

Titel/Title: Migratory Movements in Life Stories and Literary Writing: A Conversation with Joaquín Mbomío Bacheng on Equatoguinean Literature and Afro-Diasporic Communities in Europe

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Veröffentlichungsversion/Published version: Postprint

Publikationsform/Type of publication: Artikel/Aufsatz

Empfohlene Zitierung/Recommended citation:

Borst, J. (2017). Migratory Movements in Life Stories and Literary Writing: A Conversation with Joaquín Mbomío Bacheng on Equatoguinean Literature and Afro-Diasporic Communities in Europe. *Research in African Literatures* 48(3), 146-153. doi:10.2979/reseafritelite.48.3.13.

Verfügbar unter/Available at:

(wenn vorhanden, bitte den DOI angeben/please provide the DOI if available)

doi:10.2979/reseafritelite.48.3.13.

Zusätzliche Informationen/Additional information:

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Migratory Movements in Life Stories and Literary Writing

A Conversation with Joaquín Mbomío Bacheng on Equatoguinean Literature and Afro-Diasporic Communities in Europe¹

Interview

Julia Borst (University of Bremen)

Joaquín Mbomío Bacheng, born in 1956 in the district of Niefang in Equatorial Guinea, has left his native country twice to go into exile for political reasons. Currently, he lives in France near the French-Swiss border. Mbomío Bacheng is the author of four novels--*El párroco de Niefang* (The Parish Priest of Niefang, 1996), *Huellas bajo la tierra* (Underground Footprints, 1998), *Matinga, sangre en la selva* (Matinga, Blood in the Jungle, 2013), and *Se fue la independencia* (Independence has gone; forthcoming)--that tackle the hybridity of Equatoguinean identity, influenced by both African cultures and the Spanish colonial heritage. Besides several poems published in the journal *África 2000*, he has also written numerous literary essays and journalistic texts for different journals, among others *Africultures*, *Regards Africains*, *Lettres de Reporters Frontière*, *Tam-Tam*, *Lettre de l'uidh* and *El Patio*. Being an advocate of Equatoguinean and Hispano-African literature, he participates in many cultural events such as the *Semana de Literatura Guineoecuatorialiana* 'Week of Equatoguinean Literature,' an annual event at the University of Vienna, Austria.

Julia Borst: The articles of this RAL special issue deal with migratory and diasporic phenomena and their representation in contemporary Catalan and Spanish African literatures. In this regard, why did you leave Equatorial Guinea and how would you describe your experience of migrating to and living in the African diaspora in Europe?

¹ This interview was conducted by Julia Borst in May 2015 during the 4th *Week of Equatoguinean Literature* in Vienna, Austria.

Joaquín Mbomío Bacheng: The reasons for my exile are political in nature. I left my country because I was being persecuted under the dictatorship of Francisco Macías Nguema, which was established there soon after its independence from Spain in 1968. As an Equatoguinean, the most natural thing for me would have been to go to Spain, where the majority of Equatoguineans living in Europe are to be found. But I have cultural ties to France, I went there for my university education and to work for the French news agency AFP. And also, French society is much more tolerant and open to African people and cultures than Spain.

On the political and human level, my migratory experience has been frustrating. But on a cultural and intellectual level it is an interesting and enriching one, for it allows me to appreciate the advancement of knowledge that one gains in the encounter with other countries and cultures; a gain one is not aware of if one stays confined to one's homeland. I would love to be in Equatorial Guinea, but I enjoy the liberty I have as an emigrant to Europe even more; a liberty that I wouldn't have in my native country. As a whole, my experience of migrating therefore tends to be positive compared to the cultural misery I observe nowadays in Equatorial Guinea.

Julia Borst: Does your writing mirror this experience?

