than a million. Located on the west coast of central Africa, the nation is comprised of two geographic and cultural entities. The island of Bioko (formerly Fernando Poo) in the Bight of Biafra is inhabited by the Bubi. The area called Rio Muni south of Cameroon and northwest of French speaking Gabon is inhabited by the Fang. Spanish has been the official language of Equatorial Guinea from 1778, through independence (1968), to the present, yet indigenous languages have also prevailed. The most widely spoken is Fang, the predominant ethnic group of continental Rio Muni extending into Gabon and Cameroon.

The area's first European arrivals were the Portuguese whose interest in Fernando Poo had to do with the exploitation of slaves, fruits, and minerals. In 1778 this island passed to Spanish sovereignty. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Spaniards paid little attention to it other than as a possession providing free labor, coffee, and other fruits. There were, however, expeditions into continental Africa, and in 1900 the area of Rio Muni became a Spanish possession through a treaty with France.

In the twentieth century, Spain began taking greater political interest. During the dictatorships of Miguel Primo de Rivera (1923-1930) and Francisco Franco (1936-1975), colonial administrative units were established to regulate activities in Morocco and the areas on the African central west coast whose duties would be to “foment the culture, morals, and well-being of the indigenous people of the Gulf of Guinea and to insure their adhesion to Spain” (Ndongo, *España en Guinea* 166). After the Spanish Civil War, Franco extended his predecessor's policy with the expansion of the Bureau of Moroccan and Colonial Affairs. Ironically, due to Franco's paternalistic policies, there

was an economic amelioration: an increased budget for health, education, and agriculture which bolstered the production of coffee, cocoa, and lumber.

Equatorial Guinean independence in 1968 was followed by the dictatorship of Francisco Macías (1970-1979), which gave rise to a coup plotted by his nephew, Teodoro Obiang. The latter promised democracy, yet Obiang's rule (1979-present) has turned into an autocracy in which critics have been imprisoned, tortured, or executed. The economic decline, collapse of the infrastructure and increased poverty bring us to the discovery of oil in the eighties and its development in the nineties which has made for the new arrival of the "first world" as we begin the twenty-first century—this time in the form of energy conglomerates such as Exxon-Mobil, Triton Oil, and other Texas-based companies. Today Equatorial Guinea is among the poorest countries in Africa despite the oil boom: the infant mortality rate is 95 per every thousand births. Some Guineans have addressed these issues, but many dissidents have been sent into exile or jailed (Silverstein, Liniger-Goumaz, Klitgaard, Nerín).

Some say that we humanists are experiencing an intellectual crisis due to the erosion of foundational knowledge and values. This issue of *AJHCS* represents not as much a refutation that we are in crisis, but an affirmation of the intellectual excitement (a renewed rigor) that can emerge as a result of the questioning of old knowledge. Indeed, a series of interrogations are being posed today by a group of social critics and theorists concerning perceptions and realities of formerly colonial nations as well as the relationships between those postcolonial cultures and their past colonizers (Bhabha, Spivak, Said, Appiah, Ngugi, Ashcroft).

We hope this volume will participate in a timely discussion among Hispanists and non-Hispanists on the tensions between the so-called developed cultures and those under imperial domination less than a century ago. As is the case with the founders of this journal, the contributors understand the culture of a given area to be multi-faceted: the high along with the low, literary texts as not only embodiments of an aesthetic construction but also as telling indicators of cultural conflicts and tensions, images including those in the communications industries, music, cultural representations and manifestations of space.

Thus our first section, "Culture," comprises a series of three essays on "extra-literary" phenomena: the first is perhaps the most basic and provides a wealth of necessary information. "The Spanish Language of Equatorial Guinea" by John Lipski (an earlier version of which appeared in *Afro-Hispanic Review* 2000) deals with the labyrinthine connections and relations among the variety of languages spoken in Equatorial Guinea and thereby treats a great deal of related issues (anthropological, political, social, historical, ethnic) some of which will be addressed in the rest of the essays. Igor Cusack's work on "Equatorial Guinea's Cuisine" and the politics of nutrition is anything but a guide for a prospective tourist searching for that country's best and most authentic restaurants; it is a fascinating study on how the nation's eating habits are revealed to the world community. One might say that eating as a cultural practice along with its representations reveal a variety of political tensions, especially in an area of Africa in which many citizens are malnourished. They also add complexities to the notion of national identity.