Joaquín Mbomío Bacheng: Yes, of course, I tackle migration in my writings. An evident example is *Huellas bajo tierra* (Underground Footprints), where you can find a true itinerant and migratory life cycle: the protagonist, Juan Ndong, is born and grows up in the continental region of Equatorial Guinea; after having been imprisoned under the dictatorship and forced to work on the cocoa plantations on the island of Bioko, he has to leave as a student for France, where, eventually, he dies in the city of Dijon. The story is told by a narrator who is the protagonist's fellow student.

The novel deals with a 'privileged' form of migration, that is, an African who goes abroad to study and who ends up in France, a culturally fairly open country. But in reality, there are also many stories of migration, less glorious, for example, if people lack the most basic means of survival and flee because of misery; those who end up in Europe having difficulties finding a place to live and having to work unwittingly, as waiters, for instance. The economic migrants' situation is much more precarious than the students', who are still young and have access to higher education, a privilege that helps them become a member of the host society.

Julia Borst: Many literary texts by Equatoguinean authors tackle not only a particular experience of transterritoriality and diasporic condition but also describe the multiple and hybrid cultural influences and encounters that are portrayed as characteristic of the Equatoguinean subject's identity--of both living in Equatorial Guinea itself and having migrated to Europe. How would you explain this particular hybridity of Equatoguinean identity retraced in numerous texts that likewise oscillate between both geographically and culturally different spaces?

Joaquín Mbomío Bacheng: First of all, I think that all identities and cultures are hybrid, not only Equatoguinean identity and culture. In Spain, you also have different identities, for instance the Catalan, the Andalusian and the Basque identity, which are all quite different. However, these three identities all closely share what you could call *hispanidad* 'Spanishness'; they share the geographical background of their peninsularity, and they have Europe as a common project for the future. You have a similar situation in Equatorial Guinea, where different African peoples share the same geographical space. Most of them--like the Fang, the Bubi or the Ndowe--belong to the Bantu peoples and share a common *weltanschauung* that includes two existential realities--the ancestral reality and the conscience of the Supreme Being (*Nzama ye Mebhegue* in the Fang language). Added to this indigenous vision is the colonial heritage, which is legitimated by its

historicity, for history irreversibly shapes the future of peoples. Therefore the identity of Equatoguineans is very complex: it's been subject to the influence of their African past as well as to that of the Spanish colonial heritage. And what's more, it's been shaped both by a continuity of dictatorial regimes and by the postcolonial experience of living in an African country still struggling as a nation state at the beginning of the 21st century. Consequently, Equatoguinean identity is a challenge or almost a perpetual 'confrontation,' dragging along everything it bumps into. In a nutshell, it's a multiple, complex, and hybrid identity still in process, undergoing a constant transformation.

I believe that these experiences that are specific to the Equatoguinean cultural space are articulated in Equatoguinean literature. That is, of a cultural space that--as I said--is neither homogeneous nor continuous, for it consists of multiple territories that give rise to a multispatial--both continental and insular--Equatoguinean identity; an identity, in addition, affected by both a Spanish colonization, unique on the African continent, and by the experience of Francoism, a regime that, in equal measure, was unique in the Western political space.

Equatoguinean literature abounds with texts that tackle this particular colonial and postcolonial relation to Spain. The vision of Spain, however, is not as negative as that in other African literatures with respect to their former colonizing power; there are even some nostalgic aspects to be found. For due to Equatorial Guinea's particular colonial past and its singular status as the only Spanish-speaking African country, many Equatoguineans do not identify that much with other African countries, but with Spain. And some even talk of Spain as if she was their own country. Psychologically, their neighbors are the Spaniards and not the Cameroonians. For example, they think of Madrid first and then of Yaoundé. Consequently, writers living in Equatorial Guinea might adopt a diasporic perspective and writers living in the diaspora often refer

to Equatoguinean realities in their texts, an oscillation of the imagination that arises due to this cultural proximity between Spaniards and Equatoguineans I have mentioned.

All this gives rise to Equatorial Guinea's particular experience that lays the foundations to the originality of her creative expression. I'm an advocate of this originality of Equatoguinean literature; a literature that conveys its own message, adding to the concert of all the other literatures such as Gabonese, Cameroonian, French or Spanish literature, but which, at the same time, also includes a profoundly human dimension that adds a universal, transcultural and interracial aspect.