Concluding this section on culture, Dosinda García Alvite discusses one of Spanish Guinea's most popular cultural products, the musical duo from Equatorial Guinea now living in Spain, Las Hijas del Sol. Perhaps as much of a contemporary Spanish (peninsular) phenomenon as a "native" or exotic one, Las Hijas del Sol seems to be Spain's main source of knowledge of its former colony. Exotic, sensual, and at the same time socially critical, this musical group, according to García Alvite, has raised Spanish post-colonial consciousness despite certain criticisms. All of these essays signal the necessity to inspect manifestations of popular culture from within that culture. Cusack's

pointed study suggests, as does that of García Alvite, the necessary global connections with the politics of the international community. Beware, suggest Lipski, Cusack, and García Alvite, of the knowledge we in the "west" are receiving, especially in the age of cyber-information.

In 2000 an anthology compiled by one of this volume's guest editors, M'baré N'gom (with Donato Ndongo-Bidyogo), *Literatura de Guinea Ecuatorial* revealed an extensive body of literature written by

Equatoguineans. The book is at once an introduction to the culture and literature of this land as well as a collection of works (poetry, stories, fragments of novels, essays). Given that *Literatura de Guinea Ecuatorial* is by no means exhaustive, it gives the reader

the impression that for such a tiny country with a relatively small population, everyone seems to aspire to being a writer—comparisons with Andalusia or the U.S. American South come to mind. The names of both established and young writers eager to make their mark are plentiful. One of the most important of these writers was Leoncio Evita (1929-1996), a pioneer of the Ecuatoguinean novel with his *Cuando los combes*

*luchaban* (1953), a work that inspired other novelists of the same nationality to tell stories set in their land (Donato Ndongo, María Nsue, Tomás Avila Laurel, Joaquín Mbomio among others). Spanish Guinean poets also abound: Francisco Zamora Lobocho, Tomás Avila Laurel, Ciriako Bokesa, Gerardo Behori Sipi, Raquel Ilonbé. Drama, while not published or staged with the same intensity as poetry is not without its Guinean proponents such as Tomás Avila Laurel and Trinidad Morgades.<sup>2</sup> That the



Self-portrait of Leoncio Evita Enoy, author of what is considered Equatorial Guinea's first novel, *Cuando los combes luchaban* (1953).

work of these artists and intellectuals is well disseminated or even recognized is another matter entirely. As we have pointed out (and cannot stress enough) postcolonial realities, the machinations of the culture market, material hardship, and neglect on the part of Spanish literary/cultural elites all contribute to the “unknown quantity” (and quality) of Equatoguinean literature.

In the three essays of our section on “Literature” it is implicit that to speak of literature in the conventional sense when dealing with Equatorial Guinea (as with that of virtually all African countries) is problematic. Also important to consider in these discussions are the definitive colonial and post-colonial realities out of which Guinean literature arises; thus if we view the published creative texts of Equatorial Guinea in purely aesthetic terms, we will almost necessarily miss a crucial component of the texts in question. (See both the section on pedagogy and the interview with Donato Ndongu). Indeed, this issue of *AJHCS* merely scratches the surface of the complex interrelationships among orality, literature, and colonialism, but it's a start.<sup>3</sup>

The first essay of our “Literature” section deals with Equatorial Guinea's colonial literature and manifests many of the tensions inherent in the interrelationships mentioned above. This essay deals with the figure of the mirror, “in all its permutations,” as Montserrat Alás-Brun writes in her essay, “The Shattered Mirror.” Colonial writing must absorb the dominating culture's construction of the colonized and make use of this construction in order to deconstruct or in some cases perpetuate it. An essay that takes postmodern literary theory into consideration, Alás-Brun's is not only informative as it makes us aware of texts on few lists of canonical “western” literature, it is also a

telling indicator of the importance of the gaze in Spanish Guinean writing both from the point of view of the Spanish colonizers as well as that of the colonized.