Julia Borst: Does this experience of transterritoriality and diaspora influence your locus of enunciation as an author? Where do you speak from?

Joaquín Mbomio Bacheng: Those who study African legends tend to forget a supposedly insignificant aspect with respect to the notion of time and space: both are unlimited realities for African peoples. It's therefore difficult in my situation to phrase my position as an author. I'd say that I write from my 'mental space,' a space that embraces various positionings in compliance with the realities I have crossed in my existence, from Africa to Europe, passing Equatorial Guinea and Spain. The experiences of Juan Ndong in *Huellas bajo tierra* (Underground Footprints) or Matinga in *Matinga, sangre en la selva* (Matinga, Blood in the Jungle) mirror that space.

I could also say that I live in Europe but my mind remains in Africa. In this context of mental tension, I can hardly position myself in a concrete physical place, added to which, the current cultural context is becoming more and more global. Therefore only the reader can determine my positioning through her or his interpretation of my texts. And, anyway, I consider my writing transversal, for it embraces different and contrastive realities and reflects both the religious syncretism and the hybridity of Equatoguinean culture.

Julia Borst: You have mentioned the ambivalent relation of Equatoguineans to the former colonial power Spain. How would you state your position to the Spanish language being both the former colonial language and Equatorial Guinea's literary language?

Joaquín Mbomío Bacheng: Spanish has been the language of the colonizers, but nowadays, Spanish is also our official language, and we use it for our daily communication between the different peoples and communities that form the Republic of Equatorial Guinea. Consequently, Spanish already is African heritage; it is ours; we have adapted it to our linguistic realities; we have 'colonized' it and made it ours. By means of the Spanish language, we have freed ourselves from the burden of the colonial past and embraced our future reality. Being the basis for this future, the Spanish language represents an inalienable part of Equatoguinean identity. Accordingly, Spanish in Equatorial Guinea is not a colonial language anymore; it is our national language that we have tamed and adopted. Therefore it defines us and distinguishes us from other African states and all the other nations in the world.

Julia Borst: In your opinion, do African migrants suffer a particular discrimination in European societies? What role does a stereotyping media coverage play in this context?

Joaquín Mbomío Bacheng: Due to their visibility and their skin color--which has a negative connotation in a Eurocentric discourse on migration that follows colonial thinking patterns--, Black migrants from Africa are the prime victims of discrimination in Europe. I, personally, suffer discrimination on a daily basis but I've got used to it, and sometimes I even stand to benefit from it. Often, when taking a train, no one takes the seat next to me, and I can travel much more comfortably, while all the other passengers are squeezed together.

However, the situation is much more severe concerning media coverage. To keep selling more, the media single out Blacks, for, in a white world, Black people always attract attention. But, paradoxically, the discrimination Black people suffer forces them to make more effort than white people. Therefore, in countries such as France and even Switzerland, you can find Blacks with different migration backgrounds in all kinds of outstanding positions. Altogether, we can thus observe a certain social advancement among the migrant community. In turn, the role of this collective is to serve as an example and a model of social insertion in a context of coexistence, preventing the creation of some sort of a permanent ghetto that is opposed to the rest of a mainly white society.

Julia Borst: What is the role of Afro-diasporic communities in this context? In your opinion can they help to change these stereotypes by offering alternative imageries and act as mediators between European societies and African cultures?

Joaquín Mbomio Bacheng: Everywhere, diasporic communities assume an essential and vitalizing role. They are a motor and a privileged intermediary in the context of a continuing encounter and dialogue of cultures. For instance, the State of Israel is a labor of its diaspora dispersed throughout the world. The Hebrews, persecuted everywhere in the past, now have a place that serves as a homeland and helps them continue the dialogue with other communities and cultures with which they coexist.

The case of the African and Black diaspora is the same: it has the noble and sacred mission to help bring into being a Panafricanism that both provides in its core positive aspects of European modernity and conveys to an egocentric and capitalist Western world humane values characteristic of African cultures, values such as a culture of peace, the Ubuntu, the art of living in a community,

and, eventually, knowing how to share the usufruct of collectivity and not to claim its benefits just for oneself.

Nowadays, people in the Western hemisphere live a solitary life, they do everything on their own, they earn money on their own, dance on their own, make love on their own and even almost reproduce themselves on their own. All this stands in stark contrast to the humane values of African people who essentially share life with others. That is the message that African diasporic communities could potentially circulate in European societies. For instance, I'm a member of a platform that fights anti-Black racism in Switzerland.² We aim at appreciating and combining aspects of the Swiss social democracy and contributions from African knowledge of the Ubuntu by mutually respecting and tolerating each other and by conducting an open dialogue.

Julia Borst: Do you think that a respectful coexistence of cultures is in fact possible or do you consider a transcultural society a utopian ideal that cannot be put into practice in real life?

Joaquín Mbomío Bacheng: Transcultural coexistence is not a utopia. Since the 2000s, we have been able to observe an increasing number of mixed couples, Black and white, in major European countries such as France and Switzerland. Some of these couples became famous, such as the Afro-French football player Christian Karembeu and his former wife, the model Adriana Karembeu. Nowadays, every consumer who lives in the Western world is obliged to experience transculturality in her or his daily life, for instance in the job market, clothing, nutrition.

Thus, the transcultural is a reality, a reality that, sadly, also is currently giving rise to populism and xenophobic movements in Europe. These movements' voices sing the swan song of the nostalgics who think that multiculturalism as it exists today leads to the loss of national

² *CRAN--Carrefour de Réflexion et d'Action Contre le Racisme Anti-Noir* (www.cran.ch).

identities of ‘old Europe.’ However, the contrary is true: transcultural dynamics strengthen and enrich the European model and its social space.

Julia Borst: Some scholars argue that literary texts are able to open up an imaginary space where notions of a transcultural society and new models of coexistence can be tested. Do you believe that literature can live up to this important task to reveal other cultural realities experienced, for instance, by Afro-diasporic communities?

Joaquín Mbomío Bacheng: The literary text--like journalistic writing--represents a reflection of society. As a writer or journalist, I do not write to reproach or to suppress this or that feeling; instead, I write to articulate a mental reality that is the product of my imagination or the result of an observation or an experience. The impact on the reader of what I write is what can give rise to a social reaction. To this effect, yes, the literary text can have its share in making other realities and experiences known that otherwise remain hidden to common knowledge. Correspondingly, literature is, like painting, an art with which to discover the beauty of existence and which helps humankind to find its path to uprightness.

Julia Borst: Although Hispano-African writing is slowly starting to gain some attention in academia, Hispano-African authors are still little noticed by the Spanish readership? Why is that? Furthermore, your novel *Huellas bajo tierra* (Underground Footprints) has been translated into French recently.³ Is the perception of your novel different in France in that it echoes the country’s relative openness to African cultures you mentioned before?

³ Joaquín Mbomío Bacheng. *Malabo littoral*. Translated by Annelise Oriot, L’Atelier du Tilde, 2015.

Joaquín Mbomío Bacheng: The marginal condition of African literature written in Spanish seems given, for Spain has a globally racist society that is narrow-minded compared to its neighbor France. The French are much more familiarized with Black people and Africans whereas the Spaniards' subconsciousness keeps being subjected to an inquisitorial past that sermonized the *pureza de sangre* 'purity of blood,' for example. Consequently, the interest in my novel *Huellas bajo tierra* (Underground Footprints) is different in France, and it is much more visible. For example, the publishing house *L'Atelier du Tilde* promoted my book much more than a Spanish publishing house would do for a text from an Equatoguinean writer. However, sadly, there are not many works by Hispano-African authors that have been translated at all.