From colonial texts to the contemporary age, we continue our literary analyses by including two studies of the novels of Donato Ndongu, arguably the most important writer of Equatorial Guinea today. The essay by one of the editors of this volume (Ugarte), “Postcolonial Exile,” serves as something of an introduction to Ndongu's works, from his celebrated novel *Las tinieblas de tu memoria negra*,<sup>4</sup> set during the last years of Spanish control, to *Los poderes de la tempestad*, the second work in a trilogy that Ndongu is completing as we put this collection together. *Poderes* is the subject of the next essay by Clarence Mengue. An intricate analysis of the language and themes of this difficult novel, Mengue begs yet another question: was Equatorial Guinea better off under Spanish rule—a question not as “politically incorrect” as it might sound. It may be argued that the entire thrust of post-colonial studies assumes that colonialism gives rise to a series of new problems in the aftermath of independence, and that these newer global dilemmas are in as much need of world attention as those prevalent under colonialism. To end this section we have concluded a meticulous analysis of Tomás Avila Laurel's 1999 novel, *La carga*. Eliza Rizo, the author of this essay, raises questions about the ex-colony's ongoing negotiation with the colonizer on the very issue of representation of its own culture—that is, “who speaks for the object of colonization?” Rizo reads Avila Laurel's novel as an interrogation of a colonial ideology that continues to represent the colonized subject, now under the disguise of the writing of history and anthropology.



Since our volume's intention is to spark thought and discussion on this seemingly marginal aspect of the Hispanic world, we have included three items not in the traditional category of essays: a round table discussion held at the University of Missouri on the attempts (real and hypothetical) to incorporate African issues into the language and literature classroom. For this we included specialists in both Anglophone and Francophone Africa as well as experts in Afro-Hispanic culture so as to initiate an interdisciplinary dialogue through which those of us in "Hispanism" might gain some pedagogical insights. A lengthy interview with Donato Ndongo follows, and finally a remarkable dramatic text by Trinidad Morgades Besari with an informative introduction by Kathleen McNerney and Gabriel Quirós Alpera, which manifests a unique recasting of the Antigone story from a Guinean woman's post-colonial perspective.

All of the essays are followed by what we hope are useful works cited as well as consulted lists and websites that incorporate much cultural material necessary to engage in further research on this fascinating area of the world. Again we hope that the readers of *AJHCS* will be stimulated by these discussions and perhaps even use the material either in a future course or in present or future research.<sup>5</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> At the moment of this writing, Donato Ndongo, Equatorial Guinea's foremost exile novelist, has the advantage of being able to work in Spain. Yet he now finds himself without a job due to the closing of the Centro de Estudios Africanos in Murcia. The "personal computer" he must use now to complete his work in progress is a model that most universities in the U.S. would not even deem worthy of stor-

ing in their warehouses. See the addendum to our interview with Ndongo in this volume of *AJHCS*.

<sup>2</sup> See both the Ndongo anthologies—the one he edited with M'bare N'gom is more extensive and more recent—for more information about these writers. Of all the novelists mentioned, perhaps María Nsue is the most well known woman writer from Equatorial Guinea after the publication of her *Ekomo*.

<sup>3</sup> Prof. Celine Magneché Ndé of the University of Zaragoza is now in the process of dealing with Equatoguinean literature from a theoretical perspective which concentrates on orality.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Ugarte's translation of the first chapter of *Tinieblas* appeared in *Raritan*, XXIII (2004), no. 5.

<sup>5</sup> We would like to thank Tracy Barnett, Shalisa Collins, and Toni Rahman for invaluable editorial expertise.

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