And added to that, the colonization of Equatorial Guinea was the work of Spain's governing elite, who sent soldiers and civil servants to the African continent. The Spanish population, however, has never been aware of Spain's presence in Equatorial Guinea. Nowadays, if an Equatoguinean goes to some village in Spain, people are very surprised that they speak Spanish. Furthermore, when one comes to Spain as a migrant from Equatorial Guinea, one thinks that Spaniards know what the Spanish state did to Equatorial Guinea; but quite the contrary is true. This is something that one does not know until one gets here.

Yet, a positive aspect in Spain is that the generation of Spaniards that have started travelling since the transition to democracy has a different attitude, in particular with respect to the integration of Spain into a communal European space. Spaniards have started to travel to Africa, to have relations with the African continent. And, consequently, little by little, Spain is opening up to African societies and cultures, as we can see by the founding of the *Casa Africa* on the Canary Islands or the *Fundación Sur* in Madrid. Even the Basque region is very advanced in integrating Africans. In San Sebastián, for instance, there is the Association *Guinea Etxea*, which

means 'House of Guinea'; it comprises a project of social aid supported by the institutions of the Basque region--and in particular by the Department of Cultural Diversity of the city of San Sebastián--, one that aims to tackle the integration of Africans into the Basque social structure. These and other similar initiatives will procure a space open to Hispano-African artists and writers in the near future.

However, Spanish society still needs to fight many stereotypes, for there is a tendency to reduce Africans to an image of disadvantaged and needy refugees and foreigners. Though, it is essential for Spanish society to overcome such a notion, both to be able to acknowledge the Spanish African diaspora's contribution to Spain's society and culture and to become aware that there is a second generation of creative Afro-Spanish voices, such as writer Guillermina Mekuy or journalist and blogger Lucía Mbomío, who claim Spain as their country--without suppressing their African heritage--and who already live a synthesis of cultures.

Julia Borst: What significance does Hispano-African literature have in Equatorial Guinea? For example, Equatoguinean writer Donato Ndong-Bidyogo tends to emphasize that he did not know that there were literary texts written by Africans before, as an adolescent, he got to read Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. Has the situation improved in recent years?

Joaquín Mbomío Bacheng: In Equatorial Guinea, as in other African countries, literature as a form of creative expression represents a possibility to build a viable identity and a national consciousness based on common experiences. In Africa, where lots of things still need to be built, literature helps to create a national myth, narrating a legend that, in reality, is the chronicle of the

lives of Equatoguinean women and men--such as in the two anthologies of Equatoguinean literature written by women, edited by writer Remei Sipi Mayo.⁴

However, Equatoguinean literature is fairly unknown in Equatorial Guinea itself. Due to a continuity of dictatorial regimes since the country's independence, intellectuals have been persecuted and free expression has been inhibited, so that most authors were forced to write abroad--Juan Tomás Ávila Laurel wanted to prove that an Equatoguinean writer can stay but he, too, eventually had to leave the country.

Furthermore, the Equatoguinean government does not support culture and downrightly deprives Equatoguineans of any cultural knowledge. There are, for instance, no real book stores in Equatorial Guinea where you could, in reality, buy books; there are just one or two in Malabo, but they are just 'for decoration' to make it at all possible to say there are book stores in Equatorial Guinea. Moreover, in Equatorial Guinea, there are only very few institutions promoting culture such as the *Centros Culturales Españoles* in Malabo and Bata or the *Institut français* where one can also find books written by Equatoguinean authors. Consequently, Equatoguinean kids and adolescents do not know writers such as Donato Ndongo-Bidyogo, as their writings are not taught in Equatoguinean schools either, where children tend to learn about classic Spanish literature like *El Quijote*.

Translated by Julia Borst

⁴ *Baiso. Ellas y sus relatos*. Edited by Remei Sipi Mayo, Editorial Mey, 2015; *Voces Femininas de Guinea Ecuatorial. Una Antología*. Edited by Remei Sipi Mayo, Editorial Mey, 2015.